grassroots editor

A journal for newspeople

Published by the International Society of Weekly Newspaper Editors

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'Rural America, Community Issues'

Those of you in community newspapers realize some of the shortcomings of local news. It is local, it is seldom connected to other communities with similar problems, and there is often never enough time to do analysis of current local issues.

So where does that leave the 20 percent of America that lives in rural areas and depends on weeklies for information?

Is there hope for the future in rural communities? Will the big boxes drive out the mom and pops? What about rural health care or the exodus of young people, often to the military? Can rural areas attract industry to balance the loss of jobs in farming?

These are some of the issues discussed in June at "Rural America, Community Issues," a seminar at the University of Maryland. It was funded by the Knight Center for Specialized Journalism, with offices on that campus, and coordinated by Al Cross, director of the Institute for Rural Journalism and Community Issues at the University of Kentucky.

In addition to the concerns expressed above, the conference talked about covering local issues; the impact of rural politics on national elections; just what is rural, and why is it so important; why agriculture is still important though less than 2 percent of the country is employed in farming; whether broadband is the answer to rural America's isolation; and other issues.

The engine fueling federal rural programs is the national budget, which has taken a hit with 9/11 and Iraq, and will take a further hit because of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. The outlook for increased federal funding is bleak at best, and further cuts in many mandated programs are likely.

And if rural communities hope to balance their budgets by attracting industries from other communities, the advice given at the Knight seminar was: Forget it. The day of luring small industries to your community is over, given globalization. In fact, Mexico and other countries which had been "stealing" American factories are now losing them to the Far East. Regional cooperation and new approaches could be one answer.

Perhaps the most riveting speaker was Deb Flemming, former editor in Mankato, Minn., who quit her job rather than cut five positions in the newsroom.

ISWNE member Ray Laakaniemi, professor of communication at Tiffin University in Ohio, was one of the 31 fellows selected for the conference. What follows is his report of the sessions, all of which he hopes will be of value to rural editors.

For further information on the IRJCI, its purpose and programs, and its daily rural blog, go to www.ruraljournalism.org. For information on the Knight Center, go to www.knightcenter.umd.edu. For questions to Ray Laakaniemi, email him at laakaniemir@tiffin.edu.

We start with an overview of rural issues by Dee Davis, president of the Center for Rural Strategies in Whitesburg, Ky., who as you will see, has an interesting history in the newspaper field and is on top of the problems in rural America. He can be contacted at dee@ruralstrategies.org.

Enjoy!

Press needs to cover rural issues better

Keynote speech by Dee Davis, president, Center for Rural Strategies, "Rural America, Community Issues" conference, Knight Center, University of Maryland, June 12, 2005.

Tonight I am going to speak to you about journalism as I understand it, about rural perception and rural policy and where there is work to be done. I am quite aware that you were selected to be part of this group because of the exemplary work you have done with your own publications and broadcasts and I certainly appreciate the chance to have this exchange.

My journalistic credentials are quite modest. I grew up in Hazard, Ky., where my daddy read me the funny papers in *The* [Louisville] *Courier-Journal* every Sunday. Through the years I moved from the funnies to "Ask Andy," to the sports section, and in time to the news, which at its most memorable meant exposing corrupt local officials, rapacious mining practices, and the stifling poverty in the Appalachian Mountains around our home.

At age 16 I got my first letter published in the Louisville paper. The thing about growing up in a small town is that people whom I had no idea even knew my name would come up to me and tell me how proud they were that a young person from our town could write a letter that would get in the *Courier-Journal*. Then they would each politely point out that they disagreed with what I had said, but they were very proud that I could say it.

At 17, I got my own humor column in the Hazard High School newspaper. It was called the *Bulldog's Bark* and it was my first work with an editor, Agnes Kirby. She was the senior English teacher best known for walking around the school saying, "Alas, alas." It was her job to read my columns to make sure I didn't sneak through any cuss words or overly conspicuous double entendre. I would watch her read it, to see which ones she would catch, and not one time all year did she crack a smile, though occasionally she would look up and say, "This is funny." So at least I have sensed that affection from an editor that many of you have experienced.

I skipped journalism at the University of Kentucky, but there was a course called rural government. I had no interest in the subject, but was convinced by my pals to take it, that it was an easy 'A' and everybody loved the professor, an avuncular stroke victim who called everyone "Mister" or "Miss" and spent a third of every class calling the roll. He began his first lesson by defining rural government as inferior government served by an inferior press. I found that to be biased and unhelpful. I not only objected in class, I complained to the dean of arts and sciences. The dean said he agreed, but he couldn't understand why a serious student would take the class in the first place, that most students signed up for that class so they could get an easy 'A.' At that point, I found myself going on at length about how important the study of rural policy was to my life and my future. This, I understand, is Karma.

I left the University of Kentucky to start a job as assistant editor of *Mountain Review*, a quarterly magazine with a press run of 1,500 and a subscription rate of $5 a year. I invite you to do the math.

At age 25 my fortune turned and I went to work for the *Courier-Journal* — as a paper boy. Though I was both dependable and punctual, my employment ended abruptly the week of our nation's bicentennial when a comrade and I decided to celebrate the Fourth by dressing in commando gear and liberating all the lawn jockeys along my paper route. We filled the back of a Buick wagon with nearly a ton of freed statuary before the Hazard police strongly suggested we take them back to where their owners, my customers, were waiting to have a word with us. They say a paper route builds character.

My real journalistic education came in the years I was married to the granddaughter of Mark and Willie Snow Ethridge. Mark was then the retired editor of *The Courier-Journal* and of *Newsday* after that. He had been one of the Southern editors who had crusaded for modernization and for civil rights in the South in the face of rough opposition from every sector, especially schools and churches. He had served on the Ford Foundation board and the U.N. Commission on Palestine, and retired to a rural tract near Pittsboro, North Carolina.

Willie Snow, Mark's wife, was the author of 16 books and a delightful raconteur who often recounted their adventures together in the newspaper business, and was in some demand to make speeches all around the country. I remember her telling the story of having to go off to make a speech in Wichita. She said she spent the whole week before saying that she could not believe that there even was such a place as Wichita. And how could there be anybody there who wanted to hear her? She said she had no earthly idea why she had agreed to do it. But the morning came, and she dutifully climbed on an early plane and flew an indirect route to the Wichita airport where a delegation from the women's club met her in time to whisk her off to her luncheon speech. Willie said that as they drove along she went on gushing about how lovely the town was and how nice it was to get to come to Wichita and to meet each of them. She started seeing these quizzical looks, and finally one woman said, "Miz Ethridge, we so loved your speech here last year, we just couldn't wait to hear what you had to say in this year's speech." Willie said, that she thought "this year's speech? I only had the one."

By the time I met Mark Ethridge, he was in his late 70s with some health concerns, and the doctor had limited him to only two drinks a day — a restriction he faithfully observed by purchasing a great yellow plastic flower vase that he loaded with vodka and grapefruit once in the afternoon and again before supper.

And on holidays and family vacations I spent all the time that I could steal sitting beside him, keeping pace with conventional stem ware, and urgently asking him all that I could think of about the state and the South and the people he had met: the '37 flood when the paper shut down, integrating the schools, Happy Chandler, Harry Truman, Alben Barkley, FDR, the coal strikes and John L. Lewis, Ed Prichard stuffing the ballot boxes in Bourbon County, the Binghams, the Guggenheims, the Hodding Carters, Huey Long, the Virginia Byrds, Margaret Mitchell, Sherwood Anderson, John Steinbeck. It made me feel that there was something great about newspapers, how they connected us and what they connected us to: stories, language, common understanding. The things I had studied in school like the struggles for voting rights and decent wages he had witnessed, perhaps even influenced.

And here you can plainly see that I came to over romanticize journalism, and journalists and the language they spoke — the

things they could make happen. For the next 20 years I made my way mostly by working with others to produce television documentaries about the coal fields where I grew up. In that process you move from idea to finished product in three years if you're lucky. But on the front lines of every tough fight in Appalachia, from strip mining to official corruption, there was some reporter out there getting the story and taking a commensurate amount of abuse for it. Once in a while they got beat up.

One morning back in the '80s the judge in my home county was so incensed about a *Courier-Journal* exposé of his malfeasance that he confronted the paperboy on the county line and relieved him of his inventory and destroyed them so no one would read the story. The county was outraged. People get upset when they don't get their paper. Trust me. Next day the *Courier-Journal* brought more copies and escorted the paper boy on his drops. A paper route builds character.

But the problem with romanticizing journalism is that there are also the disappointments that follow. Issues not covered, blown stories, the budgetary priorities of the papers. It's not the despair that gets you, it's having the hope.

Two years ago the *Courier-Journal*, now owned by Gannett, accomplished what no corrupt county official or outlaw strip miner ever pulled off. It stopped delivering the papers to East Kentucky — let the paperboys go and pulled the routes back to its primary market area. It was a sound business decision and understandable. And it is part of an industry-wide trend that is manifest in a system where fewer and fewer staffers put together what are still highly profitable papers for fewer and fewer readers.

This is the way Albert Scardino explained the system to me when he was covering the media beat at *The New York Times*. He said that the real insiders would tell each other that you have to be brain dead if you can't make money running a newspaper these days. He said here's how it happens: An editor goes to ask for another reporter on his city desk or a regional bureau and is told sorry, we just don't have that in the budget. But if you want something for the business page, we can talk.

Now Scardino is the executive editor for *The Guardian* in Britain, and he refers to those same insiders as "corporate press barons who have turned a once-honorable profession into a 17 percent return on equity."

These trends present a particular set of problems for rural America in a conventional newspaper economy. Rural is where the market ends. The twenty percent of Americans outside the metropolitan areas are more costly to reach. And they have less purchasing power. But even though they represent a less valuable demographic, they still could use real journalists looking into the issues that matter.

At the Center for Rural Strategies, our business is campaigns. Sometimes that means building public awareness and sometimes that means picking fights. But we got into this business because we saw things in rural America were bad and getting worse. Moreover it seemed like nobody was paying attention. And we wanted to do something about it.

Here is the lay of the land we were seeing:

- Of the 200 poorest counties in the United States, 195 are rural.
- The rural poverty rate is 21 percent higher than the rest of the country.
- More than one out of every five rural children lives in poverty.
- Rural children are 50 percent more likely than urban kids to lack health insurance.
- Eighth-graders in rural America are twice as likely to use amphetamines, and are 83 percent likelier to use crack cocaine than eighth-graders in urban centers.
- The adult suicide rate in rural areas is 20 percent higher than the rate among urban adults.
- The death rate in Iraq for American soldiers from the least populated counties is twice that of the nation's most populat ed counties.

And not only was that information below the national radar, those public and private systems set up to address conditions of poverty and community dysfunction were often absent when it came to dealing with rural problems. For example, per capita federal investment in community development is twice as much in metropolitan areas. And of the $30 billion in charitable grants private U.S. foundations make each year, only $100 million go into rural community investment, less than half a percent.

So to some of us who found the situation untenable, the question became what do you do? You can't complain to the dean on this one.

We began our work with a couple of simple notions. The first is that there is strength in numbers — that the more isolated and divided rural people are on issues affecting them, the less power they have to make change. And conversely as rural practitioners find each other, make allies beyond their own sectors, and identify solutions, there's more chance to get something done. When we talked to folks working in rural places like coastal Maine, the Upper Midwest, Mississippi Delta, the Sacramento Valley, a lot of what we heard was that they were feeling alone out there. If there were problems in the community or with the local economy, they faulted themselves for not doing enough, not the elected officials, not national policy, not the stars. And mostly they felt when the media did show up, they got it wrong.

The second notion that we organized around is that policy follows perception. If we were going to get better policy for rural America, change the status quo, then we are going to address how rural America and its issues are perceived. Here's an example.

First, the overwhelming view in this country is that rural people make their living on the farm. The image of the venerable family farm is pervasive. But farm reality is very different. Fewer than 2 percent of rural Americans now earn their primary living on the farm. Nationally there are just 600,000 farmers earning $40,000 a year or more. To put that number in perspective, there are more than three times that many people who file on their income taxes as artists. But because so many of us commonly hold this common perception, the country can find it acceptable, even necessary, to subsidize agribusiness, what we assume is family farming, by more than $20 billion a year. Believe me, the arts endowment gets less.

The reality is that most farmers don't even participate in those subsidy programs, and of those who do, 8 percent get 60 percent of the take. It is easy to assume, even to expect that farm subsidies make a real difference for poor rural communities. It becomes our de facto rural policy. But the reality is that other than propping up land prices in the farm belt, those subsidies are a very inefficient way to assist struggling rural communities. And whatever this sys

tem of subsidized commodity production is designed to do for the balance of trade, it is not happening. The U.S. has become a net food importer.

So back to the business of bringing people together and reframing rural perceptions. At Rural Strategies we have undertaken some specific campaigns. A couple of the more successful ones, I will mention here. (The unsuccessful ones, I plan on talking about next year, in Wichita.)

When CBS announced plans to make "The Real Beverly Hillbillies," a reality show that would take a low-income, uneducated rural family and place them in a Beverly Hills mansion for amusement, we took exception. We ran ads saying so in major papers across the country, and we put together broadly diverse coalitions to stop the show. This effort brought together many strange bedfellows: three dozen Republican members of Congress; the leadership of 10 of the country's largest trade unions; Paul Weyrich, the founder of the Heritage Foundation; Michael Moore; Zell Miller; and whoever the opposite of him is.

And it got thousands of regular folks from around the country to register their protest and make some stand in support of what is rural. In a way a campaign against bad television is like pissing in the ocean, but in another way it's empowering to take a side in a big fight and feel that you made a difference.

And one of our great discoveries in running the campaign was that rural America was far larger than the 55 million people who reside there. The actuality is that the cities and suburbs are full of people who have left the countryside to find work or opportunity, and they identify themselves as being rural. In seeing that the internal study at *The New York Times* suggested more rural coverage, it made me wonder if this was a response to those readers who feel connected to a rural heritage.

Another campaign we just took part in was confronting the administration and the banking regulators over their plan to exempt all but the largest banks from Community Reinvestment Act obligations. That law compels banks to lend money back into the poor and moderate-income communities that they serve. This was a more complex campaign than rallying against reality television. And nobody gave us a shot, but we started with good seasoned partners, like the Congressional Black Caucus, the Hispanic Caucus, NAACP, LaRaza, and the Local Initiatives Support Corporation. We ran ads that asked: "Will the president's promise of an ownership society include rural America?" We asked: "Why reverse legislation that had brought over a trillion dollars of private investment into needy communities in cities and towns?"

One widely held perception of rural America is that it is redneck, all-white and intolerant. And that's neither accurate nor helpful. As my pal Gurney Norman says, when did John Boy Walton become Timothy McVeigh? Or maybe the more up-to-the-minute question is, when did Jessica Lynch become Lyndie England? The reality is that rural America is only 8 percent less diverse racially than the country as a whole. And what we have seen from surveys is that urban people tend to think of rural people as intolerant, and rural people tend to think of urban people as intolerant. And they may both have a point. But it is also true that the problems of inner cities and the problems in rural towns ranging from disinvestment to substance abuse are not that different, and there very well may be remedies that serve them both.

And in this campaign with these diverse partners, e-mail by e-mail, letter by letter, we brought in enough petitioners to overwhelm those the banks ginned up in support of their own regulatory relief. And in the end, together, we were able to eek out a reversal from the regulators, FDIC and the Office of Thrift Supervision, on rural investment.

Here is what I am trying to say. There are problems in rural America. There are also some solutions. How we set about to solve these problems makes a real difference for those who live in the countryside and for those who don't.

And the press has a critical role to play. Not as advocates. No one who romanticizes journalism as much as I would want to change your job description. But we need to cover rural issues better. Misperceptions have consequences. We need to explain rural better. We need to show how it is connected to a bigger world. We need to talk about solutions from time to time. And we need more folks like you to show up and get some shit on their shoes.

And when they do, there are going to be some tough rural issues to deal with, like the political segregation going on in this country, or the burgeoning clericalism in rural community life, or the true prospects of revitalizing our communities when the public coffers are empty and the real price of war has shifted back to the communities whose volunteers fought it. And when those stories come out it's going to be uncomfortable. Readers will cringe. Some of you may even get beat up. That would be great. I would love that. It builds character. And it might just mean that these issues matter.

Thank you for indulging me.

Defining rural America — what is rural?

By **Ray Laakaniemi**

Calvin Beale, a senior demographer at Economic Research Service, is a legend in Washington. His career has run 56 years — and still going — in analyzing population patterns, migration flows, and racial/ethnic composition of rural areas.

He produced the first report on a massive rural exodus from the South by blacks from 1920 to 1960. Then, in 2001, he helped show the reversal of that trend, blacks returning to the South, connecting it to economic development in the rural South.

He was among the first to note that Hispanics accounted for a quarter of all rural population change in 1990-2000. Over the past two years, his research on the disproportionate placement of prisons in non-metro areas has drawn national media attention.

And refusing to be belted to the Beltway, he has visited most U.S. counties and photographed over 2,000 county courthouses. He even has a government statistic named for him. Beale codes classify metropolitan counties by size, and non-metro counties by degree of urbanization and nearness to metro areas.

So when he discusses what is rural, people listen. And he will tell you there at least 75 definitions of rural.

Why so many definitions? The Census Bureau uses 2,500 as a cutoff between rural and urban towns. The Grand Canyon is considered metro because the county it is in, Coconino, has more than 50,000 people. Large parts of Worcester County in Massachusetts are considered rural even though there are 144,000 people in the county. And census tracts can list smaller units of rural population within a larger urban county.

So what trends does Beale see at this time?

For one thing, 21 percent of the population is considered rural, but 35 percent is eligible for rural development funds, thus showing how Congress defines "rural" as it sees fit in different cases.

You could drive from North Dakota to Texas (the farm belt) and not go through a county with a positive growth rate. This is called "natural decrease" where deaths surpass births. Growth areas include retirement communities in several states, counties which have added prisons (a new prison opened in a non-metropolitan area in the U.S. every 15 days during the 1990s), and communities which have become the home for telemarketers, subscription processing, and airline reservations, several of which are in Iowa.

Twenty-eight percent of the U.S. population crosses county lines to go to work.

And, only 3,500 people in the country are employed in the Ethanol business. But one thing is sure. Loving County in Texas, on the Pecos River east of El Paso, is rural. It has 111 people.

Reinventing the rural economy

Mark Drabenstott thinks we have this rural development thing all wrong. He says we have to "reinvent the rural economy."

He thinks globalization has changed the rules of industrial development because "all the world has cheap labor, cheap land and cheap taxes."

He suggests that rural areas are being forced to rethink their economy, and "rural areas are going to have to 'grow' businesses in their areas, not recruit them."

Drabenstott is vice president of the Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City and director of the Bank's Center for the Study of Rural America. He is also a member of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development that tracks global trends in rural issues. His URL is kansascityfed.org.

Drabenstott's position is that communities should not be competing with each other to lure factories to their communities, since those jobs are already going to Mexico and from Mexico to China. Further, economic development dollars are hard to come by "and not producing as they used to," he said.

Rather, they should be combining into regional forces, capitalizing on the strengths of the region, combining education, industry and the assets of the region. "In effect, we should be growing businesses in our area. Not hunting for businesses in other areas. You will need to sell what you grow, not grow what you sell," he said. Enterprises involved in world marketing must "be big or be gone."

To do this, cities must think like regions, work together and understand their distinct economic assets, which markets they can access, and how to develop a strategy to reach those markets. "Competitiveness is a regional factor, not a national one," Drabenstott said. They will need "the fuel of innovation and the engines of entrepreneurs" to explore new ideas and take some risks. Since you cannot compete on costs with much of the world, you have to compete on innovation."

Education is key since "we cannot afford dropouts to go to work in factories if there are fewer factory jobs" and enterprise education and economic literacy are required, not optional, in this type of system.

Some examples are Missouri farmers combining with Northwest Missouri State University on the immunity properties of mother's milk into grains of rice, Wisconsin farmers selling high-end farm-fresh organic produce directly to white table-cloth restaurants in Milwaukee and Chicago, and Walla Walla, Wash., developing its own niche winery industry because one of its main cash crops — onions — was a low-profit item.

In Australia, seven states have combined into one for transportation and regional services rather than competing. In Mexico, regional economic development is one of two top goals of the country. Most regional partnering is where the economic hardships are the greatest, whereas it should be the focus of even the prosperous regions because the times are changing. Ask your region where it will be 10 years from now if things do not change, Drabenstott suggested.

In the Midwest, he points to Purdue University becoming a "Lexus V-8" engine for Indiana growth, by working across disciplines to get the best projects funded, by commercializing research done on its campus, and by assessing which innovations will work best in different parts of the state.

Adapting this to the regional concept, and adapting it to Ohio, he says the question should be "what does Northwest Ohio need that Southeast Ohio does not need, because 21st century economics will not respect 19th century surveyors."

We should be recruiting entrepreneurs to bring together the assets of the region, rather than trying to attract industries from other regions of the country, Drabenstott said. And since state funding is shrinking, public universities are becoming national and research is becoming incentive-driven. "Higher education needs to reconnect to the regional needs," he said.

"And there is a tremendous opportunity for the press in all this," he said. "You can build regional bridges through the press. It is not Tiffin versus Fremont, it is Tiffin and Fremont against the Chinese and the rest of the world."

He suggested the media focus on long term successes. "Ribbon-cuttings are fine, but the real stories are getting venture capital and hiring more people as businesses expand." The role of the federal government should be "to support, not dictate to, regional planning" and the states should be doing everything they can to promote regional cooperation and public-private partnerships.

"The time is short, the stakes are high and the alternative is a third-world economy," Drabenstott said.

Cut 5 positions by Monday

You quite literally could have heard a pin drop, and there were 30 journalists in the room.

It was a seminar in rural issues and Deb Flemming was speaking about the issue in Mankato, Minn., where she had been editor of the *Mankato Free Press* until April of this year.

"I told people I had the best job on the planet — until excess profits did me in."

She HAD the best job on the planet, until the Friday she returned from a vacation. Her boss welcomed her back, a few pleasantries were exchanged, then the bombshell.

"Deb, you have to cut five positions from the newsroom by Monday."

Five positions! By Monday! On a staff which averaged 15 years experience with the paper! On a paper that had been making budget goals and profit margins all along.

It was an agonizing weekend. Where to cut?

First to go was 40 hours of part-timers in sports.

When she made her report, a couple of other cuts were suggested — and she asked that her job be eliminated.

Management was incredulous. The paper had won awards. She had roots in the community. You can't mean this.

But she did stick to her guns, and an assistant editor she recommended was named editor. And she left. No farewells. No farewell column, though she had one ready. She was told "just go away."

A brief announcement appeared in the paper, without any details.

But "Our silence is to blame. Readers were clueless. They had no idea what was going on in the news business," she said.

There had been some signs. The paper was first bought by Ottaway some years ago, then more recently by Community Newspaper Holdings, Inc. of Birmingham, Ala. The marketing manager, with 20 years on the job, had left three months earlier.

The paper had gone from six days to seven. She asked for 10 more staffers to cover the larger Sunday edition and the extra work. They laughed. She got five.

She asked for permission to send a reporter to Afghanistan to cover local soldiers. Cost about $5,000 for three weeks. Turned down. Insurance problems in a war zone.

Then a chance to cover Bosnia as a member of a group at a cost $100. Insurance concerns again, but it was approved. Not a war zone at this time.

Money was there to cover local teams in state sports tournaments, but not to cover state government in St. Paul, 86 miles away.

And after new ownership came in, a bill arrived from a previous FOI case against a local government unit. She was told in no uncertain terms that there would be no funds for legal fees under this ownership.

But what does this mean? Limited travel funds. No chance to sue for FOI or closed meetings or public interest issues? The public's right to know throttled by a comptroller in Alabama or a stockholders' meeting?

"They want the privileges, but not the responsibilities," she said.

Since she left, Flemming has been reading a lot about journalism and the First Amendment and the role of the press, especially Bob Picard and Phil Meyer. She is not surprised to read about profit margins in the 30 to 40 percent range (although several of the reporters in the room were hearing that for the first time).

She quotes Phil Meyer in *The Vanishing Newspaper* talking about "the harvest marketing position — take the money and run."

But what about the Fourth Estate, the one which watches over government?

"I keep hoping, I know it won't happen, but I keep hoping stockholders will get to the point where even that return is not enough, and they will sell the papers back to the community," Flemming says.

The press reacted. Stories were written. Associated Press covered it. Then it died, without discussion of the real reasons behind the change.

To the reporters in the room: "This is going to happen to you, regardless of the size of the paper you have. Fight your editors for the stories you want. Stand up for what is right."

To those in her newsroom, she had jealously separated them from the business side. Now she is wondering if that was right.

As always, the real losers were the readers. Regional coverage was cut as a result. Someone who knew the community and cared for it was no longer watching out for the impact of the hog farms, the loss of family farms, and the weekend surge by people from the rural communities that was putting pressure on the police department.

And not one cent for legal fees.

Why rural still matters

The rural population of the United States is about 20 percent, depending on the definition of rural — and there are more than 70 definitions, based on different pieces of legislation. This is down from 60 percent rural in 1900.

The percentage of people who live and work on farms is less

than 2 percent of the totals.

Why then does rural still matter? Why do politicians court the rural vote, and legislators seek opinions from their farm constituents?

David Freshwater thinks he knows. He is director of graduate studies for the College of Agriculture at the University of Kentucky and has worked for Congress on the Senate Agriculture Committee, among other roles.

The number of farm-dependent counties in the U.S. has dropped dramatically since 1950 to where the Office of Management and Budget in 2000 found only one farm-dependent county in Illinois, one in Kentucky and none at all in Ohio or the states touching Ohio.

"In the Northeast and Appalachia, large areas of what was farm land has been abandoned and returned to bush, he said.

Yet the number of acres used in farming has not changed appreciably since 1945, so "the number of farms has declined but the average size of those farms has increased markedly," Freshwater says.

And those farms, many of them corporate farms, are increasingly important in feeding the 280 million people in this country and many countries overseas. Over the last 50 years, there has been no decline in the value of agricultural production in this country.

In addition to the food production, there are several other reasons why farming is still important, Freshwater says.

Environment — Farmers control the vast bulk of the land in many states, and the plants help in the CO_2 cycle. Further, farmers are becoming more important in the bio-diesel and ethanol alternatives to fossil fuels.

Political roles — Farmers are active in political leadership roles "at an incredibly high rate" such as school boards, county government and civic organizations. A part of this is to protect their own interests, he says, but much of it comes because of farmer training in these subjects.

"In the 30s and 40s, when the federal government got into rural programs, they needed local leaders to lead local programs," Freshwater said. "So they trained them through 4-H, FFA and other programs and so we have 50 years of training local leaders, while urban leaders do not create training programs of these types.

"In fact, without the people trained in these programs, not much happens in this country."

Effective ad campaigns — "Got Milk?" "Eat Beef." "Pork: The Other White Meat" are examples of highly effective campaigns to keep rural products in the minds of the 80 percent who live in urban areas.

Historical value — As Thomas Jefferson and others have stated in many ways, farmers are the backbone of this country. And for the first 120 years of this country, it was a rural country. And since 9/11 the yearning for a simpler, safer life has gained strength, and the emphasis in recent political campaigns on values has strengthened this even more.

The rural vote — Farmers may be a smaller percentage than ever before, but the rural vote is still 20 percent. And in close elections like the last two, even 1 percent is crucial, Freshwater points out.

While farmers do tend to support certain candidates, "you don't buy the farmer's vote, you just rent it." Farmers have been known to turn on candidates between elections.

"You can get the farm vote," Freshwater says, "but you have to keep working to keep it."

Economics — There is still a crucial factor of a safe and stable food supply for the country, Freshwater points out. In terms of employment, farms are a key entry step for foreign workers who come to this country to serve agriculture in jobs Americans don't want, then gradually move into tending horses or other farm jobs, then into construction and other work fields.

"If the jobs don't go to Central America, then the Central Americans will come to this country for the jobs. If the locals don't want the jobs, then do you want the jobs here or in Central America?" he asked.

This is not to say that farmers and rural areas do not have problems, he said, because they do. They are stuck between the high cost of elevated living standards in the United States and the fact that Third World countries can do the same work for 10 cents on the dollar.

And finally, what about young people getting a change to farm? Freshwater says some can through "generational succession," and in fact getting started on a farm may be easier than 30 years ago because the government is leaning on lenders to help young people and keep the farms operating. He said large numbers of farms are now being leased for investment purposes, giving young farmers more acres to work with.

No rural child left behind?

President Bush's No Child Left Behind Act is underfunded, overwritten and unlikely comes anywhere near its goals. And it hits especially hard in the rural schools.

That is the opinion of Alan Richard, award-wining writer for *Education Week* magazine.

No Child Left Behind took state laws, especially those of Texas, and brought them to the national level. Among other things, it requires that teachers be highly qualified in every subject they teach, that adequate yearly progress toward 100 percent in 2013-14 be documented, and that sanctions be imposed if progress is not made.

Utah has opted out of the program, Connecticut is suing certain provisions, and some governors are publicly voicing concern.

But, says Richard, the loopholes are big enough to drive a farm combine through without any damage.

Rural schoolteachers must return to school to become highly qualified, but many of them are 100 miles or more from a university and do not earn enough to return to school, he said.

The adequate yearly progress rates are such that the school of Charlotte, N.C., could be making progress every year for 300 years to reach its mandated goals. In small rural schools, the addition of one or two unprepared students to a well-school group can skew the statistics enough to indicate no progress is being made, Richard said.

And that is not the only problem rural schools are faced with. Some children in West Virginia are forced to ride buses more than an hour each way because West Virginia closed several schools in order to qualify for construction money, which required consolidation.

Dropout rates in some states are astronomical. The graduation rate for black males in Florida is 38 percent. Only 70 percent of

U.S. high school students graduate in four years.

Nineteen percent of America's schoolchildren attend rural schools, but the poverty levels are such that 37 percent of rural students qualify for government assistance.

In Ohio, according to the *Rural School* and *Community Trust*, the state ranks low on Importance indicators. Its rural schools are fairly large and their classes larger; spending on rural school administration is relatively high, and teacher perceptions of parental support are low. Rural teacher pay is decidedly lower than salaries of other Ohio teachers. All this indicates an urgent need for policy attention, with Ohio ranking 11th nationwide on the Urgency Gauge.

Problems getting teachers plague rural school systems, especially in such fields with outside income potential as math, science and foreign languages, also in special education. Richard asks "Should we be paying teachers more and doing without one third assistant superintendent?"

Not that rural areas are the only problem areas, as urban schools have their difficulties as well. In fact, in some measures, the American school system ranks 17th in the world in an era when education is more important than ever in developing an economy based on innovation and foreign trade.

The five neediest rural states are in the south, starting with Mississippi, New Mexico, Kentucky, Louisiana and Alabama. The five least needy are four in the northeast and one in the Midwest. In order, they are Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode Island, New Jersey and Wisconsin.

How long will the needed changes take? Richard was born in Clarendon County, S.C., where blacks sued to get school buses fixed because they had to walk seven miles to school. This case became one of four dovetailed into Brown vs. the Board of Education — 51 years ago. Today private schools and public schools exist alongside one other in the same community, and segregation is also a problem with several minorities in different parts of the country, Richard said.

Wal-Mart may be softening a bit

Ken Stone has given about 1,300 presentations on Wal-Mart stores since 1988. He has been kicked out of a Wal-Mart Neighborhood Store, which he calls "an upscale convenient store" for taking pictures, and he was hustled out of a Korean Wal-Mart for the same reason.

But the retired Iowa State economics professor sees some softening on some of Wal-Mart's positions, and sees problems for the giant big box retailer down the road.

Of special interest to newspapers is Stone's comment that Wal-Mart "may be softening on not running ads in newspapers. It may be because of the negative publicity that they are getting, but I have seen more ROP ads by Wal-Mart than I have ever seen before." And he noted, Wal-Mart officials will be speaking to the National Newspaper Association in Milwaukee later this year.

They are also more willing to share information. "At one time they would not tell you where their stores were in Pennsylvania," he remembers.

This does not mean the chain is in trouble, he added. Changes may be coming because Wal-Mart is building 250 supercenters a year and they may be reaching a saturation point. Their next move is into the major cities, and they have encountered consistent opposition when trying to move into California.

A community in northern Vermont voted to admit a Wal-Mart last week, despite some local opposition. Wal-Mart had located stores in New York and New Hampshire right across the border from Vermont when that state opposed its entry for some time.

Stone's message to merchants facing a Wal-Mart Supercenter is the same as it has always been. "Study the competition; Wal-Mart prices in your product may even be higher." And be creative. Iowa food stores have their own butchers, which Wal-Mart does not have, and some stores make their parking spots two feet wider to allow easier access.

"Price alone is not the only reason people will shop with you," he says. Yet he admits many small town merchants are reluctant to change their store hours from the traditional 9-5 despite evidence most of their customers work those hours.

Wal-Mart is not the only problem rural areas face, he says. Less than 2 percent of the U.S. population works on farms, and 2 percent of those farmers leave the occupation every year. Traditional shopping centers (anchored by the Penney's, the Dillard's and the Yonkers, for example) are struggling, and retail is not the only area of business hurting. Wal-Mart is only the latest in a series of threats to local business, starting with catalog purchases, large grocery stores and local and regional malls.

The Supercenter is the latest concept, based on the fact that people shop for groceries more often, and everything under one roof leads them to shop the higher profit non-food items more often.

Yet Wal-Mart is not without problems, Stone says. Moving from a regular store to a super store has left them with many empty stores, and the Sam's Club stores are not doing well in their competition with Costco, which offers higher-end merchandise.

And when the Supercenter movement nears an end, Wal-Mart's same store profits will not jump as markedly as they did when the regular stores became Supercenters.

And different communities and states are putting pressure on Wal-Mart regarding health care, hours, and sizes of stores.

But "the company never stops," Stone says. In one community, they offer bingo in the store. And they have their own banks in some of their stores and are lobbying in the federal government to do banking on a wider basis.

Rural problems — let's talk about them in the press

By **Ray Laakaniemi**

If you think the mainstream media largely ignore the rural population in America, you are probably right.

And if you think there is something rural editors should be doing to focus on rural problems that the major media ignore, Alli Webb of the Kellogg Foundation has two words for you — episodic and thematic.

First on the rural coverage in the national press: rural issues are all but forgotten in the major national media in the study, which included *The New York Times*, *Washington Post, Chicago Tribune, USA Today, Time, Newsweek*, and the three major networks' morning and evening news shows. The study was conducted by the Center for Media and Public Affairs, a nonpartisan research and educational organization.

Among the major findings:

The amount of coverage linked to farming dropped 50 percent between two studies in 2002 and 2004. Only one of 16 stories found in the major media relating to rural had anything to do with farming.

One-quarter of all rural stories dealt with zoning and/or land use issues, the largest single grouping in both studies. Most of these dealt with urban areas encroaching on farming areas.

Most comments on rural folks were positive. Three-fourths of all terms used to describe rural America were favorable, such as good values, strong work ethic, and all-American.

When it came to discussing any changes in rural America, three-fourths of all comments were negative, a major drop since the study two years ago. Nearly half of the persons quoted in the media (46 percent) opposed any changes, and 29 percent said they would accept them only grudgingly.

When this was further broken down, those supporting change were business and economic development people (79 percent) and government officials (35 percent). Thus, only 7 percent of rural individuals who were interviewed for stories were in favor of change.

The television networks covered fewer rural stories than the magazines or newspapers, with an average of fewer than two stories a week on the total of all three networks' morning and evening shows.

Alli Webb is the communications manager for rural development programs for the Kellogg Foundation and this summer completed her Ph.D. in mass media at Michigan State University. Her web contact is aliwebb@wkkf.org.

And since the major national media are doing little or nothing to solve local and regional rural problems, "rural people have to fix problems themselves, and that is the way they would like to do it."

She suggests editors think in terms of their stories as either episodic (one-time events) or thematic (issue and trend stories). Only by adding thematic stories to their newspapers are they going to get discussion going in their communities, Webb said.

Too much of what is news is episodic, one episode at a time, one individual in trouble, one group pushing one program.

Thematic stories, which are obviously harder to write and take more work, deal with issues, trends, political environments, and programs to change conditions.

Democracy requires public debate, Webb points out, and episodic stories usually do not address problems that involve large numbers of people. Editors need to connect urban problems with rural problems because "if one part hurts, we all suffer."

And since there is no organized rural constituency, as there are for urban programs, editors should be reframing their stories outside the usual stereotypes. Only by coming together can rural groups develop solutions to their problems, and if the problems are not discussed in the press, little happens. Discuss community problems, she suggests, but also find and point out other communities that have had the same problems and have come up with solutions.

Conflict is a normal part of the news process, but using conflict to point out differences on issues can lead to discussion and perhaps eventually to community decisions.

Politics and the rural vote

Politics is a 24/7/365 obsession in Washington, and rehash of the rural vote in the Bush-Kerry election was a major factor in the rural issues symposium.

Discussions ranged from detailed descriptions of how the Republicans used computerized marketing data to "microtarget" potential support, to one saying "the rural vote can be rented, but not bought" (meaning rural voters can change their allegiances), to a third person flat out stating the GOP would continue to do well by stressing the three Gs — God, guns and gays.

While the rural population is much smaller than the urban population, the last two presidential elections have been so close that even the 1 percent of Americans listed as farmers could be a deciding factor, much less the roughly 20 percent who are classified as rural.

And there was general agreement that the Republicans outworked and out-analyzed the Democrats in the 2004 presidential election, with computerized marketing data a major factor. GOP analysts could tell which magazines you read, which cause groups you support, and what kind of car you drove, and they used information like that relentlessly to identify people who might respond to an issue.

While Democrats got out the numbers in their usually reliable support groups — minorities, labor, etc. — the Republicans worked the computers and the phones, using consumer data with several hundred variables, to identify people (beyond the expected Bush voters) who might be persuaded to vote for their issues. These people were then contacted by volumes of mail, or personally or through friends, and it worked.

Democratic consultant Jim Duffy recalled the days of the reliable large Democratic turnout, and admitted the Republicans had a better system in the last election. "The Democrats' problem is not turnout. They need a message that will resonate with the voters."

Rural people who still remembered how Roosevelt electrified their homes in the depression era and continued to vote for Democrats because of it, are no longer a factor, he said.

He recalled how Lyndon Johnson, when he signed the Civil Rights bill, was prophetic in saying "I have given away the South forever."

But one major faux pas or the lingering Iraq war could prove fatal to the Republicans in the next election, Duffy said. His best bet for a Republican candidate, he said, was John McCain.

Two other consultant-researchers, Republican National Committee adviser Bill Greener and MoveOn.org adviser and former Harvard professor Anna Greenberg, also spoke.

Greener said rural voters were key to Bush's election, but "recently some 'buyer's remorse' is showing up with reaction to Bush and the war and this could cause problems in the next election. All it would take for the Democrats is someone who is able to connect on a very human level, like Bill Clinton," Greener said.

But Greenberg said Clinton is partly responsible for the Democrat collapse because he failed to develop a rural economic initiative and "abandoned his Populist streak" after the disastrous Gingrich-led 1994 GOP landslide.

Greener said recent polls show rural voters are focusing on issues such as "abortion, gun control and gay marriage, which are something they think they know about and understand. But polls also show they have concerns about education, health care, job retraining for unemployed workers and access to technology."

Greener said rural churches were very important in the last election, because they matched the grass roots intensity formerly attributed to Democrats.

The emphasis on values along with the security issue in staying with the war were the issues that won the rural vote, Greener said. Kerry was unable to frame a successful alternate pattern to the Republican themes, he said, and the two strongest doubts about Kerry were with regard to gay marriage and abortion.

Disproportionate rural deaths in Iraq; Veterans' health needs unmet in rural areas

Bill Bishop of the *Austin-American Statesman* and Hilda Heady of the National Rural Health Association have both come to the same conclusion — soldiers from rural counties are being killed at a much higher rate in the Iraq war than those from metropolitan statistical areas.

Both spoke at the Knight Center program on "Rural America, Community Issues." Bishop has since had his figures printed on *The New York Times* op ed page on July 25.

Bishop started his career at the *Mountain Eagle* in rural Whitesburg, Ky., and also ran a weekly in Smithville, Texas, for four years before selling and joining the Austin paper.

His studies show counties with over one million population have 26 percent of the U.S. population aged 18-54, and a total of 342 U.S. soldiers killed in Iraq (20 percent of the total number of soldiers killed). The three smallest county size categories (under 100,000 population) have 24 percent of the population aged 18-54, but have 536 deaths (31 percent of the total number of soldiers killed).

Thus, both the top population size category and the bottom three categories contained about one-quarter of the population at risk. But, the bottom group not only had a relatively higher death rate, it had more deaths in absolute number (536 versus 342) and 194 more deaths than might be expected given the civilian comparison population.

The death rate for the smallest population size category (less than 25,000) was 1.77 per 100,000 population, which was twice the size of the death rate (.89) for the largest population category (counties with populations of more than 1 million).

Bishop and analyst Robert Cushing explain this by saying "Our early research, including interviews with families of soldiers killed, led us to hypothesize that small places some distance from metropolitan areas may be linked to a propensity to enlist in the military, largely due to more limited opportunities for employment and (higher) education available in such areas. In many cases, families and friends of soldiers killed suggested that, for children in their communities, the military presented a viable option for getting both employment and more education."

Heady, who is also an associate vice president for rural health at West Virginia University in Morgantown, agrees with the figures and says, "Rural people are disproportionately represented among veterans because, in addition to lack of economic opportunity, they are historically patriotic, self-reliant and ready to serve without being asked, among other factors."

She did a report showing that between March 2003, and March 2004, 29 percent of the 600 soldiers killed in Iraq were from rural counties while only 19 percent of the population lives in those same non-metropolitan counties.

She also pointed out that rural health care is becoming overextended because the higher percentage of veterans in rural areas is presenting a heavy load for medical care, which is scarce there to begin with.

She pointed out that every war this country has had has a "signature wound."

The Civil War had amputations, World War I poison gas and lung problems, and World War II radiation sickness. The Korean War had extreme cold weather injuries and circulation problems, Vietnam had Agent Orange and post traumatic stress disorder, and the Gulf War had the Gulf War Syndrome.

"In the Iraq war the signature wound is traumatic brain injury (TBI), which resulted in 437 cases at in six months at Walter Reed Army Hospital in Washington. This is caused by sudden shock as a result of explosions in and around armored vehicles, which are better protected than in the past, when soldiers were killed outright. Injuries vary from temporary memory loss to a persistent vegetative state."

And veterans of all ages who return to rural homes find it difficult to get medical care. Specialists are not available, so long journeys with overnight expenses result. Government funding for general practitioners in rural areas might be an answer, but current medical funding favors the larger populations in urban areas.

The average age for a Vietnam vet is now 58, and many are now just starting to deal with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Much of the help available is through community-based operating clinics or community health centers, many of which must rely on grants to stay in business. With the federal budget being what it is, continuing these grants may be iffy at best.

Add to the lack of medical professionals the problems caused by turf wars within the government agencies designed to protect these veterans and the fact that National Guard and similar non-regular Army forces do not qualify for medical help, even though they fight to protect this nation's interests. Legislation is now being introduced to correct this problem, she said.

In addition, mental health services are needed for the trauma inflicted on combat veterans, but these services are "very severely limited" and often distant or not available at all.

And a part of the nation's homeless problem is due to large numbers of veterans being reported by veteran's outreach centers.

Broadband

Is broadband Internet the "magic wand" that will turn rural communities into major industrial entrepreneurs? Can the "Information Superhighway" find its way into rural communities far from the Interstate highway system?

Not right now, but perhaps it will become so, according to Sharon Strover, director of the Telecommunications and Information Policy Institute at the University of Texas.

Right now, the problems are winning:

A study earlier this year indicated that fewer than 10 percent of rural homes have broadband access and rural users are 50 percent behind urban homeowners in broadband subscriptions. Phone service companies say it is too expensive, just as it is with cable TV, to reach persons miles away in rural areas.

Even people close to major metropolitan area do not have broadband, and the dialup access is so slow. If you can't get fast dialup within an hour of the nation's capital, what are the odds you can get it in rural areas hundreds or even thousands of miles away?

The telephone companies are not jumping on the bandwagon, so to speak. If communities seek broadband they will jump in to help, but if they do not, they will not.

In some cases, municipalities have banded together to get better service, and then the telcos have jumped in to provide it before the competition arrives.

Twenty percent of rural homeowners simply do not see the need to have broadband.

Communities which are already losing people and having difficulty attracting industry want to get broadband to entice locals to stay and not look for work elsewhere, much less develop Internet-related industries locally.

In some states, the telcos have lobbied against public utilities and governments trying to use broadband over power lines, claiming the public agencies have an unfair advantage over private companies. More than a dozen states have laws defining what governments can do in providing Internet access.

And the rapid rate of change in communications technology has some people confused and others wondering whether they should wait for quicker, cheaper methods such as Wi-Fi or Wi-Max or the emerging technologies. Some areas are using broadband over power lines, a technology that permits you to access the Internet over broadband with an electrical outlet.

On the positive side, broadband can have "100 uses in small towns," Strover said, including the familiar uses for businesses in marketing, for people to buy and sell goods, and for governmental units to communicate with one anther. Hospitals are sending bills by e-mail, and doctors communicate with other hospitals with the Internet.

What is the ultimate solution? Steve Collier, vice president of emerging technologies for the National Rural Telecommunications Cooperative, says federal subsidies will probably be needed to extend broadband through the entire country.

He told *The New York Times* in May 2005: "There are certain things in this country that we think people have a right to have no matter where they are: clean drinking water, paved roads, basic phone service, basic electric service — and ultimately, broadband Internet is going to be one of those things."

Land use map a hit with readers

Is there a hot button issue that concerns editors in different parts of the country?

If there is, it is land use. As they say in real estate, they aren't making any more of it.

Editors gathered at the Knight-IRJCI seminar came from coast to coast, and agreed that land use concerns were surfacing in Vermont, New Mexico, Nevada, West Virginia and undoubtedly other areas as well.

Chris Stadelman, owner of The Parsons Advocate *in Tucker County, W. Va., for less than a year, got attention in his town with a color land use map that took half of the front page. (See story which follows.)*

Bill Greider, an assistant managing editor at the Washington Post *during the Watergate era and now national affairs correspondent for* The Nation*, is a property owner in Vermont. He suggested editors pay attention to what makes their areas attractive, such as landscapes.*

"We have not figured out how to keep our wealth from obliterating what we value," he said.

Reporters for larger papers at the seminar, familiar with stories about urban areas encroaching on farmland, said they were not aware of the depth of concern in rural communities over land use issues.

By **Chris Stadelman**

I had visited Tucker County for vacations much of my life, but I confess I knew little about the major issues in the area before my wife and I purchased its weekly newspaper in August 2004. It didn't take long to figure out that land use and ownership dominated many of the formal and informal discussions people had.

A little background on Tucker County: It's in northeastern West Virginia, just south of the Pennsylvania and Maryland borders. It's beautiful country, home to two ski resorts, two state parks, a national forest, a national wildlife refuge and some of the nation's best mountain biking and hiking trails. It's also rural, with about 8,000 people living in its 270,000 acres.

Nearly half of that acreage (about 131,000 acres) is owned by either a public entity (parks, forest, refuge) or a non-profit agency of some sort. The parks and non-profits pay no property tax, and the forest and refuge make contributions that amount to a fraction of what most private landowners would pay.

Other private landowners take advantage of another state program called "managed timberland." That allows private companies, most of which are large corporations, to pay pennies on the dollar for their property tax. Another 52,000 acres, or 20 percent of the county, fall into that category.

Essentially, a quarter of county residents pay the vast majority of the county's property taxes, which fund the schools in West Virginia.

My impression is that people in Tucker County have talked anecdotally about the situation for years, but not many knew the exact numbers or impact. At least before "The Map."

During a Tucker County Development Authority meeting, a member of the Tucker County Commission held up a detailed color map that showed land ownership and topography for the entire county, as well as the proposed route of a new four-lane highway many consider crucial to future growth and development. It had been created by one of the non-profit landowners, Canaan Valley Institute, for the Tucker County Planning Commission, which was preparing to update the county's Comprehensive Plan for the first time in a decade.

The reaction of development authority members was quick and vocal. It was the first time in anyone's memory that such a graphic presentation of the county's situation had been created. Obviously it was also a good story, but figuring out the best way to use the map and tell a story was difficult.

I opted not to just use a small copy of the map with the routine story about the meeting, although the daily in our neighboring county did just that. Instead, I accepted the fact that we wouldn't have the story first and decided to try to do something more in-depth with greater impact.

It is to this day (we're approaching our first anniversary of owning the newspaper, and I handle about 90 percent of the reporting/writing duties) the most time I've spent on a single story or a single issue. I got figures from the county assessor to break down the exact ownership percentages for various entities and talked to commissioners, development authority members and others in the county about what it all meant.

I also talked to people who are proponents of public land ownership and (correctly) point out that by far the largest chunk of the county's property taxes come from large homes that surround the forest, wildlife refuge and parks. Many are owned by people from out of the county, or even out of state, and are used as vacation or rental properties.

Once I felt comfortable with the story, it was time to figure out the layout. I talked to a handful of people I had come to respect and trust in the area (remember, I'd been in town about three months at this point, and everything I did was being scrutinized to figure out my motives, politics and agendas) how to display the map. Three or four columns, or even bigger? Above the fold or below?

I finally decided that land use appeared to be the biggest issue in the county, and I couldn't make too big a deal of out it. We ran it six columns, above the fold, with a 40-plus inch story and graphic below it. It took up more than half the front page.

It quickly became the talk of the county, and even was discussed by some members of the state legislature. Copies of the map, and the newspaper, started showing up at meetings around the county.

Not long after that, the development authority started a petition regarding public land ownership and development in the county, essentially calling for an end to purchases by government agencies if they weren't going to develop the land.

The issue continues to be a hot one in Tucker County, and apparently similar debates are going on elsewhere in the country. Much of it likely would have happened anyway, but I'd like to think the size and presentation of the map served as a catalyst for the discussion. The story also won a first place in the West Virginia Press Association for government reporting, and the issue was included in a set that received second place in the state for best design.

Choose one future for American journalism: — Bye-Bye! — Buy! Buy! — By-and-by

By **Chris Waddle**

Reprinted from The Rural Blog *at the Institute for Rural Journalism and Community Issues at the University of Kentucky. Chris Waddle, director of the Knight Community Journalism Fellows, surveys the media landscape and discovers the monopoly is dead. The key to survival, he writes, is for old media is to reconnect with communities.*

SAN ANTONIO — News junkies debate the future of the information business from Anniston to Texas and, frankly, all over America like never before.

Readers, listeners, viewers, publishers, broadcasters, editors, writers, anchors, Web casters all find themselves in a tidal media change.

Is it for better or worse? Some of both, maybe. But there's a lot of gloom over journalism as we've known it.

So attention focuses on *The Anniston Star*, home of the Knight Community Journalism Fellows. The University of Alabama will offer a master's degree to students inside the paper after this year. By extension people want to know what's going to happen to heartland journalism.

The largest journalist-scholar conference of them all — the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication — brought the naysayers and hopefuls together this month on the cypress-lined banks of the downtown river in San Antone.

Local voices of grassroots democracy and of hometown journalism suffer jeopardy in two important ways — change of ownership and change of culture.

Reap what you sow

They are apt to be "harvested." That's Wall Street's term for profits to be raked up by the next-to-last investor of properties in a fading industry. The trick is not becoming the ultimate owner when the light of the last printed newspaper winks out.

Sometimes publishers even harvest from their own properties for capital to stave off what they see as greater threats to the franchise.

Consider the history of obituaries. They once connected every paper with every family Bible and taught green reporters accuracy and empathy for real people. Then clerks took over the task, which a sophisticated generation of journalists considered a distasteful chore. New, space-saving rules disguised as egalitarian conformity limited the rights of bereaved families to express their feelings. Finally, papers began charging for the space, which meant they were cashing in their stored-up capital known as goodwill.

The result was the passing of an important part of community Americana and a disconnect between publisher and people. Ultimately a newspaper only has its influence and goodwill with a community to fall back on. Every drain on the relationship hurts.

The scholar-journalist Philip Meyer explains the influence decline better than most in his book, *The Vanishing Newspaper.* We're so used to social crises, the one facing journalism is hard to get a good swing at, like trying to hit a changeup from a veteran baseball pitcher. Or that decades-long transformation of the death notice from item of esteem to profit center.

Meyer compares the big, long slide in newspaper journalism with the aboriginal migration of Asian peoples into North America over the Bering land bridge. The gradual process took so long "that no person who was a part of it realized there was a migration at all."

Numbers tell the media story better.

Daily newspaper circulation was 62.3 million in 1990 and 55.1 million in 2003. The number of daily papers shrank from 1,611 to 1,456 in those years.

Sixty percent of people age 60 and older read newspapers but only 23 percent of the 18 to 29 age group do. Young people from the age of 8 to 18 spend 43 minutes a day with some kind of print media but 6 hours and 21 minutes on media of all types, notably electronic outlets.

The figures come from the Newspaper Association of America, by the way, and other sources cited in *The Wilson Quarterly*. The *Quarterly* reports that principally the Big Media are collapsing from influential status to the irrelevant.

That's precisely the loss of social capital Philip Meyer warns about in *The Vanishing Newspaper: Saving Journalism in the Information Age*. He doesn't mean people won't peddle news. But new info-merchants may not have civic truth and the public's well-being in mind as today's pros like to think they do.

Crossing the divide

Surely people and press now realize something big is happening. The separation between both was never so wide. Quality of life in our self-governing nation figures in. Estrangement could get to be so bad, there'll be no return over the Bering Strait of our informed democracy.

The Annenberg Public Policy Center found 65 percent of people believe most news organizations try to hide their own mistakes. The poll showed 79 percent believe a media company would pull its reporting punches to protect its own revenue.

This polarized nation is an even bigger problem, according to Richard A. Posner. He's a federal appellate judge and essayist who wrote "Bad News" in *The New York Times Book Review* recently. Polarized? Republicans see the media as too critical of government and Democrats as not critical enough.

With Web logs it doesn't matter. Bloggers can be as outrageous as they want to be and amass readers with similar viewpoints or jet

tison opponents without the economic consequences a newspaper endures. *Wilson Quarterly* reports there are 6.8 million active blogs. The Pew Foundation's Internet and American Life Project discovered 27 percent of all Internet users are blogging.

Old-style editors dismiss blogging as an activity of the under-30 age group that doesn't read print anyway. Hm-m-m-m. Think so? A company called blogads.com took a survey of 17,159 bloggers to find 60 percent are over 30; 75 percent earn $45,000 a year; 46 percent call themselves "opinion makers"; and 79 percent are male. And do they read? Twenty-one percent like *The New Yorker* while 15 percent read *The Economist* or *Newsweek*.

Why do they blog? Eighty percent say information they want is not available anywhere else. Couple those information-hungry bloggers with young non-readers who use the Internet for entertainment. Then you see newspapers' problem coming in the not-too-distant future.

Electrons set in motion on so many computer keyboards drive the cultural business threat to American journalism. Let's be blunt. The business of journalism is a business. So the problem isn't just the touchy-feely philosophy of American civic life. Journalism needs a reconnection with community for its own survival against market forces. Social benefit will follow.

Harvest home

Publishers who bare their necks to the harvester compound the problem of community newspapering.

Just last month one of the oldest family-owned newspaper companies in New England was sold to the conglomerate controlled ultimately by the state pension fund of Alabama. Usual platitudes were stated about retaining local decision-making at the papers. But it's fair to say startled New Englanders likely reacted to the surprise announcement with the same cold comfort as would Alabamians if they awoke one morning to discover Massachusetts pensioners now controlled *The Anniston Star.*

Such a prospect explains why *Anniston Star* management, the University of Alabama and the Knight Foundation turned *The Star* into a teaching newspaper. The graduate journalism degree program they started inside the paper creates a future purpose for retaining an independent community information company regardless of what may happen to printed products at date uncertain.

We could teach the replacement generation of journalists the ways and means of doing things as we've always done them.

Or we can show them how to reach out to the replacement generation of readers — ahem, that is, non-readers — with civic and participatory journalism, using new technology.

We'll need to retain the best of journalism traditions — thorough reporting, clear writing, responsible use of sources and careful fact-checking. Accuracy drives credibility, according to *Vanishing*'s Meyer. He sees the influence derived from respect for our version of the news as journalism's last and best line of defense.

The ultimate threat

No one completely can hold back the market forces changing the news business out from under newspapers of all size. And as the numerous writers of gloom in the industry point out, editors typically are slow to respond.

Yet change is here. Change is now.

How here? How now?

My wife and I recently installed Wi-Fi technology in our home. We can sit on our patio, in our easy chairs, at our backyard gazebo and gambol on the World Wide Web. News flows to our laptops from anywhere at electronic speed.

When the cable guy came to replace some old wiring that feeds our high-speed home network, I casually asked if he had many calls to install the necessary modems. I had foolishly imagined we were among the few.

Actually, he said, the local cable company is installing more high-speed computer lines in Anniston now than cable television hook-ups.

What? Sound the alarm! That's a tipping point.

Converging with the future

The 'Net is nothing without content, some editors reading this will say. And where's the threat to any local newspaper's territorial franchise going to come from?

Yes, well, do you remember reading recently about Anniston cable TV-24 WJXS deciding to move to larger offices? That expansion in a media environment of convergence is another local tipping point. The market chooses between different ways to sell news. Consumers have more choices in where to find information.

The station's promo line, interestingly, is "Where we're making a difference in our community..." And here's an irony: TV-24's local print competition got the call letters wrong in its story about the move.

When local cable news providers can stream programs onto computers, cell phones and iPods, look out print journalism! Reporting and editing lapses will count more in the face of competition.

Newspapers mostly meet the Internet challenge by transferring their printed products onto their own Web sites. That's called "substitute technology." The idea is to pick up younger customers who don't buy the paper.

What's really happening, though, is that Americans below age 30 aren't getting their news from the computer either. The remaining, older audience for news is dying off in those obits the newspapers charge for.

Wired for doom

The true success models for expanding the consumer base are coming up with ever greater threats to conventional community newspapers which don't climb on board. The threat to journalism and to American civic life is that anyone can compete. Bloggers, Webmasters and 'Net jockeys don't need the supposed standards of ethics and performance that keep editors and reporters on the payroll now. Besides, the public perceives fewer ethical standards and less professionalism in the press than journalists do anyway.

The monopoly is dead. Because the economic capital to buy a highly expensive press is no longer needed to gather and distribute information. It's simply no longer true as *The New Yorker*'s newspaper critic A.J. Liebling once famously said, "Freedom of the press is limited to those who own one."

We are witnessing the rise of the journalistic entrepreneur. He may or may not be a journalist. But he sure knows how to make money that might otherwise have gone to print newspapers.

Modern media advocates from the American Press Institute love to stump newspaper executives by asking if they can identify Craig

Newmark. Few can. Too bad. He's the inventor of craigslist.org, the highly successful classified ad alternative spreading like a virus on the Internet. When editors asked the head of Knight Ridder newspapers what keeps him awake at night, he answered "online advertising."

It's not just the loss of revenue. Buying stuff online is a major activity of the young, non-readers of newspapers. Ads are news too. So attract the youthful pocketbook and you've got a new customer for a virtual information community.

Most newspapers try to please existing readers instead of potential ones, according to journalist and scholar, David T. Z. Mindich in *Tuned Out: Why Americans Under 40 Don't Follow the News*.

Seeking different readers is why multiculturalism is so important in the newsroom.

No community newspaper exists in only a single community. Every audience is a community of communities. The multitudes define themselves by the old geographic lines, sure, but also by age, gender, faith, race, ethnicity and especially by class.

When a news organization consists of white people speaking to white people about black people, as an example, its influence on public affairs such as school reform may diminish in a multi-cultural community of communities. Economic influence with advertisers may diminish if ads don't reach young consumers.

The generational shift means editors can no longer talk down to readers or define news without consulting readers. No more lectures. Only conversations.

Alejandro Junco de la Vega is a tough, corruption-fighting Mexican publisher who declared, "We need to make our country information-rich for the construction of our democracy." The community journalism technique of his Monterrey, Guadalajara and Mexico City conglomerate is the creation of citizen councils. They meet and advise his editorial staff to create a working relationship between newspaper and audience — a partnership.

"Relational journalism" is my term when I'm challenged for a single phrase to describe the new ways. The counter-culture I belonged to used to say, "I can relate to that" when hearing a story we agreed with. Yeah, I'm dated. I also admit the market overemphasizes youth culture. But, hey, that's the hand publishers got dealt.

To keep the community influence publishers crave, they have to learn new ways to relate. Their communities need the leadership and will be better off if familiar news organizations evolve for success. For the time being advertisers need the old media too. But how long can that last if publishers keep passing on costs through ad rates but delivering fewer young consumers, the target market?

Conversant with competition

The audience that wants news faster, conveniently on demand, socially democratic, entertaining but not pandering, fair but not necessarily objective in a phony way, journalistically unpretentious and sympathetic to a youthful outlook can get it. And ink doesn't rub off on the hands.

Expect more competition for the printed press, right down to the small community level.

Dan Gillmor is one of those entrepreneurs. He wrote an influential, syndicated techno column from Silicon Valley for *The San Jose Mercury News*. Did. Now he's developing Web-based community journalism — local newspapers without press, ink and paper.

His book *We the Media* advocates grassroots journalism by the people and for the people. Bye-bye, A.J. Liebling.

The development of participatory news in the civic interest forces community journalism to adapt. Or else. Gillmor knows it's going to happen. For a while longer it would be easier for current publishers to deploy their resources in new ways than for start-ups to compete.

As blogs, listserves, email and the rest morph into a craigslist.org for news and find a business plan, the old forms of American journalism will decline further, faster. Oh, there's life in the old model yet. Remember the slow-paced Bering Migration. But there's a "tipping point" out there where on some not-yet-known day the old economics of print journalism could collapse with a startling suddenness.

Bad news bearers

When the University of Alabama and *The Anniston Star* and the Knight Foundation started negotiating to create the teaching newspaper, their premise was graduates might not retire from a printed newspaper. Change is so swift now, the first students might only work at one of the Web-based community news operations springing up. Starting salaries of Web journalists have been higher than for print journalists.

Presstime quotes Ken Sands, online publisher of *The Spokesman-Review* in Spokane, Wash., who says the choice is simple: "We either become part of the conversation or get left out of the conversation."

National research in May, however, showed "depressingly little progress" on Web sites of 300 newspapers sampled in the 10,000 to 600,000 circulation size. University of Alabama Associate Professor Wilson Lowrey found 82 percent had no Web logs or links to blogs. The lack of interactivity is a bummer for attracting new users.

Judge Posner concludes in *Bad News* that all this technological and economic change plaguing the news media may not be so much to fret about by-and-by. Easy for him to say with his constitutionally lifetime judicial appointment!

Actually, I agree, as long as American journalism rows to the top of the wave instead of letting it crash down on our heads. That means throwing over the resistance to change and herd mentality of repeating old mistakes made by everyone else in the profession. We need originality place-by-place-by-place instead of "organizational mimicry."

The 10,000-circulation *Daily Home* of Talladega, Ala., really cheered me up journalistically one day last month. The top story showed Editor-Publisher Carol Pappas exhorting a leadership gathering to come together for the progress of the community. She co-founded the task force "Community Conversation."

Forget the old rules dictating that journalists should report the news, not make it. Community IS news. Carol was telling her community's story to itself in person and in print. Her heart was with the people and the paper.

She's also a journalist people stop on the street to thank for tough investigative stories cleaning up the public water authority by going to court to wrest documents out of the corroded bureaucracy. Who said community journalists have to be soft?

Come to terms

Civic journalism means seeing ourselves as members of the

community and part of the problem-solving rather than pseudo-objective finger pointers lurking outside the social circle.

Participatory journalism means developing new ways for the public to gather news and to post it online instead of mailing it in to wait until editors get around to printing it. That means readers get to define news too, something editors thought was their own, exclusive prerogative.

Community journalism recognizes the community of communities and spreads its influence by inclusion. It's the relational journalism I talked about.

Technology liberates journalism from heavy metal Gutenberg-like inventions so we — and our competitors — can fly with the speed and the light of electrons.

We community journalists who master civic and participatory journalism in the computer age need never vanish.

Community journalism by degrees

It's the talk of journalism circles: Newer and higher journalism education opens in Anniston a year from now.

The Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication learned more about the program at AEJMC's San Antonio meeting in August.

Six graduate students of the University of Alabama will start their year's study at *The Anniston Star* in 2006. A grant from the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation makes possible the Knight Fellows in Community Journalism — Com-J for short.

After academic courses taught by UA professors and after rubbing shoulders with *Star* community journalists for two semesters, the inaugural class will perform work projects. They'll receive the first-ever master's degree in community journalism after 12 months.

University faculty and managers of *The Anniston Star* have held series of meetings to plan. A UA research project is expected to support a National Community Journalism Conference in February with information scientifically arrived at.

Both academic and professional journalists write increasingly of a downward slide of the news business. Increasing numbers of ways to get news in the information age create more competition, and they challenge the established press to find new ways to reach new audiences.

Community journalism in an expanded meaning holds promise for the industry, which will have a new source for hiring when the teaching newspaper opens next year at *The Star.*

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