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*A journal  
for newspeople*

**Published by the  
International Society  
of Weekly Newspaper Editors**

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# Life and death in a small town:

*Cultural values and memory in community newspaper obituaries*

By **Janice Hume**

When he died of pancreatic cancer in 1995, 91-year-old Porter Harvey was remembered for bungee jumping at 90, for his monthly poker games and his love of old-time monster movies. "But his favorite pastime always was finding news and writing it up," according to the obituary published in the newspaper he founded and edited for more than 50 years, the *Guntersville (Ala.) Advertiser-Gleam*.<sup>1</sup> His obit was one of nine published that day. Lucille Hart, 87, had been "bedfast for almost two years." Her obituary noted: "Before she got real sick, she planned her own funeral, specifying that her son would preach it and her grandchildren — both boys and girls — would be active pallbearers. Her family followed the plans to the letter."<sup>2</sup> The late James (Cull) Harris was one of Guntersville's best baseball players. At one time he "played on 5 teams at once, both baseball and softball, day and night."<sup>3</sup> And Josie Love had worked for 30 years in nearby Albertville, Ala., at a laundry "which sent a bus each day for employees who lived in Guntersville."<sup>4</sup> These obits — each unique, though with common purpose — provide a fascinating peek into the lives of the people of Guntersville, a town of roughly 7,000 located in the Tennessee River Valley of north Alabama. For readers on that March day in 1995, and on nearly every other day the twice-weekly published that year, obituaries did much more than report the news of death. They celebrated life, and so represented a kind of "ideal," offering important information about community values.

Porter Harvey knew the importance of obituaries; his own noted that the *Advertiser-Gleam's* used "a lot more detail than most papers use."<sup>5</sup> In those details readers could learn what the newspaper and families wanted to remember about the lives of the deceased, in addition to details about the deaths. Taken collectively, these obituaries paint a kind of portrait of the community. This study analyzes 738 obituaries published during two years, 1965 and 1995, in the *Advertiser-Gleam*. The purpose is twofold — to show how individual citizens' lives were publicly commemorated, and to add to our understanding of the important role obituaries can and do play in community newspapers.

## Community news

The *Advertiser-Gleam*, in many ways a typical community newspaper, has received some national attention and praise for the loyalty it inspires in readers. A 1996 article in *American Journalism Review* said: "It is a paper that would make city editors at daily papers the country over laugh, yet its circulation (12,000) is greater than the population of its town (7,000). Virtually nobody in this corner of the world would think of doing without it."<sup>6</sup> Part of the attraction was the newspaper's focus on local news, on covering everybody in town. After Harvey's death, Bill Keller, executive director of the Alabama Press Association, said: "The *Advertiser-Gleam* moved years ahead of most other newspapers in treating its readers the same, whether rich or poor, black or white, male or female."<sup>7</sup> This philosophy naturally extended to the obituary page. In the memoir *High Adventure: Porter Harvey and the Advertiser-Gleam*, Porter Harvey's son Sam Harvey wrote: "On most newspaper staffs, obituaries tend to be an afterthought, a chore often passed on to clerks or handled in desultory fashion by reporters. Porter had always tried to contact relatives to get more than the bare facts provided by funeral homes...Porter could find something interesting to say about almost anybody."<sup>8</sup> The *Advertiser-Gleam's* obituaries were the focus o

**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 46, Issue 4, Winter 2005

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

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a 1993 Associated Press feature, which noted their popularity and their almost gossipy nature.<sup>9</sup> The newspaper clearly made obituaries a priority. Thus, it is not the purpose of this study to argue the *Advertiser-Gleaner's* obituaries are typical, but rather, because of the newspaper's attention to detail and its inclusiveness, to suggest that they offer a way to learn something about the cultural values in this community, and about the potential of the obituary page at a small newspaper.

Of course, obituaries have long been part of the content of community journalism. Frederic Endress, in an historical study of small nineteenth-century frontier newspapers, found that almost everyone in their communities, regardless of age, gender, or station in life, "deserved some sort of meaning being given to their lives" in published obituaries.<sup>10</sup> Journalism textbook authors in the twentieth century wrote in anecdotal ways about the importance of obituaries in community newspapers. In 1961, Kenneth Byerly noted in *Community Journalism* that an obituary "is often clipped and placed in the family Bible where it may remain for 50 years, so writing it properly is of great importance."<sup>11</sup> In 1974, Bruce Kennedy in *Community Journalism: A Way of Life* wrote: "A death in the community is a death in the family. Strangers are few; nearly everyone is a celebrity of sorts, and a death, no matter whose it is, touches a small town... An obituary is important news with high readership, and each one deserves careful, respectful writing."<sup>12</sup> And in 2000, Jock Lauterer's *Community Journalism: The Personal Approach* argued that obituaries are "a test — of accuracy, humility, enterprise and journalistic craft."<sup>13</sup> The obituary page, if made a priority, could help small-town newspapers fulfill their mission to not only cover the news, but to connect readers and maintain community.<sup>14</sup>

## Obituaries and cultural values

Newspaper obituaries have been studied before, though to date much of the focus has been on large, mainstream daily newspapers. My historical study *Obituaries in American Culture* examined more than 8,000 published between 1818 and 1930 in a variety of national and regional newspapers. These obituaries revealed an American society slowly becoming more inclusive. They illuminated other cultural changes as well, in American attitudes about dying, about religion, about patriotism, about industry and wealth and about the way individual lives are valued in a society that supposedly embraces egalitarianism.<sup>15</sup> Obits linked everyday citizens with the American past by telling stories of relationships between the deceased and historic events or icons such as George Washington, Daniel Boone, or Wild Bill Hickock.<sup>16</sup> Indeed publication of an obituary in the mainstream mass media constitutes a rare instance when an average person can become part of collective thought, part of what Americans might believe in common about their past and about the worth of a life.<sup>17</sup>

Another study analyzed the *New York Times'* "Portraits of Grief," small sketches memorializing those who died during the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and found that they celebrated ordinary qualities of the deceased, rather than elite attributes usually highlighted on the *Times* obituary page. Individuals who died that day were remembered for their devotion to family; passion, talent or interests outside work; strong work ethic; generosity, humor and humanity; and good health or energy.<sup>18</sup> They became "icons of familiarity, of the egalitarian virtues of the 'every American.'"<sup>19</sup> Obituaries in community newspapers would likely also celebrate more ordinary attributes of the deceased, or at least the extraordinary attributes of ordinary citizens, legitimizing such values for their readers. Unfortunately, to date no studies have analyzed obituaries in modern community newspapers.

Media coverage of the deaths of leaders and celebrities has also intrigued scholars, including Carolyn Kitch (who wrote about the press as a site of public mourning and for national healing following the death of John F. Kennedy Jr. and others)<sup>20</sup> and Sharon Mazzarella and Timothy Matyjewicz (who wrote about coverage of the deaths of musicians as "media friends.")<sup>21</sup> Others have observed, more generally, the power of death stories. Joseph A. Amato argues that death "causes people to tell stories" that can be "shaped by moral judgment, fashioned for the sake of argument, made buoyant by metaphor, or given meaning by the rituals of culture and the promise of religion."<sup>22</sup> Death stories are provocative, and they resonate with people because of their strong connection with cultural and religious rituals. Newspapers have long provided a public place to tell stories of the deaths of individuals, legitimizing those stories for a large audience. Such publicly shared "death stories" make individual and generational memories an element of public consciousness.<sup>23</sup>

Indeed, though on the surface a simple news story, the obituary has a resounding cultural voice. Beyond identifying the deceased, giving a "cause of death" and sometimes telling readers details of a funeral, it offers a tiny picture of a life, a synopsis of what is best remembered about a person's history. It is a type of *commemoration*, representing an ideal, and because it is published or broadcast, that "ideal" is magnified for a mass audience. Barry Schwartz calls for an understanding of two distinct aspects of remembering — chronicling and commemoration. He wrote:

The events selected for chronicling are not all evaluated in the same way. To some of these events we remain morally indifferent; other events are commemorated, i.e., invested with an extraordinary significance and assigned a qualitatively distinct place in our conception of the past... Commemoration celebrates and safeguards the ideal.<sup>24</sup>

Of course, not everyone who dies gets an obituary, especially in a major metropolitan newspaper. A study of obituaries published in Boston and New York newspapers found a clear pattern of masculine preference, giving "subtle confirmation of the greater importance of men" in twentieth-century American cities.<sup>25</sup> And not every attribute is included for those who are remembered. The obituary "ideal" filters through a variety of screens, both cultural and journalistic. For example, books written to help community journalists learn their craft offer suggestions about how to cover the deaths of local citizens, promoting a formulaic approach, though most encourage enterprise reporting as well.<sup>26</sup> Obituary writers at community as well as metropolitan newspapers deal with economic problems of space, and often must nail briefly the virtues of a person's life. This would have an impact on what is publicly remembered about individual lives.

It follows, then, that obituary pages do not offer a clear, complete, and accurate reflection of a society, but they provide a small window through which to view and better understand social values.<sup>27</sup> For example, the "accuracy" of an obituary might come into question because, in some newspapers, facts can take a backseat to sentiment in coverage of someone who has died. Still, obituaries can provide a valuable resource. As *Obituaries in American Culture* noted: "An obituary distills the essence of a citizen's life, and because it is a commemoration as well as a life chronicle, it reflects what society values and wants to remember about that person's history."<sup>28</sup> Thus the systematic examination of obituaries provides a useful tool for exploring the values of Americans of any era. And such an examination can help in understanding an important aspect of their culture, the public memory of citizens.

## Memory and media

Media are the primary influence on the way a culture builds its memory, according to Andreas Huyssen, and are the “hidden veil” through which cultural memory and structures of temporality can be viewed.<sup>29</sup> American newspapers, notes sociologist Michael Schudson, “are today the most representative carrier and construer and creator of modern public consciousness.”<sup>30</sup> And news stories of all kinds use symbols to hold readers’ interest. W. Lloyd Warner in *The Living and the Dead: A Study of the Symbolic Life of Americans* writes that newspapers include “evocative, non-logical symbols rather than logical, empirical ones” representing the “non-logical symbolic beliefs and folk symbols of people who buy the papers.”<sup>31</sup> Newspaper obituaries, which carry to the public consciousness those powerful, symbolic death stories, must have at least a small role in influencing collective thought.

Obituaries contribute to the vitality of American society by highlighting the importance of its individual members.<sup>32</sup> The traits and actions of individuals, remembered and idealized, would become part of collective consciousness. But Lowenthal warns of the importance of understanding “the screens through which historical information and ideas are commonly filtered.”<sup>33</sup> The obituary is a type of screen, filtered by the media and by families and friends of the deceased. A good example of this is how the *Advertiser-Gleam* reported suicides.

Relatives were generally glad to tell the *Gleam* in considerable detail just how the departed left this world. Not so in the case of suicide. Traditionally, when someone took his own life, the paper said so, as part of telling the news. But Sam and Porter finally concluded they were causing too much pain for people who were already going through enough pain. They decided in 1993 that they would withhold the cause of death in suicides if the family requested it.<sup>34</sup>

As Halbwachs writes: “Since a past fact is instructive and a person who has disappeared is an encouragement or an advertisement, what we call the framework of memory is also a concatenation of ideas and judgments.”<sup>35</sup> Each obituary would preserve some of those “ideas and judgments” so elusive for historians and chroniclers of values and culture.

## Methods

This study seeks to answer the question: How did obituaries published in 1965 and 1995 in the *Guntersville* (Ala.) *Advertiser-Gleam* portray the lives and deaths of the deceased?

Though any year might have been appropriate for this kind of study, the years 1965 and 1995 were selected based on the life and death of newspaper editor Porter Harvey, who made obituaries a priority at the newspaper. He and others at the *Advertiser-Gleam* began focusing on feature style obituaries in the 1960s, and he died in 1995. The 30-year span should provide an opportunity to compare and contrast changing cultural values in this small Alabama town. This study is meant to provide a starting point for more research into community newspapers in American culture. Future studies might focus on different regions, or compare obituaries in rural versus suburban weeklies. This study simply provides a qualitative depth analysis of obituaries in one community newspaper recognized for its obituary quality and inclusion.

In all, 738 obituaries were examined, 271 in 1965 and 467 in 1995. These obituaries were photocopied from the microfilm collection of the *Advertiser-Gleam*, located in the Guntersville Public Library.<sup>36</sup> The intent was to gather all obituaries published during these two years, including 105 issues in 1965 and 104 in 1995. In 1965 obituaries for 160 men (59 percent), 91 women (34 percent)

and 20 children (7 percent, 14 boys and six girls) were included. The 1995 *Advertiser-Gleam* included 231 men (49.5 percent), 225 women (48 percent) and 11 children (2.5 percent, six boys and five girls). Analysis includes cause of death and occupations but focuses primarily on the personal attributes of the deceased adults. Each cause, occupation, and attribute was listed to determine major themes or categories, as well as threads that were less significant in terms of percentages, but that provide cultural insight. Most obituaries for infants and children included only news of the deaths and information about pending funerals.

## Cause of death

In 1965 the *Advertiser-Gleam* sometimes left out the cause of death altogether, even for a relatively young person. More often, the cause was described for both men and women as a long or extended illness, or as a short illness or as happening “suddenly.” Lengths of illnesses were reported — at three months, four weeks, 12 days, or two years. Obituaries in 1965 included more detailed accounts of the 11 deaths by automobile accidents and three suicides (likely because police reports would have been available), but they also offered descriptions of heart attacks, which were the most commonly listed specific cause of death. J. Early Nix, for example, died suddenly watching a football game on TV. The obituary noted: “He apparently died so peacefully that Mrs. Nix at first thought he was asleep.”<sup>37</sup> Others died from strokes, an accidental shooting, drowning, burns, a fall, a tractor accident and freezing. Cancer was reported as the cause of death for only two people in the 1965 sample, indicating that at least some of the extended or short illnesses were likely cancer, but for some reason were not reported as such.

By 1995 cancer ranked as the leading cause of death listed for women, and was the second most common cause of death, after heart problems, for men. Only rarely were the terms “long illness” or “short illness” used. According to these published newspaper obituaries, more men and women died from heart problems, cancer, strokes, and kidney failure than from other reported causes such as emphysema, aneurysm, Alzheimer’s, diabetes, blood clots, pneumonia, bleeding ulcers, Lou Gehrig’s Disease, liver cirrhosis, and a rare disorder called progressive supra nuclear palsy. There were six deaths by car accident, three reported suicides, and three Guntersville residents were killed by a tornado.

As in 1965, heart attacks seemed to warrant extra attention in these 1995 obituaries. People had them while driving, walking the dog,<sup>38</sup> deer hunting,<sup>39</sup> or unloading corn at the hog barn, to name a few.<sup>40</sup> Many obituaries reported the deceased had not been sick at all before the attack.<sup>41</sup>

So there were changes in the way the *Advertiser-Gleam* reported causes of death in the three decades after the newspaper began to focus more attention on its obits. The newspaper was more likely to list medical causes in 1995 than in 1965 when Guntersville citizens had more often died of short or extended illnesses. A theme common in both years was the sudden and random nature of heart attacks, a leading killer of both men and women. Even with no official police reports to aid in the coverage (as would have been available with suicides, murders, automobile crashes, tornadoes, and drownings), the newspaper did extra reporting to give detailed accounts of heart attacks, indicating a fascination with, or a sense of unease about, these deaths.

## Occupations

An examination of the occupations of those whose deaths were reported in the *Advertiser-Gleam* in 1965 and 1995 paints a dynam

ic picture of the working lives of the people in this small Alabama town — and indicates a major cultural change during this three-decade span, particularly for women.

Only eight of the 91 women's obituaries in 1965 listed occupations. These included work at a Piggly Wiggly (a Southern grocery store chain), a poultry plant, and a pharmacy. Two women were remembered for being teachers, one a nurse, one a school secretary and one a domestic worker for a local family. The work lives of the other 83 women were not considered important enough for commemoration in their newspaper obituaries. Six of the women's obituaries published in 1965 listed the husbands' occupations.

In sharp contrast, obituaries in 1995 reported a long and varied list of women's occupations, including many farmers, teachers, store clerks and managers, cooks, waitresses, nurses, and workers in the area cotton mills and textile plants. One was a portrait artist, another an electrical designer for NASA. One woman drove a chip truck for the Charles Chips snack food company. Another cleaned the offices of a U.S. Senator. Still another was a behavioral psychologist. Ninety-one-year-old Naomi Regan's obituary recalled that in 1924 she had to give up her teaching career because the law would not allow married women to teach.<sup>42</sup> Vera Caldwell "worked at 4 textile or garment plants and she outlasted them all."<sup>43</sup> A number of obituaries listed "housewife" and "homemaker" as women's occupations. Though not every obituary listed an occupation for women (and 49 listed their husbands' work) overall the obituaries published in 1995 celebrated women's work of all kinds, and deemed it something worth remembering publicly as an important aspect of a life.

Nearly all the men, of course, were remembered for their work, and in both years farming was the occupation most often reported. Obituaries noted the number of years farmed, and the kinds of crops grown. Often farmers did other things, too, like drive trucks, build houses or work at area plants.

Most men's jobs reflected some kind of service. They were mechanics, construction workers, engineers, carpenters, truck and bus drivers, machinists, electricians, fire fighters, a commercial fisherman, a logger, a state trooper, painters, brick masons, a butcher, maintenance men, lawn service workers, postal workers, a doctor, welders, draftsmen, a newspaper editor, pharmacists, teachers, a coach, and security guards. One man was remembered for being a chicken catcher.

Industry in and near Guntersville was well represented too, including Redstone Arsenal, NASA, the Tennessee Valley Authority, sawmills, textile, poultry and other types of manufacturing or processing plants. Men also sold cars, tires, boats, bait, furniture, real estate, children's Bibles, groceries, hardware, ice cream, insurance and sandwiches. Several preached, and some were public officials, including a four-term mayor, county coroner, fire chief, judge, and school superintendent.

Occupations listed in men's obituaries during 1965 and 1995 did not reflect a major cultural shift, as did the women's. The men of Guntersville just kept on working, most in very physical blue-collar jobs, either providing some type of service in the community, or labor for area industry. Often, one man's obituary would include several different jobs, and numerous obituaries in 1965 and 1995 listed how many years the man had worked as a fact worth remembering publicly.

### Community Connection

Community connection was among the major themes reflected in the obituaries of both 1965 and 1995 in the *Advertiser-Glean*. Over and over again, citizens were remembered for the number of years

spent in their communities. Particularly noteworthy were those who spent a lifetime in the same house, or in near proximity. Floyd Ayers, for example, lived "within rock throwing distance of where he was born,"<sup>44</sup> as did Azzie Cherry Ramsey, who died "only about 500 feet from where she was born."<sup>45</sup> Hometowns were listed, places where the deceased were born or spent their childhoods, and reasons were given for moving either into or out of Guntersville. Annette McCombs and her husband, for example, had vacationed on Guntersville Lake and moved to town to be near it full time.<sup>46</sup>

For men, membership in a Masonic lodge was worthy of note in both years examined, and men in 1995 were remembered for memberships in a variety of community associations including Lions Club, Moose Lodge, Civitans, Kiwanis Club and Rotarians. Fewer women's obituaries from 1965 noted such associations, though two were remembered for being part of a patriotic organization and one for heading the March of Dimes, for being a charter member of a book club and a member of a music club.<sup>47</sup> By 1995, women were remembered for their associations with the Business and Professional Women's Club, Pilots Club, university alumni associations, League of Women Voters, Retired Teachers' Association and for being either a member or an officer in the Daughters of the American Revolution or the United Daughters of the Confederacy.

Both men's and women's community service was worthy of commemoration. I.B. Hyde had been in public office continuously longer than anybody else in the history of the county.<sup>48</sup> Doward Oaks had helped build the levee that kept Guntersville from flooding;<sup>49</sup> Jake Talley helped get water lines installed in the area;<sup>50</sup> and Waymon Darden donated land for a fire station.<sup>51</sup> Janet Veazey's obituary offered a long list of public service, including service as vice president of the local school board and volunteer work in numerous service and charity organization.<sup>52</sup> Several women were remembered simply for helping others, by sitting with the sick or cooking.

Finally, both men and women who died in 1995 were remembered simply because they enjoyed being with other people in Guntersville. One woman loved to walk with her neighbors. M.J. Lambert looked forward to going to town on Saturdays "because of all the people he'd see."<sup>53</sup> Both men's and women's obituaries in 1995 noted they enjoyed activities at the community senior center.

### Church

Church was another major theme in *Advertiser-Glean* obituaries during both years examined. In 1965, thirty-three men's obituaries (21 percent) and 47 women's obituaries (52 percent) listed membership in specific churches or affiliation with particular denominations. That number was 92 in 1995 for men (40 percent) and 121 for women (54 percent). And membership was only part of the picture. In 1965, some men were remembered for leadership roles, as deacons, or simply for being active in church affairs. One man's obituary noted he had been a church member for 43 years. Women were remembered for regular attendance, and for being active.

Obituaries in 1995 provided a much richer picture of church activities. Women taught Sunday school, sang beautifully in the choir, played organ and enjoyed church leadership and work. One was commemorated for being the oldest member of her church and another for her work in her church's women's Society for Christian Service.<sup>54</sup>

Men were remembered for being charter members of their churches, or at least long-time members. They were known for service, including one man who did not charge for it, but regularly mowed grass in area church yards and cemeteries.<sup>55</sup>

And religious values were expressed not just through church service or affiliation. One man was remembered for hand-copying the entire New Testament 22 times and the Old Testament seven times. He bound the copies in leather and gave them to his children and friends.<sup>56</sup> Another had five given names, each one for a preacher at a “camp meeting” his parents had attended.<sup>57</sup>

## Family

It is not surprising that family was another major category in obituary coverage during both sample years examined, particularly since family members were likely the major sources of information. Most obituaries listed, at the end, the deceased’s immediate family as “survivors.” Though these lists might provide interesting insights into changing definitions of families and their dynamics, they were not analyzed as part of this study. Family affiliations were mentioned here only as part of the descriptions of attributes and contributions of the deceased.

Spouses were the most often listed family member for both men and women, though many obituaries also listed parents by name, even the deceased parents of elderly citizens. As noted earlier, a number of women’s obituaries included their husbands’ occupations, though more pointed out when their husbands died. Women in Guntersville, it seems, often outlived their spouses. Men’s obituaries mentioned wives, and noted, much more often than women’s obituaries, the number of years they were married (likely because their widows provided information for the newspaper). Names of children were seldom listed in the narratives of the obituaries (apart from the survivor lists), but often women and men were remembered for being great-great grandparents. And those with big families received special attention, particularly those with eight or 10 siblings or many descendants. One man was remembered for leaving 73 descendants in five generations, and another for 131 descendants.<sup>58</sup>

But obituaries, particularly those in 1995, remembered much more than names of spouses and numbers of siblings or offspring. They offered hints into relationships. Rilla West’s husband, a one-armed carpenter, only called her by name one time during their entire marriage, and that was when the house was on fire. He always called her “sweetheart.”<sup>59</sup> Obituaries also reflected family connections. For example, one woman was the oldest of 10 children, all of whom lived within 10 miles of their father’s home. Another woman and her twin sister married brothers and lived next door to each other.<sup>60</sup> At the end of their lives, many of the deceased lived with their children, siblings, nieces or nephews. They enjoyed or loved spending time with their grandchildren. One man walked to Guntersville nearly every week with his sister.<sup>61</sup> Odell Moore was remembered for helping rear her niece, the first black majorette at the local high school.<sup>62</sup>

## Service to country and public memory

Obituaries linked the deceased to American history, particularly men with the nation’s wars. While only one woman was remembered for being a veteran, many men were noted for their war service, including 11 World War I veterans (one of whom had received the Purple Heart medal<sup>63</sup>) and eight World War II veterans in 1965. War service was commemorated in more detail in 1995 when 43 World War II veterans, eight Korean War veterans and two Vietnam War veterans died. (Eleven other men were remembered for being veterans, with no particular wars named.) Location of service was often mentioned for World War II, and some obituaries noted the men had been combat veterans. Some of the obituaries told stories. Billy Dyar “was one of 13 survivors when his destroyer was sunk;”<sup>64</sup> another man was stranded on a Pacific island for several months;<sup>65</sup> another

fought in the hedgerows at Normandy,<sup>66</sup> and another survived the Battle of the Bulge.<sup>67</sup>

Women’s connections to history were also noted. Flora Klueger “barely escaped Hitler and the Nazis in Austria, and it was eight years before she and her children were reunited with her husband in America.”<sup>68</sup> One woman lived on a farm during the Great Depression, another worked in a gunpowder plant during World War II. Remarkably, one man and two women were remembered for being children of Civil War veterans,<sup>69</sup> including 97-year-old Annie Lemley whose father had been a Baptist minister and a Confederate soldier.<sup>70</sup> Alice Taylor’s obituary noted that family fought on both sides during the war, “one grandfather fought for the South and the other one fought for the North.”<sup>71</sup>

Obituaries published in the *Advertiser-Gleam* linked Guntersville citizens and their families with national history and collective memory. While close community connections were important, so too were regional and national ties. In this Southern town, Civil War memory was still strong.

## Pastimes

Perhaps the biggest difference in the obituaries published in 1965 and 1995 was in the inclusion of favorite pastimes of the deceased, the things they loved to do. Only a scant few of the men’s obituaries in 1965 mentioned the deceased’s keen interest in stock car racing, or sports.<sup>72</sup> By 1995, obituaries for men and women celebrated their many passions. For men, fishing and hunting were the most popular hobbies (Bobby Dabs’ obituary actually included a photograph of him holding up two fish),<sup>73</sup> and for women it was growing flowers and quilting or crocheting. Viola Dunn, for example, “crocheted 700 Christmas ornaments for members of her family just this year,”<sup>74</sup> and Horace Cranford was “one of the country’s best coon hunters...He coon hunted right up until he went into the hospital for the last time.”<sup>75</sup>

Women in 1995 were remembered for pastimes that made use of their hands. In addition to quilting and crocheting, these women sewed clothing, knitted, did embroidery, worked in ceramics, made pillows, painted, shelled pecans, played piano, and cooked big meals for their families. One woman canned more than 4,000 jars of fruit and vegetables and “never failed to share with other people.”<sup>76</sup> They enjoyed activities that took them out, too, in addition to the creating the beautiful flower gardens. They grew vegetables, traveled, watched birds, walked, boated, attended gospel sings and dances, camped, golfed and bowled. And many obituaries mentioned reading as a favorite activity.

When they were not hunting or fishing, Guntersville men followed sports, either on television or in person, and several were remembered for playing baseball, softball, basketball, or football, and for coaching Little League or PeeWee sports. Obituaries noted their passion for college football, particularly when the deceased was a die-hard Alabama, Auburn or Georgia fan. These men also liked tinkering with motors, whether from cars, tractors or lawn mowers. They cooked (and ate), traveled, gardened, did yard work, read, painted, played and listened to music, rode trails, and collected baseball cards, guns, knives, grandfather clocks, and antique cars. One man took up woodcarving and made fireplace mantels for his friends and family.<sup>77</sup> A few had more unique hobbies. E. Wade Cox raised “game chickens” and shipped them around the world to places where cockfighting was still legal.<sup>78</sup> Another flew planes and was remembered for flying one under a bridge, “which was probably against the law.” (This amateur pilot was so tall he once “rode through town in an ambulance with his feet sticking out the back window.”)<sup>79</sup>

Though they had a strong work ethic, the people of Guntersville were remembered, too, for passions outside of their jobs, for their creativity and energy.

## Individuality

While these broad trends in causes of death and qualities of the deceased provide telling information about the culture of a community, so too do some of the unique attributes of those who died. “Firsts” became important, as did nostalgia. Joe David (Shank) Moore, who died in 1995, was remembered for being the first black employee of the Guntersville Post Office.<sup>80</sup> Henry Richardson “had the first flour and grist mill ever in Guntersville.”<sup>81</sup> Sarah Savannah Buckelew swapped a milk cow for her first radio.<sup>82</sup> Kathleen Harper’s father had operated the last horse-drawn hearse in the area, but her obituary noted she “went to her grave in a modern hearse, now called a funeral coach.”<sup>83</sup> David Price, 36, known as a cowboy, had “said many times he wanted to be taken to his grave in a mule-drawn wagon. That’s just how they took him.”<sup>84</sup>

Obituaries of elderly citizens offered hints of the difficulties of aging. For example Royce Armstrong had to give up his cows at 85 because he was afraid of being knocked down.<sup>85</sup> Yet sometimes the oldest Guntersville residents provided inspiration for staying young and active. Minnie Bishop “mowed her yard well into her 80s, fished into her 90s, and quilted after she was 100.”<sup>86</sup> Ervin Brothers took up motorcycle riding late in life.<sup>87</sup> Maudie Lathan was remembered for looking younger than 99.<sup>88</sup>

Sometimes the obituaries simply related something unusual. When Nannie B. Jones died, her obituary pointed out that the “B” in her name didn’t stand for anything.<sup>89</sup> When he signed up for service in World War II, the Army made R.V. Childress call himself Robert, even though his name really was R.V.<sup>90</sup> Joy Bridges was remembered for her love of cats; when she died she had 10 grown ones and seven kittens.<sup>91</sup> Edna Cunningham won second place in the state Miss Nursing Home contest.<sup>92</sup>

## Conclusion

Viewed collectively, the 738 obituaries published in the Guntersville *Advertiser-Gleam* in 1965 and 1995 do paint a kind of portrait, representing certain cultural values in this small Southern town. Taken individually, each obituary is more than just a news story about a death. Each also describes a life, portraying what was valued about an individual member of the community. These “commemorations” were shared with an audience larger than the town, legitimizing these memories and values to a much broader audience than simply the families and friends of the deceased.

What these published memories reveal is a people with strong ties to place, family, church, and to others in the community. These ties were more than simple affiliation; they included service as well. Obituaries reflected people — men, and later women — with a work ethic. Guntersville area citizens took joy in simple pastimes such as fishing or quilting. Their obituaries showed individuality, humor and energy. They revealed links to American history and memory as well, particularly to wars — even the Civil War.

These obituaries also revealed some cultural changes between 1965 and 1995. The strongest example was in the commemoration of women’s work, which barely existed in 1965 but was a strong component of 1995 obituaries. Of course, this does not mean that

women were not working in 1965, just that their work was not publicly acknowledged and remembered in the way it would be in decades to come. Published causes of death offered hints to other cultural changes, as well. According to Sam Harvey, who took over the newspaper after his father’s death, editors at the *Advertiser-Gleam* had worried about the stigma of suicide, and reported such deaths with care. But was there an unacknowledged hesitancy in reporting cancer, or other kinds of causes, in 1965? When the newspaper and families reported deaths from an “extended illness,” the silence surrounding the cause is telling.

Indeed, it is important to remember the silences on obituary pages. Women’s work, and particular causes of death are perhaps just two examples. Obituaries tend to reflect only dominant cultural values. The question becomes: Who and what were left out? Represented in only 34 percent of obituaries in 1965, it is likely that some women who died that year were not commemorated. The *Advertiser-Gleam* included obituaries for African-Americans in both years, but likely in very small numbers in 1965 when only a few obituaries identified the deceased as “colored.”<sup>93</sup> These obituaries published the same kinds of information as those for Caucasian residents, and they were given equal placement. So why were there so few? Was there a subtle discrimination at the newspaper, or did African-Americans themselves not place any value in a published obituary? In 1995 the newspaper did not identify race, so percentages of inclusion are impossible to determine. Yet the newspaper’s policy of running photographs of the deceased when available revealed a number of black faces, and the affiliations with traditionally black churches indicate that African-Americans were regularly included in 1995.

Of course obituary pages are limited only to those who died, and so their reflection of the community is naturally skewed. Though people of all ages were included in 1965 and 1995, most obituaries were for people over 60, and many were for people in their 80s, 90s and even a few over 100. Thus, the cultural values here are those of an older community. Values of youth remained largely silent.

Yet despite these limitations, obituaries did contribute to the vitality of the community and helped the newspaper perform its mission not only of reporting news but of connecting readers. Obituaries connect families, friends, co-workers and neighbors in shared commemoration of not only the deceased, but of his or her love of hometown, church, associations, families, and simple pastimes. In legitimizing these powerful death stories for a wider audience, obituaries become not only reflective, but instructive as well.

It follows, then, that inclusion is the most important attribute of an obituary page. This is vividly apparent in the Guntersville *Advertiser-Gleam*, which focused resources on its obituary page — in space allocated and staff time spent — and made it an important part of the coverage of its community. Not only were more people included in 1995 than in 1965, but these obituaries provided a much richer portrayal of the values of community, family, church. Whether this coverage added to the circulation figures or popularity of the newspapers is unknown, but the newspaper’s editor, the late Porter Harvey, believed in the importance of such coverage. And this legacy was remembered, commemorated and legitimized in his own obituary, which noted the national reputation of his obituary page, and Harvey’s love of “finding news and writing it up.”<sup>94</sup>

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43. "Vera Caldwell," *Guntersville Advertiser-Gleam* (2 August 1995), 14.
44. "Floyd Ayers," *Guntersville Advertiser-Gleam* (26 July 1995), 16.
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48. "I.B. Hyde," *Guntersville Advertiser-Gleam* (14 April 1965), 1.
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58. "Wiley Schrimsher," *Guntersville Advertiser-Gleam* (16 August 1995), 16; "Dan Tucker," *Guntersville Advertiser-Gleam* (16 August 1995), 16.
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# “McJournalism”, the local press and the McDonalidization thesis

By **Bob Franklin**

British local newspapers experienced seismic and rapid change in 1995 when the greater part of the local press shifted to tabloid formats. By 1997, only 10 of the 72 local evening papers published in broadsheet (Griffith 1997, p12): two years later, the *Yorkshire Evening Post* was among the last converts (Reeves 1999, p18). The move to tabloid generated changes in editorial content as well as page layout and size. A greater editorial emphasis on entertainment, consumer items and reports which refracted news stories through the prism of human interest, was evident in a higher story count and shorter, ‘frothier’ stories which used bigger headlines, more pictures and a greater use of colour (Franklin 1997, p 113). Driven by the increasing competitiveness and corporatisation of media markets, these restyled local newspapers emerged bearing all the hallmarks of tabloid journalism. By this process, the local press has become a focus for what has been described as the “dumbing down debate” which engages both those who “lament” the decline in traditional journalism and those enthusiasts who wish to celebrate the emergence of more popular cultural forms (Langer 1998).

In this paper I offer some preliminary theorising of a different explanation for this evident shift in news reporting. This trend, I suggest, might usefully be understood as part of the wider socio-historical processes of rationalisation and bureaucratisation first identified by Weber (1974). More recently, George Ritzer (1993, 1998, 2002) has adopted the metaphor of a fast food restaurant based on the principles of efficiency, calculability, predictability and control to characterise this intensifying process of rationalisation which characterises modernity: Ritzer’s neologism “McDonaldization” articulates this trend. Increasing areas of social life are subject to McDonaldization and I wish to argue that the emergence of a highly standardised, packaged journalism might represent a further manifestation of McDonaldization. The high quality local journalism which used to offer a culinary feast, has been replaced by what Andrew Marr denounced as “bite-sized McNugget journalism” (Cited in Franklin, 1997, p 5) but what might better be described as “McJournalism”. I begin by outlining Ritzer claims concerning McDonaldization and provide a thumbnail sketch of the British local press, before assessing the explanatory value of McDonaldization for developments in local newspapers.

## Ritzer, McDonaldization and rational efficiency

Drawing on Max Weber’s suggestion that modern, capitalist societies are characterised by their requirement for the increasing application of rational decision making to new areas of social life, Ritzer (1993, 1998) neologises the term “McDonaldization” to characterise the highly controlled, bureaucratic and dehumanised nature of contemporary, particularly American, social life. For Ritzer, the word articulates “the process by which the principles of the fast-food restaurant are coming to dominate more and more sectors of American society as well as the rest of the world” (Ritzer 1993, p. 1; Schlosser 2002). The fast-food restaurant built on principles of effi-

ciency, calculability, predictability and control, where *quantity* and *standardisatio* replace *quality* and *variety* as the indicators of value, serves as a metaphor for this preoccupation with efficiency. Increasing areas of social life are subject to McDonaldisation including packaged holidays (1998, pp134-50) and universities (1998, pp151-163), along with the shops and hotel chains (1993, p. 88) which bring such striking uniformity to contemporary cityscapes that it becomes difficult to distinguish the built environment of Bangor from Birmingham or Barnsley. It seems irresistible to add the increasingly homogenous local tabloid newspapers to this list, as they articulate an evident corporate style imposed from the centre.

Ritzer’s analysis also explores the organisation and experience of work by drawing on Braverman’s (1974) analysis of the labour process. Work, he suggests, has become increasingly rationalised through bureaucracy, scientific management (Taylorism) and assembly lines (Fordism). Consequently, McDonaldization is leading to the creation of greater numbers of “McJobs” in which work is highly routinised and thinking is reduced to a minimum while higher level skills, creativity, critique as well as genuine personal contact and interaction are effectively excluded: both producers and, in the service industries, consumers are systematically disempowered (Ritzer 1998, pp 59-70). Contemporary journalism is increasingly earning a place here.

There are four dimensions to McDonaldization. First, *efficiency* which involves “the choice of the optimum means to a given end” (1993, p. 35). Ritzer identifies two aspects of efficiency. He is concerned with the efficiency with which goods and services are delivered to consumers and, by this reasoning, fast-food restaurants provide more efficient means of obtaining meals than cooking at home from raw ingredients. McDonald’s provides the best means for “getting us from a state of being hungry to a state of being full” (Ritzer 1993, p. 9). At “Drive Thru” facilities, the customer consumes the burger without leaving the car. But Ritzer is also concerned with efficiency in the organisation of the production of goods and services. Consequently, market forces and relations drive production within a global system.

Second, *calculability* which requires an emphasis on things that can be counted and quantified. The time required for work tasks is carefully calculated and *quantity*, rather than *quality*, becomes the measure of value (Ritzer 1993, pp62-82). McDonaldization delivers “Big Macs” not “Delicious Macs”, large fries not tasty fries, “Double” or even “Triple Deckers” but not wholesome burgers.

Third, *predictability* reflecting an emphasis on standardisation: in the world of McDonalds, the settings, the food and the behaviour of the staff are identical (Ritzer 1993, pp83-99). The food, as well as being “fast”, is absolutely standard and predictable. The Big Mac consumed in Land’s End is exactly the same as the gluttonous feast purchased in John O’Groats.

Fourth, *control* by which Ritzer means the close and increasing control of both workers and consumers, typically via the introduction of technology. People are deskilled by both the detailed scripting of behaviour (of both workers and customers) and the use of technolo-

gies which make workers “watchmen” or overseers of production rather than any more active engagement with production: so the frying machine decides when the fries are cooked, the drinks machine delivers precisely the standard amount of “shake” before switching off (Smart, 1999 p 6).

Ritzer acknowledges that there are positive outcomes from this process of McDonaldization and hence the global spread of the phenomenon — just like McDonald’s (1998, pp 81-94). But there are “downsides”: “rational systems often spawn irrationalities” and can trigger *inefficiency, unpredictability, incalculability and loss of control* (1998, p. 121): what Weber termed “unintended consequences”, Ritzer dubs the “irrationality of rationality”. In the context of the local press, the paradox of constantly declining circulations that coexist with ever rising profits expresses one such irrationality of rationality.

### The local press paradox: Less readers, more profits

The local press in Britain is comprised of a cluster of newspapers distinguished by their size of circulation, periodicity of publication and the proportion of revenue they derive from advertising rather than sales. These local newspapers differ significantly in the financial and journalistic resources they enjoy which, research studies reveal, in turn has implications for their reliance on information subsidies from non-journalistic news organisations, such as organised public relations in local government and business: smaller weekly papers, heavily reliant on press releases enjoy little prospect for independent, investigative or critical journalism (Franklin 2004, pp106-111).

In 2004, there were 1300 local newspapers including 25 morning dailies (19 paid and 6 free), 75 evening papers, 21 Sundays (11 paid, 11 free), 529 paid weeklies and 650 free weeklies. The aggregate figure represents a slight decline in the number of published titles (1333) since 1990, although the contribution of the various papers to the “local press mix” has shifted significantly with 17 morning dailies, 73 evening papers, 7 Sundays, 434 paid weeklies and 802 free weeklies published in 1990 (Franklin and Murphy 1998, pp10-13; *Press Gazette* 5 March 2004, pp12-13).

But fewer people are reading these newspapers and circulations continue their steady decline from the peak year of 1989 reflecting, at least in part, the expansion of local radio, the spiralling costs of newsprint and growing access to the Internet. Audit Bureau of Circulation (ABC) figures which measure circulation changes (July to December 2003), chart this sustained decline in all sectors except the expansive paid weekly papers: 51% of weeklies enjoyed some, albeit slight, increase. Only 7 of the 75 listed evening papers displayed any increase with each of the 20 largest circulation papers registering decline. Some papers are haemorrhaging readers with the *Birmingham Evening Mail* losing 6.1% of sales across the 6 months monitored: equivalent figures for the *Coventry Evening Telegraph* and the *Liverpool Echo* are 5.9% and 5.3% respectively (*Press Gazette*, Op Cit). Similar trends are evident for morning dailies with only 3 resisting circulation decline: at *The Northern Echo* the 6.7% loss of circulation change represents a dramatic collapse. Only the *Sunday Sentinel* bucked the trend for Sunday papers. The 10 largest Sundays, by circulation, registered falling sales: 6 showed declining circulations of 5% and above (Ibid). Only the new *Metro* papers, published by Associated Press and distributed free to commuters in the large metropolitan centres, show any prospect for optimism, with all titles revealing growth: *Metro* London increased distribution by 13.2% to 449,616. But the status of such papers is uncertain. Part

regional and part national, Associated Press describes them as FUN papers: free urban nationals.

But advertising is buoyant despite declining circulations. In 2002, advertising revenues in the regional press reached £2,870 millions which represented a 21% share of total media advertising revenues: second only to television at 26% but higher than national newspapers (14%) magazines (13%) radio (4%) cinema (1%) and the Internet (1%). In terms of year on year percentage increase, moreover, the local press outperformed the general advertising market in 2002 and remains the only medium to have increased advertising expenditure every year for the last decade: from £1,600 millions in 1992 to £2,300 millions in 1997 and £2,870 millions in 2002.

This buoyancy of advertising revenues offers partial explanation for the highly profitable nature of the local press. In 2001, for example, Johnston Press, the fourth largest UK publisher of local papers, enjoyed an operating profit of £90 millions on annual turnover of £301 millions, representing a very respectable margin of 30%. In 2003, Trinity Mirror, the largest group, returned a profit in its lucrative regional newspaper division of £123.9 millions on a turnover of £525 millions: a profit margin of 24% (Pondsford 2004, p3).

Two additional reasons explain profitability. First, the low wages paid to journalists. A survey for The Journalism Training Forum found that 18% of journalists earned less than £18000 and 51% below £25000. Perhaps unsurprisingly, ITN’s Nicholas Owen, addressing the Newspaper Society’s conference, described provincial journalists’ pay as “abysmal” (Harcup 2003 p. 19).

Second, provincial newspaper groups enjoy economies of scale because ownership is concentrated among a very small number of groups. Takeovers and mergers are rife. In 1996, for example, ownership of one third of all regional newspaper companies changed hands (Franklin and Murphy 1998, p19). Since 1995 more than £6.5 billion has been spent on mergers. In December 2002, Newsquest acquired the *Glasgow Herald*, the *Glasgow Evening Times* and the *Sunday Herald* for £216 million, following its earlier purchase of the Newscom group in May 2000 for £444 millions, adding titles with circulations of 499,550 to its holdings. In March 2002, Johnston Press purchased Regional Independent Media’s (RIM) 53 titles with aggregate circulations of 1,602, 522. An obvious consequence of this merger activity has been a marked reduction of the 200 publishing companies in 1992, to 137 by 1998 and to 96 in 2003. But while 47 of these publishing companies own a single newspaper, the largest 20 groups own 85% of regional titles and control 96% of the weekly circulation: the five largest groups own 76% of newspaper by circulation (<http://www.newspapersoc.org.uk/factsandfigures.html>).

In summary, the British local press is characterised by a sustained decline in the number of published titles, publishers, readers and circulations although, paradoxically, this decline coexists with robust and expansive advertising revenues and profits.

### The growth of McJournalism?

Ritzer notes that McDonald’s has become so symbolically significant in America, that a number of organisations have been given nicknames with the prefix “Mc” to reflect their commitment to the McDonald philosophy. The popular American paper *USA TODAY*, for example, is nicknamed “McPaper”: the short pithy articles it publishes are known as “News McNuggets”. But does the McDonaldization thesis with its emphasis on efficiency, calculability, predictability and control, illuminate recent developments in the local press in the UK and signal the emergence of McJournalism?

*Efficiency*

McDonaldization is concerned with the efficient delivery of goods and services to the consumer and consequently, McDonaldization requires newspapers to make news readily accessible to readers. In Britain, local newspapers deploy editorial and typographical techniques to enhance readers' access to news: many of these conform to tabloid formats. A brief scan of newspapers reveals a greater emphasis on big (splash) headlines, WOB headlines, humorous (punny) headlines, more sensational headlines, along with shorter words, less of them, shorter stories, bigger pictures, colour pictures and more of them. Newspapers increasingly offer readers "News at a Glance" or "News in Brief" which provides a précis of the day's news in a vertical column down the left or right hand side of the page for "People who are Busy". In the *Metro*, for example, the "Metro Digest" summarises national news stories, the "Metro World" offers brief reviews of international news, while the "60 Second Interview" provides readers with opportunities to get to know a celebrity in just one minute.

The local press is increasingly organised for "efficiency" which, decoded is a synonym for a press organised according to market principles. A key feature of this quest for efficiency has been the increased concentration of corporate press ownership in the last 10 years. As noted above, the largest 20 newspaper groups own 85% of regional titles and own 96% of local newspapers by circulation: the five largest groups — Trinity Mirror, Newsquest, Northcliffe Newspapers, Johnston Press and Archant — own 76% of newspaper by circulation. Their dominance of the local press market is evident from Table 1 below.

Source: Newspaper Society <http://www.newspapersoc.org.uk>

Concentration of ownership in large regionally based monopolies has fostered concerns about whether this pattern of industrial organisation is in the public interest. When the Competition Commission examined Johnston Press' bid to sell eight East Midlands newspapers to Trinity Mirror in May 2002, for example, it concluded that the sale would be against the interests of the public and advertisers. The

Commission expressed concern that "cluster publishing" might nurture a "live and let live" philosophy in which regional monopolies — Newsquest in northern Lancashire, Trinity Mirror in the midlands and north Wales and Johnston Press in southern Scotland and the north east of England — tacitly agree to share the market, by carving up the country and allowing each other free rein in their "own territory" without any need to compete for readers or advertisers. Cluster publishing is, of course, inimical to quality journalism. In the Commission's words, "head-to-head competition between different publishers provides a spur which causes newspapers in such areas to be of higher quality than those produced by monopoly publishers" (Reeves, 2002, p17). The impact of these "efficient" patterns of ownership on editorial integrity and homogeneity is evident. The editorial policy of a single newspaper group may now influence content in more than 240 local papers.

In corporate ownership, moreover, local papers must contribute to group profits by minimising costs and maximising revenues. Consequently, trades unions (judged an imperfection in the market according to classical economics) have been progressively derecognised since the mid 1990s with attendant cuts in journalistic staffs, casualisation, low wages and poor conditions of service (Leapman 2001, p 17).

Across the same period, the introduction of new technology has reinforced these journalistic staffing trends (Gall 1998). Some measures to secure efficiency seem bizarre. Some local newspaper groups, for example, employ centralised teams of sub editors to work on a number of remote titles, rather than employing a local sub for each paper. The centralised sub editor has little, if any, local knowledge of the patch. The efficiency is high but the tie with the local community is severed, while "little matters like quality, accuracy and integrity...don't show up on the balance sheet". A group editor claimed that subbing a paper "up to 60 miles away" was like working in "another country" (Lockwood, 1999, p15).

But it is not only the "processing" of news which is increasingly "centralised". Cuts (efficiencies) in the number of journalists employed means newspapers are increasingly reliant on local news

**Table 1: 20 Largest Regional Publishing Groups by Number of Titles and Circulation**

	Total		Dailies Paid & Free		Sundays Paid & Free		Weekly Paid		Weekly Free	
	Number of Titles	Weekly Circulation	Number of Titles	Weekly Circulation	Number of Titles	Weekly Circulation	Number of Titles	Weekly Circulation	Number of Titles	Weekly Circulation
Top 20 Regional Press Publishers	1,110	65,484,882	96	35,168,757	20	2,074,467	398	5,421,630	596	22,820,028
Other Regional Press Publishers (76)	190	2,691,115	4	418,275	1	120,395	131	876,686	54	1,275,759
Total Regional Press Publishers (96)	1,300	68,175,997	100	35,587,032	21	2,194,862	529	6,298,316	650	24,095,787

agencies and public relations departments for stories: to adopt the gobbledegook of business rhetoric, journalism has been “out sourced”. The diversity and plurality of views, opinions and information available is reduced to a narrow group of influential and defining sources (Franklin 2004, p 109). Agencies also provide a photojournalism service with the same images of events syndicated around the region stamping the dull hand of uniformity on the presentation of news.

Another “efficiency” has been the decline in journalism training conducted “in house”. Trainees used to learn not simply practical skills from senior colleagues but the professional culture of journalism and public service. But these senior colleagues have been lost to redundancy and early retirement in the quest for efficiency. The conveyor belt that transmitted values as much as knowledge across professional generations, has been snapped. Training has also been “out sourced”. Would-be journalists must fund their own training which is increasingly provided by universities.

### Calculability

For Ritzer, calculability implied an emphasis on what can be quantified, in which *quantity* rather than *quality* becomes the measure of value. The media delight in quantifying both their products and the time invested on particular tasks by their workforce. So far as the first is concerned, newspapers are preoccupied with circulation: it is the key indicator of success. Circulation is crucial of course since it is related proportionately to cover price and advertising revenues. But circulation has replaced any judgement of quality. Editors claim that if circulation is rising or even holding steady then, “we must be getting something right”. When circulation is flat, newspaper groups have increasingly resorted to “dumping” copies with special deals for students, free copies dumped at bus and railway stations. Occasionally, newspapers will — like the *Birmingham Post and Mail* — make misleading returns to the ABC.

Pagination has also expanded since the mid 1990s reflecting the close gearing ratio that local papers maintain between newspapers’ number of editorial pages and advertising revenues. The local and regional press has, uniquely across the 1990s, sustained year on year increases in advertising revenues (see above). Consequently pagination has grown apace with local newspapers producing larger than ever papers: across 2003, the *Croydon Borough Post* averaged 150 pages each issue while the *Bromley News Shopper* averaged 111 pages (Newspaper Society 2004). Like Big Macs, British newspapers are, in the words of the advertising slogan, “Bigger than ever, with more news than ever”: like Big Macs, few claims are made for quality.

But it is the management of the production process where the principle of calculability rules and has become rampant. Geneva Overholster writing in the *American Review of Journalism* describes the FTE (full time equivalent) system that oversees the production of news in newspapers in the Gannett Group which owns Newsquest. The FTE system prescribes precisely the amount of time, space and resource which certain categories of stories require for their production. It recommends that an “AI category story should be 6 inches or less and that the reporter should use one press release and/or one or two cooperative sources, should spend 0.9 hours to produce each story and should deliver 40 such stories each week”. These working protocols are market driven and Overholster comments that “investors in these companies demand quarter to quarter profit increases and when the local economy does not promote or permit growth, profits have to be squeezed up by cost cutting. In doing so journalism is diminished” (Cited in Reeves and Blyth 1999, p 15).

Newsquest has considered similar practices and has introduced story count guidelines for journalists and page count guidelines for sub editors.

### Predictability

The local press increasingly offers a standardised fare of McJournalism with similar editorial contents and formats. The local press is now virtually a tabloid press. In terms of specific content, of course, local papers necessarily publish *local* stories and consequently the particular detail of stories varies between locales. But certain story types prevail in the local press with human interest stories predominating. A number of local editors asked to account for the declining election coverage in their papers in 1997 compared to 1992, mentioned their preference for human interest stories even during the course of the election. “The pressures of circulation are upon us,” an editor explained. “We would obviously love to have human interest stories day after day because we worry about becoming too boring for the public. They’re very much keener about what they will buy. Reporting about schools, councils, that sort of thing, you might have got away with that in the past, but now you have to look for good stories and the good stories which sell newspapers are tabloid stories. So for a couple of years now there has been big pressure on us to report these tabloid stories” (Cited in Franklin and Parry 1998, p225). The fact that the paper had been taken over by the Johnston Press Group two years earlier perhaps signals the impetus towards standardisation and predictability which group ownership can provide. *The Newcastle Evening Chronicle* describes their editorial style as “human interest with a hard edge” while “court and council are turn off”: a new family desk assumes a central role in the newsroom and reports health, education, family and consumer issues” (Pilling 1998, p187).

Other consequences of group ownership trigger standardised press formats. The economies of centralised subbing have been mentioned. The result is that a single sub editor with little if any knowledge of the local area may impose a uniform feel on local news reported in a number of local papers in the same group. Worse, the same stories and even the same readers’ letters may be passed around and published in the different papers in the same press group. A study of local press coverage of the 2001 general election discovered that letters which appeared in one local paper appeared in a sister paper owned by the same group some three weeks later (Franklin and Richardson 2002).

Resource starved local papers, moreover, like their national counterparts are increasing reliant on press releases from local government and other local sources. A study of a county council’s success in placing stories in the local press revealed that the same press release generated stories in 11 local papers in Northumberland: 19 of the 44 press releases each generated 3 or more stories in local newspapers (Franklin 2004, p110). But news management by government (locally and nationally) has subsequently developed apace prompting further standardisation of news. Journalist Peter Osborne, for example, claims that Alastair Campbell distributed a single press release with Tony Blair’s byline which was published verbatim in 100 different local newspapers: the only word changed was the name of the town in which the paper circulated (Osborne, 1999)

But there is a further point here, which illuminates the dehumanising, routine, almost robotic aspects of the work process under McDonaldization. At one point Ritzer’s discussion of cooking the burgers at McDonald’s provides a metaphor for journalists’ growing dependence on press releases from non-news organisations, as well as the de-skilled, repetitive and even unreflective nature of some con

temporary local journalism. “The food arrives [at McDonald’s]” Ritzer claims, “preformed, pre cut, pre sliced and prepared... all they [the workers at McDonald’s] need to do is, where necessary, cook or often only heat the food and pass it on to the customers” (Cited in Smart 1999, p6). In the Northumberland study cited above, journalists also seemed to operate in this passive manner, reading and publishing with only minimal — if any — editing or additional information, the press releases delivered to them “prepared and preformed” by the County Council: like the cooks at McDonald’s, journalists’ professional practice required no more than to “pass it on to the customers”.

### Control

The introduction of new technology, a cause and consequence of staff cuts, has resulted in journalists and production workers’ losing control of their workplace production. Locally, Eddie Shah pioneered the introduction of the new print technology at the *Warrington Messenger* in 1983: the Union response was robust (Goodhart and Wintour 1986). But it was Murdoch’s transfer of the *Sun*, *News of the World*, *The Times* and *Sunday Times* to Wapping without disruption of production or consultation with the Unions which marked a decisive shift in power and control in newspapers. Murdoch sacked 5000 print workers, cut his production costs substantially and challenged his competitors to employ similar technology or become uncompetitive. Murdoch’s unilateral move spoke eloquently to journalists and production workers about their new position in relation to management in the production of news.

Subsequently, new print technology has been established throughout the industry: two consequences follow. First, new technology allows for the convergence of some production tasks and the elimination of others. The role of subs and page layout designers has been challenged by new software which delivers journalists template pages into which they simply write their text: “QuarkXPress has given every reporter the capability of being an editor” (Bourke 2003, p 15). Second, new technology has prompted “multi-skilling”, perhaps better described as the “de-skilling”, of journalists (Pilling 1998). Digital convergence requires journalists to combine news gathering and reporting with other tasks: One example “is the way reporters are being encouraged to carry digital cameras” (Pilling 1998, p191). Additionally, the availability of laptop computers, modems, mobile telephones, and digital cameras mean that pictures and reports of events can — and must — be filed within seconds. Speed and efficiency are the obvious benefits of this technology which allows a 1000 word story to be filed in seconds without a copy taker (the downside of such technology being more evident to copy takers than newspaper managers). But new technology also isolates journalists, makes them individual rather than team workers, removes them from the collective news room culture, facilitates freelance work, reduces journalists’ bargaining power, encourages multi-skilling practices and empowers managers against journalists and other production workers: casualisation is widespread with fewer staff jobs in the local press than in the recent past.

### Conclusion

I have tried to suggest that recent developments in the local press might be clarified by employing Ritzer’s suggestive metaphor about fast food and McDonaldization. A new style of journalism which may be dubbed McJournalism, reflecting the drive for efficiency, calculability, predictability and control via technology is evident in the

local press. The manifest paradox — “the irrationality of rationality” — of this sustained emphasis on these four aspects of McDonaldization is that while readerships, circulations, the number of published titles, publishers, production workers and full-time journalists on staff contracts has experienced a sustained decline since the 1990s, advertising, pagination, profits and turnover have all increased.

Associated Newspaper’s *Metro* series seems to exemplify the McDonaldization phenomenon. The editor of the 6 regional FUN (free urban newspapers) papers insists the “commuters’ free tabloid *Metro* has spawned a different kind of journalism and journalist”. Its claims for exceptionalism are largely quantitative: size is important! The “sixth biggest daily paper in the country and the biggest free paper in the world” it has only “half a dozen news reporters in London and four in Manchester working for the regional editions”. The *Metro* is “basically a subs’ paper” with a high story count informed by the “‘F\*\*\* me Doris’ factor so beloved of Kelvin MacKenzie when he edited the *Sun*”. In sum, the editor claims, “what we are doing is soundbite journalism. We are giving people very compact news stories. We don’t have on-the-road reporters. Our reporters are Internet literate and do a lot of casting around on websites. We are reinventing what it means to be a news reporter” (Morgan 2001, p 14). In truth the *Metro* is a larger scale version of the old “slip edition” in which an identical and common core of centrally produced news and agency copy has different smatterings of local news wrapped around it to create a number of local editions: the essential feature of the paper remains the homogeneity of the central news core.

McJournalism delivers predictable and standardised newspapers. While market theorists claim diversity and quality as the essential products of competition, the reality is McJournalism and McPapers with similar stories and even pictures reflecting a growing reliance on agency copy. The reduced numbers of journalists, the influence of local advertisers, the increasing reliance on information subsidies from local government and other organisations with active PR staffs, means that from Land’s End to John O’Groats, McJournalism delivers the same flavourless mush.

Two consequences follow from the emergence of McJournalism. First, there is evidence of what might be termed an increased “spoon feeding” of news to readers in ever more accessible formats exemplified by the changes in the presentation of news in local, but also national, newspapers. Second, there is evidence of increased “force feeding” of readers with a relentlessly *uniform* and *predictable* diet of news presented in ever more *uniform* formats. Predictable news, of course, is an oxymoron: another irrationality of the rational. Price wars, special offers, relaunches and free supplements have become perennial components in local newspapers’ marketing strategies, but they have failed to stem the long term decline in readership. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the key “irrational” outcome of McJournalism is that customers are no longer willing to enter the restaurant. There are lots of empty seats: special offers have failed to seduce the customers back to try the newly launched dishes. A more fundamental dietary change is necessary.

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*This article originally appeared in a collection of essays titled Journalism: Critical Issues (2005). It is reproduced with the kind permission of the Open University Press/McGraw-Hill Publishing*

# Tangible history:

## *The value of commemorative newspaper sections*

By Corbin H. Crable

### Introduction

In smaller communities across America, it's a safe bet residents take pride in two things: their newspaper and their town's history.

When a major milestone in a town's history comes along, most notably a centennial, sesquicentennial or bicentennial anniversary, the town's newspaper is right there to cover it. That coverage can take many forms, from a mere front-page article to a full-color photo spread on the back page, to a larger project, such as a special section that marks the town's anniversary and its celebratory events. That special section and its coverage, then, become beloved keepsakes to the townsfolk, many of whom likely will hang onto the newspaper for sentimental reasons or just because they're history buffs.

It seems a disservice to end the newspaper's use there — surely such a lengthy piece, the result of hours, days and weeks of research and work, has a larger, greater use than simply sitting on someone's bookshelf or coffee table, serving as an occasional piece of reading.

This study maintains that there are several benefits to producing these special commemorative sections, and that journalists should not see the production of these sections as a chore or as simply obligatory. These special sections mainly serve three greater purposes:

- To bring revenue into the town and the newspaper itself through advertising dollars and tourism,
- To educate the youth of the community through use of the newspaper in historical societies, museums, and classrooms of all grade levels, and
- To foster practical experience and team-building skills throughout the production process.

These three main benefits should help all involved realize the long-lasting worth of commemorative sections and thereby turn the newspaper into something in which the entire community can take pride.

Although both the long-term and short-term benefits of the production and distribution of commemorative sections seem so obvious, community journalists increasingly see such projects as obligatory, according to Jock Lauterer, professor of communications at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. When he worked at a community newspaper in North Carolina and the time came to produce such a section, the editors and reporters laughingly referred to it as the "Moan and Groan." To them, the section wasn't produced because they had any interest in their community. It was produced because...well...that's just the way it was always done.

Upon close examination of the greater values of the commemorative section, which will be presented here, the old "Moan and Groan" just might become a more highly anticipated project.

### Background

Riley County, Kansas, and the community of Manhattan, Kan., home to Kansas State University, recognized their sesquicentennial anniversary this year, with celebratory events taking place during the first weekend in June. In the days preceding and during the events, local media covered the celebrations and recounted the history of the town and county through articles, archive photographs and editorials. The city's newspaper, *The Manhattan Mercury*, printed a 64-page special section titled "Manhattan 150: Celebrating 150 Years of Progress." The student-run daily newspaper of K-State, *The Kansas State Collegian*, printed its own 10-page special section, as well as a collaborative section with another area paper, *The Riley Countian*, titled "Riley County Legacy." The section, printed in late April 2005, was the result of months of preparation by local elementary, middle, high school and college students. Elementary, middle and high school and college students researched the county's history and wrote articles on its past and present, while K-State undergraduate and graduate students edited and designed the section. Romelle Van Sickle, outgoing editor of *The Riley Countian*, and Gloria Freeland, assistant professor of journalism and mass communications at K-State, oversaw the project. A *Collegian* photographer took many photos for the section, but most were donated by the Riley County Historical Society. The section made its debut in the *Riley Countian* on April 28 and was inserted into 5,000 copies of the May 2 *Collegian*.

Other local media, such as the weekly *Manhattan Free Press*, did not print special sections because of budget and personnel issues, but instead devoted much of their regular print space to precedes and coverage of the county and town celebrations.

This case study employs more than a dozen interviews with students, educators, professional journalists and historians in presenting its assertion that commemorative newspaper sections have a greater worth than many realize. These benefits of financial and educational gain should indeed make the entire production process more than worth your time and money.

### Commemorative newspaper sections bring revenue into the town and the newspaper itself through advertising dollars and tourism.

One of the more tangible benefits of putting together a commemorative section also is one of the most obvious: more ad revenue. In addition to your regular paper, you now have 60 more pages in which to allow businesses to tout themselves and, in turn, supply extra revenue to community newspapers that need it so desperately.

According to Lauterer, who also has written several books on community journalism and is considered by many in his field to be one of the foremost scholars on the topic, the successful advertisements take the same tone as the section in which they appear: they

should sell their role in the town itself. These ads, Lauterer says, should be crafted for special sections, offering the history of their business while combining interesting facts about their business that catch the reader's eye.

Lyle Butler, director of the Manhattan Area Chamber of Commerce, said newspaper editors shouldn't see the commemorative section as something that interests only a few people. Butler said he believes businesses see placing an ad in such a section as a long-term investment.

"For advertisers, there is a greater benefit," Butler said. "When they look at buying an ad for that section, they know it's going to be held onto for a long period of time."

Ned Seaton, editor in chief of *The Manhattan Mercury*, said his paper's commemorative section, published May 29, 2005, garnered more ads than he expected. Seaton wouldn't disclose the exact monetary amount that the ads brought in.

However, it is safe to estimate that the paper came away with several thousand dollars. When *The Marysville Advocate* covered the sesquicentennial anniversary of the town of Marysville, Kan., last year, publisher and co-editor Howard Kessinger said his paper's special section brought in more than \$5,000 in additional ad revenue. *The Advocate* has a readership of more than 5,000.

Van Sickle said throughout the process of promoting the special section to advertisers, she encouraged them to include historical information or photos on their respective business, to better link it to the community's history.

She said the local banks, especially The Riley County Bank, were instrumental in generating added advertising revenue for the section. Van Sickle said while some were more than happy to include the history of their business and their pride in their past, others were more modest and humble in their presentation.

"The banks did print some of their own history, but some don't like to toot their own horn," she said. "We had (merchants) who could've expanded on their history (in the ads) and chose not to, but we offered that."

Van Sickle said she realizes that many of the local merchants could have given their advertising dollars to other area newspapers, but most gave both their money and their support to the *Legacy* project because of the youth involved and because the ads in the section would be seen by other readers for years to come.

"(Advertisers) are so good at supporting anything where there are young people involved. They see the young folks as the future," Van Sickle said.

"You realize how much the community businesses are contacted by outside sources to have their advertising dollars go elsewhere, and you're grateful for what they give you. They knew this was something that would be kept for historical reasons and that this would be read down the line."

Regardless of the reasons advertisers decide to spend their money on these commemorative sections, perhaps more important than bringing in more ad money is determining what to do with it. Despite the need for many community newspapers to upgrade software or facilities, Lauterer said, editors and publishers would be wise to focus their funds on the very people who helped put the section together, be it journalists employed at the paper or community members who contributed articles or editorials.

Lauterer suggested establishing a monetary bonus to staff members or an honorarium to pay those student interns or community members who contribute articles to the section. This act, he pointed

out, would help raise morale among the newsroom staff, and it would act as a subtle "thank you" to those community members on whom your paper relies for historical data and story ideas. Bringing in and paying "fresh faces," Lauterer said, also would add a fresh perspective to the paper's reporting on the town's history. Instead of handing the coverage over to staff members who simply "go through the motions" of reporting on the town's history, find a longtime community member or an intern who can be excited about the town and write about it enthusiastically. Then, reward them with some of the funds you acquired from your ad sales. Taking these steps can only bring a newspaper closer to its community — both its established members and those experiencing it for the first time.

"You can build on a culture of community in the newsroom," he said. "You can build morale and celebrate good, hard work."

The newspaper's commemorative section also can indirectly contribute to tourism dollars, as well. Although newspapers like *The Mercury* and *The Collegian* might charge no more than a dollar or two to those who wish to purchase a copy, Lauterer said he suggests distributing the section free of charge to local restaurants and hotels. The paper, then, could act as an introduction to the town and its history and merchants for those new to town. Or, Lauterer said, it could serve as a way for those who have moved from the town to rediscover it — and their favorite stores and businesses.

"There's got to be an intersection between surprise and information," he said.

### **Commemorative newspaper sections educate the youth of the community through use of the newspaper in historical societies, museums, and classrooms of all grade levels.**

The reference to education here has dual meanings: commemorative newspapers should be used to teach students of all ages about their background in the community, but it also can be a practical tool by which students of all ages can learn more about journalism. The example cited by Lauterer in which he advocates hiring interns to help produce commemorative sections is appropriate to this argument.

First, newspapers can teach students so much that textbooks cannot. Newspapers offer firsthand accounts of events, and these accounts are published as soon as these events occur. Looking back at old newspapers, it's interesting to see how someone involved in a tornado in the 19th century, for instance, reacted to such a natural disaster, as opposed to readers of today, who can anticipate and better prepare for something of the same magnitude. Newspapers give us an immediate snapshot of events that affect our community, our nation, and our world.

With that said, all Manhattan area papers donated several copies to the Riley County Historical Society, local schools in the Manhattan-Ogden Unified School District and the Manhattan Public Library with the specific intention that they be used as historical references.

Jon Brake, editor of *The Manhattan Free Press*, said he's received much interest, both from the historical society and those residents who visit it, about the town's history since the paper published its coverage of Manhattan's celebration. In fact, Brake said, his paper teamed with the historical society for four months to publish parts of the diary of the founder of the town.

"We're having all kinds of people coming up and saying, 'I didn't know Manhattan had that,'" Brake said. "It's been a real delight."

The historical society, besides staying connected with Manhattan-area newspapers and contributing content, also has connections with area schools. Cheryl Collins, director of the Riley County Historical Museum, said she has a collection of archived information, from newspapers to brochures to photos, that teachers within the school district can specifically check out for their students for use in a paper or project. Such materials offer insight that no text-book produced on the other side of the country can, she said.

"In a lot of ways, newspapers are better than textbooks, because they allow students to discover the history of their community themselves, which makes it a lot more personal for them," Collins said.

Collins also said that educating oneself on a town's history can give a person a more solid connection to his or her home.

"With (K-State) and (Fort Riley), this is an extremely transient place, and it's really hard for people to connect because they may only be here for a little while," she said. "But local history can make that connection for you. It's important for people to connect with where they live."

Lauterer said community newspapers and their special sections play a greater role in education about one's town than most journalists would tend to believe.

"Community newspapers in general are responding to the documentary imperative," he said. "The newspaper is the history book of the community. It looks at life in this place, at this time. It is everyman's history book."

### **Commemorative newspaper sections foster practical experience and team-building skills throughout the production process.**

In addition to learning about their community, students in small towns can benefit both themselves and their local newspaper by becoming involved in the production of a newspaper section commemorating their town's anniversary. Such was the case for students in the Riley County school district and Kansas State University students, who produced the section "Riley County Legacy" for the local newspaper, *The Riley Countian*, and K-State's student-run newspaper, *The Collegian*.

Early in the spring 2005 semester, the coordinators of the project met at Riley County High School to discuss story ideas and the timeline for the project. A short time later, junior high and high school students came from the town of Riley to meet with Freeland's Community Media class to brainstorm theme and story ideas for the special section they were to produce. Each Community Media student and some individual students received story assignments; other younger students worked in groups.

Working with undergraduate and graduate students in a K-State Community Media class, nearly two dozen elementary, middle, and high school students did research on the county's historic people, places and events, and, with the help of their teachers, the young students wrote articles to be published in the special section. Van Sickle, Freeland and two K-State graduate students all proofread the articles. Freeland continued to make regular trips to RCHS and Blue Valley/Randolph schools to meet with students about their corrections before the students made final revisions.

K-State undergraduate and graduate students designed the special section using Adobe InDesign software, with photos donated by the local historical society, as well as photos taken by Freeland, a *Collegian* photographer, a high school student, and Kathy Monser, a middle-school teacher in the Blue Valley/Randolph school district.

Sixth-grade students at Riley County Grade School penned "The

ABCs of Riley County," a lighthearted poetic tribute to their home. The poems ran as a double-truck spread in the section.

Julie Doyen, library media specialist at Riley County Grade School, supervised her students' research and writing of "The ABCs of Riley County." Doyen said that after the section was printed, her students literally spent hours reading and rereading the publication on their own time. They had learned the value of hard, journalistic work, as well as much about their own community.

"Seeing that other local people put it together made them more interested," Doyen said of her students, harkening back to Lauterer's suggestion that local residents provide most of the section's content. "It provided a sense of ownership and pride, and they wanted to use it more (than textbooks)."

Middle-school teacher Monser said her students felt their hard work paid off.

"When we saw the printed copy of *The Riley Countian*, it was like winning a trophy," Monser said. "Each of the students looked for the articles they had a part in and were filled with a sense of pride and accomplishment."

The journalistic skills her students learned, amid the many revisions they were asked to make, were equally worth the experience, Monser said.

"We learned that there were different kinds of writing, and reporting and journalism are far different from writing an essay or a report," she said. "We found that it was hard work and that (Freeland) would ask us to write and rewrite until we got it right."

K-State students in Freeland's Community Media class said they, too, benefited from the practical experience offered by the special section project. J. Scott Bowman, senior in English at K-State and a former student of Freeland's, said he learned that because of the size of such towns, knowing one's sources and how to approach them with story ideas and interview questions is important.

"I realized that in small towns, great events (like the 150th celebration) require more work to figure out what's going on and whom you need to talk to," he said.

Even Van Sickle, a 22-year veteran of *The Riley Countian*, said the project was a learning experience for her, too. For the first time in her tenure, Van Sickle, who has used Adobe Pagemaker in designing her paper since she began as editor, used Adobe InDesign in creating the page templates and designing the ads.

The experience of learning new software was both exciting and challenging, she said.

"My mom always said, 'You can do anything you have to do,' and by golly, I did," Van Sickle said. "Considering we were working on (Riley County Legacy) and putting out our own weekly edition at the same time, I think we did OK."

Freeland, one of the people who spearheaded the project, said the students' work on the special section gave them the chance to get out into the community and interact with its residents in person.

"Too often, people rely too much on e-mail and phones for interviews," she said. "Now, they had to go out and meet people face to face."

Freeland said if given a second chance, there would be one major revision she would make to the overall organization of the project. She said, though, that she was pleased with what the students took away from the project, both personally and professionally.

"I would've liked to have more interaction between the college students and the younger kids," she said, "but the most important thing was giving them a sense of pride in their community."

The span of the *Legacy* project was so great that it served as a learning tool for students of all age ranges. Since most were new to the field of journalism, not only did they gain a greater appreciation of the county in which they lived, but they were introduced to a career they eventually might want to pursue. Such fresh faces, as Lauterer pointed out earlier, can only help commemorative sections by offering a new, eager perspective full of wonder.

### Summary and conclusion

While these three hypotheses about special sections in newspapers might be obvious to the layperson, there remains a need for these viewpoints to be presented time and again. If you go about the production of these sections by looking at them as a chore that needs to be attended to, your readers will pick up on that apathy. If you're not excited about your town's history, how can you expect them to be? If you bring in budding journalists or seasoned historians from outside the walls of your newsroom, you will find a renewed life in these projects, and that will be evident in the writing, in the photography, in the design of your section. And, if you choose not to, try to see the project as another way for you and your staff to learn more about the town you cover.

If it's monetary benefits your paper seeks, advertisers are sure to bring thousands of additional ad revenue dollars into your paper, thanks to special sections. This is the advertiser's chance to tout the history of his or her business and the role it plays in the community's economy. And, with the added revenue, you can be sure to maintain high morale among your newsroom employees and contributing writers and historians by issuing an honorarium to each person who helped in the production of the special section.

By examining these financial and educational benefits, the production of your next special section commemorating special events in your town can be a learning experience (and a profitable one, at that). All it takes is optimism, willingness to learn, and an eager attitude.

### Where to start?

If your town faces an upcoming anniversary and you're not sure where to begin your coverage, these few ideas should help get your started on your big project:

1. Talk to the people who live in your town. Sometimes, your best historian won't be the president of the historical society. It will be the little 85-year-old lady living by your church. These are the residents who sometimes get overlooked. But just get them talking about your community's past and you'll be amazed at the story ideas you'll receive from just one conversation.

2. Remember that although the people make up your community, your town wouldn't be there if it weren't for the historical buildings and places that make it great. Go to churches, schools, cemeteries

and the like to get their history and what they mean to everyone in town.

3. Profile the organizations that fuel volunteerism in your town. Get people excited about its past through your other stories, but profile organizations like Rotary Club to get people excited about your town's future. Don't forget that one of the jobs of a newspaper is to get residents engaged and involved in their community.

4. When the time comes for the planning of celebratory events, cover every single planning meeting. Again, these coverage stories will help call your readers to action and get them involved in the planning stages themselves. They won't know what is needed for the parade or pancake feed unless you tell them. This is another excellent way to get your readers involved in your town and give them a sense of pride and a feeling that they contributed to the celebration.

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# Real Alabama Project creates real world results

By Nan Fairley

The aim of two journalism professors involved in implementing the Auburn University Department of Communication and Journalism's Real Alabama Project is simple — get our majors out of the classroom, off the interstate and Internet and into the small towns that are still the heartbeat of our rural state. The challenges and rewards of our approach so far will be presented here. Journalists and journalism educators alike complain the loudest about students who only want to work for *Rolling Stone*. We also wring our hands over the dilemma of attracting and retaining students of color interested in journalism careers. At Auburn, we were looking for a way to address these complaints directly.

That's how the Real Alabama Project started. It is proving to be an effective method of sparking interest in community journalism. It is also improving multi-cultural understanding while encouraging minority students to consider journalism as a career.

Two Real Alabama programs will be highlighted in this paper. The first is the Tiger/Cub mentoring program. This effort pairs AU "mentors" with underserved students at two rural high schools with high minority and poverty rates, Loachapoka High School (LHS) and Notasulga High School (NHS). Articles written by the Tiger/Cub teams, focusing on issues and "unsung heroes" in rural Alabama, have been published in the *Montgomery Advertiser* and elsewhere. But, more importantly, students at both levels have a new appreciation for rural issues and each other.

The other is an Auburn University Newspaper Management class effort to essentially start a community newspaper from scratch. This class took the lead in an ASNE (American Society of Newspaper Editors) Newspaper Partnerships program effort to revive the *Notasulga Times*, a high school-based community newspaper. At the same time, the upper-level journalism students prepared a guide explaining how to start a community/school newspaper.

This guide, called "Start the Press!" is a down-to-earth manual based on their experience in Notasulga. The class did succeed in leading efforts to bring the *Notasulga Times* back to life in December 2004. And, ASNE's Senior Project Director Diana Mitsu Klos has given "Start the Press!" a home on [www.highschooljournalism.org](http://www.highschooljournalism.org), calling the guide "practical, not preachy."

Student feedback on the project suggests that giving them a "real world" challenge was appreciated.

The motivation of high school and college students involved in the Tiger/Cub Reporter program is real, fueled by the thrill of seeing bylined stories published. Both of these accomplishments have their roots in a total package we call the "Real Alabama Project." Before describing the Notasulga project and the Tiger/Cub mentoring system, the philosophy behind it will be explored.

## What is the Real Alabama Project?

The Real Alabama Project, put simply, is an effort to find new

ways to educate students about the value of both community journalism and community. We have also described The Real Alabama Project as a program promoting literacy, diversity and cultural understanding. The project was based on the belief that we could have a positive impact on literacy by introducing rural youth to opportunities in journalism while also building essential skills needed by our journalism majors.

The program was designed by Nan Fairley, associate professor of journalism, and Trish O'Kane, a veteran journalist and feature writing instructor who became the Outreach and Diversity Coordinator for the Department in 2003 and the driving force behind the Tiger/Cub approach.

In addition to the feature writing and management students, we also hoped to provide more opportunities across the curriculum that emphasized practical, hands-on experience, the heart of journalism education. An initial grant from AU Outreach provided salary and travel expenses for the Real Alabama initiative in 2003-2004. Additional funds were allocated from the College of Liberal Arts and the Department.

As the project evolved, we were inspired, in part, by the AU School of Architecture's Rural Studio ([www.ruralstudio.com](http://www.ruralstudio.com)). This nationally acclaimed program requires architecture students to live in one of the most impoverished areas of West Alabama's Black Belt. And they do a lot more than camp out. These students design and build award-winning homes with materials such as hay bales and discarded bottles. Another inspiration was the University of Alabama's PACERS Community Newspaper Project ([www.pacers.org/](http://www.pacers.org/)). The PCNP, under the direction of founder Jack Shelton, helped establish newspapers in rural schools across the state.

The decision to focus on rural Alabama was fueled by two primary factors: the void in availability of community newspapers that sadly continues to grow, and the equally sad gap in the Auburn students' grasp of serious issues facing rural Americans. They were much more attuned to what was happening on campus or in Birmingham or Atlanta. Third world conditions do still exist down the road from Auburn University in what is known as Alabama's Black Belt. It wasn't that our students did not care. It was simply that they did not know.

Based on the Rural Studio model, we recognized that creating real products for real people was key. Jack Shelton, the genius behind PACERS, describes this as "consequential learning." He suggested that students on the high school level benefit most by producing something of consequence in and for the communities where they live. We hoped to expand the benefit to college students by training them to mentor local journalists (high school students) who could cover their own communities, with both groups producing "something of consequence."

The Real Alabama project, then, is simply an approach to journalism education that strives to benefit rural communities and schools while enhancing our students' skills as journalists. In the process, we hoped to address some serious needs in rural schools. It sounds obvi

ous, but we wanted to make those benefits tangible.

### Real impact in the community

Many rural communities in Alabama and across the nation have lost or never had a local newspaper or “voice” for citizens. The number of newspapers in Alabama, 1,000 at the turn of the twentieth century, has dropped by almost 90 percent today. Rural communities such as Notasulga and others beyond the interstate and high-speed Internet access have been hardest hit.

The free flow of information is essential to creating a sense of community and boosting the self-esteem that is a building block of economic development, according to Auburn University’s “Beyond the Interstate” report ([www.ocm.auburn.edu/beyondtheinterstate.pdf](http://www.ocm.auburn.edu/beyondtheinterstate.pdf).) As noted in that AU Outreach report, “building connections among citizens, groups and institutions within the community” is critical. We hope the Real Alabama Project, by creating media outlets, can help make those types of connections.

The resurrection of the *Notasulga Times*, with support from the *Montgomery Advertiser* and ASNE, was a test case to see if we could find new ways to build, support and even help create community news outlets. While we achieved an immediate goal of reviving the high school newspaper, we also helped build community.

### Real solutions for high schools

Through the Tiger/Cub program, we are coming face to face with dire needs in the two targeted schools.

High schools in both Loachapoka and Notasulga have been hit hard by budget cuts and loss of personnel. There are no advanced placement classes or extracurricular activities beyond sports at either school, and dropout rates are among the highest in the state. The programs put in place last year may help the high schools improve their retention rate, writing test scores and perhaps even provide a path to community journalism careers. The initial year of the project proved students were thirsty for opportunity.

We are convinced we can create interest in reading and writing in the process of producing a community newspaper or through other Tiger/Cub initiatives. The need is great. For example, at Loachapoka High School, students who are not passing the exit exam are all failing the same subject. While most students pass the mathematical section, almost all are failing the reading and language section of the exit exam, according to the State Report Card for 2002-2003. The principal and teachers at both schools hope that the Tiger/Cub program will continue to excite their students about staying in school and eventually help retention rates. Many of the students drop out by the 9th or 10th grade.

In addition to planting the seeds of journalism in these two schools, we selfishly hope that some of the Cubs will eventually become AU Tigers. We believe the type of relationships built through this effort will eventually boost minority enrollment in our department and, eventually, help newsrooms still struggling to find and attract a diverse staff.

The majority of the student population at both NHS and LHS is African American, while the majority of students at Auburn University is white. Loachapoka High School is six miles away from Auburn. It might as well be 6,000 miles.

By bringing high school students to Auburn on a field trip, and by pairing them with our students, we are showing that Auburn University really does want them, and that college is a real option. In the long term, it could help to produce a new generation of African-American journalists from rural areas.

Another byproduct of this effort is identifying high school instructors who express interest in learning about and teaching journalism. At this point, we believe the production of the *Notasulga Times* and other similar projects will create a learning environment that could become a training resource for teachers in rural schools. Many high schools across Alabama are in desperate need of additional training and resources for high school journalism educators, particularly because of new certification requirements. Curriculum and training programs could be developed to meet this need and expand the impact of Auburn’s high school outreach efforts, with the “Start the Press!” guide being one such example.

### Real experience for AU students

Many of our students will become opinion-makers, reporters and editors at community newspapers. But we were witnessing a growing gap in their higher education experience. They needed a total immersion experience in a community to challenge their stereotypes and help them acquire critical thinking skills.

We believed it was our responsibility to provide those experiences. One of our AU Journalism Program goals is to produce journalists who understand community journalism and its own brand of public service. The vast majority of healthy newspapers in the country are smaller circulation newspapers (under 30,000), and our graduates must value the smaller communities that they will be working in. But, again, they know a lot more about Atlanta and Birmingham than they do about Monroeville or Roanoke. The Real Alabama Project forced them to spend time in communities they had managed to overlook. It also rewarded them for making connections with the folks who lived in those communities, particularly those who worked together in Tiger/Cub pairs.

Forcing our students off campus to cover stories beyond the usual city council meeting is proving to be rewarding. Stories focusing on Notasulga, Loachapoka and beyond, written by students participating in the first two years of the project, have been published by the *Montgomery Advertiser* and other outlets.

O’Kane best described this goal saying: “The Real Alabama project will take students out of the classroom and into the real Alabama. It is the Alabama they will one day be covering, diverse in many aspects, where rural poverty, ingrained discrimination, breathtaking beauty, changing demographics and a medieval prison system are realities. The Real Alabama project field experiences are based on two journalism teaching principles: 1) “Show, don’t tell,” and 2) the interview — an in-depth face-to-face encounter with another human being as the building block of every good story.”

O’Kane, a former *Time* reporter with extensive newspaper experience as an international correspondent, was also eager to challenge a passive style of journalism education that ignored what she called “cultural competency.” As she put it:

“I’m pushing the line that if you are afraid to talk to people different from you, if you feel uncomfortable being the minority at a community event you are covering, if you are ignorant about different cultures, languages and history, you cannot do a decent job as a reporter in today’s world, and that includes rapidly changing Alabama.”

She suggested, “They should all be studying another language, taking risks, throwing themselves into situations that scare them.” And, believe it or not, “scaring them” did not require sending them to Central America or Iraq. It was just down the road in two rural Alabama schools. The specifics of two Real Alabama projects are spelled out below.

## The Tiger/Cub mentoring program

A critical component is the mentoring system that pairs AU students with students in the targeted schools. The Tiger/Cub Program, links two Auburn Feature Writing courses (total of 30 students) with two groups of high school students (30), in a writing mentor system each semester.

The Auburn journalism students are the Tiger correspondents, who are going off-campus to learn and write stories about a rural community. The high school students in the community are the “Cub” reporters and story scouts. As experts on their community, the high school students help Auburn students find the best local sources and stories.

The Auburn students tutor the high school students on basic journalism skills. Each pair meets weekly after school for one hour to discuss interviewing techniques, story organization, and ethics and to share information about the community. They meet at the high school in a classroom with a teacher present. Then they work separately on their stories.

The best stories are published. The *Montgomery Advertiser* ran a three-day series in fall 2004 featuring Tiger and Cub stories on the people and issues in rural Alabama. In 2004-05, Tiger/Cub reporting teams contributed stories published in the *Notasulga Times* and in a Loachapoka newsletter. Tigers and Cubs also wrote a front-page story on deadline for the *Montgomery Advertiser* on campus politics on the eve of the presidential election.

To prepare, Auburn students participate in one-on-one writing coaching sessions with their professors. These are intense editing sessions where students analyze and dissect their own stories and ideas. This gives them the opportunity to provide that same service to high school students. It reinforces lessons they learn in the Auburn classroom since they are required to explain story structure and interview techniques to their cub.

During the first half of the semester, Auburn students are prepared through lectures and special readings on education, rural life and racism. Since the high schools do not have journalism classes, the teacher-coordinator at each school sets up a writing club that meets regularly. The Auburn professor meets with the club to help prepare the high school students for the writing program.

By week six or seven of the semester, Tigers and Cubs begin working together. They are paired up first by gender, and then according to personality and interests (hobbies). They meet weekly for 10 weeks. During that time the Auburn student produces two stories Cubs help them find while he/she helps the high school student produce at least one story. The best stories are published.

Each Auburn student is required to meet weekly with his/her Cub, plus spend two hours a week in the community doing interviews and research. We also try to arrange joint field trips to civil rights historic sites and media centers, which serve to bring the Tiger/Cub pairs together for at least another eight hours.

Auburn journalism majors gain confidence as they confront the ethical dilemmas of going into a community as an outsider and reporting and writing about real people. They act as role models for their Cubs and encourage high journalistic standards. These experiences force them to think about their responsibilities as citizens and future journalists.

Together the Tigers and Cubs are producing stories in which readers hear the voices and opinions of people too often ignored by urban and suburban media. The high school students write about their school, their peers, their own grandparents, pastors, teachers

and other community leaders. This fosters a sense of pride and gives the community written documents to keep.

## The newspaper

Both the Notasulga and Loachapoka schools were formerly served by the University of Alabama’s PACERS program. As that program shifted focus, advisers left, and school schedules changed, the original *Notasulga Times* died three years ago. It was a loss for the school and the community. The former successful run of the *Times*, produced by students and former adviser Brenda Boman, was designed to give their community a forum.

As we considered bringing back the newspaper, residents seemed eager to see the return of the *Times*. The circulation of the once successful newspaper was estimated at 2,000, a healthy circulation for a community newspaper in a town of less than 1,000. As noted, one of the objectives of the Real Alabama project is to create real products. Fortunately, the Tiger/Cub plan was in place at Notasulga.

Then, the AU Journalism Program partnered with Notasulga High School and the *Montgomery Advertiser* and received a \$5,000 ASNE grant. The *Notasulga Times* was revived, with the first issue published in December 2004. More importantly, the structure was established to help keep the newspaper going in coming years.

The assignment — start a newspaper from scratch — was given to the newspaper management class members. They had help from the Tigers in my feature writing class, who were assigned Cubs (journalism club members at NHS). To document lessons they learned that might be of use to other high school students, the management students were also asked to compile information.

Students in both classes gained real world experience and more through their involvement in the launch of the *Notasulga Times*. As a result of their hard work, the “new” *Notasulga Times* was delivered to Notasulga High and the community just before Christmas. The ASNE grant provided desperately needed equipment and resources for NHS while the *Advertiser* covered printing costs. Some production work was also done at AU computer labs.

AU student mentors from newspaper management and feature writing classes worked with Notasulga Journalism Club members to establish a staff and work on stories and photos featured in the first issue of the revived *Notasulga Times*. Under the direction of English teacher Monica Barnes, the Notasulga High Journalism Club was established in the fall. This after-school program met regularly to form a staff and discuss journalism basics in October and November.

The NHS Journalism Club also participated in a field trip to Auburn University, where they met with management and feature writing students in planning sessions and toured the offices of the campus newspaper, the *Plainsman*.

The semester-long project was marked by major challenges. There was no formal journalism class at the small rural high school 13 miles from Auburn’s campus. Scheduling meetings on the different calendars by equally busy high school and college students was difficult. Administrators were uneasy about content of the forthcoming publication. But by bringing the newspaper back, students learned how to basically start a newspaper from scratch, dealing with issues such as ad sales, design and motivating staff members.

At the same time, they managed to finish “Start the Press!” The guide is now available in PDF form on ASNE’s [highschooljournalism.org](http://highschooljournalism.org) Web site, yet another “Real Alabama” product. In critiquing the guide, Klos said, “What I love most about it is that it was written by college students for high school students.”

Dr. Dale Harrison, chair of the Auburn University Department of Communication and Journalism, said the project gave the Auburn students, primarily juniors and seniors, an opportunity to learn while teaching. He also expects the program will inspire NHS students interested in journalism.

Wanda Lloyd, executive editor of the *Montgomery Advertiser*, said the ASNE Partnerships plan, which pairs a professional newspaper with high schools interested in journalism, worked in Notasulga.

"We really need more young people in high schools to have the opportunity to learn how to write for newspapers and learn how to produce newspapers," Lloyd said.

Years ago, she said, it was common for most high schools to have a newspaper and journalism classes, but too many have been eliminated because of budget cuts, a fact particularly true in rural schools.

The December publication of the first issue of *The Times* was celebrated by the university students and their younger partners at Notasulga High. Perhaps more importantly, the 930 residents of Notasulga were thrilled. Notasulga Mayor Frank Tew said, "The paper coming back is a great idea. I enjoy finding about the school and community news I have missed."

Klos added, "The ASNE partnership is not only great for Notasulga students who are interested in journalism, but for the entire school community, which will benefit from the free flow of information and exchange of ideas."

The value of the Notasulga program was best confirmed in Auburn student comments such as these:

"The process of starting this newspaper has taught me a lot about the importance of local journalism to small towns, including how crucial it is for every community to have a voice that represents local concerns and events."

— Elizabeth Farnsworth, AU management student

"A project of this magnitude was something I had yet to experience in my time as a journalism student at Auburn University. I believe that the lessons learned by our class in building a real-life newspaper will serve as a valuable reference in my future as a journalist. I firmly believe that putting together a viable news publication as a college student will serve later on as encouragement in the face of challenges that pop up in my career."

— Jason Odom, AU management student

## Conclusion

It is our hope that the Real Alabama Project can become a model for educating college students about the value of both community journalism as a career and the value of community. Once the program is firmly established, we hope the enterprise will produce a model that can be replicated in other rural communities that do not have the benefit of a newspaper.

In a keynote speech given by Dee Davis, president of the Center for Rural Strategies, at the "Rural America, Community Issues" conference at the University of Maryland, he bemoaned the fact that major newspapers continue to pull back circulation from rural areas "in the name of a 17 percent or higher profit margin." He explained:

"These trends present a particular set of problems for rural America in a conventional newspaper economy. Rural is where the market ends. The twenty percent of Americans outside the metropolitan areas are more costly to reach. And they have less purchasing power. But even though they represent a

less valuable demographic, they still could use real journalists looking into the issues that matter."

Some of those issues that matter, including health care, economic development strategies and education inequities, have been the focus of Real Alabama in-depth feature stories and columns. They've learned and seen up close evidence of the statistics from the Center for Rural Strategies that point out:

- Of the 200 poorest counties in the United States, 195 are rural.
- The rural poverty rate is 21 percent higher than the rest of the country.
- More than one out of every five rural children lives in poverty.
- Rural children are 50 percent more likely than urban kids to lack insurance.
- Eighth-graders in rural America are twice as likely to use amphetamines, and are 83 percent likelier to use crack cocaine than eighth-graders in urban centers.

And the list goes on.

College students involved in both the Newspaper Project and in the Tiger/Cub program also learned that what seemed like apathy in the Cubs was in reality more like hopelessness. They also saw that hopelessness in students' eyes turn into a glimmer of hope as the Cubs visited Auburn's campus and took field trips to Montgomery's civil right's historic sites and CNN's sparkling newsroom in Atlanta. And, they definitely saw and helped create a sense of pride when students saw their work published.

As Davis pointed out, "There are problems in rural America. There are also some solutions. How we set about to solve these problems makes a real difference for those who live in the countryside and for those who don't."

We hope that the Real Alabama Project continues to be at least an effort to find one solution.

Davis further suggested: "...we need to cover rural issues better. Misperceptions have consequences. We need to explain rural better. We need to show how it is connected to a bigger world. We need to talk about solutions from time to time."

Cover, explain, praise accomplishments and point out problems and solutions...the tried and true formula of community journalism. If that is missing in a community of 930 folks or 3,000, there is a gap that affects us all. Journalism students, educators and successful journalists, whether from small newspapers or large metro papers that continue to pull back from rural areas, need to take action.

So far, the action taken under the Real Alabama umbrella has revived a newspaper, produced clips, helped high school students and raised the level of our students' journalism skills and awareness of rural issues. In addition to a series of "Real Alabama" articles published in the *Montgomery Advertiser*, other "products" include a Tiger/Cub package, published in the *Advertiser* prior to the 2004 presidential election, and work published in the *Tuscaloosa News* and on the Web site of the Southern Poverty Law Center, [www.tolerance.org](http://www.tolerance.org). Other student essays on topics ranging from moms in prison to racism have been printed in the Auburn student newspaper, *The Plainsman*. Even now, a recent journalism graduate, Crystal Jarvis, is editing a book-length project that resulted from a Real Alabama field trip to Alabama's prison for women, a project she worked on under O'Kane's supervision.

In the future, we hope to see the program grow by partnering with more newspapers in Alabama that will run Real Alabama pack

ages. The *Montgomery Advertiser* has pledged support in terms of professional journalists serving as coaches to both college and high school students involved in the Tiger/Cub program.

Other partnerships with Alabama media are certainly possible as state newspapers see two program objectives — educating future journalists about particular needs in community journalism and mentoring future minority journalists — as critical.

We are also in the process of exploring ways to fund a Rural News Bureau to be used as headquarters for the Real Alabama project. We hope to partner with the School of Architecture to design this newsroom in a nearby rural community.

The Rural News Bureau will be set up like a community newspaper, with workstations, Internet access and classroom capabilities. The newsroom would also be a central site for after-school activities geared toward improving information access and writing skills for rural students and teachers.

For community journalists, I would suggest exploring creative ways to create “teaching partnerships” with schools in your own area if you are not doing so. Sometimes, internships are not enough. Look closely at the high schools in your area to see if they have any journalism education opportunities. You may be dealing with a school that has no journalism class, no adviser, and no time in a tight, test-heavy schedule. In our program, after-school “clubs” were established with the help of interested English teachers. This is not an ideal situation but it is much better than nothing, which is what exists in terms of journalism education at so many schools. Take advantage of programs such as ASNE Partnerships. ([www.highschooljournalism.org/teachers/asneprograms.htm](http://www.highschooljournalism.org/teachers/asneprograms.htm).)

Even without outside financial support, you can find creative ways to partner with schools, particularly reaching out to underserved populations in schools that need help. Find a way to build a “mentoring network” involving college students, high school students, and professionals. Area colleges can be enlisted to create teams that can work in schools. Whether working independently or with a college partner, make sure you have a passionate “match-

maker” who can oversee the relationships as they evolve. Don’t let red tape or other bureaucratic roadblocks from publishers, academics or high school administrators slam the door on what you are trying to do.

Again, student reaction to this project has been heart-warming and productive. Just recently, Professor O’Kane heard from one of her Loachapoka Cubs who called to say that, because of our program, he was hired by the Alabama State University newspaper as a staff writer. This young man was thrilled to be writing. He also happened to be the son of a father who told him black men could only make money at basketball.

As O’Kane said, “This was a seed worth planting.”

*Nan Fairley is an associate professor of journalism at Auburn University. This paper was presented at the Newspapers and Community-Building Symposium XI sponsored by the Huck Boyd National Center for Community Media and the National Newspaper Association Foundation at the 119th annual convention of the National Newspaper Association in Milwaukee on Sept. 29-30, 2005.*

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# Time to redesign?

## *How do you know, and how do you do it at a community newspaper?*

By Amber Willard

You want to redesign your newspaper. Excellent.

Now what?

Don't start by sketching new templates for the front page or creating a new flag. Put down the pencil and pick up some recent issues of your newspaper instead. An effective redesign starts by assessing current content because redesign is not just about looks — it retools the content, making it more relevant to readers, *and* it restructures the look to make it easier to read and, hopefully, to design each issue.

Assessing content sounds like it should be easy, but often it isn't because such evaluations are usually done by the same people putting out the content, and it is difficult to recognize that perhaps your way isn't the best way to do it or isn't effective as it could be. This is troublesome especially for community newspapers, which often don't have the money to hire a consultant and, moreover, are so busy compiling content and publishing it that they don't have time (or make time) to consider if their presentation is what readers truly want and need. But starting there, with what readers want and need, is the foundation of an effective, thoughtful redesign.

Once you determine what readers want by reviewing your content and actually asking readers (and nonreaders) their opinion, deciding whether to implement the recommendations and how to go about it is the next step. During this stage, it is important to also establish a timeline for accomplishing the goals of the redesign. (That means first you'll have to outline the goals of the redesign, creating a roadmap to lead you through the process. And redesign is a process, not something thrown together in your free time.) After the goals are crafted, you must determine concrete ways in which you will achieve those objectives. For example, "make the obituary copy more readable" is a goal, but *how* will it become more readable with the redesign? Is the problem with the point size or font choice, or both? Would it be better to change the way the obituaries are packaged, going from stretching each person's name across two columns and filling in text underneath in two one-column blocks to putting the name and obit copy into a single column? These are questions that need answering before you start the physical redesign of the newspaper.

Following decisions about content changes, then the physical redesign part starts. Do you want to start from scratch, or keep some of the previous design features? Again, this is where knowing what readers like and want is crucial. If they hate that stories jump from page 1 to 2 because it means they can't cut them out and save them without buying two newspapers, then fix that in your redesign. Look at what other newspapers — large and small — are doing as well. What do you like about them as a reader? What would you change? What ideas can you "borrow?" Make more than one prototype of every page to see if you can combine good elements of each.

When you've redesigned each page or whatever fits your needs, don't just start cranking out the "new and improved" newspaper. Go back to your readers again with the prototypes and ask them what they think. Do they like what you like? Does this version of the newspaper better serve them? Is there anything else you can do? And as you go through the redesign process, keep your readers apprised

of what's going on. Tell them, "We're working on making the newspaper better for you. Here are some of our plans. We're excited about these changes because they'll make the newspaper a stronger source of community news for our readers." When the redesign is unveiled and the first few issues are published, listen to what the readers have to say about it. Better yet, write a column asking them to tell you.

This paper will address each of these issues, walking you through the process of redesigning your community newspaper, from evaluating the effectiveness of content and reassessing the way it's presented to producing the final product. It's not a handbook for how every newspaper should be redesigned, but will supply crucial questions to ask through the course of redesigning the newspaper and offer suggestions and examples of what works well at other community newspapers.

### Knowing when it's time for a change

So how, exactly, do you know when it's time to redesign? Many factors can influence the answer. The reduction of printing press web sizes to save money by using less newsprint has driven many newspapers, including the *Chicago Tribune*, *Omaha World-Herald* and the *Washington Post*, to embark on redesign projects.

For others, such as the *Osawatomie Graphic* in Osawatomie, Kan., the redesign was fueled by the need to improve its content — "more stories, more issues coverage, fewer meetings," said Greg Branson, who is the publisher of that newspaper along with two others that were redesigned on a smaller scale. None of his papers had received meaningful redesigns in several years, and Branson believes newspapers should be redesigned every three to seven years. That does not mean a complete overhaul each time, but "visual updating." "People expect design to evolve," Branson said, explaining that just as consumers expect automakers to revamp the design of their vehicles every couple of years, they expect it of their newspapers too.

Sometimes, looking at the competition is enough to consider a redesign of your own newspaper. Contact newspapers in your area and beyond to see about setting up an exchange program in which you send them copies of your publication on a regular basis and they do the same. In addition to getting an idea of whether it's time to redesign, you might also get some ideas to incorporate into your redesign. Utt and Pasternack found in 2003 that more than half of the newspapers in their study had completed redesign projects in the past five years. More than 70% of their responses came from community newspapers — ones with circulations of 50,000 or less. These findings suggest decision-makers at these smaller newspapers recognize the value in redesigning their product.

"A common complaint is that community papers are always compared to larger newspapers in their market. Design conveys professionalism that you can't ignore. A sloppy, dated look is a signal of a sloppy, dated newspaper," said Ron Johnson, a journalism instructor at Kansas State University and design consultant.

If your newspaper looks old, readers are likely to infer that its news is old as well. As cities expand and suburbs encroach on formerly small-town areas, the local newspaper must rise to meet the

expectations of the new residents. Branson faced this as the Kansas City metro area grew to include Louisburg, Kan., and he decided it was time to update one of his other newspapers, the *Louisburg Herald*. “The Louisburg community has a lot of commuters, so we wanted [the newspaper] to look more cosmopolitan,” he said. “We didn’t want it to look like a hometown hick paper.”

### Looking at your content and figuring out what readers want

After the decision is made to redesign, the next step is not to dive into pumping out prototypes but to steadily go through recent issues of the newspaper and evaluate the content. This isn’t copyediting — you’re not reading for grammar mistakes. You need to assess how the content is presented, asking questions like:

- Does the city council story need to be 20 inches long each time?
- Should we be running six stories on the front page with only one photo?
- Do we have to put the school lunch menus on the same page every week? (More than likely, the answers to those questions are no, no, and yes.)

The most important question to ask, though, is what do the readers want? Are they reading all 20 inches of those council stories? Do they look at those six articles on the front and feel like someone vomited copy all over the page? Are they so frustrated by having to hunt for the lunch menus that they just give up? You don’t know until you ask. As you go through the content, make notes of possible changes or points on which to ask readers their opinions. Then follow up by actually asking them. Better yet, Johnson said, get together a small group of subscribers and nonsubscribers and give them a couple of recent issues. “Ask them to circle what they read,” he said. “Don’t coach them. The results may surprise you.”

### Surveys

In a recent survey of a town of 50,000, one researcher found that residents’ top concerns were about jobs and wages in that community, and that while they believed education should be a national and local priority, the residents polled were more interested in the local economy than the national one (Stone, 2000).

Recognizing the need to change coverage can be an important element as you plan your redesign. Ascertaining what types of coverage the community wants is the first step, and it does not have to be an expensive one. You can opt to hire professionals to conduct telephone surveys or question focus groups to learn what readers want from their newspapers. But money often is an issue at community newspapers, so paying an outside firm to poll residents might not be feasible. Leaders at these smaller newspapers can take the do-it-yourself approach to public polling — although it will not be as scientifically sound or exact — and gather meaningful feedback. The most difficult part will be determining what information you want to collect and how to phrase questions so they are simple enough to be understood by residents but still register detailed, helpful responses. For example, asking residents, “What do you think of the newspaper?” will not yield useful answers because many responses will be: “It’s great” or “I hardly ever read it.” You want to figure out *what* about the newspaper is great or *why* they hardly ever read it. Getting those kinds of answers is hard to do with a list of survey questions. If you do opt for a survey, make sure the questions are concise, such as:

- Which stories do you prefer to read on the front page of the

newspaper? (*Decide how many of the following options they can choose — one, two or all of them? These are merely possible answers — you must decide what’s appropriate for your survey.*)

Local schools  
Local government  
Local sports  
Local events  
National education  
National government  
National sports  
National events

- Would you prefer to see the school lunch menus published monthly, weekly or not at all?
- Would you prefer to see the letters to the editor page in the same place in each issue?
- Do you have difficulty reading the type in articles?

Keep the questions short (as well as the survey itself) and the answers simple — just make sure that the possible answers you provide aren’t based on a faulty presumption. For example, with the question about which types of stories people want to read on the front page, the answers assume that education, government, sports and events are the topics of the greatest interest to readers. Is there something else you’re missing?

One way to distribute the surveys is to print them in the newspaper, with an explanation that the newspaper is going to be redesigned and you want residents’ help with knowing what they want. Keep the surveys anonymous — don’t require names or addresses on them to ensure more honest responses. To encourage participation, ask readers to drop off their surveys at the newspaper office, and when they do, they can register to win a prize — perhaps \$100 or a free annual subscription. (To keep the surveys anonymous, have the respondents write their contact information on another sheet to enter the drawing.) Recognize, though, that this method will only elicit responses from readers of your newspaper, not those who don’t read it. If increasing circulation is a goal of your redesign, you need to develop another survey to figure out why people aren’t reading the paper and what would persuade them to read it on a regular basis.

About 10 years ago, the *Mobridge Tribune* in Mobridge, S.D., was redesigned, going from a broadsheet to a tabloid. Publisher Larry Atkinson took advantage of a regional show that attracts about 5,000 people and set up a booth for area residents to compare an issue of the broadsheet and a prototype of the tabloid. Each newspaper had the same news content and advertisements, although the sizes of some photographs and other elements had to be readjusted (Atkinson, 1993). The newspaper staff, along with a consultant, developed a 12-question survey in which participants could check a box to show whether they preferred the presentation of the “big paper,” “small paper,” or “no difference” (Atkinson, 1993, p. 4). Questions included:

- Which paper seems easier to read?
- The type seems easier to see in which paper?
- In which paper does it seem easier to find stories you want to read?
- Which paper would you most likely subscribe to?

“It showed 70 percent of the respondents preferred the tabloid paper overall, and a whopping 88 percent felt the smaller paper was easier to hold. Additionally, 59 percent said they felt the tabloid version was also easier to read, even though we had not changed the body typestyle of size.” (Atkinson, 1993, p. 4)

## Focus groups

However, if you want more detailed responses than what can be gained from surveys, setting up focus groups might be a better choice. In them, you can pose questions to participants and record their answers for later review. While you should have questions prepared for the group, you can also ask on-the-spot questions based on responses that need further elaboration. (Again, the questions must be specific — don't ask participants what they think of the newspaper and expect to get detailed replies that yield information useful for a redesign.)

Several approaches can be taken in determining how to recruit focus group participants, and should be influenced by the mission of your redesign. If one of the main objectives of the redesign is to attract more readers and increase circulation, you should include subscribers and nonsubscribers in your search for participants. You might decide to further categorize the subscribers into groups of those who have had subscriptions for at least five years and those who are newer subscribers to get their different perspectives of the newspaper's relevance to their lives. Other possible categorizations include:

- Long-term residents who are subscribers and newer residents who are subscribers
- Long-term residents who do not have a subscription and newer residents who do not have a subscription
- Older residents who are subscribers and younger residents who are subscribers
- Older residents who do not have a subscription and younger residents who do not have a subscription
- Various community leaders (these can be divided into groups such as education, city government, religion, business — look at the people who are stakeholders in the town) and “regular” residents

To recruit participants, you can use the newspaper itself by announcing the need for subscribers and nonsubscribers to have a voice in the impending redesign of the newspaper. Obviously, this method likely will yield more subscriber volunteers than nonsubscribers. To reach people who do not regularly read the newspaper, you have a few options to solicit volunteers. You can employ the approach utilized by the *Mobridge Tribune* and set up a booth at a local event to poll passers-by, or you can send requests for volunteers to area organizations and clubs, as well as businesses and churches, and post announcements around town. You can also enlist people you know, but keep in mind that they are not as likely to be honest with their answers because of your personal relationship.

Do not issue a blanket invitation to take part in the focus groups — you might end up with 40 people at a session, which will not produce meaningful responses because too many people will be talking over each other and each person will not have enough time to explain his or her answers to the question prompts. Stick with 10 to 15 people in each focus group and control the numbers by assigning participants to show up at a designated time and location. If you have trouble attracting participants or are worried they will skip their session, offer some sort of reward — a prize drawing for those who attend, mementos such as shirts, pens or notepads with the newspaper's logo, or free food if the session is scheduled during a mealtime.

## Setting obtainable objectives

After the focus groups meet, compile participants' responses and look for consistent points, such as several remarks that the weekly

“Upcoming Events” listing often is incomplete or that no one really reads the advice column. Then it's up to you to decide how to make the newspaper better for the readers — in the end, it is their paper and if they don't like it, they won't read it.

By knowing what the readers want, you can begin developing objectives and devising plans to meet these goals. You probably had a few ideas in mind about how you would like to change the newspaper and, as much as possible, those ideas should mesh with the feedback you received during the focus group meetings and/or from the surveys. For example, one of your objectives might have been to make the newspaper more readable and was supported by reader comments as straightforward as “I feel like I need reading glasses when I sit down with my paper, and I'm only 28.” But others, such as “I don't read much on the front page because it's too ‘busy,’” are also indicative of a readability problem. In a focus group you could have asked the speaker to explain what was meant by “busy,” but absent of that, several design elements could be competing with each other and turning off readers. For a goal of making the newspaper more readable, one specific way to meet the “I need my reading glasses” complaint can include changing the point size, font, leading, or kerning in articles, headlines and decks. This will open up more white space on the page, which may address the “it's too busy” issue as well.

Another goal of your redesign might be to offer shorter stories because residents indicated they weren't reading articles that were more than 10 inches long. So how do you meet this objective and still provide readers with news they need to know? Do it with more extras, which can include sidebars, fact/other information boxes, graphics and so on. The *Glendale (Calif.) News-Press* uses information boxes to recap decisions at weekly city council meetings as one way to shorten what otherwise would be long articles. At the end of the council story, which usually highlights one major council hearing or decision, the reporter includes information for a box with headings like “What Happened,” “What it Means,” and “Vote” that are explained in one or two sentences. The reporter might follow up on one of those items with a story later that week, but the information box keeps readers from being the dark until the article appears.

The objective-setting stage is another point where studying other newspapers can be helpful — look at your objectives and see if there's something someone else is doing that can help you meet your goal. For example, the *Glendale News-Press* and its sister paper, the *Burbank (Calif.) Leader*, have dedicated pages in almost every issue. These theme pages usually include a mix of hard and soft news articles that run once a week and include topics such as education, politics and business. News about these subjects is not limited to these pages, but they help provide an anchor that readers look for and expect. Grouping related content in the same location better serves readers. If having dedicated pages for specific types of news is one of your redesign goals, you must decide the topics that will be covered on each one (perhaps you'll opt for “public safety” instead of “crime” for a heading so you can include a wider range of articles) and develop an idea of how each page will be presented. Will each topic-driven page be in the same place each week, or will you allow the education page to be on pg. 4 one week and pg. 8 the next? How much space will you set aside for the stories and advertisements on each page? Does each page have to have a centerpiece with multiple pieces of art?

Another goal might be to better develop your opinion page. First of all, you need to define what constitutes “better developed.” If that means making it less text-heavy, you could borrow a practice of many other community newspapers and run either an editorial car

toon or a photograph that illustrates something discussed in a letter to the editor or editorial — maybe even more than one cartoon or photo. The art helps to break up the blocks of text on the page and can help fill the space when the letters to the editor run low. Perhaps “better developed” meant attracting more letters to the editor. In that case, one solution might be to begin running regular question boxes with articles that present more than one point of view (as most articles should). You can place the question box within the story so the text wraps around it, and pose a question to readers that solicits responses. Be sure the question you ask is concise and does not evoke “yes” or “no” answers. For example, do not pose the question: “Should the city fund a new skate park?” Instead, at least add “Why or why not?” to the end of the statement. Include information about how readers can respond — e-mail, voicemail, snail mail, etc. — within the question box so they don’t have to search for the newspaper’s contact information.

Whatever your objectives, you must outline them clearly and brainstorm tangible, feasible ways in which they can be met before beginning the physical redesign of the newspaper — the objectives and solutions must drive the redesign for it to be a successful venture.

## Doing the redesign

After all of the surveying and goal setting, getting to start on the actual redesign should be a relief. In some cases, it will be. That’s if you have clearly defined the possible ways in which to meet the objectives and designated someone who is responsible and organized to guide the redesign. (Note that last sentence said “guide” the redesign, not execute the redesign.) If your newspaper is fortunate enough to have a designer, that person probably should not be solely responsible for planning everything associated with the redesign. Someone else (the editor or publisher perhaps) should be the guide — following up on progress made with prototypes, ensuring deadlines are met, etc., said Michael Keegan of the *Washington Post* in remarks posted online from an April 2002 workshop presented by the American Society of Newspaper Editors. The designer, should you have one, will have enough to do without having to manage the entire project.

As you embark on the redesign on your pages, Johnson offered this advice: “Design and typography clutter inhibits smaller newspapers. Design is structure, not a matter of plugging in holes with information. Package related information so it’s most helpful to readers.” If it’s not possible to put every related article in the same package, then use refer boxes to let readers know about associated stories. It can be as simple — “For related news, go to page 2” — or detailed — “For news explaining the funding sources of the proposed skate park, go to page 2. For community responses to the proposed skate park, go to page 4. For letters to the editor about the proposed skate park, go to page 7. For information about how to weigh in on the proposed skate park debate, go to page 8.” — as you want.

During his redesign of the *Osawatimie Graphic*, Branson created many prototype pages because he “wanted it to look like a traditional newspaper with a simple layout that the staff could execute, but still be flexible for special features.” It is reasonable to expect some initial challenges as staffers adjust to learning new design styles, but some workers might not have the skill level required to consistently produce a quality publication following the redesign. Part of the driving force behind the redesign should be to make workers’ lives easier, not more difficult. By creating several prototypes and having test runs along the way, you should be able to gauge your designers’ ability to adapt to the redesign changes. If they

cannot consistently execute the redesigned product, you either need to retool the redesign or seek out designers with the skills you need.

## Type

The best place to start a redesign is with the chief element of the newspaper — the words. While what those words say is the paramount function of the newspaper, how those words are presented is important as well. “There is no Holy Grail when it comes to type,” Johnson said. “But if you’re relying on Times and Helvetica, your font is not working as hard for you as it should.” Although those fonts are classics and easily readable, each letter takes up more space than is necessary. Other fonts, such as Times New Roman and Helvetica Neue, are just as readable and take up less space, making them more efficient. They work harder for you.

Most newspapers designate one serif font and one sans serif font to be used in headlines and a single font for body copy. Some examples include the Escrow font used for main news headlines in the *Portland (Maine) Press Herald’s* redesign last year. The newspaper explained in a column that while the design team liked the font for its aesthetics, the key value of Escrow is it was designed for narrower pages, allowing more words to fit in headlines (Guttman, 2004). *The Moberidge Tribune* changed its headlines to Optima during its redesign and increased the body copy point size to 10.7 on 10.3 leading but kept Times Roman for the font (Atkinson, 1993). Utt and Pasternack found most newspapers prefer smaller point sizes for body text, 9 or 9.5 type, and that most of the newspapers in their study use a serif font for body copy (Utt & Pasternack, 2003). They also learned that most of the newspapers surveyed use sans serif fonts for headlines and had increased the size of their headlines to some degree. Johnson recommends avoiding wide or extreme bold sans serif fonts because “you shouldn’t always scream the news.”

Branson suggests changing the body text font before the redesign, slipping it in with no fanfare. “When you launch the redesign, people will complain they can’t read it and you can tell them it’s the same as it was before,” he said. “It’s all about perception.”

Another area to give special attention during the redesign is the type used for data in figures, such as sports agates, stock prices and real estate sales. Finding a font that works harder for you means saving space, improving the presentation, and being able to offer the reader more information.

## Front page

Before you start placing items on the front page, determine the number of columns you will use to build that page and all of the other pages in the publication. Many newspapers use a six- or seven-column format because those allow for greater design freedom in varying the width of columns in articles. For example, a six-column format allows a five-column, one-column design one day, a four-and-a-half, one-and-a-half design the next day, and a four, two design the day after.

Your next decision about the redesign of the front page should involve the flag. Will you keep the same flag or modify it, perhaps changing the font or adding a graphic? Some newspapers prefer to keep the same flag because it represents the newspaper and its place in the community’s history. It is the identity of the newspaper and some might fear that readers won’t recognize the newspaper if the flag is different. Others may want to change it to revert to a more classic-looking flag or opt for one that is more modern if readership surveys indicated the majority of readers are newer to the town and younger than in the past. Resist the temptation (if you have one) to go overboard with the flag redesign — adding a lot of bells and whis

ties to the flag probably won't help you sell any more newspapers.

Along with the design of the flag, you must determine its placement. Will it always appear at the top of the page, or will you run teasers above it? Utt and Pasternack found a majority of newspapers regularly run teasers above the flag and more than half regularly run photos above the flag. Only about a quarter of those surveyed regularly run headlines above the flag (Utt & Pasternack, 2003). Johnson questions the use of teasers in community newspapers, saying: "If you tease 10 things in the flag or rail, do you have enough content to do that and is that really going to send people inside? Is it a waste of space for a paper that has 12 pages? Your content has to be compelling."

The same concern can be raised with index boxes. If you are producing an eight-page paper every week, it's probably a waste of space to dedicate an entire rail down the left side of the front page for the index or news digest. You can determine the effectiveness of such features during the survey phase of the redesign by asking readers if they use the index box in its current form or if they would prefer a longer or shorter version of it. (One way to really measure this is to provide them with prototypes of a "new" front page that have an abbreviated index and another with a longer one, asking which one the readers find most helpful.) Atkinson (1993) wrote of his redesign: "Most of the outside research seemed to indicate that today's readers of newspapers are primarily 'scanners,' so we decided that our paper would have to be well compartmentalized, have a heavy use of graphics that would assist the reader in finding stories in which they had an interest in reading..." (p. 7-8).

Next on the list of front-page decisions should be the number of articles permitted on the front page and the packaging of a centerpiece. Ideally, a broadsheet community newspaper should have no fewer than three stories and no more than five stories begin on the front page. You also should set the allowable point sizes and fonts for different headline column widths, as well as the width and length of corresponding decks and/or summary leads during this part of the process. It's easier during everyday design if you set guidelines upfront — for instance, that a strip story on a six-column format should have a 72-point Times New Roman headline with a two-column, 36-point Helvetica Neue deck. While you're thinking about headlines, also consider whether you will have special labels for any stories and if so, if the label will be above the headline or in the story with the text wrapped around it? How will those headline rules change with centerpieces?

As you move toward reflecting on how to package centerpieces, remember that centerpieces require strong photographs because such art is imperative in crafting a good redesign. Centerpieces should have photos that are larger than the pictures on inside pages, and they should have at least two photos (or one photo and another visual element, such as a photo illustration or graphic). Stick with a simple rectangle shape for the centerpiece package. Terry Greenberg, during the 2001 ASNE convention, shared the centerpiece approach used at the *Elkhart* (Ind.) *Truth*: "[W]e just decided to get everybody in the room, Wednesdays at 1:30, and they don't leave the room until seven centerpieces, Friday through the next Thursday, are planned. The photographers are in there. The graphic artist is in there. And they get it done." Sometimes, forcing the staff to sit in a room until they accomplish their task is what must be done.

Finally, don't be afraid to use white space instead of black lines to separate stories and photos. Frame your centerpiece with extra space — white space — and give all of the stories some more breathing room.

### Inside pages

As you move beyond the front page, it is crucial that you have a plan for the rest of the pages and their content. If you decided to produce some theme pages, will those be closer to the front or the back of the paper? Do readers want the opinion page to be in the same place every issue? What about jumps? *The Manhattan* (Kan.) *Mercury* almost always jumps its front-page articles to the back page so readers automatically know where to look for the remainder of any story. Anchoring pages can make a big difference for readers because many people scan newspapers and they're more likely to read if they know where to go every time to get the news they want. "Be consistent. Don't use the school lunch menu to plug holes," Branson said.

You should develop headline and deck rules for inside pages, just as you did for the front page. Stick with the same font choices throughout the newspaper — the only exception should be for an extra-special front-page feature story or the front page of the feature section, should you have one. When it comes down to crunch time while designing, it helps to have preset guidelines to refer to. Don't rely on articles and photos for inside pages (or the front page); instead, use fact boxes and other lists to pull important information out of stories. In its redesign, the *Portland Press Herald* opted to shorten articles by having reporters write a main story and sidebar, as well as create a list of top Web sites and other resources for the topic (Guttman, 2004; Wickenheiser, 2004). These lists and boxes do not require great design skill and, again, better serve readers than dumping mounds of information into a single article.

Some other changes to consider:

- Focus on making your community calendar a true "one-stop shopping" experience for readers and come up with ways to get some art on the page to break up the text. (Think about running file photos of listings or sending a photographer to shoot a rehearsal of an upcoming event.)
- Think of ways to get more voices in the newspaper.
  - ☆ Weekly question-and-answer feature of "regular" community members whom you can select or invite to submit their answers on a form they can pick up.
  - ☆ "Man-on-the-street" question posed every week in a different location and printed on the opinion page (if you have trouble filling it).
  - ☆ Columnists for dedicated pages, such as a PTA column for the education page, or columnists to represent minority groups in your community.

### After the redesign

Are you done yet? Almost.

After you create prototypes of all the pages included in the redesign, it's good to go back to readers and nonreaders and ask them what they think of the "new and improved" newspaper. Do they actually read the more-detailed index box? Does the increased amount of white space on the front page make it seem like it's easier to read? Make sure your changes were for the better.

Take notes of the questions that these test groups ask and use them to compile a "Frequently-Asked-Questions" column that can run in the first issue of the redesigned newspaper. Letting readers know what's going on probably will make them more accepting of the change. And let them tell you what they think — set up and promote a special e-mail account or phone/voicemail line for readers'

feedback. Listen to what they have to say because they might have some suggestions for making your good newspaper better.

If you haven't already pursued an exchange program with other newspapers, do it. Contact other publications in your area and beyond, and when you receive their newspaper take the time to do a side-by-side comparison of their product and yours. Do they do something better than you? Is there an element of the other newspaper that you like and can apply to your publication?

The study of design and community needs should be continual at every newspaper and adjustments should be made along the way so the next time you redesign, it isn't such a major production. Design tweaks can be an ongoing process as you find ways to improve your newspaper, but take care not to rely more heavily on the visual presentation of the product than its content. As Tom Mangan wrote for *Editor & Publisher*: "[T]he most creative and colorful graphic packaging imaginable isn't going to change the disastrous cumulative effect of off-the-mark reporting or mediocre writing in our newspapers" (Mangan, 1998, p. 80)

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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  
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