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# New ways of connecting with readers:

## *How community newspapers are using Facebook, Twitter and other tools to deliver the news*

By Jennifer D. Greer and Yan Yan

As of March 2010, the Internet ranked as the third most popular news platform, behind local and national television outlets. Local print newspapers ranked as the fifth most popular news sources, with 50% of respondents to a national survey saying they get news this way (Pew Internet, 2010). The trend of news consumption shifting online is not new. Readers have been logging on to news websites, including those produced by traditional news organizations, since the 1990s. But the Pew Internet & American Life Project survey revealed that digital news consumption is changing in three fundamental ways. First, a substantial number of readers are now getting their news on the go, with 33% of cell phone users accessing news on their mobile phones. Further, people are personalizing their digital news to fit their interests, with 28% of Internet users customizing their homepages to get feeds from specific sources or on narrow topics. Finally, more consumers are actively participating in disseminating the news than ever before, with 37% of Internet users saying they either created news through blogging or posts, commented about news, or shared news on social media sites like Facebook or Twitter. Experience with news in a digital environment "is becoming a shared social experience as people swap links in emails, post news stories on their social networking site feeds, highlight news stories in their Tweets, and haggle over the meaning of events in discussion threads" (Pew Internet, 2010, Summary of Findings, para. 5).

Also in 2010, a September survey by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, found that while use of traditional news media platforms (broadcast and print) was declining slightly, news consumption across digital platforms — websites, cell phones, email, social networks, and podcasts — was increasing, leaving news consumption at its highest levels since the 1990s (Pew Research Center, 2010). In short, news delivered digitally was supplementing the diets of the U.S. news consumer. A third (34%) of people surveyed said they had gone online in the past day to consume news, but when all other digital forms were added in, the number jumped to 44% (2010). This compared with 31% who reported reading a print newspaper.

Clearly the delivery of news, dominated by print for much of U.S. history, is undergoing a fundamental shift. Newspapers, if they are to survive in an era of digital delivery, must adapt. Community newspapers may find themselves in a unique position to lead the industry in this transformative period of American journalism. Morton (1993) sees the fundamental strength of newspapers as the ability to "provide intense local coverage of events and subjects of intense concern to local consumers" (p. 21). In a time of transition, Adams (2007) argues that community newspapers "are in a better position than traditional media to extend their brand in the local community with their online newspapers" (p. 37).

This study examines how community newspapers are using alternate delivery methods to connect with audiences beyond print and beyond the basic website. Specifically, this study examines the use of newer digital delivery tools (e-mail, RSS feeds, Facebook, Twitter, and mobile/text alerts) among a sample of community newspapers nationwide. We content analyzed the newspapers' Web sites at three points over a 10-month period to see how many papers were using these tools and whether adoption of these alternate delivery methods increased over time.

### Literature review

Alternative delivery of newspaper content has taken many forms in the past three decades. The first foray into the digital delivery era was newspaper websites, now almost seen as a traditional publishing platform. Very quickly after going online in the mid to late 1990s, newspapers started using tools such as e-mail digests and aggregators to push web content to readers. The second category of alternative delivery emerged in the mid 2000s, when newspapers started using social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter to send content to readers. The third and most recent innovation is delivery of news on mobile devices, including cell phones and e-readers. Each of these formats is discussed in turn below. At the end of this review, studies showing a link between size of newspaper and alternative news delivery are highlighted.

## Websites, aggregators, and e-mail digests

U.S. newspapers started moving online more than 25 years ago with *Viewtron*, a service provided by Knight-Ridder newspapers (Harper, 1997). By 1995, newspapers settled on the World Wide Web as their electronic publishing environment of choice (Beamish, 1997). Nguyen (2008) argues that “the pervasive fear among traditional practitioners of becoming irrelevant in the Internet age ... stimulated the “massive online migration” in the mid 1990s (p. 91). According to Scott (2005), “In the dot-com boom between 1995 and 2000, almost everyone in the news business went online, and almost no one made any money ... newspapers hustled to find profitable strategies before they went out of business” (p. 96).

Most early online papers didn’t fully exploit the opportunities offered by the new medium (Kamerer & Bressers, 1998; Tremayne, 1997). In the early days of online news, most content on online newspapers was merely “shovelware, reproductions of content that appeared in a news organization’s primary distribution channels” (Scott, 2005, p. 110). As time went on and newspapers devoted more resources to online products, however, papers began to stress interactivity with readers and “push” delivery of digital information. Sites became more sophisticated through the use of informational graphics, video and two-way communication with readers (Greer & Mensing, 2004).

Increasingly, newspapers stopped waiting for readers to find their sites and started looking for ways to push information to readers, first through digests and breaking news updates delivered to e-mail inboxes. Vivian Schiller, once general manager of NYTimes.com, said that the newspapers sought out new opportunities to interact with their readers in new ways as technology developed (Emmett, 2009). Many early online newspapers required subscription or registration for users to enter their sites (Greer & Mensing, 2004), and as such they collected e-mail addresses. In addition to delivering breaking news to these addresses, newspapers allowed readers to sign up for daily or weekly summaries that linked back to their sites. Newspapers still use these digests for news and special advertising deals.

Another new “push” technology that emerged in the early 2000s is the news aggregator, a program that collects links, headlines, and other content of interest and delivers them to the reader’s homepage (Palser, 2005). The aggregators mean that readers no longer had to visit each site to see what is available. RSS, or really simple syndication, is the most common form of aggregation (2005). By making this option available to readers, site managers hoped to drive traffic by sending compelling headlines through RSS and enticing readers to click into the site.

## Social networking

Social networking sites, including Twitter and Facebook, are booming in all sectors of U.S. society, and the news business is no exception. Many news organizations have worked to forge a considerable presence on social media to reach new audiences, to drive traffic to their sites, and to extract information about their consumers. Schiller of NYTimes.com argues that “social media marketing is one of several essential strategies for disseminating news online — and for surviving” (quoted in Emmett, 2009, p. 41). James Brady, executive editor of washingtonpost.com, cites social media as the main attraction for younger news audiences, an attractive demographic, because they allow consumers to congregate and disseminate information with like-minded people. Many news companies have altered their social media strategies, from being protective of content to aggressively pushing it on all digital delivery platforms. “The bigger play is to put your stuff directly into a social media site,” Brady said. “There is more opportunity in social media for a niche story to be successful” (quoted in Emmett, 2009, p. 43).

*The Roanoke Times* in Virginia reported a twofold increase in referrals to its website in 2009 from Facebook and Twitter. Facebook accounted for 4.38% of the site’s referrals, and slightly fewer referrals came from Twitter. These numbers are growing and add hits with little to no cost (Schulte, 2010). Schulte also cites the impact of Digg, a live ranking of the Web’s most popular offerings, which can draw thousands of hits.

## Twitter

Twitter, started in 2006 and self described as “a real-time short messaging service that works over multiple networks and devices” (About Twitter, n.d.), had more than 5.3 million “twitterers” as of August 2010 (see [www.twttr.com](http://www.twttr.com)). Twitter, a micro-blogging site that limits posts to 140 characters, is being used by news organizations to bait readers to follow links to full versions of stories on the organizations’ site. “If you can’t get the traffic to go to your own site, why not take your content to where the traffic wants to go?” (Hane, 2006, p. 5). Online news avatars such as The Colonel, the *Chicago Tribune*’s “Web ambassador,” have become increasingly instrumental in news organizations’ interaction with consumers. “Colonel Tribune” was created as an online representative for the paper, with profiles on Facebook and Twitter, as part of Project O, a move to systematically build loyal relationships with consumers of the *Tribune*’s online product (Adee, 2008).

One list compiled in February 2009 cited about 1,300 Twitter accounts affiliated with newspapers. Some were general news or main accounts (a smaller newspaper’s only account, for instance); others were section accounts (such as books or sports); and still others were individual journalists’ accounts, which were updated with news or personal tweets (Smith, 2009). The number of newspaper-affiliated Twitter accounts has surely soared since then. The *Wall Street Journal*, for example, now has more than 50 Twitter feeds promoted on its site, on topics ranging from politics to sports (see <http://online.wsj.com/public/page/twitter.html>).

Palser (2009) advises news outlets to use Twitter to reach audiences that their print editions can’t reach. Most news organizations are simply sending headlines directly to Twitter, which is just the first of a plethora of possibilities. Betancourt (2009b) argues that Twitter is a way to engage an audience, connect with sources, and continue building personal brands. This format also forces writers to get to the point quickly and focus their attention. She cites some media professionals using Twitter to crowdsource, find sources, and promote stories. John Dickerson, chief political correspondent for *Slate*, argues Twitter actually improves the information-gathering process and points consumers toward the longer versions of stories for more information. “Written the right way, Twitter entries build a community of readers who find their way to longer articles because they are lured by these moment-by-moment observations” (Dickerson, 2008, p. 6). Further, frequent posting on Twitter helps an organization develop relationships with consumers (Garrison-Sprenger, 2008).

## Facebook

Facebook, which counted more than 500 million users worldwide as of August 2010, has the mission of giving “people the power to share and make the world more open and connected,” (Facebook, n.d., Mission). Users collectively spend more than 700 billion minutes per month on the service, uploading pictures, sharing information, and chatting (Facebook, n.d. Statistics).

Newspapers saw Facebook as an extension of their brand, and started their own pages on the social networking site to reach out to new readers and share stories. Emmett found that recommendation of stories by friends on Facebook leads to an increased readership of the news stories (Emmett, 2009). Greenhow and Reifman (2009) urge news organizations to jump on the Facebook bandwagon because it links them to the lucrative market of ‘tweens, teens, and young adults. Newspapers should “Facework,” he argues, meaning they should aggressively use their social networking sites to promote information sharing and creative inspiration. Many newspapers have followed that advice. Betancourt’s journalist’s guide to Facebook touts the service as a way to connect to communities involved in stories, find sources, and generate leads (2009a). She also says for media companies, Facebook is a way to build community and reach a larger audience. “Journalists should be using Facebook as a tool to unearth timely conversations around their topic or local community,” said J.D. Lasica, former editor of the *Sacramento Bee* (quoted in Betancourt, 2009a, Finding, para 2).

One example, described by Thompson (2009), was the *Tallahassee Democrat*’s

use of Facebook to find sources in covering the death of a 23-year-old college graduate killed while working for police in a drug sting gone bad. The z also found many of the “readers” of the story in this age group through alternative means, not through the print newspaper (Thompson, 2009).

### Mobile delivery

The most recent development in alternate delivery of newspaper content is through mobile devices such as cell phones and e-readers. Smartphones and other mobile Internet go beyond simply pairing mobile and Internet capabilities to offer seamless connectivity, increased personalization, and great opportunities for users to produce their own content (Castells, et al. 2007). Cell phones are used in virtually every segment of the population, and e-readers are gaining popularity as they become cheaper and more flexible. E-readers, such as the Kindle and the Nook, and other smart devices, such as the iPad, are becoming less like computers and more like something that mimics “the ink on-paper experience” (Skowronski, 2009, p. 13). Emmett (2008) argues that mobile devices will “complement other media, becoming ‘smart,’ readable, visual, acoustic, and connected, serving readers who access breaking news, sports scores, weather, blogs and stock quotes on the mobile Internet” (p. 25).

Newspapers started developing content for mobile media in the late 2000s, designing scaled-down websites with simple links, headlines, scores, maps, or stock quotes. *The New York Times* saw its mobile traffic increase by more than 9.8 million page views after launching its mobile-friendly version (Emmett, 2008). After the iPhone was launched, The Associated Press was the first company roll out a specialized news application, which launched in June 2008. By 2009, the number of AP members distributing content via AP Mobile rose from 107 to more than 1,000 (The Associated Press, 2009). More news corporations soon followed suit (McCombs, 2009). On average, AP Mobile users spend 17 minutes per month interacting with AP mobile applications and apnews.com. Top stories account for more than 50% of items accessed by AP Mobile news users, followed by Local News (21%). By December 2009, 100 million mobile news pages were served, a 160% increase from the previous year (Verve, 2010).

### Size matters

The Internet, in theory, levels the playing field, allowing dailies and weeklies and small and large papers alike the chance to break news and access to roughly the same technology (Adams, 2007). Yet Adams found that relatively few weeklies were taking advantage of the ability to publish whenever news broke; only 12% of weekly newspapers reporting updating their sites daily.

Both for weeklies and dailies, size is related to differences in interactivity, updating patterns, and digital content, according to several studies. Larger papers continuously outpace smaller ones, even in an environment where everyone can be a publisher. Gubman and Greer’s 1997 content analysis of 83 online newspapers found that sites were consistently sophisticated or unsophisticated depending on the size of the parent print news organization. These patterns have held true for the past 13 years, with large newspapers, on average, making the most use of alternate online delivery options. Greer and Mensing (2004) found that smaller newspapers “lagged behind” larger newspapers in every aspect of interactivity. Further, they argued that “if adoption rates of new features at smaller online sites continue at the current pace, they will never match their larger counterparts” (2004, p. 110).

Boyle (2008) also found that circulation was related to the adoption and use of interactive items, with “distinct differences in the levels of content and interpersonal interactivity based on circulation” (p. 115). However, as a newspaper’s circulation increases, so does the level of interactivity on the newspaper’s website (2008). Most authors have linked these differences to the differences in resources at large and small papers. Because smaller papers are in smaller markets less dependent on online communication, it is hard for papers to justify “spending scarce resources on a product that captures only a small percentage of the audience” (Greer & Mensing, 2004, p. 110). Lowrey (2003) argued that cost was a “real

obstacle to site innovation for papers in small communities.” Many “editor-publishers perceive the Web site as an extravagance, especially absent a proven business model” in competitive markets (p. 89-90).

### Research questions

Given the shifts in delivery and the development of digital technologies, the time is ripe to ask three questions about community newspapers’ use of alternate delivery methods:

- RQ1: How widely are community newspapers using alternative delivery tools? Did use of any tools increase over the study period (May 2009 to February 2010)? Did this vary by size of newspaper?
- RQ2: How prominently are community newspapers placing these tools on their websites? Did prominence of the tools increase over the study period? Did this vary by size of newspaper?
- RQ3: How many readers are connecting with community newspapers through social media (Facebook/Twitter)? Did community newspapers’ attract more fans/followers through social media over the study period? Did this vary by size of paper?

### Method

To answer these questions, a content analysis of community newspaper websites nationwide was conducted. Content analysis yields categorical data rich in “descriptive, classificatory, and identification powers” (Kolbe & Burnett, 1991, p. 244), necessary to compare and contrast the data in this study.

### Population and sample

The theoretical population for this study is all English-language general-interest daily or weekly community newspapers published in the United States with circulations less than 50,000. Further, the papers had to have an active associated website because the study examines alternative delivery methods available through the online edition. The available population was general interest, English-language community newspapers listed through Ulrich’s Periodical Index that showed a corresponding online edition. For the first data retrieval, in May 2009, there were 1,426 newspapers that meet the criteria. After that, a systematic random sampling technique was used to select 10% of papers. A random starting point was found within the first 10 papers on the list, and then researchers counted down every 10th paper in an effort to reach a representative sample of community newspapers nationwide so that the results could be generalized to all peer newspapers. It should be noted, however, that this list does not include community newspapers without active websites; therefore, the results can only be applied to community newspapers who deliver news through a website. In total, 141 papers were examined.

### Unit of analysis

This study used two units of analysis. For the first two research questions, researchers examined the entire website, meaning the homepage and any linked page hosted on the newspaper’s server. External links or redirects to other sites were not examined. For the third question, the main Twitter and Facebook pages linked to from the sites were analyzed. Researchers recorded the number of Twitter and Facebook subscribers to each newspaper along with the frequency of updates, if applicable.

### Time period

Once the sample was drawn, the newspapers were examined at three time periods to examine if adoption of alternative delivery tools increased over time. The first coding period took place in May 2009. The second period was in October 2009, and the third was in March 2010. The study period spanned 10 months, and the sites were examined in five-month intervals.

## Variables

After recording the name, circulation size of corresponding print newspaper, and frequency of print newspaper publication (daily/weekly), researchers examined the presence of delivery tools, the placement of delivery tools, and the activity on social media sites.

**Delivery tools** are defined as methods through which the newspaper distributes content online beyond the website — specifically e-mail alerts, text message or mobile application, RSS feed, Twitter profile, and Facebook page. Each tool was coded as either present or absent for each site. To identify presence of each tool, researchers looked either for icons indicating the tools (an envelope for e-mail, the bird, for Twitter, the blue “F” for Facebook, a mobile phone for text or mobile application, and the orange RSS symbol for RSS. If these were not found, researchers then explored the site map, looked for text-based indications that these tools were available. In the case of RSS, coders looked for the automatic RSS detector through the Web browser. If these were found in any form, they were coded as “1”; if not, they were coded as “0”.

**Prominence of delivery tools** was coded by giving each site a score for placement of each tool. If the tool was not present on the site, as discovered above, it was given a “0”. After that, researchers scored better placement of the tool with higher numbers. For instance, if the tool was found on the front page with no scrolling, it received a “5.” If it was found from a drop-down menu on the front page, it received a “4.” Tools on the front page that required scrolling to find them on the front page were coded as “3.” Any tools that were on a page other than the homepage received a “2.” And, lastly, if a tool was part of a rotating display or an automatic signal, but not present anywhere else, it was coded as “1.”

**Social media activity** was determined by following links found on the sites to the newspaper’s Twitter feed or Facebook page. Once on these pages, the number of fans (people following on Twitter or fans “likes” on Facebook) was recorded. Also, the frequency of updates was coded as follows: “0” for no updates in the past week; “1” for updates in the past week, but not in the past 24 hours; “2” for a single post in the past 24 hours; and “3” for multiple posts in the past day.

## Intercoder reliability

Once the initial sample was drawn, two coders examined 26 of the newspapers in the sample (18.2%) to check for intercoder reliability. Both coders were given a copy of the codebook, and instructed on its use through examples and a brief in-person training session. The instrument proved to be highly reliable, with intercoder reliability for all variables ranging from .82 to 1.00. Using the Krippendorff method of straight agreement, the reliability for all the variables was 95.4%. In total, after reliability was established, three coders examined the papers in the three time periods.

## Results

### Demographics of the sample

On the first data collection time, 143 papers were studied, comprising about 10% of the population of community newspapers with active websites. For the other data collection times, only 141 of those sites could be accessed. Therefore, the final data is based on the 141 community newspapers coded at all three times; 73 papers were dailies (51.8% of the sample) and 58 were weeklies (48.2%). The papers ranged in size from 400 to 48,407 (Mean = 12,537.47, SD = 11,561.97, Median = 8,100). To analyze difference in community newspapers by size, the papers were broken into three groups: Those smaller than 5,000 (42 papers or 28.8% of the sample); those between 5,000 and 12,000 (48 or 34.0% of the sample); and those 12,000 and larger (51 papers or 36.2% of the sample).

### Tests of the research questions

The first research question examined which tools were most common on the community newspaper websites examined and whether presence of any of the tools increased over time. To test this question, a percentage of the 141 sites with each

tool present was calculated, then Chi-Square analyses were run to test increases over time. As **Table 1** (page 5) shows, RSS feeds were the most common tool present on the sites in all three time periods. Further, the percentage of sites with RSS present increased significantly over time, ending with 62.4% of the sites with feeds in February 2010. Twitter and Facebook, the two social media platforms examined, also showed significant increases over time. The number of sites with Twitter present more than doubled in the 10 months and the number of sites with Facebook present more than tripled. E-mail delivery options, present on a quarter of the sites in February 2010, showed a slight but not significant decline. There was no significant change in the use of text alerts or mobile applications over the study.

Next, the total number of tools present per site was computed by giving each site a point for each tool present, meaning each site could score from 0 to 5. As **Table 1** shows, overall, the sites averaged 1.12 in May 2009 and 1.62 in February 2010. Using a repeated measures test and examining the papers by size, significant differences emerged. First, clear differences emerged at all time periods by size of paper. At all three time periods, the smallest papers had the least number of tools present, and the mid-sized community papers had the next lowest average. While the tools present did increase over time for small and mid-sized community papers, they still lagged behind the largest community papers (those with print circulation greater than 12,000).

The second research question looked at the prominence of the tools on the sites and whether the placement of the tools improved over the study period. As with the first research question, repeated measures tests were run on the prominence scores for each tool, broken out by size of the newspaper. As **Table 2** (page 5) shows, RSS feeds had the highest prominence scores, indicating they had the best placement (visibility) on the sites. (Note that “5” was the highest placement score that could be awarded and sites were given a “0” if the tool was not present). The placement also improved slightly over time for this tool. Text/mobile tools had the second-highest prominence scores, and the placement of this tool also increased over time. There was no change in the placement of the e-mail tools over time, but placement increased significantly for Twitter and Facebook icons. It should be noted that because the sites scoring “0” were included, the prominence score clearly reflects the fact that more sites had these tools present as the study went on.

To analyze the prominence scores collectively, the scores from each tool were summed to create a total prominence score, which in theory could range from 0 to 25. The last rows on **Table 2** show that the overall prominence scores increased significantly over time from 4.63 to 6.02.

Finally, the second research question asked if differences existed in size of newspaper. As with the first question, the smaller papers had lower scores across all tools and during all time periods. As illustrated by the total prominence score, the smallest community newspapers averaged 3.74 in February 2010, compared with 5.33 for the mid-sized papers and 8.57 for the largest papers. Therefore, the larger community newspapers were more likely to have the tools present on their sites and to give them better placement on their sites.

For the final research question, the unit of analysis shifted from the newspaper websites to the affiliated social media pages linked from the website. Therefore, the number of sites analyzed in this question was limited to those with the tool present at the time of analysis (for example 40 sites with Twitter and 29 with Facebook in February 2010). The third research question examined the activity on social media pages by recording the followers on the sites and how frequently the papers posted news and updates on the pages. **Table 3** (page 6) shows that the average number of followers/fans increased significantly over time for all papers. However, the frequency of updates did not increase over time, and for Facebook, updates became slightly, but not significantly, less frequent. (Note that higher scores reflect more frequent updates.) For both types of social media pages, the average update schedule was close to “2,” indicating one post was present in the past 24 hours.

## Discussion

For all the talk about new forms of delivery for newspapers, the results are strikingly similar to studies conducted in the past. We’re seeing a significant increase in the use of virtually all alternate delivery tools over time. Some papers are

*Table 1*  
*Alternate delivery tools present over time; Average number of tools present by size of site*

<i>Tool</i>	<i>May 2009</i>	<i>September 2009</i>	<i>February 2010</i>	<i>Chi-Square</i>
RSS	62 (44.0%)	90 (63.8%)	88 (62.4%)	14.10***
Twitter	17 (12.1%)	29 (20.6%)	40 (28.4%)	11.59**
E-mail	42 (29.8%)	41 (29.1%)	36 (25.5%)	.725
Text/mobile	26 (18.4%)	35 (24.8%)	35 (24.8%)	2.183
Facebook	9 (6.4%)	19 (13.5%)	29 (20.6%)	12.17**
Total tools present	1.12	1.52	1.62	$\eta^2 = .146$ ***
Under 5,000	0.59	.90	1.02	
5001-12,000	0.92	1.46	1.46	
12,000+	1.71	2.08	2.25	

\*p < .05, \*\*p < .01, \*\*\*p < .001

*Table 2*  
*Prominence scores for each tool over time, by newspaper size*

<i>Tool</i>	<i>May 2009</i>	<i>September 2009</i>	<i>February 2010</i>	<i><math>\eta^2</math></i>
RSS	1.96	2.28	2.03	.027*
Under 5,000	1.45	1.64	1.45	
5001-12,000	1.56	2.19	1.85	
12,000+	2.76	2.88	2.67	
Text/mobile	0.75	1.12	1.11	.052***
Under 5,000	0.19	0.55	0.50	
5001-12,000	0.67	1.15	1.04	
12,000+	1.29	1.57	1.67	
E-mail update/alert	1.24	1.29	1.07	.011
Under 5,000	0.60	0.86	0.86	
5001-12,000	0.81	0.85	0.79	
12,000+	2.18	2.06	1.51	
Twitter	0.44	0.79	1.04	.099***
Under 5,000	0.19	0.31	0.50	
5001-12,000	0.37	0.71	0.88	
12,000+	0.71	1.27	1.63	
Facebook	0.24	0.52	0.79	.078***
Under 5,000	0.00	0.24	0.43	
5001-12,000	0.21	0.69	0.77	
12,000+	0.47	0.59	1.10	
Tot. prominence score	4.63	6.00	6.02	.119***
Under 5,000	2.43	3.59	3.74	
5001-12,000	3.63	5.58	5.33	
12,000+	7.41	8.37	8.57	

\*p < .05, \*\*p < .01, \*\*\*p < .001

Table 3

*Social media activity (followers and updates) over time*

<i>Tool</i>	<i>May 2009</i>	<i>September 2009</i>	<i>February 2010</i>	<i>Stat (eta) <math>\eta^2</math></i>
Twitter Followers	409.35	768.41	768.08	.368**
Facebook Fans	175.89	400.05	586.86	.603***
Twitter Update	2.82	2.52	2.20	.020
Facebook Update	2.22	1.47	1.79	.176

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

embracing the new technology that allows them to connect with readers in new ways, while others are not. And for the most part, even with the “level” playing field of the Internet, the level of adoption comes down to size of the print publication, a finding consistent with newsroom innovations of the past (Greer & Gubman, 1997, Greer & Mensing, 2004). Results of the study and the implications are discussed in three areas: Overall use of tools, changes in adoption over time, and differences by size of paper.

**Overall use of tools**

Looking at how tools were penetrating the nation’s community newsrooms as of February 2010, not all alternate delivery tools are being used equally nor are they being promoted equally on the sites. The earliest digital push approaches (RSS and e-mail digests) are ranked first and third respectively in presence and in placement. RSS was clearly the most widely used alternate delivery method, with about two-thirds of the sample having the feed available. In contrast, e-mail delivery of links to stories was used on a quarter of the sites, roughly equal with all the other forms studied (social media pages and mobile). It is not surprising that RSS would be the most common and the most prominent on the sites because this tool, once placed, requires no upkeep or additional staff resources. All of the other tools must be “fed” daily or weekly — meaning they need a human to manage them to some extent.

Of the social media-related forms of alternate delivery, Twitter is the most commonly used. More than 28% of the sites were linked to Twitter feeds by February 2010. It should be noted that researchers also looked for MySpace pages. As these were found on only two sites, that social media outlet was dropped from the study. Two sites also had links to Digg and one featured Flickr, which came up in an “other” category that coders could check. While Twitter was present on more than a quarter of the sites, Facebook, in contrast, was present on only 20% of the sites. These two tools, surprisingly, had the lowest prominence scores of all the delivery methods. So while newspapers are using social media to some extent, they’re not aggressively promoting it on their sites to the extent that they are other tools. One example illustrates the investment in Twitter with the lack of promotion. One mid-sized community newspaper had a fairly active Twitter page (multiple posts a week), but the only promotion of it on the site was in a rotating “house ad” space. One coder found it immediately. The second coder had to enter the site about a dozen times before the Twitter promotion ad rotated in. This meant that average visitors to the site might have easily missed the fact that the newspaper even had a Twitter page.

Even for small papers, the numbers of Twitter followers and Facebook fans (now called people “liking” the site) was fairly small. Average circulation size was about 12,500, yet the number of people connecting with the social media pages for the papers was under 800 as of February 2010, or less than 7% of the print circulation base. It is surprising, however, that the prominence was so low for these tools although newspapers were clearly investing resources into updating these pages. The fact that community newspapers, including a large number of weeklies, were averaging about one post or update per day indicates that papers are making an effort to make these lively sites with frequent connections to readers. Perhaps better promotion of these tools will follow as they become more established.

Finally, text alerts and mobile applications were present on about a quarter of sites by February 2010, and these were given fairly high prominence on the sites when they were available. It should be noted that none of the 141 papers studied had a dedicated mobile application at the last round of data collection and that all the tools in this category were text alerts sent to a mobile phone. In future study, those two items should be separated because a growing number of papers are developing dedicated mobile applications.

**Changes over time**

Looking across all tools and all variables coded in this study demonstrates a fairly rapid adoption of certain alternative delivery tools. RSS, Twitter and Facebook all saw significant gains in adoption over time, as more and more newspapers turned to social media to reach readers in new ways. While text alerts did not significantly increase over the 10-month study period, the prominence of the text alert tool did, indicating that this is growing in importance as more readers access news on their mobile phones. While the number of fans or followers of social media pages for these newspapers is not large, significantly more people are connecting with the publications through these sites over time. Given the demographics of the users of social media, this could indicate that community newspapers are connecting to younger audiences that may not read the print newspaper.

The overall picture of these four tools (RSS, Twitter, Facebook, and text alerts) is that community newspapers are rapidly adopting a variety of new approaches available to them. Even in a period of less than a year, we’ve seen significant changes in the ways newspapers seek to get news and information to their local audiences. Clearly, community newspapers, with their strong local connections, are well poised to connect with their communities as technology and media use patterns evolve. The fact that significant changes took place in only 10 months show that the papers are responding rapidly to the changing delivery landscape.

Perhaps what is more significant is looking at areas didn’t show an increase over the study period. First, e-mail alerts and digests were actually used by slightly fewer papers over the study period. While 30% of the sites had the tool in May 2009, only a quarter did by February 2010. This likely indicates that sites are shifting their limited resources from a more “old-fashioned” digital delivery tool to newer forms such as mobile and social media pages. However, while the presence of social media pages increased, the frequency of updates for both Twitter and Facebook actually decreased slight over time. Significant increases weren’t seen over the study period in the presence of text alerts, but this area may be the one to watch as consumer Internet connectivity patterns continue to shift to personal mobile devices. Changes taking place at national and large metropolitan newspapers, which are launching their own mobile applications, will soon filter down to the community papers.

**Size still matters**

Not surprisingly, for every tool and every variable studied here, the smallest community newspapers lagged behind the mid-sized papers, which in turn lagged behind the largest community newspapers. While the Internet provides the opportunity for publications of any size to use these tools with very little cost, the truth is that feeding content through these tools still requires staff time. Smaller papers,

especially weeklies, put out by a news staff of two or three, don't have the human resources available to add tools. Further, these publications often serve areas where Internet connectivity lags the larger areas. Print is still the most efficient way to reach readers in some rural areas. This is likely to change over time, as Internet connectivity shifts to mobile devices feeding from cellular networks rather than wired infrastructure. But it is striking that even 15 years after newspapers started going online en masse that size matters in what is offered on the smallest sites.

## Conclusion

The results of this study show that the nation's community newspapers are using a variety of alternate delivery tools to reach readers in new ways. Further, these publications are adopting tools at a fairly quick pace, with significant increases in virtually all areas in less than a year. This is a transformational time for the print newspaper industry, and community newspapers, for the most part, are well poised to continue their service to their readers. Still, there are areas where community newspapers, especially the smaller papers, could take better advantage of new forms of delivery in pushing news to their readers in the places they're congregating digitally. Staying on top of these tools as they emerge is a vital first step.

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# Survival and growth strategies when merging small media

By Rudy Taylor

Newspaper publishers like to boast about our place in the communities we write about — the towns where our offices have graced the local main street for more than a century. It has been a communal existence where retail stores and service shops buy ads, hopefully with good results, and in exchange each newspaper keeps local politicians honest and tries to add sensibility to coffee shop rumors and street gossip.

A citizen who reads the local paper simply knows more than those who might get their information from other places such as television or radio. At least that's the line maintained by publishers since the days when every letter of every word in a newspaper was hand-set using the California job case and editors came home from a day at work smelling like printer's ink.

But it's a new day out there. Everything traditional is being challenged and that definitely includes the three-way relationship among a hometown newspaper, the business community and the readers who claim it was always their newspaper in the first place.

Mergers of newspapers became commonplace in the 1980s and 90s, mostly among dailies. With huge sums being paid by the big chains to buy daily newspapers, there began a shift in the very dynamic that undergirds local media. Local merchants and readers complained at first that local ownership was being shifted from the corner desk at the newspaper office to a board table located someplace up the interstate.

Community-builder was no longer one of the hats worn by the local publisher. He or she had bigger fish to fry, mainly generating financial reports to be sent online to what became known as "corporate."

If a newspaper could no longer make donations to a local foundation, it was because "corporate" said no. When the percentage of local news was taken down from 60 percent to 20 percent, it was because "corporate" had to improve its bottom line.

Meanwhile, those of us in the non-daily business smugly maintained our local stance. After all, all our news was local and ownership still was proudly held by old-name locals. If you wanted to know about something historical, you could skip the local historical museum and head straight to the newspaper office where the publisher would reel off facts and names that would impress anyone.

But the pain was only delayed in the non-daily business because soon buyouts were common. It became necessary to combine a town's weekly newspaper with another town where the same malady infected its local advertising base — namely Wal-mart, superior highways and a society that had forgotten that the word "loyalty" ever existed.

That's where our Taylor Newspapers found ourselves as we grew from one small weekly to an ultimate level of owning and separately publishing eight hometown newspapers. And, even though we knew these markets well and made sure our presence was known in every town where we took ownership of the local paper, we always felt like aliens in towns where the publisher's house was not located.

After publishing the *Caney Chronicle* for 24 years, which was tagged onto 27 previous years of my wife Kathy's parents' owning the newspaper, we saw an opportunity to purchase another weekly in nearby Cherryvale, located within the same county.

The day we took over the *Cherryvale Gazette* was the same day our son and daughter-in-law came back after finishing college with journalism degrees and they moved to the community, Andy Taylor serving as editor and Amy Taylor taking over as sales manager for both the Caney and Cherryvale newspapers.

That date on the calendar also marked the very instant that we devised the first

bullet of a set of strategies that would lead us to more acquisitions and the gradual combining of eight newspapers into the three publications comprising our company today.

**The first strategy: Sell combined advertising, design certain common pages and change the name of the Cherryvale newspaper**

The *Cherryvale Gazette* was not a century-old publication. It was the survivor of a local newspaper war that started a decade earlier. Cherryvale's history with local newspapers was not good, therefore a young editor and his wife were welcomed with open arms into the community. Even the name change went over well, although many community residents couldn't understand why we would rename it the *Cherryvale Chronicle* when we already had a *Chronicle* in Caney, located 40 miles away.

Three years later, the reason became apparent — the newspapers would be merged into one publication with a new name: *The Montgomery County Chronicle*. Young Andy Taylor was named editor of the combined newspaper and his dad continued in his role as publisher, also looking at other acquisitions.

The merged newspaper wasn't exactly praised by either of the towns, Caney or Cherryvale. But by utilizing the term "value added," in all their planning, the Taylors tried to make the newly merged publication bigger and better, and adding email access (remember, this was 1997) and bringing other small towns into the mix — towns that never had been able to say they had a local newspaper. The name *Montgomery County Chronicle* provided such an umbrella for tiny towns with names like Dearing, Elk City, Liberty, Havana and Tyro.

Country correspondent writers were found for many of these towns and the whole project took off with good reviews among advertisers who liked the combined circulation numbers.

An anecdotal note here: Amy Taylor, whose background was in art and advertising, left the company at this point to open Grass Roots Design Group, now a successful advertising agency located in Independence. Her largest client to this day is Taylor Newspapers because she designs most advertising placed in our three newspapers. As a result, even the smallest advertiser can be assured of top-quality ad layouts. Meanwhile, we replaced Amy Taylor with a sales director who sells advertising to go in all three of our existing publications.

**Strategy No. 2: Look for adjacent markets and purchase newspapers which can generally follow the same successful template.**

Four small newspapers in neighboring Labette County were placed on the market in 1998 and they became the Taylors' second acquisition. Based in Oswego but still operating part-time offices in Chetopa and Altamont, the newspapers were: *The Oswego Independent*, the *Chetopa Advance*, the *Altamont Journal* and the *Edna Sun*.

Because of seller financing and contractual stipulations, the newspapers could not be merged or the names changed until the newspapers were paid off and that took nine years to accomplish.

Here is where patience and itty-bitty steps were important because the folks in Labette County are steeped in tradition. And, even though I drove to our main office in Oswego four days a week to serve as publisher, local people still saw changes that scared them.

After two years, we closed our job printing shop which came with the deal. The previous owner agreed to stay and do our job printing for two years at which time he totally retired and there wasn't much business volume anyway. But telling the public that we were "closing" a portion of the business didn't go over well.

The only value-added element we could think of was to repaint the building inside and out and give it a bright new look. With that look, we also announced that a long-time employee of 20 years was being appointed as editor.

That allowed me to drop back to two trips per week to the Oswego office and push the better accepted local editor to the forefront.

Even though we could not change the names or merge these newspapers, there was nothing keeping us from our next strategy: Giving each town its own identity with a front page switch-out and keeping all inside pages the same. This went over pretty well, mostly because the previous, individually-named newspapers carried much of the same news and advertising. But now we were on a roll, knowing something that nobody including our own employees knew — that someday we would pay off the previous owners and merge the newspapers. Incidentally, the towns involved are all four in southern Labette County and are located within an eight- to 15-mile radius. So they truly were neighbors.

Three years after buying the Labette County newspapers, we purchased two more that were located in Elk and Chautauqua counties: The *Sedan Times-Star* and the *Flint Hills Express*. With this purchase came another of our children home from college, Jenny Diveley, with a husband and communications degree in hand.

With Jenny came an all-new approach to what we were doing. Being younger, and having received considerable training in technology, Jenny became editor of our two newest acquisitions, but also added another hat — that of technology coordinator for the three newspaper companies. It also meant that our family now had its own board of four seasoned newspaper owners, and our strategy sessions were held at the kitchen table in our home. They still are, by the way.

**Strategy No. 3: Make changes slowly. Never apologize for making improvements. Make every major change into an event.**

The years passed quickly in Labette County where the previous owners tried their best to keep us in line.

Finally, in 2007, we paid off the big loan, spent five minutes celebrating, and then sat down to plan our next move.

At this point, we brought our local editor into the discussions and she was quick to embrace the concept: One newspaper to cover all four communities.

It was she who came up with the next strategy: Sell the big building, which was at least 10 times larger than we needed as a newspaper office. We put the building up for sale and immediately found a smaller one across the street then totally remodeled it.

When the day came in 2008 for announcing that one newspaper would serve all four local towns, we promoted it big-time. We bought radio ads, printed brochures, hosted a booth at the county fair, had employee shirts imprinted and placed a new sign on the building. But how could we possibly come up with one name that would include all four historically significant newspapers? We didn't. Instead, we chose a non-traditional name: *Labette Avenue*.

We also hired a long-time resident to serve as our new face and voice. A retired real estate agent whose husband was a respected insurance agent, she would work three days a week answering the telephone, calling for news and writing local items. She also would make a renewed effort to find country correspondents for smaller towns and line up writers for all clubs in the area.

The announcement story came out the same day the big *Labette Avenue* sign was hung on the front of the building. In the story we promised to add process color photographs to each edition and that the newspaper would be bigger and better than ever. Instead of being 10 to 12 pages, it would now be 14 to 16 pages.

We also asked each of our three *Labette Avenue* staffers to write personal columns, and we touted them with special house ads. In addition to their columns, we also have columns written by my wife and me, so that's a total of five columns in every edition — something of a rarity in weekly newspapers. And they're pretty good — not sappy or gossipy.

Here's the bottom line of the *Labette Avenue* story: From that day in 2008 until today, we have not received one complaint — and that's in a county where everyone's middle name is "tradition."

We go out of our way to maintain a good relationship with the area daily newspaper in our area, the *Parsons Sun*, and it remains solid today. We even get our

newspaper printed in their shop. Still, we can tell that our presence in the county and our excitement over our all-local, colorful, personalized newspaper has caused them some consternation. Our greatest area of circulation expansion has been in the direction of Parsons. The *Parsons Sun* is owned by a chain that seldom sends its owner to town, and the typical slashes in budget have been made there. These have come at a time when we have added products to our operation, offering a less expensive albeit less frequent newspaper for readers in Labette County to enjoy.

**Strategy No. 4: Take the Labette Avenue success to our newest acquisitions in Elk and Chautauqua counties. Add an exciting website. Get into podcasts and videos.**

Both newspapers, the *Flint Hills Express* and the *Sedan Times-Star*, were published out of our office in Sedan, Kan. Both papers were official county newspapers and revenue for legal notices outpaced display advertising. The combined circulation of these two newspapers was quite good when we were the only newspaper game in town. I've always heard that competition is healthy, but in these two counties, we're doing just fine without it.

Elk and Chautauqua might as well be a hyphenated word. They're in the same legislative district, conservation district, 4-H and Boy Scout areas, plus they all work together in county fairs. Still, when we would float the idea of merging the two newspapers, we would get red-faced lectures from those living there. That's why we waited eight years to make the change. We involved ourselves in both counties in a big way so when the day came to announce our plans, it seemed to go over much better than if we had done it early in our ownership.

We pulled out the strategies we had used in Labette County and made some adaptations. We totally remodeled our building, giving it a bright new look. And, as we had done before, we waited to put up our new sign until the day we made our announcement.

We chose the name *Prairie Star*, leaving off the article adjective. It's just *Prairie Star*, just as it is just Labette Avenue. No "the" with either name.

We announced that for the first time in history, the local newspaper would be printed in color, which drew rave comments. We promised that nothing would be removed from either paper's previous coverage, and that readers would enjoy reading a much larger newspaper.

This time, our value-added concept was company-wide. We launched an exciting new website with the first publication of *Prairie Star*, and it included equal coverage for *Labette Avenue* and the *Montgomery County Chronicle*, plus multimedia offerings such as podcasts and video.

Again, we imprinted shirts, hit the county fairs with our booths, entered every parade in the region with our staff members marching in front of a decorated float or vehicle.

Again, we sought more local correspondents and pounded the fact that all staff members would be writing personal columns. As a publisher for 40 years, I have never printed one edition that didn't contain my own column, "Off the Cuff," so I served as the column coach. The last thing I wanted was our readers trying to work through blubbery bilge so often seen in local newspapers. And it has proven successful. In all, we have eight columnists who write for our various newspapers, and each column is unique in its own right.

This merger was hugely popular in Elk County. They have become accustomed to their newspaper getting merged and its name changed every ten years as new owners have come and gone. But in Sedan, Kan., the town newspaper had carried the same name for 135 years, and local readers were not shy about expressing some disappointment. Still, they live in a depressed economic area and have become accustomed to bending with the times, and they have finally come around to liking the new paper with its color photos, more writers, a great website and owners who have become community leaders even though none of them actually live there.

**Strategy No. 5: Add something new every year at least.**

This year, we have added three e-editions to our list of products and readers like

what they see. We charge for these e-editions and many of our out-of-state readers have switched from print subscriptions to digital versions of the same newspaper. We promise them one thing: “You will receive your e-edition before our newspapers hit the street each Wednesday.”

Another aspect which our readers have come to expect is hearing two of the Taylors on area radio stations. Andy and Rudy Taylor both have broadcast backgrounds and they frequently offer stories, at no charge, to radio and television stations both at the local and statewide levels. We also have become the source for news facts and actualities for these broadcasters. When a television station in Topeka wants to know about a boating accident that claimed two lives, they call us and we provide a story. The same is true with state sports playoffs, historical feature stories and other subjects of interest. We make no money with these services but it helps keep our readers satisfied when they hear their local newspaper mentioned in a statewide story or broadcast.

#### **Strategy No. 6: Look at digital products as more than toys.**

During the first decade of hosting a website, we looked at it as a hobby. We liked the idea of being in the pack of progressive newspapers that posted news and photos on line. Our half-hearted attitude showed as we made two different launches — mostly using inexpensive, store-bought templates.

Two years ago, we got serious about the Internet and launched “taylornews.org.” We hired a digital consultant, spent lots of time planning and designing it and most importantly, made sure the site we launched had good add-on capabilities. Regardless of which direction media websites go, we should be able make a few adaptations and join the latest action.

Our site is three-headed with the home page serving as a simple entry. From there it divides into our three newspapers, and into a multi-media section that features podcasts and videos. We place only a sampling of stories on our website, always teasing to our print edition. We do take every opportunity to post breaking news on our site, and we look for opportunities to add audio and video

Our website is totally free and we promote it only in our print editions. We have sold limited advertising on our website, we still look at it as an area of potential growth.

With a new e-edition for each of our three newspapers, we charge an annual fee of \$25. It has met with striking success, largely from out-of-state subscribers who often complain about time delays in receiving their newspapers through the U.S. mail.

We promise readers that they will receive every page of their full-color, high quality e-edition before our local newspapers are placed in news racks. Again, a family member and one of our editors, Jenny Diveley, manages our e-edition and web functions.

#### **Strategy No. 7: Make circulation into a major revenue stream.**

Newspaper owners have always known that circulation income was important, but few small newspapers are willing to invest money into the retention and growth of readership. After 40 years of taking a laissez-faire attitude about circulation, the Taylors decided to go on the attack, naming a long-time staff member to lead the charge, and adding budgeted funds to make it happen.

Direct mail, radio commercials and house ads are providing the promotional exposure to convince readers to renew their print subscriptions or convert to an e-edition. Having a paid circulation manager has also given company owners an opportunity to discuss expanding two of the newspapers into area towns which have daily newspapers that are struggling to exist.

#### **Strategy No. 8: Attempt to blur historical lines between our weekly newspapers and area dailies.**

There are actually three daily newspapers serving the markets served by our three weekly newspapers and not one of them is doing anything with websites or

e-editions. While we maintain a good relationship with these daily newspapers, we are experiencing circulation and advertising growth in the very areas they serve. And, yes, they do notice us.

This is precisely where perception comes into the picture. It has been our observation that readers and advertisers don't count the number of editions per week. They look for newspapers that make a good presence in their community, stay excited about their future in local media, and stay connected with up-to-date methods of reaching readers and consumers.

#### **Strategy No. 9: Look at upgrades in technology as cost-saving, life-giving measures.**

Twenty years ago when our company bought its first Macintosh computer, we did so on a shoestring budget. Granted, those pioneer computers were quite expensive, as were accompanying equipment and software. It was common in those early days to swipe software which was easy to do since none of us had yet logged onto the Internet, therefore it was hard to catch us.

Now it's different. And one of the best things we've done in the past decade was to purchase new computers, legitimize our software, appoint a young staff member to get our offices networked and our broadband connections buzzing at optimum levels.

Even today, we purchase low-end Mac Minis and new iMacs. They work great for our purposes. We upgrade our Adobe Creative Suites at every opportunity. We utilize Skype and office-to-office networking. And each time we purchase a computer, it costs less than the last one did.

I can walk into any of our four newspaper offices, sit down at any computer and see exactly the same screen-view as those in my own office. We don't allow anyone to download additional software without our approval. This tight policy has paid off.

It saves miles of driving, since files of all sizes can be transferred quickly via the Internet. Trouble-shooting computer problems can usually be handled by telephone since the person with the expertise is looking at the same system, same software and same screen set-up. If we allowed a menagerie of computers, systems and software applications, we'd find ourselves in a confused work environment.

Our little company has 14 Macintosh desktop computers, three laptops and two PCs. We are glad we listened 10 years ago when the youngest member of our newspaper family advised us to spend some money to get ourselves legal, updated and proud of the equipment that enables us to make a living.

#### **Strategy No. 10: Stand ready for whatever comes next.**

We have no earthly idea what new ideas, gadgets and communication concepts are waiting just over the horizon. But this we know: If we're not in a mindset of change in our present day, we won't be ready for the challenges that lie ahead.

What we know for sure is that our communities will continue to need us. Someone with classical journalistic training will still be needed to use nouns and verbs to explain the processes, confrontations and exchanges of ideas in a new society.

It is my personal belief that traditional, non-daily media companies hold a keen advantage in addressing these exciting challenges.

The survivors in today's media wars will be those with winning strategies, and we hold no regrets for remaining flexible and staying in tune with the changing world in order to remain — a local newspaper.

#### **A final note: All these strategies fall under one umbrella statement — we still care.**

While such a comment may seem trite, we believe it tells much about a family-owned newspaper company that serves 50 tiny towns in rural Kansas. When we sit down to our kitchen table for a planning session, there is a common element that emerges from each member of the Taylor Newspaper Family. That commonality is

the care that we feel for the communities where we live and work. It is the care that we feel for our historic newspapers. And it is the personal pride that we all feel about being in the newspaper business — a habit that now is five generations deep.

If there is a missing trait among most newspaper staffers today, it is the passion that this family feels for what we do, how we do it, and why.

We still hold the unwavering views that I described earlier from years gone by. As publishers, we definitely feel that the smartest folks in town are those who read newspapers, whether ours or someone else's. We don't hold ourselves up as experts in anything other than knowing how to gather information, double check our facts, compose readable articles and maintain a list of readers who will buy products and services from our advertisers.

We don't know if these feelings will assure our success in future months and

years. But we do know that nobody in the world is more excited about the industry which has been so good to our family, our communities and the publications that we work so hard to keep in print, on the web, and wherever else this ever-changing business of ours might take us.

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# The 30-50-60 curve: Locally generated news content in small and medium-sized American dailies

By Marcus Funk

## Introduction

How local is the front page of the local newspaper? Small newspaper editors today must answer unique geographical and philosophical questions when designing their front pages due to the omnipresence of online news. While the iconic Mr. Gates (White, 1950) could be confident that most readers lacked equal access to wire services, today's small-town publishers must be considerably more prudent with their selections — regarding both locally generated news and wire news.

Furthermore, there is evidence that small newspapers are more equipped to survive declines in newspaper circulation than their metropolitan counterparts. Advertising revenue at small newspapers dramatically outpaced the industry average during the second quarter of 2009, seeing only a 12.4 percent decline that was less than half the 29 percent average decline for all newspapers (Saba, 2009); there is also further evidence of small newspaper's economic resilience. (Givens, 2009) Those figures are especially significant considering those declines continued throughout 2009. (Fitzgerald, 2010a)

Could there be a connection between local editorial focus and financial stability? It's a simple question, but one that has not received ample attention from the academy or the industry. Instead, conventional wisdom that small newspapers are simply awash with locally generated news content is allowed to reign without quantitative analysis, universal benchmarks or standardized discussion. Such a scholastic gap begs the question: How local are small American dailies, really?

This study seeks to answer that question. It will determine how great a priority is assigned to locally generated news content among a wide range of small daily publications. In turn, this will illustrate the editorial policy of the vast majority of American newspapers — small, regional products far from the coastal media Meccas that dominate the national news cycle. It will ask which writers (local or wire) cover which stories, as well as the geographical focus (local, state, national or international) of each article. Such an analysis will provide a categorical database illustrating the most essential of editorial trends — patterns regarding locally generated news content and wire news content, and local and non-local news.

## Literature review

Newspapers are currently steeped in financial troubles, with *Editor and Publisher* reporting that advertising revenue for Q2 2010 was the lowest in 27 years; during the same period, advertising revenues across the industry dropped beneath levels not seen since 1985. (Fitzgerald, 2010b) The newspaper industry is not static, however, and there is some evidence that small newspapers are faring better financially than their metropolitan counterparts; in 2009, revenue at small newspapers declined at less than half the national average. (Saba, 2009)

Those figures are especially compelling given well-established editorial differences concerning large and small newspapers. Jock Lauterer's formative study of community journalism illustrated an industry concerned, first and foremost, with local content (Lauterer, 2006); similar local emphasis was identified by a number of other scholars. (Beaudoin & Thorson, 2004; Hindman, 1996; Hindman, Littlefield, Preston, & Neumann, 1999; Hume, 2005; Northington, 1992) On the differences between large and small newspapers, Reader's qualitative analysis concluded that "the most dominant theme was clear — direct accountability to the community is the biggest difference." (Reader, 2006) Editorial differences are clear in some instances, including studies by Kanervo and Kanervo identifying mixed perceptions of unflattering news in small newspapers (Kanervo & Kanervo, 1995)

and an inquiry by Harry into differences concerning controversy coverage (Harry, 2001); further studies by Beam illustrated these differences (Beam, 2003). Those differences, combined with reader's dedication to small publications (Smethers, Bressers, Willard, Harvey, & Freeland, 2007), make the distinction between large and small newspapers prime for further analysis.

## Research questions

This study seeks to determine the amount of locally generated news content and wire news content across a wide range of American daily newspapers, with particular emphasis on small and medium publications. Therefore,

**RQ1)** Is there a correlation between circulation size of daily American newspapers and the publication of locally generated news content and wire news content?

**RQ2)** Is there a correlation between circulation size of daily American newspapers and the geographical proximity of the news — do they focus on local news, state, national or international news?

The third research question approaches locally generated news content and wire news holistically and independently, not as content published by particular newspapers. Doing so examines the focus of both media formats.

**RQ3)** Holistically speaking, what is the geographical proximity of locally generated news and wire news to a publication — is it local news, state, national or international news?

These questions will establish if institutional trends in American newspapers exist; and, if so, they will provide a benchmark for their theoretical analysis.

## Methodology

A random sample of newspapers was stratified by circulation size and regional geography. Data was collected throughout the month of February, 2010. *Editor and Publisher (Editor and Publisher's International Yearbook: The Encyclopedia of the Newspaper Industry, 2008)* identifies 50,000 daily circulation as the threshold between "small" and "large" newspapers; effort was also taken to ensure that diversity among smaller newspapers was ensured, given their statistical dominance of the American newspaper market.

## Circulation Categories

### Small Newspapers

- C1) Daily circulation < 4,999
- C2) Daily circulation between 5,000 — 9,999
- C3) Daily circulation between 10,000 — 19,999
- C4) Daily circulation between 20,000 — 29,999
- C5) Daily circulation between 30,000 — 49,999

### Large Newspapers

- C6) Daily circulation between 50,000 — 99,999
- C7) Daily circulation between 100,000 — 500,000
- C8) Daily circulation > 500,000

Data collection controlled for regional geography and corporate ownership, although they were not independently analyzed. Three national publications, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* and *The Los Angeles Times* were also

included; ultimately data collection from three states was too unreliable for inclusion (in some cases due to a shift to weekly publication), leading to the final tally of 42 newspapers. Front pages were collected primarily from the Newseum website (“Newseum: The World’s Most Interactive Museum,” 2010), in PDF form, over a four week period, although a number of pages were also collected from individual publication’s websites. Some smaller publications consolidated week-end issues, but were nonetheless still considered “daily” publications.

Individual articles comprised the unit of analysis, although the newspapers themselves were first identified. Articles and bylines were read to determine their authorship — was the article written by a staff writer or other local writer, or was it submitted by a wire service of some kind? Initially, criteria were included for specific varieties of staff writers (i.e., statehouse correspondents vs. beat reporters) as well as particular wire services; both were ultimately consolidated. The proximity of the article to its publication — meaning, is it a local story, or a national story? etc. — was determined by reading the article.

Once the data concerning locally generated news content and wire service news content was established, chi square tests were performed alongside crosstabs and percentage-based analyses. Overall, more than 1,000 front pages and 4,600 articles were analyzed using a combination of Microsoft Excel and SPSS.

## Results

Chi square tests indicated significant results for each of the three research questions; analysis of percentage-based crosstabs and raw data yielded equally compelling figures.

**RQ1)** Is there a correlation between circulation size of daily American newspapers and the publication of locally generated news content and wire news content?

To answer RQ1, a chi square test was performed contrasting variables concerning circulation size with variables concerning locally generated and wire news content. A *p*-value less than .001 revealed strong correlations among the publication of locally generated and wire news content across circulation sizes; in short, smaller newspapers were more likely to publish locally generated news content on their front pages than larger publications, although national publications provided an exception. The C5 category, which examined publications between 30,000 and roughly 50,000 daily circulation, produced the most noteworthy aberration, publishing considerably more wire news content than both smaller and larger publications. (See Table 1)

Further exploring the C5 categorization is worthwhile. The group published nearly 20 percent less locally generated news content than the national average; indeed, all six C5 publications printed between nearly 10 and 30 percent less locally generated news content. Two, *The Medford Mail-Tribune* (OR) and *The Lake Charles American Press* (LA) published almost half of their front-page news content from wire services; of the remaining four, the closest to the national average was the *Wilmington Star-News* (NC) at 69 percent.

**RQ2)** Is there a correlation between circulation size of daily American newspapers and the geographical proximity of the news — do they focus on local news, state, national or international news?

RQ2 adopted identical research methodology to RQ1. Chi square tests were applied to crosstab analyses concerning circulation size and the geographical proximity of the news coverage; meaning, did each article focus on local, state, national or international news? Data again demonstrated a *p*-value less than .001. Small newspapers were by far the most likely to focus on local news, at nearly 20 percent more than the national average; similarly, national publications were the most likely to focus on national or international news. Of particular note, however, is the above-average focus on national news among C5 publications. (See Table 2)

**RQ3)** What is the geographical proximity of locally generated news and wire news to a publication — is it local news, state, national or international news?

The third research question also yielded a *p*-value less than .001. It found that the vast majority of Associated Press wire content was devoted to national news (49.2 percent) or international news (21.8 percent), with only a bare minimum of content devoted to local issues (4.1 percent); there were similar figures for other wire services, which devoted 56.1 percent to national issues and 26.7 percent to

international issues. Locally generated news, meanwhile, devoted nearly three-fourths of its coverage to local issues (74.6 percent) and only a minority (10.2 percent) to national or international issues.

## Discussion

In short, small, daily American newspapers are the most likely to publish news focusing on local events, and generally speaking, the least likely to feature wire service news content on their front pages. This reinforces findings from a number of scholars indicating, in the words of Lauterer, the “relentlessly local” focus of community journalism; such analysis quantifies and reinforces the traditional adage that community newspapers are more local than metropolitan publications. Data presented here provides a strong reference point for professional and academic tabulations of local-oriented news in modern journalism.

However, the data also illustrates two distinct exceptions. First, data indicates an intriguing aberration concerning medium-sized newspapers, and in particular those circulating between 30,000 and 50,000 daily copies. Such newspapers publish significantly less locally generated news content than newspapers of both higher and lower circulation size — nearly 20% less than the national average, as well as 20% less than slightly smaller newspapers and roughly 15% less than slightly larger ones. With the exception of national newspapers, C5 publications also are the least locally focused, and by a considerable margin. If small newspapers are hyper-local, then why do medium-sized newspapers behave so differently?

Graphing this phenomenon may be helpful to understanding it. The clear statistical decline in the publication of locally generated news content can be understood more tangibly as a “30-50-60 Curve,” illustrating the tendency of newspapers between 30,000 and 50,000 daily circulation to publish roughly 60% of their front pages using locally generated news content. (See Graph 1)

It seems logical that such publications occupy a unique niche in the American newspaper industry. They are perhaps too large to be considered “community” newspapers, but they lack the circulation — and, presumably, the resources — of major metropolitan publications. Could they be sitting on an ideological fence, between the hyper-local trends of smaller publications and a desire to print national and international news like metropolitan publications? Could there be a disconnect between the perception of the community, and the newspaper, between readers and editors? Or could this circulation size sit at a critical economic juncture, offering a product too large to be hyper-local but too poor to cover high-profile events without help from the Associated Press?

Secondly, it is also worth mentioning that national publications feature even more locally generated news content than America’s smallest newspapers. It seems likely that distinction is due to their formidable resources, which allow them to forgo outside wire services entirely; indeed, their focus on national and international news implies the same conclusion. However, it does deserve mention.

## Discussion — opportunities for further research

Answering such questions may incorporate several different approaches. The simplest, perhaps, would require surveys of newspaper editors, long considered the hallmark of gatekeeping research. How do editors determine how much locally generated and wire news content should be published on the front page? How do editors at small, medium and large dailies evaluate national and international news? And how cost-effective are divergent strategies concerning local reporters and wire services? Care must be taken to ensure that editors of all sizes of newspapers are included, but such a precaution can be dealt with quite practically.

Secondly, of paramount importance is the role of economics, particularly given the floundering state of the American newspaper industry. Such concerns are omitted here, in large part because they are not plainly visible by analyzing the finished product; however, they likely play a large role in the formulation of locally generated and wire news content. At what point, and for what size publication, does wire service news become more expensive than local reporters? Or does the threshold function in the opposite direction, with wire services offering cheaper services for smaller circulation categories? Conventional wisdom implies the latter, but without proper analysis, it is unfair to speculate. It also seems logical that the business

models for wire services and local newspapers are changing, and as such, the financial relationship between the two may also be in flux.

What this study offers is a quantitative benchmark for the amount of locally generated and wire news content in daily American newspapers. It reinforces previous findings that small newspapers are more locally-focused than most larger publications, but in doing so it poses further questions for scholars and journalists.

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**T1: Overall Use of Locally Generated / Wire [Content By Circulation Size**

Figures in Percentages; Count in Raw Data

Circulation Size	Local	AP	NYT / Other Wire	Count
<b>C1: &lt; 4,999</b>	82.7	15.5	1.8	444
<b>C2: 5,000 - 9,999</b>	83.6	14.7	1.7	590
<b>C3: 10,000 - 19,999</b>	77.9	19.4	2.7	480
<b>C4: 20,000 - 29,999</b>	78.4	12.9	8.7	645
<b>C5: 30,000 - 49,999</b>	58.2	33.9	7.9	675
<b>C6: 50,000 - 99,999</b>	73.6	14.3	12.1	685
<b>C7: 100,000 - 500,000</b>	76.1	10.9	13	686
<b>C8: &gt; 500,000</b>	96.6	0.00	3.4	417
<b>Total</b>	77.1	15.9	7.1	4622

$X^2 = 4.07, df = 14, p\text{-value} < .001$

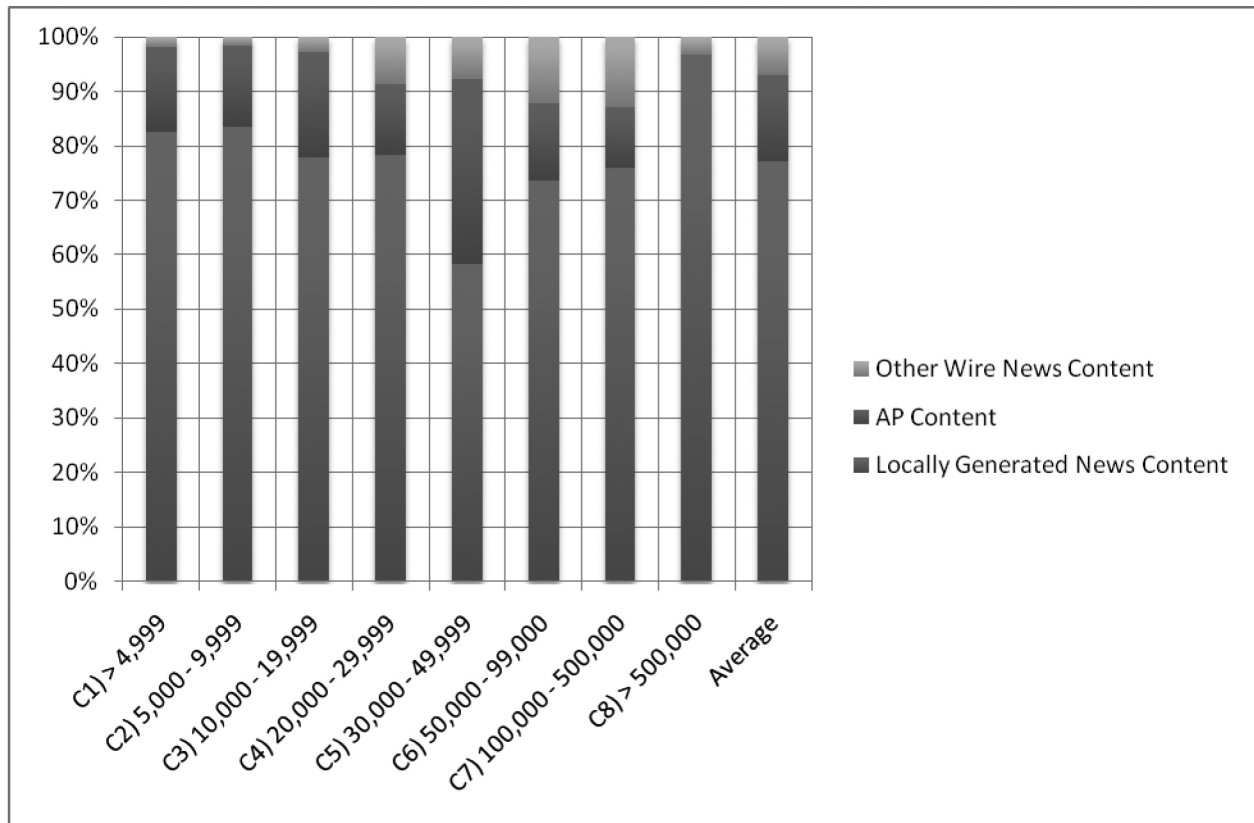
T1: Data chart comparing locally generated and wire news content against circulation size.

**T2: Proximity of News Focus by Circulation Size**  
 Figures in Percentages; Count in Raw Data

Circulation Size	Local	State	National	International	Count
<b>C1: &lt; 4,999</b>	79.1	11.7	7.7	1.6	444
<b>C2: 5,000 - 9,999</b>	82.2	12.0	5.1	.7	590
<b>C3: 10,000 - 19,999</b>	62.5	24.4	8.3	4.8	480
<b>C4: 20,000 - 29,999</b>	71.0	12.2	12.6	4.2	645
<b>C5: 30,000 - 49,999</b>	54.2	10.7	26.5	8.6	675
<b>C6: 50,000 - 99,999</b>	56.9	20.1	14.0	8.9	685
<b>C7: 100,000 - 500,000</b>	44.3	29.7	14.4	11.5	686
<b>C8: &gt; 500,000</b>	14.6	4.8	52.5	28.1	417
<b>Total / Count</b>	58.7	16.3	16.8	8.1	4622

$\chi^2 = 1.19, df = 21, p\text{-value} < .001$

T2: Data chart comparing locally generated and wire news content against geographic region.



**G1: The 30-50-60 Curve**

G1: Graph illustrating publication of locally generated news content on the front page of American newspapers by circulation size; highlights statistical drop among publications with daily circulation between 30,000 and 49,999.

# Building mobile community: Bringing digitally naive rural newspapers into the race to mobile

By Dana Coester and George Cici

## Overview

The race is on to make news mobile, but digitally naive and geographically remote rural newspapers may be slow to adapt. Based on data that suggests mobile connectivity increase overall access to digital resources and more deeply engages users in a broad spectrum of digital life (Horrigan 2009b), and that early adoption increases power and network centrality for first users in an organizational system (Brass 1990), we have proposed an early adoption strategy for mobile engagement for one rural newspaper, *The Parsons Advocate*, in Tucker County, West Virginia.

Located in the Northeastern region of West Virginia, Tucker County has a population of 6,812, with a median household income of \$34,157. The per capita income for the county is \$16,349. About 15.9% of the population lives below the poverty line, which is consistent with data for the state of West Virginia as a whole. The area features several renowned tourist destinations, including Canaan Valley Resort and Blackwater Falls.

*The Parsons Advocate*, a weekly newspaper with a circulation of 3,850, was initially slow to migrate to the online environment but once they began to transition, the acceleration has been rapid and compressed. *The Parsons Advocate* began online delivery in 2007, after a 113-year history of exclusively print publishing. Within a single year of initiating web publishing, in October 2008, the newspaper published its first online multimedia content in partnership with the PI Reed School of Journalism “WV Uncovered” project (wvuncovered.wvu.edu). Since 2008, the publishers, Chris and Kelly Stadelman, have strategically refashioned their role from newspaper publishers to new media entrepreneurs. With the onset of this mobile initiative in 2009, they have become fully invested, albeit on a shoestring budget, in a conversion to mobile news delivery and mobile monetization opportunities, not just for the newspaper, but also for the potential economic advantages to community businesses.

Notably, this pace of adaption for *The Parsons Advocate* mirrors the accelerating pattern described narrowly by “Moore’s Law of Integrated Circuits” (Moore 1965), but which has been extended by futurist Ray Kurzweil, among others, to help a lay audience better visualize, understand and anticipate accelerating paradigm shifts in technological culture and practice (Kurzweil March 7, 2001).

Kurzweil argues that both individual’s and organizations’ default settings for anticipating change is commonly based on an “intuitive linear view” of progress — in essence that it is human nature to maintain an unexamined perception of change that fits with recent experience of change. In the case of a rural newspaper, which may take 10 years to adapt to an online publishing model, a false expectation may exist that an adaption to mobile publishing would reasonably follow a similar time line. Thus, according to Kurzweil, this false perception results in consistently underestimating the pace of technological change and the planning for subsequent adoption of new technology. An acknowledgement of this exponential growth pattern is a key rationale for urging early adoption of mobile in what might otherwise be considered an unlikely community for widespread mobile behavior.

According to the Pew Internet and American Life Project, cell phones help to bridge the digital divide for both teens and adults by providing Internet access to less privileged community members, including those with economic, social and/or geographic disadvantages (Horrigan 2009b). The notion that disadvantaged communities can use a mobile strategy to overcome barriers to Internet access is supported by data noting 41% of teens from households earning less than \$30,000 annually access the Internet with their cell phone, although 30% of this income

group do not have a computer in the home (Lenhart 2010). Despite geographic limitations and subsequent inconsistent cell service, user behavior data for a sample of audience members for *The Parsons Advocate* from a survey conducted spring 2010 reveals that 51.3% of respondents own a web-enabled smart phone, 30% use their cell phone to access the web, and 28% use mobile applications 2-3 times daily.

Although we concede that mobile behaviors remain low in rural areas nationwide, research in transitioning local markets suggests early mobile adoption is key to future viability. According to Neal Polachek, CEO for market research firm BIA/Kelsey, “Within the local advertising sector, there will be a real share shift, and the players most ready to leverage and adopt interactive models will achieve greater success going forward.” Polachek reports that traditional media and advertising will continue to decline at the local level, and that the share shift “could actually be more pronounced if the major traditional media are not able to integrate new interactive products into their bundle.” BIA/Kelsey forecasts growth in local mobile advertising revenues nationwide from \$160 million in 2009 to \$3.1 billion in 2013 (Megna 2009). In anticipation of exponential acceleration of adoption, there has been a documented sharp rise in the number of individuals accessing the Internet through mobile devices (Horrigan 2009a). The pace and extent of anticipated growth, along with the forecast for local share shifts from traditional to interactive media, supports the argument that early investment in mobile engagement is strategically sound for publishers and businesses in this community.

We propose that rural papers — and the communities they serve — which have become acclimated to testing mobile delivery, engagement and monetization with their audiences will be better equipped to adapt and lead in this coming 3-5 year landscape. Early social science research indicates that adoption of technology as an organizational strategy can increase power and network centrality for individuals (Brass 1990) because centrality reinforces access to people, information and resources. We extend this observation about early adopters within an organization to investigate the role that early adoption can play in increasing “network centrality” for a legacy media brand among community members.

## Building sustainable mobile community

A key principle of this mobile initiative is to approach the barriers to mobile adoption as a community challenge, not merely a publishing challenge. We recognize these barriers are not solely technological: This project takes into account the geographic, sociological, economic and political context of legacy media in rural communities, and the role of culture, access and user behavior on both the business and consumer side. We view the role of a local news source as a vital center of civic discourse, and we seek to extend and re-invent that role of community media in a mobile sphere. We don’t consider that we are building a mobile *application*; rather our goal is to build a vital, sustainable mobile *community*.

In order to envision a sustainable mobile community, our approach is multifold:

1) We are engaging the local chamber of commerce, visitors bureau, downtown businesses and surrounding resort communities in the integration of a geo-mapping application that has been successfully used with retailers in mall settings, airports and other familiar locations to create local, geo-specific communication and advertising/information sharing with community members. This application, PointInside, is one of the first smart map apps approved for iPad and has been a forerunner in the mobile community. As part of our sustainable community building effort, we envision mapping the commerce hub of this rural community in a manner that is hyper-local, community-driven, and which can compete with increasingly mobile venues in commercial mall spaces. And we can’t help but like the idea of diverting

commercial mall space technology to the original authentic “mall space” of Main Street.

Because this engagement with local and regional businesses is led by and integrated into *The Parsons Advocate* mobile brand, we hope to reinforce the role of legacy media as a central source of commerce exchange and content curation — and to initiate this partnership before increasing disintermediation of a legacy brand and fragmentation in the community’s mobile behaviors can occur through penetration of competing vertical apps and other vertical brand information streams, what we have dubbed the “Infinite App Parallel Universe Problem.”

2) *The Parsons Advocate* branded mobile experience has been designed in two parts — first as a mobile site using the Wordpress publishing platform, and secondly as an iPhone mobile app integrated with Wordpress. The application makes use of parallel vertical features to feed select data streams to the consumer that fulfill familiar and established needs within the community. These streams also represent what we’ve determined to be “low hanging fruit” for initiating mobile behavior as they have both local and broad regional appeal for diverse sets of audiences that strategically combine seasoned iPhone users (tourists from suburban communities in Alexandria, Fairfax and Richmond, VA, Baltimore, MD, Washington DC, and Charlottesville, NC) with the local community of limited mobile users. This approach reflects data that identifies the initiating steps in digital engagement for communities that are based in practical actions: information seeking, leisure information, and buying (Helsper 2008). This pattern of initial use around practical needs is holding true for even the earliest adopters of the iPad. Virginia Heffernan reported for *The New York Times Magazine* in July, 2010 that the most popular downloads from the Apple’s App Store are “productivity” apps such as “Pages” for writing or “Things” for making to-do lists (Heffernan 2010).

Similarly, the identified data streams for *The Parsons Advocate* are not “sexy” in news parlance, but they represent useful information to select targets, while reinforcing a relationship with *The Parsons Advocate* as a news brand. These include: Ski Reports for the region’s resorts; River conditions for fishing, canoeing and white water rafting; Calendar of events; Dining Guide; Video Player; and Photo Gallery. Interactivity includes the ability for users to submit photos and videos to *The Parsons Advocate* from the app, and the ability to rate restaurants in the dining guide.

In the app’s debut to community members, scheduled for fall, 2010, we are including an in-app demo of an iAd, created for one of the local resorts, following the lead of Steve Jobs demonstration of the July 1, 2010 release for iAd, in which the company models a prototype iAd for Nike (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eY3BZzzLaaM>).

This provides an iAd debut in service to one of the community’s key businesses, reinforces the brand’s relationship to *The Parsons Advocate* as a relevant communication vehicle, and provides an accessible model for other local businesses by an influential business force in the region. With this strategy we build on data demonstrating that early adoption by “opinion leaders” in communities helps to accelerate adoption by community peers (Valente 1999).

The project introduces a brand extension for *The Parsons Advocate* that significantly updates the newspaper’s visual brand while thoughtfully retaining a clear relationship to the community and landscape with strategic design elements. The designer, George Cicci describes the visual branding rationale:

“The word mark within the logo represents a mountain, and the lines beneath represent the water-based activities in the area. The pine tree icon is placed to inspire the growth that *The Parsons Advocate* hopes to help bring to region. The green and white color schemes reflect the natural colors of spring and winter, and the orange represent the colors of autumn, elements key to this season-based resort community.”

We have also designed the app with a tablet evolution in mind, while taking care to pre-empt the emerging “Parallel Universe” problem discussed above — in which narrow-use, branded native apps are beginning to clog users’ mobile devices with ever splintering content (Gilbreath 2010). Vigorous debate has ensued as to whether a “walled garden” approach serves to increase brand fragmentation

or serve to privatize brand experience (a “walled garden” refers to closed or otherwise exclusive sets of information or services for users, as opposed to allowing consumers open access to applications and content). Additionally the introduction of HTML 5 and emerging methods of cloud computing in which a “super mobile browser” may threaten the nature of mobile apps themselves (Tsrulnik 2010), although Apple continues to defend its walled-garden, native app approach for the iPhone and iPad.

For our purpose, we are keeping a watchful eye on this debate and anticipating different scenarios for a tablet evolution of the app that enables a sustainable, curated journey, whether web-based or app-based, while reinforcing the legacy brand by integrating app, web and print experience. The celebrated opportunity that “mobile offers a channel for every publishing objective” (Butcher 2010) may be counter-productive to reinforcing holistic relationships with legacy brands. Our model from the outset attempts to address and test some of the issues being vigorously debated regarding on the one hand the dilution of the infinite web and on the other hand the splinter effect of native apps (Tsrulnik 2010) by employing a strategic integration of mobile web, mobile app design. We posit that the novel nature of mobile interactions, such as those proposed in the iPhone Human Interface Guidelines (Apple 2008) for a streamlined user experience with unique navigation metaphors and that include location awareness, touch screen interface, etc. — adequately represent the desired new behaviors we are initiating in the target community, regardless of whether those are ultimately web-based or native to a device. With this foresight, the news organization, the businesses and the consumers will first and foremost be acclimated to mobile habits around the news brand, regardless of whether the mobile experience is enabled through effective penetration of 3G and 4G networks in the region, or through “cloud computing” mobile apps, or other emergent work-around solutions for reliable local access to web in non-urban community settings.

3) A third strategy for building sustainable mobile community is through the participation of local youth and high school students in news consumption and marketing efforts, in recognition that millennials are both the future media makers and media consumers of these communities. Strategic early adoption of mobile media with this target group of users builds a bridge within communities to a future community on their terms, which are overwhelmingly social and mobile (Lenhart 2010). *The Parsons Advocate* has already successfully built a vibrant young audience. The introduction of a sports section and increasing coverage of school events in 2004 helped to initiate a growing youth readership, as well as the establishment of a journalism club at the high school. Recent outreach, in which they have conducted hands-on multimedia training in the high school in partnership with the “WV Uncovered” project, has further increased youth engagement and sense of ownership/authorship in the newspaper. Of 350 students, about half regularly access the website and represent a 10% increase in readership over the past two years. The papers’ online multimedia and photo gallery pages average 4,000-6000 hits per month. A page devoted to student video work averages an additional 1,000 hits a month.

4) Finally, the mobile initiative has been integrated into curriculum at the WVU PI Reed School of Journalism over a series of semesters in order to provide extended support for the community initiative, to use students (millennials with key insights) as partners in research, development, deployment and field testing of the application, and to make strategic use of the crowd sourcing potential inherent in the classroom setting. To serve the project, we created a series of project teams, each of which inform the work from unique perspectives with distinct problem sets to address. These teams function within the community, within the lab, and within the classroom as well as pilot for the School of Journalism a nascent collaboration between the program and WVU’s College of Mineral Resources and Engineering computer science program. The need for such collaborations has increased in the past five years as the intersection of technology, user behavior and journalism practice intersect, although few schools of journalism are equipped to implement curriculum that incorporates expertise in coding and user-behavior in the design, testing, and distribution of interactive content for mobile and tablet devices. The school is supporting a graduate assistant from the College of Engineering and

Mineral Resources to serve as a member of the core development team, which is led by journalism graduate student George Cicci, who is also a professional technologist and “digital Swiss army knife” by profession. Of note, George Cicci, who is currently a master’s candidate in the school’s Integrated Marketing Communications program, represents the rare new breed of journalist/programmer who is able to approach the programming challenge with a key perspective that integrates content, audience and user behavior.

In an effort to efficiently address rapid changes in the mobile market, we used a crowd-sourcing model as the basis of an experimental class in Spring 2010 to conduct supporting research for this project. The class, “Audience Development and Mobile Marketing for Media/Special Edition: West Virginia Uncovered” was divided into five teams. Each team was assigned to curate content for one specific area of expertise. This included monitoring conversations and aggregating content from across the web via Twitter, the blogosphere, and institutional resources and databases, as well as conducting focus groups, field research and user behavior surveys. Each team was assigned one of the following subject areas with the unique needs of community and rural newspapers in mind: 1) Mobile and Tablet Publishing 2) New Economic Models in Publishing 3) Monetization & Audience Building 4) User Behavior 5) Millennials and Media.

Each team identified and aggregated names of key opinion leaders around each topic, assembled lists of blogs and Twitter profiles to follow, and provided glossaries and at-a-glance briefs of the current state of each topic area.

The teams effectively and swiftly became relevant partners in discovery about the changing industry and co-creators for the project as they experienced first-hand, and in real-time, the knowledge-building efficiency at the heart of crowd sourcing. They also learned how to effectively navigate and curate content from disparate, dilute sources, and were simultaneously able to meaningfully absorb the complex factors currently shaping the media landscape — which through traditional teaching methods might have taken semesters to impart. Subsequent iterations of this course will build on this crowd-sourcing model as a strategy for imparting large amounts of complex, evolving content.

Existing literature reinforces that the strategic use of social media in the classroom as an “integrated suite of tools” can improve literacy (Rheingold 2008) and suggests a clever metaphor in describing this in-class collaborative social process as a “living content management system,” such as a CMS that creates “efficient information delivery systems” in web publishing (Fontaine 2009).

The User Behavior team conducted field research on mobile access within Tucker County, and designed a survey to assess mobile behaviors and potential for mobile behaviors for the audience of *The Parsons Advocate*. This data is being used to inform the development of the initial pilot application, and additional user behavior research and community action research will occur in fall, 2010 to inform subsequent iterations of the application as it continues to evolve at the community level. Recent literature demonstrates the success of engaging students directly with users to assess interactive, community-embedded news projects (Hanley 2008).

## Challenges

A series of challenges are worth noting, not only for this and similar projects but because they reflect broader obstacles in media and higher education at a paradigmatic shift in communication and technology.

1) The targeted community is geographically remote with limited cell and wireless Internet access. An initial proposal in August, 2009 to design a mobile application for what was at the time a predominantly a mobile-naïve community with a newspaper readership of which 85% is over the age of 30 was reasonably met with skepticism. Considerable debate exists in the industry around delivering content around existing user behaviors vs. moving an organization toward *anticipated* user behaviors (Owyang 2010). Absent the luxury of research and development resources, most newspapers make do with serving existing user behaviors and platforms, continually playing catch up in ad hoc fashion as user behaviors evolve and change.

2) Neither *The Parsons Advocate* nor the WVU School of Journalism had personnel or resources, [or curriculum in the case of the Journalism School] ready to

support programming for a native mobile or tablet application, or even for mobile web. Coding for mobile delivery in the iPhone and iPad platforms requires specialized skills in iPhone SDK, HTML 5, Interface Builder, and programming expertise in Actionscript, JavaScript, PHP, Java, Ruby and others. The current solutions to this dilemma are not simple.

A plan for outsourcing programming of the application for undertaking a mobile initiative requires an understanding of the entrepreneurial process of product development, testing, use-ability, how to storyboard dynamic content, skilled interface design and existing experience in interactive narrative. Considerable discussion has emerged in the past year around the growing need for “journalist as programmer” (Legrand 2010), although one commenter cleverly noted in response to Legrand:

“Rather, programmers should learn journalism. Of the two disciplines, journalism is much easier to master and if the Internet has taught us anything, it’s that the artificial barriers between professional and citizen content creation are erected by protectionists and not realists. Good coders, even those who do it fulltime, are still difficult to come by. And remember, the major transformations that have hit the media industry in the past 15 years are nearly all originated by technologists (Google, Facebook, Twitter, etc.), not English majors. Power to the geeks!” (“Logan” June 3, 2010)

Without coding support, the broader design and product development skills may not be widely common to newspaper publishers or schools of journalism, although both newsrooms and schools are increasingly moving to address these deficits through strategic interdisciplinary partnerships, revamping of curriculum and considering the need for programming skills with new hires in the classroom and newsroom alike.

3) The persistent economic downturn remains a problem. It is a challenge to convince individuals and businesses to divert limited time and personnel, as well as scarce financial resources to experiment with new technologies that may be costly (with costs measured in either time or money or both) to implement without a certain or immediate return on that investment. The current state of the media landscape across all platforms involves considerable speculative actions with no clear emergent models for audience building, content distribution or monetization. The analogy of mobile being like a “gold rush” is apropos — not only because of its presumed promises of profits, but also because of its highly speculative nature. In focus groups and workshops conducted with the “WV Uncovered” project, publishers and staff members consistently expressed concerns about their ability to meet daily operational needs, while at the same time learning new skills, new technologies and new modes of practices, many of which require immersive, time-consuming training to learn.

4) Naivety about the current flux in media technologies and their implications for practice persist among practitioners and educators alike. With the exception of the newspaper owners and publishers participating in the “WV Uncovered” project (who understandably had a keen awareness, if not full understanding, of the financial implications of the ongoing disruption to the economic models of newspaper publishing presented by web and mobile behaviors), many of the community journalists, journalism educators and students remain largely naïve about the profound changes in the ecosystem of journalism itself. A series of focus groups conducted with PI Reed School of Journalism news editorial, broadcast and public relations students in Fall, 2009, revealed that most students perceived the economic challenges facing journalism as an industry to be “somehow” related to the “rise of blogging” or to “the recession”, but beyond this superficial association around changes in content acquisition and the economy at large, students were uniformly unable to articulate how journalism practice is situated within larger publishing models and how it operates in either old or new media models from acquisition through distribution.

Traditionally, journalists have worked separately from the distribution, advertising, and audience-building activities of the publishing enterprise, and although rural and community newspapers may be more intimately involved in most aspects of the publishing due to small staffs, there remains a naivety about the disruptive forces at play in technology and user behavior across devices — and how exactly

those intersect in their day-to-day activities around content acquisition, distribution, and monetization. In workshop settings and one-on-one discussions, it came as a surprise to the participating papers that solutions for how to effectively build audience across devices and how to distribute and monetize content remains a moving target — not just to economically disadvantaged or digitally naïve publishers, but to many of the largest players in the media industry.

5) Finally, the changes in the mobile landscape since the 2009 initiation of this project have been profound. Though discussions of a “mobile revolution” have circulated for 20 years, it may have taken Steve Jobs’ announcement on Jan. 27, 2010 of the iPad to let the rest of the world know that the revolution had long last begun. Publishers scramble to staunch the hemorrhage of readers via “The Jesus Tablet,” without any real data to suggest the existing distribution models will effectively re-establish sustainable monetization of content — other than a preceding 2-year meteoric rise in the purchase of mobile apps for smart phones. Rural newspapers begin to consider mobile and RSS feeds, even though many had only recently begun to implement decade-old web publishing and multimedia work. Similarly journalism educators are scrambling to implement mobile and tablet publishing curriculum, while already lagging significantly in addressing the previous decade’s “new media” revolution (Buskirk 2010).

As of this writing, the industry is fraught with indecision, questions, challenges, and competing interests around key aspects of mobile engagement. Just a few among many disruptive forces at work include the following: Unresolved disputes between broadcast and mobile carriers over broadband spectrum allocation; the potential erosion of Flash ubiquity with the emergence of HTML 5; The lack of support in iPhone and iPad for Flash and implications for the emergent differentiation of competing devices; Continued debates and differentiation among carriers and devices around the “walled garden” approach; The anticipation of effective “cloud computing” and its effect on mobile vs. native apps, carrier specificity and barriers to web access; The emergence of disruptive models for audience building, content monetization and distribution; and finally, the implications of iPad and emergent tablet devices on almost every aspect of the “how, why, and where” of what we do as media makers and consumers.

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# Changing the journalism paradigm: How community participation helps newspapers

By Manuel Chavez

Some of the recent events in the news media industry, especially for newspapers, are indicative of two major processes that are not directly linked but that they seem to be associated. One is the business-advertising model use for more than a century that relied heavily on the advertising power of newspapers. Then a new ownership model arrived with managers who were able to sell automobiles but unable to understand the business model of the newspapers and its role as a social and political institution. Ultimately, they did not understand the critical importance of journalism for our society.

While the redefinition of the business model needs a pressing strategy; the cleavage between the newspapers and its readers needs urgent action. Executives making decisions about newspapers need a continuing reminder that journalism, and its pillars — the newspapers — are institution needed in democratic societies. To be clear, the format and the delivery of newspapers may change but the fundamentals won't. Simply said, new executives arriving to newspaper organizations need a basic course of journalism.

Added to that, there was a combination of technological changes, demographic trends and reader preferences changes that impacted the newspaper industry brutally. Fast but not very visible these trends started to show almost 25 years ago. By the end of the 1980s, the rapid technological change and usage started to permeate most industries. Demographics caught up by the mid to the end of the 1990s and the rest is history. Preferences and “digital-easy-to-use” inexpensive access provoked critical challenges to the newspaper industry. And it is clear that the technological and demographic forces are not going to reverse or go away (King, 2010).

However, the other major process affecting the industry was and still is, a pure and simple issue of organizational practice: the increasing distance between newsrooms and readers, or the gap between editors and publishers and the community and readers they serve. This second process is the one that is the purpose of this paper.

The paper illustrates a research project of almost five years on the Reforma Group newspapers that demonstrates that a connection between the newsroom and the community needs to be built and nurtured if newspapers want to increase their circulation and credibility. Some caveats, this is a model that requires commitment at three levels and it's not easy to achieve. The first is from the reporters and journalists themselves who need to hear what the readers and community are supposed to be interested in. The second is from the editors who need to accept that they are not experts on everything; and the third one is from the publishers who need to understand that it is a good investment to have a permanent connection system with the community and their readers.

## The elusive challenge of community participation in the news process

The limited-to-non-existent participation of the community in editorial decisions is a persistent American news media challenge. The distance between the newspapers and other news organizations and their ultimate consumer: their reader or audience is clear when reviewing the news media literature. In fact, something that is fundamentally counterintuitive was done by the industry for several decades, that was to overlook the importance of its customers by offering a product that needed to be in synchronicity with the preferences of their clients. There are not too many industries that can afford to ignore their customers.

Ultimately, the reader or “customer” won. They started to depart from the products that did not reflect their concerns, interests, and preferences. Reader dissatis-

faction emerged against the quality of the products being delivered — a lethal combination that caused serious impacts on the newspaper credibility.

Public dissatisfaction with the paucity of transparency and lack of citizen input in the news process are factors in the dramatic declines in the credibility ratings of the mainstream media. Public demand for a role in defining and disseminating news has given rise to the weblog, Tweeter, Facebook and other forms of social media phenomenon.

But with different signs on the horizon, parts of the industry recognized that the distance between newsrooms and readers would have an impact. In fact, the declining demand for newspapers prompted in 2001 a major journalism association, the Associated Press Managing Editors, to help many news organizations by holding a community forum to obtain citizen input. It was a good initiative, but it did not get wide traction in the industry.

If one needs to understand the value of the role of the media in sustaining civic society and citizen engagement — and the news media's need to rebuild credibility with the public — one might wonder why bolder steps to involve citizens in news agenda-setting have not been taken. And yet, such steps have been taken; the model for change, though, is in Mexico — not the United States.

Survey after survey show the need for change in the American newspaper industry. For example, the Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism last year reported 15 years of declining trust in newspapers (PEJ, 2009). Also, in 2009, a Gallop survey reported that less than half of Americans (45%) have no confidence in how facts are presented in the news media (Morales, 2009). In addition to journalism think tanks and pollsters, U.S. journalism associations, scholars and media analysts have cited low community participation in the news process as a problem.

Prominent scholars such as sociologist Herbert Gans have dissected the complex relations between a healthy democracy, the news, and citizen participation. Gans strongly argues that the press should function to empower all citizens in a model of profitable news organizations. However, Gans says the mainstream media has failed to cover politically relevant activities of all social strata, gaps in economic classes, race and ethnic transformation and — instead — reports from the perspective of owners and bureaucrats of the dominant institutions (2003).

Influential commentator such as Bill Moyers (2009) recently wrote about the problems facing our democracy as result of the lack of engagement with the community and its citizens. He said that many of the changes in the news landscape — media consolidation among them — have not been in the interest of democracy and the collective interest. Ultimately, he says, it is the social responsibility of the news media to connect to communities. Whether there is an agreement about the social function of the news media, the importance of being connected with the community and readers is accepted. In addition, American journalism critics as McChesney (2004) argue that the mainstream's media's lack of attention to community has led to a consistent erosion of democracy and its meaning in the United States.

Moreover, in the United States, many democratic practices are taken for granted and sometimes little attention is paid to the role of the news media as a builder of civic society. Reflecting in his classic book “Democracy in America,” Alexis de Tocqueville said that the emerging journals in rural areas of early America kept the citizen well informed to the point that they encouraged social formations to fulfill civic responsibilities. Even with the advancement of technology, in the 21st century the roles and fundamentals of the press are essentially the same (McChesney, 2010).

Simply put, the press accomplished a social function that empowers the entire community (Guerrero and Chavez, 2009). That practice was a trademark of

American news media for most of the 19th century and the early part of the 20th century — from the abolitionist press, to exposés that supported labor movement efforts to end exploitive workplace practices, to the muckraker attacks on political corruption. In the 21st century those traditions need to be reinvigorated without losing perspective of profitability.

Thus, it is ironic that a news model that empowers communities by establishing an inclusive approach to the news process would emerge south of the border — the editorial councils of the Mexican news group *Reforma*.

### A model for including the community in the practice of journalism

The media in Mexico and Latin America have not had a major role in empowering communities and sustaining civil society. The formidable functions and structures of the state, controlled, for the most part, by the political and economic elite, have limited social advancement and stymied a media that could encourage a grass roots movement for change.

In fact, Mexico's media were among the institutionalized groups serving to preserve the political system. Control over information was a mechanism through which the political system was guarded for decades. Indeed, a major element of the PRI-regime was its tight handling of information. Public information was treated as government property, restricted to political authorities. The press was a powerful player in the system that helped maintain the PRI-regime largely unchallenged. Similar to other patron-client relationships, the state-press relationship was based on a tacit agreement: in exchange for favorable coverage of the public agenda and government actions, newspapers were economically protected by the state. The printed media grew increasingly dependent on government's subsidies, official advertising, and bribes. In fact, journalists' incomes relied partly on direct cash payments from government officials in return for their pro-regime posture (Lawson 2004: 379-380). The stakes were too high for journalists and newspapers to depart from their supportive role. In most cases, newspapers worked within the boundaries of a self-censorship rather than direct censorship or open repression, which made the system seem legitimate. Most journalists did not question their passive and subordinate roles (Hughes 2006).

Analysts of Mexican politics (Camp, 2007; Lawson, 2004) have documented how controllers of the political system have used old forms of co-optation, corruption, and pressure to manipulate the press. The relationship between the government and the press created collective distrust of any type of journalism. Also, the professional training of journalists had lacked rigor and intensity to apply ethical and internal review standards. A major paradigm shift was required to improve the credibility of the press.

Exceptions to this institutionalized control of information were small regional newspapers with progressive publishers who resisted it. This group of publishers, editors, and reporters believe in a model where the press was a watchdog not a lapdog. Fighting the low credibility that the press has had in Mexico, the few independent examples such as *A.M.* in León, *El Imparcial* in Hermosillo, *Diario de Yucatán* in Mérida, and *El Norte* in Monterrey (Hughes, 2006; Chavez, 2007). Eventually, *El Norte* would become the flagship of the influential and independent Grupo Reforma news media group.

Grupo Reforma is a family-owned organization of four major newspapers in Mexico's largest cities. The oldest is *El Norte* in Monterrey, founded in 1938 by Rodolfo Junco de la Vega. Decades later under the leadership of his grandson Alejandro Junco de la Vega, the group established the daily *Reforma* in 1993 in Mexico City to create an alternative to the national newspapers offerings. In 1997, in Saltillo, the capital of the northern state of Coahuila, they launched *Palabra*, the third newspaper in the group. A year later, in Guadalajara, the capital city of the state of Jalisco, they opened the newspaper *Mural*. In addition to the daily newspapers, Grupo Reforma launched midday tabloids in Monterrey and Mexico City. The total weekday circulation of the papers in 2008 was 550,000.

For the circulation standards of U.S. newspapers, two things are different: an extraordinary success of a new news media organization in a short period of time; and second, a relatively young news organization with a growing credibility in

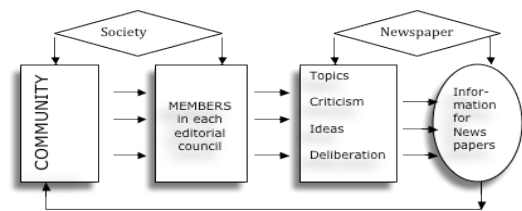
markets dominated by old journalism paradigms. This record is, in part, the result of a constant preoccupation to link the newspapers with readers and their communities.

The perceived disconnect between the community and the newspaper was a concern of *El Norte* during most of the 1980s. That concern led Junco to create a model that could incorporate readers into the decision-making process of the newspaper. The original objective was to have a pool of reviewers who could bring up their concerns, comments, suggestions, and criticisms. These connections generated, however, a shift in the editorial process that empowers citizens and re-connects journalism to communities.

Under these conditions, in 1991, in Monterrey, the newspaper *El Norte* created the first editorial council to connect the citizens it served with the newspaper. The two primary objectives of the council were to help the newspaper determine what the readers wanted to see published and to obtain readers feedback. The councils provided input about their interests but they also reviewed the newspapers for errors, omissions, biases, and ethical issues. Explaining the philosophy, *El Norte* publisher Alejandro Junco called the editorial councils "a mechanism of the community for the community."

The understanding of the editorial councils is reflected on Figure 1 that shows the interconnection of all elements and its circularity to maintain a constant flow.

Figure 1  
*Reforma* Community and Newspapers Model



In this figure the connection of society and community members with their newspapers are clearly shown as continuing, independent and interactive. Also, it shows that at the end of the process, the newspapers provide members' input as information that flows back to the community.

### Connecting the community and the newsroom and how the process works

Every year, reporters, editors and staffers at each section at all of Grupo Reforma newspapers — hard news sections, feature sections and zoned suburban editions — recruit and select a voluntary editorial council of citizens. Each council is composed of 12 individuals who are readers, opinion leaders, and people who are experts on the general focus of each newspaper section. Recommendations come from the staff, readers, and editorial council members themselves; but more importantly, members are not compensated.

The first group, "readers," are members of the community who read *Reforma's* newspapers whether they are subscribers or non-subscribers. The second group, "opinion leaders," are community stakeholders who have a relevant and leading position in their professions, institutions, and organizations. Among them are leaders from the private, public, civic, and non-profit sectors, as well as academic institutions and religious organizations.

"Experts," the third group, are those who have a high degree of skill or knowledge relating to the theme or focus of each newspaper section — from city news, to business news, to the national section, to the sports section, for example. These experts are invited to councils that focus on the various newspaper sections.

In 2004, Grupo Reforma established a new layer of participatory journalism — thematic councils. The thematic councils are comprised of experts on critical political, social, legal, environmental and economic topics such as: education, trade, energy, agriculture, tourism, environment, and security and the rule of law

among them. For these councils, the main objective remains the same — advise the newspaper. This is mostly a pool of academics, policy makers, and practitioners who contribute with their expertise to the preparation of investigative reports for the newspapers. Primarily two newspapers — *Reforma* in Mexico City and *El Norte* in Monterrey — recruit and consult thematic councils. *Reforma* houses four thematic councils and *El Norte* houses three.

Since 1991, the editorial councils have evolved from a small suburban group of 10 readers providing feedback to *El Norte* to a national network of 59 councils with more than 900 participants for the entire newspaper group in 2008. As mentioned before, candidates for council positions are selected from a list of nominations made by editors, reporters, out-going council members, high-profile members of society and proactive readers — those who have written letters to the editor or called an editor’s desk.

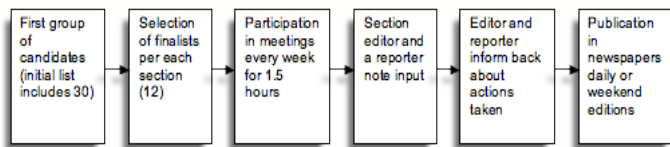
In interviews with former council members, the importance of nomination is well understood, as *El Norte* council member Rafael Longoria reflected in an interview: “I recommended people who I trust, people who I know and respect; after all, my own credibility is on the line.”

The initial list is reviewed by the section editor and the newspaper managing editor and then relayed to the council’s staff, newspaper employees who handle administrative work for council members. The council staff interviews the candidates to develop the final list. That list is then relayed to the managing editor for final approval.

All approved council members participate in two training sessions that emphasize group dynamics and the basics of journalism and newspaper functions. The participants, representing all sectors and segments of the Mexican society, engage every week in public deliberation. Each of the 59 councils operates in calendar years with the 12 participants per council — two of whom are reelected by their peers for a second year. Including the current members of the 2009 councils, more than 9,600 individuals of the Mexican community have participated in the editorial councils.

Figure 2 summarizes the process for each council in its interaction with the newsroom. Each process takes time and effort and newspapers section editors are regularly helped by an office that tallies input and output. The input is understood as the actual members’ contributions in a section and the output as the actions taken by the newsroom staff.

Figure 2  
*Reforma* Editorial Councils Process



**Active community engagement in the newsrooms**

Members are free to present their views, voices and ideas — especially on issues that affect the entire community. For example, an editorial council at *El Norte* two years ago insisted on a complete different approach to covering issues related to education and labor. High school students were graduating with no practical skills to engage in the labor market. The council included members with experience in education and labor training who recommended that the paper investigate how school facilities were used after hours and explore the potential of using school resources to meet this need.

The idea was to use the empty classrooms after regular hours to provide courses that could provide special skills for those close to graduation. School district officials reacted with skepticism but as a result of the coverage, the idea gained collective support and school administrators are studying implementation options.

The members of the councils believe they provide the means “of learning how the issues are presented by the media, who the actors are, and how to change out-

comes,” said *El Norte* council member Saul Garza. In other words, the councils are the catalysts for positive change in a newspaper chain that has begun to see itself as an agent of democracy. The *Reforma* editorial councils have an opportunity to promote the public interest. While the newspaper may have an idea of what the issues are and how the issues should be framed, the council — with community input — may suggest a different approach or a different ranking of the issues discussed.

For example, local law enforcement agencies of Monterrey may have one perspective on crime; the judiciary may have a different view; human rights groups may have another; and the media may yet another take. The council may deliberate and recommend a novel way to examine the issue of crime — one that has little relationship with conventional perspectives. The same happens with job creation, health services access, educational quality, affordability of housing, taxes, etc.

Also, by participating in the councils, citizens are making their governments accountable. When citizens and communities have direct access to the newspaper, they provide information about government services and the impact of government decisions — in a very direct way. That information, if it happens to be correct, is published.

Elected and appointed officials can no longer afford to ignore the importance of the *Reforma* papers, knowing that there is input from members of the community. Government performance is constantly examined not only by the press — but by the community itself. In fact, the councils have empowered citizens to demand accountability.

The editorial councils also help insulate the chain from charges of anti-government bias that might be made by politicians because those in government are aware that citizens help shape the news agenda. Governments are learning that is in their best interest to respect the voice of citizens when their voice can be amplified by a chain of newspapers.

Commenting on their impact on governance, a council member in the state news section in Guadalajara’s *Mural* newspaper, Araceli Rizzo, said: “I am here to participate in the initiation of a responsible government.” In some cases, the council literally demands that the section editor send reporters to cover local problems and issues they face in their neighborhoods. Ultimately, demanding the media to intervene in public issues is also an outcome of the councils, which is a practice of citizen empowerment.

Members have a strong sense of social participation directly connected with their personal notions of civic involvement. In an interview in Monterrey, city news editorial council member Martin Cantu said: “I am here doing my civic duty.” Other council members have expressed similar sentiment. “This is an opportunity to participate in public opinion, to have some influence, to have a voice,” said Rafael Longoria, in a 2007 interview.

Table 1 shows that most participants reported that they saw their contribution primarily as an opportunity to contribute to the improvement of the newspaper news production. Yet, after additional questions, participants also reported other contributions and benefits from the process. Of the categories mentioned by the participants, a bit more than 25 percent believe that their perception on accuracy in stories and having access to the correct sources was the primary reason in improving quality of news.

Table 1  
Responses by council members  
Direct journalistic impacts

Major categories	Impact areas	n	Pct. of total
Improvement on accuracy	stories, sources	63	0.26
Improvement on relevancy	real, meaningful	51	0.21
Improvement on objectivity	balance, sources	49	0.21
Improvement on gov/politics monitoring	stories, actors, institutions	40	0.17
Overall quality improvement	headlines, photos, text	36	0.15
<b>Total</b>		<b>239</b>	<b>1.00</b>

Improvement on relevancy and objectivity were the next two categories mentioned more frequently by the council members. In the first case they refer to the importance of making the stories relevant and meaningful. Participants saw that by helping the editor and reporters with ideas about how to improve the relevancy to the readers, their contributions were on target to journalistic objectives. In the second case, they saw objectivity as helping the editors with ideas about how to provide balance to the stories and how to widen traditional and non-traditional sources.

### Editorial councils and other journalism models

Upon first examination, the model seems comparable to the American movement called “public journalism,” well documented by Rosen and Corrigan (1999). Also known as “civic journalism,” advocates of public journalism encourage news organizations to increase the level of contact with communities. The idea of linking readers, community and newspapers was a response to the widely held conclusion that the U.S. mainstream media is disconnected from the communities it serves.

The movement’s advocates encourage news organizations to identify specific community, civic, or socio-economic issues that a newspaper would cover completely from beginning to end. Common coverage issues included race relations, job creation, education improvement, crime prevention, and economic development.

In public journalism the newspaper usually selects the agenda, determining special reporting projects that are community development and social issues. However, in the case of *Reforma*, members of the editorial councils help determine the special community issues to be covered. Also, there is no consistent frequency in when and how civic journalism projects are launched and there are no uniform mechanisms for community input. In the *Reforma* councils, on the other hand, the newspaper and the community examine issues and priorities on a weekly basis. Simply put, the *Reforma* model relies much more on community input.

The immediate impact of the editorial councils on credibility and circulation is difficult to gauge. The impact on circulation is not clear because councils were established when three of *Reforma*’s four newspapers were launched, leaving the chain with no comparative circulation benchmark. Similarly, there are no studies of credibility before the launch of the councils.

However, most participants in the council process say that community input has raised the credibility of *Reforma* newspapers relative to the rest of the Mexican news media. Also, it’s clear that the circulation pay-offs are adequate enough for the chain’s board of directors to maintain the community input model for 19 years.

As for the journalistic bottom line — coverage — the councils have had a clear and measurable impact. A *Reforma* executive, Sergio Miramontes, in an interview last year, said the councils’ recommendations on average account for 30-40% of the weekly news production. While not a majority of the news production, it is a fundamental shift because it derives from a direct community input. The process, ultimately has increased credibility, loyalty and, therefore, profits in the Grupo Reforma.

An even when these numbers seem low, they are almost more than triple of the ones found in U.S. newspapers. In a recent Project for Excellent in Journalism report (2009), researchers found that the percent of news coverage triggered by citizens was 12% only. For the most part, American newspapers still continue their heavy dependence on government, academic institutions, businesses, and other news organizations as triggers of news coverage.

### The factors of success of the editorial councils

In addition to the creation of a formal structure for community involvement — including a system for recruiting and rotating council members in and out — there appear to be three factors in the success of the editorial councils of Grupo Reforma: (a) the adoption of the notion that community input and community review and editorial follow-up should be an institutional part of the news process; (b) development of democratic rules and deliberative procedures of the councils that provides equal participation to all council members; and (c) the strong and deep commit-

ment of the publisher.

As for the first factor, a diverse pool of citizens have input and impact because there is institutionalized follow-up on recommendations by the councils’ central office in Monterrey and the respective council offices at each newspaper. Grupo Reforma editorial council’s central office in Monterrey has an electronic internal system to monitor the councils’ weekly activity in each newspaper. These follow-up mechanisms empower the councils and reinforce their sense of inclusion. Commenting on their role, council member Roberto Fuentes said: “I think that it is important to connect the media with the pulse of the society...because that is what we are — the pulse of the society.”

The second factor is the democratic practice under which all members enjoy equal opportunity to speak, participate, and contribute to the news section that engages them. No member, regardless of position outside the councils, receives special time or privilege. The format encourages equanimity and consensus decision-making. This is based on the notion that new ideas, foci, and themes need to have the support from all members — not just a few who might try to act as representatives of interest groups. The councils operate in a deliberative, participatory environment.

Last, but not less important, is the strong commitment that Alejandro Junco, the publisher of Grupo Reforma, has to the editorial councils as standard practice of journalism. The permanency, durability, and constant improvement of the councils are essentially the result of a top management’s belief in the model.

### Changing the paradigm in American journalism

U.S. newspapers are entering a threshold period in which it can revitalize and transform itself. Adjustments are needed to respond to a spate of problems. First, the news organization’s lack of connections with the communities they serve is a major obstacle to improved coverage. This disengagement prompts community apathy, distrust, and collective resistance to news products. The news media needs to acknowledge and respond to the simple fact that the community wants to see their issues reflected in news coverage.

Second, the American news media is having difficulty on credibility because of the lack of transparency and accountability in the news process. The media relies on internal accountability controls that are — too often — ineffective, inconsistent, and opaque. News executives have a stake in this system and are reluctant to acknowledge problems or the need for changes such as community inclusion in coverage review and news agenda-setting. External input can sharpen the story review process and allow the public to see and take part in the process. This is one of the tangible benefits of the *Reforma* editorial councils.

Some of the responses to obtain more community input, as the National Credibility Roundtables Project 2001 launched by the Associated Press Managing Editors was designed to coach newspapers on how to have practical and productive dialogue with their communities about issues and coverage of those issues. However, unlike the *Reforma* model, the news organizations that host these community forums also generally set the agenda — choosing the topic for the discussions.

While responses to readers and to the community at large are taken seriously by many — if not all — American news media, most U.S. newspapers have done little to incorporate citizen input into editorial decision-making on a regular, frequent basis. The typical practice is to have an ombudsman or a public editor, neither of which is proactive. In fact, both tend to connect with the reader after some error, omission, or ethical problem is detected. The *Chicago Tribune*, for instance, has a public editor who responds to editorial inquires, comments, and suggestions sent to the newspaper. This is a reactive process that primarily tries to respond to errors and complaints.

As for transparency, publications such as *The New York Times* have ombudsmen who publish columns to explain editorial decisions, to review errors and technical problems, and to present corrective measures to the readers. While these are positive steps, they lack the intense systematic external review process provided by the *Reforma* editorial councils.

Other newspapers respond to the need to connect to the community by having

community advisory boards or by publishing more neighborhood news. To obtain citizen input, the *Lansing State Journal* — like many other newspapers — engages a community board that provides a diverse set of views on local issues. At the *Journal*, board members sometimes write opinion pieces. However, these boards meet infrequently — at the *Journal*, only twice a year. Unlike the *Reforma* papers, U.S. newspapers do not involve citizens in the news production process on a weekly basis.

The other response is to publish weekly supplements about communities in zoned editions distributed to those neighborhoods. For example, the weekly “Neighbors” supplement published by newspapers such as the *Miami Herald* include sections that have features, reports on community developments and neighborhood institutions such as schools, nonprofits and small business. This is an important effort to connect to the community. However, editors and staff set the news agenda for coverage with little or no input from outside.

Some newspaper leaders — editors at the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Boston Globe* and mid-size newspapers in Michigan and Pennsylvania for example — have obtained some information on the *Reforma* model. However, when most U.S. newspapers get detailed information on the mechanics of this editorial council model, they react with excitement and apprehension. Excitement is generated because U.S. journalists immediately see the intrinsic benefit of the model; the apprehension stems from institutional and organizational commitment.

Some of the apprehension derives from the notion that American journalism is an exclusive professional trade. The thinking is that individuals with no professional experience have little or nothing to contribute. Another factor in the resistance is the notion that journalists distill developments and public and private initiatives and have the right to exclusively set the public news agenda. However, social scientists have shown that political and financial elites have much more access to the media and a disproportionate role in helping journalists to frame those news agendas. To empower communities and to shift the agenda to non-traditional actors is a real change in paradigm that requires a new paradigm of journalism.

American newspapers can learn from the *Reforma* model. When more communities engage in a strong partnership with the news media, newspapers gain credibility and citizens are more infused with a sense of civic responsibility. The result — as practiced by the *Reforma* newspapers — is a shared agenda setting, an empowered community, and a more accountable and profitable newspaper industry.

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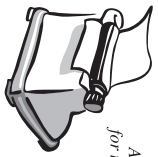
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