

# grassroots editor



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# Cheerleaders, watchdogs and community builders: How rural weekly newspaper publishers in the Midwest view their roles

By Anne L. Tezon

The rural weekly newspaper is under siege. Some fear this community institution — one that emphasizes local high school sports over national and world news and one that makes a local man into a hero when he is the subject of a feature story — is headed down the same path as the small family farmer . . . a path to near extinction.

The fears that are being voiced for the future of rural weekly newspapers are confined largely to trade publications and state newspaper conventions. They are not, however, tinged with as much emotion or fervor as the now silenced cries of alarm over the future of family farming. Perhaps they should be.

Rural weekly newspaper publishers often struggle with shrinking advertising revenue, competition from larger newspaper chains and nearby metro dailies, and the near impossibilities of finding qualified employees in an era of increasingly complex job descriptions and changing technology. Many of these rural weekly publishers are trained in the best journalism schools in the nation and occupy positions of respect and influence in their communities. But too many of them are nearing retirement age and are worried about who will fill their shoes, especially when they often compete with metro dailies or public relations firms for young journalists, most of whom prefer more exciting urban lifestyles and higher salaries than rural weeklies can afford.

It is time to address the future of rural weekly newspapers . . . time to hold a “conversation” with some practitioners and see what keeps them dedicated to their calling. Perhaps the best place to begin this assessment is in the Midwest, where the fate of the nation’s farmers and small business owners is usually inextricably linked to the fate of community weekly newspapers.

## A review of the literature

*American Journalism Review*, in a staff editorial on the joys of “newspapering,” notes, “. . . unless industry economics change drastically, and that’s unlikely, independent and family owned newspapers seem destined to be a dying breed” (AJR, 1993).

Nowhere is this fear more pronounced than in rural areas once largely dependent on agriculture and now struggling to survive. A newspaper broker and journalism instructor notes:

In the Midwest alone, scores of weekly newspapers have been shut down in the last couple of decades. Given the cyclical nature of the Midwest economy, long-term population and economic declines in much of the Midwest, and the changes in retailing and its advertising, the labor pool, competition for advertising, newspaper printing and delivery costs that have affected everyone, many, and perhaps most, of these shutdowns were essentially unavoidable and inevitable. (Claussen, 1999)

Despite the apparent gloom, the men and women who operate the thousands of rural community newspapers in this country are not ready to put a -30- at the end of their stories. They are too busy making a difference in their communities.

Weekly journalists account for 20 percent of all print journalists and 40.7 percent of all journalists in the Midwest (Claussen, 1998). The weekly newspaper has been described by a former journalism school dean as, “ever-bound to its community by ties of the greatest intimacy.” Indeed, the term “community” has been regularly associated with small town newspapers (Stricklin, 1998).

In a survey of small town newspaper readers, many who said they read their hometown papers from cover to cover (72 percent) also report reading them entirely within

two hours after receiving them (58 percent) (Hilliard, 2000). Often small town publishers tell of readers buying a copy of their papers on the newsstand the day of publication, even though they're due to receive one in the mail the next day.

Community weeklies have an advantage over big city dailies. According to Jock Lauterer, "At their best, community newspapers satisfy a basic human craving that the big dailies can't do, no matter how large their budgets — and that is the affirmation of the sense of community, a positive and intimate reflection of the sense of place, a stroke for our us-ness, our extended family-ness and our profound and interlocking connectedness" (Lauterer, 1995).

But the threats to this connectedness are many, beginning with the rural economy and its long, agonizing slide into what author Osha Gray Davidson calls the "rural ghetto" (Davidson, 1996). Beginning in the 1970s, with increasing dependence of the nation's farmers on debt financing, and reaching a painful peak in the so-called "farm crisis" of the 1980s, the demise of rural America continues unabated today. To the volatile mix of the "Wal-Mart-ing" of the country, resulting in the death of thousands of mom and pop retailers, rural Americans face a number of other challenges. These include a crumbling infrastructure, lack of high-wage jobs and the continued exodus of the best and brightest young people to larger cities. And despite the apparent end of the farm crisis, poverty continues to grow, prompting Davidson, in his book, *Broken Heartland*, to compare what has happened to small towns and agriculture in this country to a gigantic "sinkhole" (Davidson, 52).

How do these conditions affect rural community weeklies? According to executive directors of several press associations, there is a direct correlation between the financial fortunes of weekly newspapers and the dramatic changes in rural America in the past decade. In Kansas, Missouri, Nebraska, Wisconsin, and Iowa, the majority of newspaper association members are weeklies — most of them independently-owned. All these papers' owners have felt the effects of erosion in their towns' retail bases, population shifts, school consolidations, etc.

The director of the Missouri Press Association has seen smaller publishers struggling with shrinking staffs, delaying equipment upgrades, and changing their advertising sales strategies to cope with diminished returns (A. Tezon, personal communication, November 18, 2001).

A media researcher studying the question of whether farming is still newsworthy in general interest publications found that editors in rural papers experienced the effects of the decline of farming in lost auto, grocery, and implement advertising. "Editors said that economic changes generally have meant they must cast a wider net and work harder to get ad sales that used to 'walk in the door'" (Berg, 2001).

In addition to the diminished rural economy, small town weeklies usually struggle with fewer financial and technological resources than their more prosperous city cousins. In a study of the rural-urban gap between newspapers, Douglas Hindman asserts that smaller organizations are less likely to risk adopting technologies that are incompatible with the newspaper's more pressing need to maintain economic viability (Hindman, 1998).

Another threat to the future sustainability of weekly newspapers is a lack of younger people to take the place of current publishers as they reach retirement age. Some aging community publishers cannot afford to take a vacation or even get sick, as there is no one to fill in for them. A Kansas State researcher notes the severity of the problem by comparing the situation to neighbors

helping a sick or hospitalized farmer harvest his crops. "But who are the neighbors who know about computers, page layout, news values, inverted pyramids, and headline writing?" she wonders (Bergen, 1997).

As if this lack of future bodies to carry the weekly journalism torch were not enough, weekly publishers have been forced in recent years to cut the sizes of their staffs. Between 1982 and 1992 the average size of the news staffs on weeklies decreased to 2.9 from 4.6 (Weaver & Wilhoit, 1996). Employee turnover is also a major issue for rural weekly newspapers, averaging between 20 and 25 percent (Claussen, 1999), and when publishers seek new employees, they cannot find qualified applicants, especially younger ones (A. Tezon, personal communication, Jan. 21, 2002).

Many small newspaper publishers are nearing retirement age but are finding it difficult to sell their properties. Ed Anderson, a newspaper broker who operates in the nation's heartland, reports a current flood of small newspapers on the market, with prices falling due to the poor economy. Where solid weeklies once brought 10 to 12 times earnings, they are now bringing between four and six times. "Producing newspapers on a weekly basis is a matter of pride . . . like giving birth every week," notes the broker. "But the need or desire for larger annual salaries may be keeping potential buyers away from the profession" (A. Tezon, personal communication, October 1, 2001).

Another Midwest broker admits he has a list of 14 or 15 papers in his inventory, but not many buyers. The buyers he usually lands are often younger people employed at larger newspapers — those wanting to run their own show (A. Tezon, personal communication, October 15, 2001).

The magic number to put weekly newspapers in the market for a buyer is \$500,000. Three years ago it was \$300,000. Now it is extremely difficult to sell weeklies with anything below a \$200,000 annual gross income. Claussen warns of an impending crisis. "The number of weekly newspapers being published, compared with the age of many publishers and the numbers that have been sold in the last few years, also tends to indicate that actuarial trends alone will result in a large number of weekly papers put up for sale within a relatively short period of time in the future" (Claussen, 1998).

With so much working against rural weekly newspapers in the U.S., the need for information to combat their demise becomes urgent. More research on weekly journalists could be crucial to the survival and future propagation of the species. Indeed, the survival of entire rural communities could be dependent on discovering what keeps these rural "Eveready bunnies" going and going. Study of these journalists in their communities has national economic implications as well. As the Center for the Study of Rural America notes, "To a considerable degree, rural America is steward to the nation's community spirit. Lagging rural areas are a crucial drain on the nation's economic potential" (Federal Reserve Bank, 2001).

## Methodology

This study proposed an examination of the "intangibles" of rural weekly newspaper operations — the abstract and sometimes emotional motivations that prompt a person to answer the higher calling of rural weekly journalism and then to stick it out.

The best method to achieve this type of information is through qualitative research, (Wimmer & Dominick, 2000), as we are searching for an understanding of the motivations of rural weekly

publishers. Thus, a series of e-mail “interviews” was conducted with selected rural weekly publishers. A purposive sample of 50 publishers was selected for the surveys. These publishers were chosen by the executive directors of five state press associations with the stipulation that the publishers operate independently-owned or small, state-owned chain newspapers in non-metropolitan areas with mostly agricultural economies.

The survey examined the following basic research questions:

RQ1 — What prompts a person to become involved in publishing a newspaper in a small town with limited prospects for future prosperity?

RQ2 — What things about their profession bring small town publishers the most satisfaction . . . things that most young journalists may never learn about in their current journalism school curriculums?

RQ3 — Must a small newspaper publisher be “married” to his or her community, devoting many extra hours to civic duties in order to carry out journalistic goals? If that is so, what conflicts of interest or personal difficulties may arise from this situation?

RQ4 — What kinds of survival strategies has the publisher developed to cope with threats to future viability?

RQ5 — How would a small town publisher view the future of the industry as a whole?

RQ6 — What factors will prompt the publisher to seek a buyer for the property or to leave the industry?

RQ7 — How does the publisher view his or her mission as a professional?

These research questions were supplemented by questions to gather routine demographics and other information, including whether the publisher has managed to take vacations, how many hours a week was spent on newspaper duties, educational background and years in the business (See Appendix A).

The analysis of the qualitative research that was conducted in this project was structured according to the constant comparative technique suggested by Glaser and Strauss and refined by Lincoln and Guba (Wimmer & Wilhoit, p 107). Demographic information was keyed into an Excel worksheet for analysis, while the remainder of the responses was assigned to specific categories and repetitive answers sought for analysis of patterns and trends.

## Analysis of results

A total of 36 of the 50 survey subjects responded to requests to participate, following one or two phone contacts and three e-mail requests. Ten of the respondents were from Nebraska, four were from Iowa, six were from Kansas, eight were from Minnesota and eight were from Missouri.

The 36 responding publishers had been involved in the business for an average of slightly more than 20 years. The median for years of experience was 20, with the survey respondents clustered fairly evenly between longevity categories. Ten of the respondents had a few months to 10 years of experience, while seven had between 11 and 20 years, five had between 21 and 30 years of experience and seven had more than 30 years in the business.

The responding publishers listed an average of 1.7 newspapers under their supervision. Twenty of the respondents publish one newspaper, while six respondents listed two newspapers, three listed three newspapers, and two listed four or more newspapers.

Average circulation of the responding publishers’ newspapers was 5,302, with a median of 2,700. Circulation numbers were skewed slightly by four publishers reporting circulations of more than 10,000. Eleven of the respondents published papers of more than 2,000 circulation but less than 3,000, while five were in the 1,000 to 1,999 category.

### *How or why they became publishers*

Despite popular perceptions of weekly journalists as backwater practitioners with little or no training, a study found that some 40.8 percent of them are graduates of journalism/mass communications programs (Claussen, 1999). Nineteen of the 36 publishers in this survey were graduates of a journalism school and two of the respondents minored in journalism or communication studies in college. One-third of the respondents was involved in a family-operated newspaper. A few of the publishers served as interns at the papers they later purchased and one female publisher was hired as a high school student to work after school and summers at the paper she later purchased. Several publishers said they wrote for high school and/or college newspapers and three had planned to or did teach high school or college journalism before becoming publishers. Another four publishers had worked for other newspapers, primarily dailies, before becoming publishers and relished being their own bosses.

Some of the publishers’ responses to the question on how they got involved in the business perhaps reveal the underlying motivations that keep them involved. Those comments included a love of rural life, preferences for individual ownership instead of large corporate ownership, frustration and lack of opportunities for advancement at larger weeklies and dailies, the pride of being involved in a third or fourth generation operation and putting a journalism degree to good use.

### *Analysis of publisher duties*

If a researcher were to conduct case studies of each of the 36 publishers who responded to the e-mail survey, he or she would find them involved in a wide variety of duties, as different from one paper to the next as the communities they cover. In an attempt to find the similarities among the duties, publishers were asked to assign a percentage value to the following duties: supervision of employees, editing, production, advertising and other. In averaging the percentage responses, the publishers spend an average of 18.75 percent of their time supervising employees, 18.5 percent editing, 18.5 percent in production, almost 13 percent on advertising and more than 25 percent in the “other” category.

While not asked to specify what duties they might include in the “other” category, several publishers did. Those responses were almost as revealing as the assumed duties they responded to. They listed the following: strategic planning, bookkeeping, association involvement, writing editorials and columns, administration, building maintenance, financial leadership, staff development, visioning, service club work, community relations, commercial printing, and photography. One publisher’s list might cause other publishers a chuckle of recognition, as it included, “Picking up after people, refilling stuff, janitorial services, fixing and repairing equipment, installing software, learning new stuff, etc.”

### *Married to their papers and communities*

One of the survey questions carried the hypothesis that rural weekly publishers, perhaps unlike their city metro counterparts, must be “married” to the communities they serve. This hypothesis arises from the sociological nature of small, rural communities and the need for leaders at every level to contribute their time

and involvement to local projects and causes, since the pool of leaders is smaller than that of large cities. The responses to this survey confirm that hypothesis.

Only one publisher refused to say he was “married” to his community, preferring, instead, the term “sold” on the community. The rest admitted that there is, indeed, a marriage of sorts with the communities they cover, but nearly every publisher went into a thoughtful analysis of that marriage, providing valuable insight into the “careful and well contemplated balancing act” that results.

The thorniest issue for many publishers is that their heavy involvement with the community, added to the need to devote many more than 40 hours a week to publishing their papers, takes valuable time away from their families. One wrote: “I have spent hundreds of hours, especially in economic development that is so critical to a small community’s survival. We have been successful in creating about 1,400 new jobs over the past 15 years in a town of 3,500, but it has been a drain on my personal time, time with family and work.”

Conflicts of interest are always a danger in small communities, but most of these publishers think they can handle them. As one publisher wrote:

“There are limited resources in a rural community — both for volunteer jobs and work that needs to be done at the paper. We do not have the luxury of not being involved. . . The difficulty comes on the editorial page. Issues I’m directly involved in I leave to my managing editor. If I do find myself in the situation of writing an editorial, I make darn sure the readers know where I’m coming from and this is something I am personally involved in.”

A female publisher gave a detailed account of what marriage to her community means when she noted:

“You never get away. You take classifieds in the grocery store aisle, subscriptions at the Christmas parade, you get called on holiday weekends. Since I have kids in school, I always have to walk a thin line when I disagree with something. You have to keep the big picture in mind. You’re always ‘on’ as the publisher. Your kids take flak because of something you’ve written. Also, the local business owner whom you depend upon for advertising is also on the city council. When he makes a really stupid decision, you’re caught between a rock and a hard place. Newspaper people live in a fishbowl . . . I cater to everyone and eat lots of Roloids.”

### **Community newspaper mission statements**

In his highly acclaimed book, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People: Powerful Lessons in Personal Change*, author and organizational guru Stephen R. Covey cites the need for personal and organizational mission statements. These written statements, according to Covey, contain what a person or business wants to be (character), to do (contributions and achievements), and the values they adhere to. He stresses that an organizational mission statement can be a tool to create unity and commitment. “It creates in people’s hearts and minds a frame of reference, a set of criteria or guidelines, by which they will govern themselves” (Covey, 1989).

In the small, labor-intensive organization that is the rural community weekly newspaper, one assumes that a mission statement, even if not developed by employees and revised frequently, as Covey suggests, would be a necessity to help keep staff on track and on task. Most of the survey participants profess a strong sense of mission. Only three publishers did not list a mission statement, and one of those was no longer actively involved in the business, having turned it over to her daughter due to illness.

Several publishers’ mission statements were brief and pointed, as seen in the following examples:

- Be a watchdog. Give community facts so they can make their own informed decisions.
- Be a record, a historian for the community.
- Bringing the best in community journalism, great hard news coverage, great feature stories and complete gender equality in sports coverage.
- Be the best source for local news and information, provide a public forum, offer an editorial voice.

Those publishers who answered the mission statement question in greater detail echoed each other frequently, using the terms “community booster” or “community cheerleader” frequently. Other frequent terms found in these mission statements are often reflected in the mastheads and banners of newspapers all over the country. They include words such as beacon, guide, advocate, spotlight, leader, mirror, record, forum, chronicle, champion, challenger, and historian.

The majority of recorded mission statements of these community weekly publishers included some reference to promotion or the role of cheerleader for their towns. As one publisher outlined, “The newspaper is a medium that brings the community together. It is the spokesperson for community betterment, the watchdog over local government for its citizens, the medium to help local businesses succeed and prosper, the source for residents to stay informed about all aspects of the community.”

One publisher sees her role as “the town’s cheerleader for economic development and growth, the town’s wise mother, the town’s watchdog, the town’s champion of the underdog, the town’s challenger of the status quo, and the town’s historian.”

### **The frustrations and satisfactions of rural weekly publishers**

Many rural weekly newspaper publishers vent their frustrations and share their satisfactions by engaging in “shop talk” at regional and state press association meetings and through a network of supportive friendships with fellow publishers.

The response to a survey question on frustrations and satisfactions of their profession may point to the need for additional means of sharing and shop talk among weekly publishers.

The publishers surveyed share many of the same satisfactions in producing a weekly newspaper. Chief among them is pride in product, making a difference in the lives of the readers and in the economies of their communities. Many publishers also find supreme satisfaction in seeing happy readers and say they enjoy watching people line up to buy the paper.

Sources of satisfaction listed less frequently included the following: employees who take pride in their work, statewide recognition, training future journalists, meeting weekly deadlines, meeting wonderful people and telling their stories, professional friendships, public opinion leadership and influence.

One would hope that the relative importance of the satisfactions listed by publishers would outweigh the much longer litany of frustrations. The top “vote-getters” in the frustration category include employee issues and customer complaints. Publishers specified the lack of employee initiative and staff mistakes under employee issues, along with training issues. In addition to generally listing customer concerns, publishers specified “unreasonable customers,” “apathetic people,” “non-readers,” “apathetic people,” “rumormongers” and “readers who don’t understand the

need for making a profit.”

Several publishers listed economic concerns among their frustrations, including business bankruptcies, declining retail bases, competition, and being bypassed for advertising. Other frustrations were more personal and related to their roles as overseers of a business. Among them were 50-60 hour work weeks, “overwhelming details,” balancing books, coming up with good ideas for columns and editorials, not being able to get away from constant demands, low pay, financial pressures and lack of capital, and covering controversial issues. Some publishers also expressed their frustrations with secret meetings of public boards, dealing with the postal service and telephone company, high insurance costs, “being taken for granted,” and difficulty in keeping up with technology issues.

#### ***Alternate revenue sources***

As the national economy continues to stagnate following the events of Sept. 11, 2001, and consumer confidence lags following Enron’s debacle, the protracted depression in the nation’s heartland continues unabated. According to interviews with several newspaper association executives, some rural publishers are coping with continued declines in revenue due to eroding retail bases and population shifts by seeking alternate sources of income.

Jeff Burkhead, executive director of the Kansas Press Association, reports many of his member publishers are “making do with less, with smaller staffs, making less money.”

Allen Beerman, with the Nebraska Press Association, sees his member publishers switching to narrower press web sizes to save money. Others use stringers and students to supplement their small staffs and publish fewer pages in an attempt to save money.

The responses to a question on alternate revenue sources reiterate the observations of these newspaper executives. Twenty-one of the survey participants, or 58 percent, said they did have to look for extra income sources beyond traditional weekly newspaper and shopper publishing.

Those publishers who responded “no” to the question included four who were emphatic that doing anything apart from news and advertising would be a distraction. As one publisher emphasized, “We are a newspaper.” But of the 15 “no” responses, four admit they may have to look for those sources in the near future.

No significant correlations were found between size of publication and whether their publishers sought alternate sources of revenue. Neither were there any apparent significant correlations between “yes” responses on this question and what state the publishers were operating in.

Several publishers reported they operate Web pages and/or sell Web advertising, but only one newspaper reported making a profit on it (\$50,000 annually). One of the largest circulation newspapers in the survey participants operates a large variety of profit centers, including an ad agency, a color copy business, cable TV advertising, office supplies sales, commercial and web printing, one hour color photo processing, and online products. Another of the larger circulation papers offers color photo reprints and does cooperative promotional projects with neighboring publishers.

The most common alternate revenue source is commercial and/or web printing, listed by 11 survey participants, but one publisher admitted its share of gross revenue has decreased in recent years. Unique alternate sources of revenue reported among survey respondents included a portrait studio, a vinyl sign business, advertising specialties, selling of class rings, a distribution company, printing and distribution of civic group newsletters, book

publishing, Web design, Internet service provider, and niche publications.

Iowa Press Association’s director, Bill Munroe, indicates that the future will be a challenge to his members if they don’t regard themselves as an information company instead of a newspaper company. “They may have to consider sidelines like computer design work . . . anything to add value to their assets. There are a lot of opportunities there if they’re open to being innovative and thinking outside the box.”

A large number of the survey participants have shown by their responses that they are indeed thinking outside the traditional newspaper box.

#### ***Comments on illness and leaving the industry***

In a paper presented at the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communications convention in 1997, Lori Bergen and Linda Gilmore posed a question that has dramatic implications for all rural weekly newspaper publishers, including those in the current survey. What happens to a community newspaper when life’s crises occur — the owner/publisher falls ill, has an accident, or, heaven forbid, dies? (Bergen)

This survey posed that same question to participating publishers. In addition, this survey asked publishers to list factors that might prompt them to leave the profession. Eleven of the 36 publishers admitted that their operations would be adversely affected in the event of a prolonged illness. One participating publisher reported an illness a year ago had caused severe stress on the staff while another publisher has already turned the operation over to her daughter, due to illness. Yet another publisher who encountered problems recently with a protracted illness found her way out of the dilemma by paying qualified people \$3 per hour more than other papers, cutting her own pay and looking at another business to supplement her income. “Thus, I have the highest paid staff and lowest profit margin of any newspaper around,” she wrote.

Even those respondents who currently have an adequate plan for dealing with a potential illness would probably identify with the words of a Minnesota newspaper man who said, “There just isn’t a lot of fat here. My wife and I do the work of three people.”

Some of the publishers who admit illness would be a problem for their operations responded that they have tried to cross-train and set up succession plans for their newspapers, but have trouble finding enough time or the right people to fulfill those plans.

All the respondents who are involved in chain operations said their illness would not create a problem for the newspaper’s continued operation.

The respondents in this survey were chosen by executive directors of press associations partly for their dedication to the profession and for their ability to articulate professional ideals. Their responses to a question on what would prompt them to leave the journalistic profession illustrate their dedication. Eleven of the respondents said only retirement would cause them to leave their newspapers, but four of them said “nothing” would get them out of the business, while two said they were in it “for life.”

Other factors that would cause publishers in this survey group to leave included burnout (four respondents), a new career, corporate ownership, a change in ownership, illness, erosion of advertising support, and the illness of a parent. Two responses were only slightly tongue-in-cheek — “\$1 million” and “a winning lottery ticket.”

### *A cautiously optimistic group of publishers*

Newspaper observers have been predicting the death of smaller, independent newspapers for at least a decade. How do the men and women in the “trenches” of these papers feel about their own futures? Twenty-eight of the 36 respondents said they were optimistic about the futures of their newspapers, but 12 of them qualified their optimism with several caveats. Four publishers are not optimistic and another five answered “maybe” or “yes and no” to the survey question on optimism.

Both the optimism and pessimism reflected in this survey correlate closely with the size of the community where the newspaper is published. Most publishers feel that the smaller the community, the dimmer the future looks. Most of the publishers did not refer to their own newspapers in that assessment, but to neighboring operations.

A sampling of those responses indicates the universality of the concern:

- Not optimistic in smaller towns due to lack of retail businesses.
- Not sure if other weeklies will be able to survive. “It’s one heck of a commitment for the amount of return on investment in areas of our state that are stagnant.”
- In smaller communities (those under 2,000) which have lost their main streets, the future of stand-alone newspapers is not bright. “Consolidations and joint flags are the future as I see it.”
- . . . those in rural areas are losing their advertising base as stores close because of population loss and shopping at big box stores in cities.
- There is very little market for newspapers in communities of 1,500 people or fewer.
- “I do fear as towns die, so will the rural weekly newspapers.”

Those with caveats to their optimism voice concerns about such things as “leadership vacuums” and a lack of economic diversity. One publisher’s caveat came from “wearing too many hats” in an ever-changing economy, which was echoed by another respondent who claims individual publishers don’t have enough time or resources to produce “really good news products.”

Several publishers say they are optimistic because the weekly newspaper is critical to small town survival. One wrote that two things will determine future success: the health of the community and the health of the newspaper industry. “Give me a healthy community and industry and I know I can compete because I’ll produce a newspaper readers must have,” he said.

Publishers of corporate-owned or chain operations seem to be more optimistic about their own operations but less optimistic about smaller papers without the backing of a larger organization. Their smaller counterparts, however, worry about the demise of newspapers due to the chains.

Some publishers who have been active in economic development see it as critical to future success to attract new entrepreneurs for their communities and to find more niche products to compete.

### **Summary and conclusion**

Rural community newspapers are the lifeblood of the towns they serve. These papers promote progress, provide an essential historical record of weekly life, and give their readers information necessary for daily living and social interaction. In the last

two decades, with the demise of traditional farming and the stagnation of the rural economy, the sustainability of rural community weeklies in areas dependent on agriculture has been severely threatened, especially in the smaller towns, with populations of 2,000 and below.

This study has shown that at least 36 weekly publishers in rural areas of America’s heartland are concerned enough about their future sustainability that many of them are seeking or using alternate sources of income other than advertising and subscriptions to bolster their operations. While the majority of them are cautiously optimistic about the future of rural community weeklies, they worry about neighboring operations in the smallest of communities.

These rural publishers, for the most part, have a strong sense of journalistic mission and high professional standards. For fully a third of the publishers, the sense of mission could easily derive from the continuity and pride fostered by family operations that span two or three generations. Their reasons for entering the profession of journalism vary from continuing the family operation to seeking independence.

These 36 publishers were nearly unanimous in their sense that they are “married” to their communities because of their roles as publishers, spending untold hours as community leaders in addition to their already long hours as publishers. These publishers struggle with the conflicts that marriage engenders, trying hard to maintain their professional credibility while serving what they see as a necessary role as the community’s cheerleader and progress booster.

By their answers to survey questions, showing an almost universal concern with economic development, and how they see themselves as community cheerleaders, this group of rural weekly publishers is practicing some of the tenets of public journalism. Without even entering into the academic debate, these journalists seem to have assimilated the concept of social capital, defined as “networks of social trust that communities draw on to solve problems of mutual trust” (Loomis). Indeed, newspapers are seen as a key to solving problems of mutual trust (Putnam, 2000).

The limited pool of entrepreneurial leadership available in smaller rural communities seems to obligate these publishers to become deeply involved in civic projects, if not political ones, to foster progress — progress that could enable their own operations to stay alive and prosper. The small staff sizes of many of these newspapers may mean that the publisher is also the editor and sometimes the reporter. Their assessment of community issues is based on social capital and often casts a broader net than that of the more specialized urban journalist.

Many of these publishers were trained in journalism programs in the “Walter Lippman” school of thought that news must be objective. While the rural weekly publishers in this study intellectualize that concept, they perhaps unwittingly adhere more to the social responsibility theory first advanced in the report of the 1947 Hutchins Commission. That theory states that news media must be a means by which an informed citizenry deliberates and governs itself. (Lambeth, Meyer & Thorson, 1998).

The social responsibility theory has formed the bedrock of the public journalism movement in this country, which downplays complete journalistic detachment and adversarial roles in favor of a more solicitous seeking of public views. In the words of Edmund Lambeth, public journalism is a continuation of the discussion on journalistic roles that the Hutchins Commission advanced.

It also tries more explicitly to activate and elevate public deliberation on community issues. It is keener on explaining the choices facing the public, and especially on identifying what values are linked to alternative policies. At its best, it seeks to gain continuing and reliable assessments of its own performance. It also takes more reportorial initiatives aimed at helping the community find ways to solve major public problems (Lambeth, Meyer & Thorson, 1998).

The position of rural community journalists is a unique one that calls for further definition and study because of the connection to social responsibility theory and the possibility they have a unique slant to add to public journalism. Many of these publishers undoubtedly sponsor election forums and host issues forums in their communities. Without further study, who knows what other unique contributions they make to their hometowns? If rural communities, already endangered because of the continued stagnation of agricultural economies, are to survive and prosper, the institution of the community weekly will be a key to that survival. It will keep the community conversation going and provide local citizens with the means to make informed decisions about their own fates.

Perhaps it is this unwitting adherence to the social responsibility theory that keeps these 36 newspaper publishers at their tasks, despite a multitude of threats, myriad frustrations, and an uncertain future. Some such journalists view their roles as a way of life worth preserving, even at the risk of diminished profits and moonlighting at other jobs. They may feel they are doing "God's work" but sometimes they lose their faith and need a revival of faith. Their isolation, broken only by professional friendships and the occasional motivational press association meeting, needs the help of additional academic research. While perhaps small in numbers and circulation, their operations merit further study and perhaps establishment of a cheering section or support network of their own.

In rural America, the stakes are high, as the traditionally agricultural economy continues to contract and the retail sector, always the key to newspaper prosperity, dwindles even more. The loss of family farms and the continued dominance of Wal-Mart on hometown life is having a lasting effect on all aspects of rural life that perhaps only a community newspaper can help mitigate. There is a vicious cycle at work here, as noted by a journalism professor at Webster University:

When retail Goliaths come in and wipe out the independents, who are often the traditional stakeholders in the life of the community, passivity and apathy inevitably result . . . The attendant decline in civic life brought on by the dominance of the biggies has a direct impact on the readership base of the community newspaper, because there is less reason for residents to care about what happens downtown and at city hall (Corrigan, 1996).

While the small numbers involved in the current study cannot be used to generalize across the population, the 36 rural weekly newspaper publishers in this study all show signs of having assumed the responsibility of helping to build good citizenship in their communities. More research is needed to see if these results fit a larger population of rural weekly publishers. If so, these journalistic practitioners need assistance and support in the form of resources and information that could help them better perform their crucial roles in society. They need a support group, or a cooperative, perhaps one sponsored by NNA, and possibly conducted online. They may need help in such areas as group purchasing of supplies and equipment, training, recruitment, and retention of qualified employees. And many of them could

undoubtedly benefit from some workshops or training in community empowerment and community economic development. Since their highly visible work as a publisher thrusts them into leadership roles, some of them may need more tools and resources to fulfill their tasks as cheerleaders and town boosters.

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### Appendix A: Cover Letter to Survey Participants

To (Name of publisher and name of newspaper):

My name is Anne Tezon. I am a weekly newspaper publisher from North Missouri and a master's degree candidate in journalism at the University of Memphis. Your state press association director provided me with several names of publishers in Kansas who are good spokespersons for the industry and who might be able to assist me with some research in the area of community newspaper publishing. Your name was on the list.

At the bottom of this e-mail, you will find a 10-question short answer (or long, if you prefer) survey that addresses the future of weekly newspapers in rural areas. This is a subject dear to my heart and I hope to be able to report on my findings at an upcoming NNA Community Newspaper Symposium. I want to study the many intangibles involved in serving our communities as publishers. Your assistance with the following survey could ultimately provide some encouragement for current and future publishers.

I hope to have all the e-mailed surveys returned to me within one week to eliminate any conflicting external variables (i.e. late-breaking national issues that could change the way some of the questions might be answered). If you would prefer not to participate or find that the week's deadline is not possible, please reply and I will seek another participant or work out a different deadline. I may contact you by phone to verify your receipt of this e-mail.

Confidentiality will be protected in this survey. In no way will your name be tied to your responses. If you have any questions or concerns, do not hesitate to contact me by phone (816-583-2116) or e-mail: [annelorene@earthlink.net](mailto:annelorene@earthlink.net). I've attached a Microsoft Word version of the survey to this e-mail so you can type your answers in there, or you may fax the responses to me at 816-583-2118.

Sincerely,  
Anne Tezon

### Appendix B: Questionnaire for Community Newspaper Publishers

1. How many years have you been a publisher? What is your educational background and/or training? Why or how did you become a community newspaper publisher?
2. How many newspapers do you publish and what are the circulations of each?
3. What percentages of your duties are comprised of the following: \_\_supervising employees \_\_ editing \_\_ production \_\_ advertising sales \_\_ other.
3. Do you feel that a rural weekly newspaper publisher must be "married" to his or her community, devoting many outside hours to the job and helping promote local causes? If so, what conflicts can this cause personally and professionally? If not, how do you reconcile your role as a publisher with what the community may expect and sometimes demand?
4. If you could sum up your mission or theory of community newspaper publishing in a few sentences, what would it be?
5. Have you taken a vacation of a week or longer in the past year? If not, why not?
6. What would happen to your operation if you became ill or required a lengthy hospitalization?
7. What, besides a prolonged illness would prompt you to leave the newspaper industry and who do you think would assume the leadership reins or ownership of your business?
8. What are the things about your profession that bring you the most satisfaction? The most frustration?
9. Have you had to search for other revenue streams besides advertising and subscriptions to improve cash flow in the past few years? If so, what ideas have worked best?
10. Are you optimistic about the future of rural weekly newspapers in general? Why or why not?

# Different strokes, different folks:

## *Comparing Danish and British op-ed pages*

By Karin Wahl-Jorgensen

It is easy to take the editorial and op-ed pages for granted. They are a revered fixture of most newspapers, and while their layout may change over time, the principle behind the pages remains the same: In most newspapers the pages consist of opinion pieces and columns written by journalists and pundits, and letters contributed by readers.

However, there *are* other ways of doing debate in the newspaper. To demonstrate this, I compare the models for debate on the editorial and op-ed, or opinion pages, of Danish and British quality newspapers. While the British model is fairly similar to its American counterpart, the Danish version is completely different because it is based entirely on contributions from the public.

I examine opinion pages in the three largest-circulation Danish dailies, as well as in the British papers, *The Guardian*, *Daily Telegraph* and *The Times*, during a randomly selected two-week period in the autumn of 2002. I also draw on interviews with key personnel at the six newspapers.

### British and Danish models

#### *The British opinion page model*

British opinion pages share with their Danish counterparts a range of features. First, both publish unsigned editorials that express the newspaper's opinion. Second, the opinion pages of both countries feature letters-to-the-editor sections. Though the rest of the pages in both British and Danish papers are made up by commentaries and columns that are laid out on the page in similar ways, and belong to the same genre of writing, the philosophy behind them is radically different. The British opinion pieces are predominantly written by a panel of regular columnists who are professional journalists, political insiders or celebrities. The ideal columnist on a British broadsheet newspaper is "experienced and informed, knowledgeable about the things they describe, their judgments based on expertise and good contacts" (Kettle, 2002, p. 14). An employee of the *Daily Telegraph* described the opinion pages as the product of an elite group of writers whose role it is to provoke a wider debate. She suggested that "a lot of the people who write for the paper are often prominent politicians or journalists, or high-profile in academia or religion." The ultimate aim of the *Telegraph's* opinion pages, in her view, is to profile the positions of this "quite established, traditionally British, right-of-centre newspaper." In doing so, the newspaper aims to stimulate public debate and action, and to provide readers with useful information (*Daily Telegraph*, personal communication, March 27, 2003).

Similarly, Ian Mayes, the reader's editor of *The Guardian*, suggested, "if you're going to have someone writing on the pages of the paper, you want them to be as articulate and well-informed as possible." To Mayes, this justifies and necessitates the exclusive

nature of the opinion page forum, because experts have privileged access to the knowledge necessary to provide authoritative commentary and analysis. Mayes suggested that it is extremely rare for national broadsheets to publish unsolicited material (Mayes, personal communication, March 31, 2003). The only contributions written by individuals who are not regular columnists tend to be solicited on the basis of suggestions made by journalists (Mayes, personal communication, March 31, 2003).

The tradition of relying on journalistic and political "insiders" for the content of opinion pages is so engrained in British journalism that the pundits who roam the opinion pages are seen as a cohesive political force. Martin Kettle (2002, p. 14) has referred to this group the "commentariat" and the "columnists' party," consisting of the "120 people in the British media who write regular week-in-week-out opinion pieces about domestic politics." Overall, then, the British model fits the description of editorial page debate offered by Benjamin Page (1996):

Because airtime and print space are expensive, and because citizens want only the most concise and vivid messages, most of those who speak in or through the media are professional communicators, highly skilled at producing political discourse and paid to do so. These professional communicators include reporters, writers, commentators and television pundits, as well as public officials and selected experts from academia or think tanks. (p. 6)

This position assumes that the media's role in the democratic process is limited to one of providing information to citizens, who have little ability to shape or access important political events.

The British journalists I interviewed did stress that they wanted to provide "a valuable forum for the free exchange of opinion" (cf. Mayes, personal communication, March 31, 2003), and designed their pages to "stimulate debate and offer a range of views" (*Daily Telegraph*, personal communication, March 27, 2003). They saw their opinion pages as more than simply a vehicle for the official editorial positions of the newspaper. Instead, they prided themselves on offering a wide variety of views, especially ones conflicting with those of the newspaper.<sup>1</sup> Ian Mayes of the left-leaning *Guardian* suggested that the most compelling feature of his paper's "Comment & Analysis" section was its commitment to publishing "opinions that conflict with government, the majority of the public opinion, and the view of *The Guardian* as a whole" (Mayes, personal communication, March 31, 2003). In doing so, the newspaper shows itself to be balanced and in tune with the range of opinions, but also lives up to journalism's ideal of providing a "free marketplace of ideas."

#### *British opinion pages and the liberal democratic theory of mass media*

In line with the belief in a "marketplace of ideas," the philosophy underlying the British pages is consistent with a liberal demo-

cratic understanding of the media's role in society. Liberal democratic theories hold that media are charged with informing the electorate (McNair, 2000, p. 1). This role, in turn, translates into a series of specific responsibilities. As Street (2001) has explained it:

This means informing citizens about their (prospective) representatives' plans and achievements; it also means reflecting the range of ideas and views which circulate within society, subjecting those who act in the name of the people to scrutiny, to make them accountable. (p. 253; see also McNair, 1995, pp. 21-22)

The responsibility for reflecting the ideas and views of society and holding the powerful responsible also entails facilitating public debate and participation, and providing a platform for citizens to express themselves (cf. McNair, 1995, pp. 21-22). However, the question of how this responsibility should be put into practice is hotly contested among both theorists and practitioners (see, for example, Wahl-Jorgensen, 2002b, 2002c). Most proponents of the liberal democratic tradition are, like the British journalists interviewed for this paper, wedded to the notion of the free marketplace of ideas, in which consumers/citizens are exposed to a wide range of opinions, and are free to choose whichever positions are most compelling to them (cf. Salmon & Glasser, 1995, p. 447). In this view, mass media are a site for the display of political opinion, and the role of journalism is one of delivering opinions to consumers (cf. Salmon & Glasser, 1995, p. 446). The task of citizens, in turn, is to process and evaluate as much political information as possible, and act according to their considered convictions when voting in elections. This conception assumes that the "regular citizen" cannot contribute their own ideas to the decision-making process, but only evaluate an already-existing agenda set by experts and elites.

Thus, the liberal democratic model of public debate underlying the British opinion pages limits public access and participation to the realm of *reception*: That is to say, members of the public participate by receiving news content, not by contributing to its production. In this vision, citizens read the newspaper, think about its content, and perhaps discuss key issues with families and friends, but restrict deliberation to private or non-mediated settings.

### **The Danish opinion page model**

On the surface, the Danish journalists express support for the liberal democratic ideals that underpin the British opinion pages. The editor of *Jyllandsposten*, the largest-circulation Danish newspaper, suggested that the aim of his paper's opinion pages is to support journalism that provokes debate and sets the agenda (Østergaard, personal communication, March 31, 2003). However, the Danish model is built on an entirely different philosophy, based on a belief in public access and participation in terms of *both* production and reception.

That is to say, in this model citizens/readers do not just read and think about politics, but actually participate directly in its making. As described by the editor of *Jyllandsposten*, "our pages are part of a healthy political and democratic tradition based on the idea that the debate should not just be elitist. At its best, the debate should include a popular contribution, so that the newspaper can be a listening post" (Østergaard, personal communication, March 31, 2003). Similarly, Per Michael Jespersen, the debate editor of *Politiken*, argued that the Danish newspaper tradition is grounded in a set of democratic values that emphasize the ability of regular citizens to contribute to the "bottom-up" determination of the political agenda, and to challenge figures of authority (Jespersen, personal communication, 27 March 2003):

There are not many cracks in the public sphere to allow regular people to participate. We try to ensure that our opinion pages are committed to the voices of members of the public, rather than the powerful interests who monopolize all the other pages of the newspaper. Therefore, our highest priority is to include a diversity of individuals.

This philosophy is put into practice through a distinctive set of opinion page conventions. First of all, regular columnists are all but absent from the Danish editorial pages and op-ed pages. Instead, the commentaries, analyses, and columns on these pages consist of unsolicited contributions from members of the public. In selecting which contributions to publish, the Danish journalists suggest that they discriminate against the voices of the powerful, so that the pages will not be taken over by spin doctors, lobbyists, politicians, and others advancing "their own agendas" (cf. Jespersen, personal communication, March 27, 2003; Østergaard, personal communication, March 31, 2003). Jespersen cited an in-house study of *Politiken's* opinion pages, which revealed that while a third of contributions came from politicians and interest groups, a third were written by academics, and the final third was the work of individuals who were not identified by title or affiliation. He said that he was constantly wishing for less contributions from academics, press officers, and spin doctors, and more from "regular people" (cf. Jespersen, personal communication, March 27, 2003). Danish journalists prefer contributions from such "regular folks" because their experience is seen as more grounded and concrete. On the basis of this experience they can therefore contribute a perspective that is impossible to obtain for "insiders."<sup>2</sup> The commitment to broadening participation also fits well with Danish journalists' conceptions of the press' role in society: They suggest that by opening up the forum of the opinion pages to citizens, the paper provides a venue through which politicians and other elites are held accountable for their actions (e.g. Jespersen, personal communication, March 27, 2003; Østergaard, personal communication, March 31, 2003).

All Danish broadsheet newspapers include a longer commentary or *kronik*, which is up to 2,100 words in length. The *kronik* is contributed by someone who is an expert on a topic — either because of educational or work background, or because of personal experience. Even though the genre is the preferred forum of academics, contributors range from kindergarten teachers to artists and ministers. Journalists employed by the newspaper are prohibited from contributing to the *kronik* (cf. Jespersen, personal communication, March 27, 2003). As Østergaard of *Jyllandsposten* suggested, the *kronik* is characterized by its quasi-scientific discourse and is considered the "flagship of the newspaper, where we try to establish a serious and impressive debate" (Østergaard, personal communication, March 31, 2003). There is no necessary correspondence between the news agenda of the paper and the topic of the *kronik* — it can cover anything from the writer's memories of a Danish island to a discussion of women in the Renaissance, a plan for the future of the National Archive, and a scientific discussion of oxygen deficiency in Danish seawater, to mention just a few pieces from the sample. The *kronik* is regarded as a highly influential genre of news writing. It often makes it into evening news programmes on national television, and a large number of letters to the editor refer to it. As Per Michael Jespersen pointed out (Jespersen, personal communication, March 27, 2003), the *kronik* is the single most important site for members of the public to introduce fresh topics, perspectives or opinions into the debate. He recalled a couple of examples of such "bottom-up" influences. First, he suggested that a recent debate on reform of the Danish high school system

had been enriched and changed by contributions from high school students and teachers. Secondly, he recalled that a proposal by the justice minister to register all egg donors had been met by stiff public resistance after an intelligent and articulate egg donor had contributed to *Politiken's* opinion pages with a *kronik* arguing that such a practice would be humiliating and demeaning. Again, these "regular people" were seen as qualified to comment on policy matters because they had personal experience that offered authentic and comprehensible perspectives on policy issues. Their perspectives were not only important to members of the public, but also provided a "lifeline" between politicians and citizens, showing decision-makers how their actions affect the public.<sup>3</sup>

**Danish opinion pages and the deliberative democratic theory of mass media**

The Danish model embraces a conception of public debate that emphasizes the ability of regular citizens to voice their concerns. While it is clearly informed by liberal democratic principles, it has much in common with what has been referred to as deliberative democratic theories. Deliberative democratic theorists believe that "a public sphere of deliberation about matters of mutual concern is essential to the legitimacy of democratic institutions" (Benhabib, 1996, p. 68; see also Dryzek, 2000, p. 1).

Deliberative democrats, then, stress the importance of the ability of those affected by political decisions — whether they be rich or poor, well-spoken or inarticulate — to contribute their opinions to the public debate. A deliberative democratic critique of the media's role in providing the conditions for public participation emphasizes the significance of active discussion (e.g. Habermas, 1995). However, merely talking to others does not make for democratic communication — deliberative democrats are adamant that the discursive process should be characterized by procedural equality, and by respect for the contributions of others, even if their opinions are at odds with your own (e.g. Cohen, 1997, p. 69).

**The pundits and the people: An analysis of the content in Danish and British opinion pages**

A two-week<sup>4</sup> sample of the opinion pages in the British Times, *Daily Telegraph*, and Guardian newspapers, along with the Danish *Politiken*, *Berlingske Tidende*, and *Jyllandsposten*,<sup>5</sup> was submitted to a basic content analysis to provide evidence for the differences between the two models in terms of the range of individuals given a voice. Editorials and letters-to-the editor were excluded from this analysis to focus on ascertaining how the differences between models of the opinion pages in Danish and British papers affect content. Only columns — that is to say, long, signed opinion pieces — were examined. Each column or commentary was examined simply to determine whether the author was a columnist and, if not, how they were identified.

**Table 1: Percentage of non-columnist opinion pieces in Danish and British papers, October 21-November 1, 2002**

British papers	Danish papers
<i>Daily Telegraph</i> : 8%	<i>Jyllandsposten</i> : 97%
<i>The Times</i> : 20%	<i>Politiken</i> : 100%
<i>The Guardian</i> : 25%	<i>Berlingske Tidende</i> : 77%
<b>Overall: 18%</b>	<b>Overall: 92%</b>

Beginning with the British pages, the analysis of two weeks of content in the *Telegraph* shows that only 5 out of 62 pieces, or 8 percent, were written by individuals who were not members of the

regular panel of commentators. These "outsider" contributions were made by an all-male and all-star cast of political elites, including Greg Dyke, the director general of the BBC; Oliver Letwin, the shadow home secretary; and David Frum, a former speech writer for George W. Bush.

More than any of the other papers, the *Telegraph* has a tone of exclusivity to its editorial and op-ed pages, and this also comes across in the tone of some of the commentary. The paper has a daily commentary running down the far left side of the comment pages, written by dignitaries such as BBC's political editor Andrew Marr and comedian Armando Iannuci. Though pieces in *The Telegraph* sample reflected the dominant news agenda, the sample was characterized by clear political leanings, often in opposition to the Labour government of Tony Blair. Many of the pieces on the *Telegraph's* opinion pages were devoted to criticising the bureaucratic excesses of big government. Thus, one columnist offered "an idiot bureaucrats' guide to playing doctors and nurses" (Dalrymple, 2002, p. 26), while another led by asking, "if we can't hunt foxes, why not hunt people?" (Nicholson, 2002, p. 27). On the majority of days, the *Telegraph* devoted at least one of its editorials, columns or opinion pieces to a campaign titled "free country." This campaign, which has as its logo a drawing of a pair of handcuffs, is designed to highlight and criticize the heavy hand of government. Articles in the "free country" series called attention to problem such as travellers' persecution by Customs and Excise (Robinson, 2002, p. 27), and the flaws of the European Convention on Human Rights (Letwin, 2002, p. 24).

*The Times* had substantially more outside contributions, with 20 percent, or 9 out of 46 commentaries written by non-columnists. Nevertheless, the range of voices represented on the pages of *The Times* was not much wider than that evidenced in *The Telegraph*. It included elite individuals such as bishops, professors, writers, and Members of Parliament, writing about their particular areas of expertise. For instance, the bishop wrote about the state of the Church of England (Marshall, 2002, p. 18) while the professor, an expert in biogeography, wrote about climate change (Stott, 2002, p. 20).

*The Guardian's* profile of contributions was similar, with 17 out of 67 columns, or 25 percent, written by non-columnists. Again, the contributors included Members of Parliament, academics, journalists, and writers. In addition to these elites, however, *The Guardian* had invited workers in Britain's public services to write about their experiences in a special section titled "public voices" (*The Guardian*, 2002, p. 15). The contributors to this section included three police officers and a psychologist. These contributions were often personalized, as when the psychologist discussed her own experience of drug-related crime in the down-on-heel resort Hastings (Newcomen, 2002, p. 15). Nevertheless, the feature did provide public servants a chance to offer specific critiques and policy proposals (e.g. Green, 2002, p. 21) and set the agenda for public debate.

Overall, though, British opinion pages constitute a genre of journalistic writing that informs an ongoing debate between national elites. With sparse letters to the editor sections that are dominated by other elite figures there is very little substantive public participation.

By comparison, the Danish newspapers analysed only rarely used columnists — overall, more than 90 percent, of all commentaries were written by non-journalists. In *Jyllandsposten* only 2 out of 69 contributions, or 3 percent, were written by journalism insiders — in this case, the opinion editor of the paper who was providing his analysis of Denmark's role in European politics (e.g.

Pittelkow, 2002, p. 10). Of all the Danish newspapers analysed here, *Jyllandsposten* came closest to reflecting the political agenda of the current right-wing government, and this tendency was evident on the opinion pages. The Danish press has moved away from the explicit political allegiances that characterize their British counterpart (cf. Brink Lund, 2002, pp. 38-39). Nevertheless, the Danish newspapers retain historically grounded relationships to political parties that sometimes colour editorial opinion. *Jyllandsposten*, catering first and foremost to the Jutland peninsula's rural areas, has long been associated with *Venstre*, the governing party, which began its life as a farmers' rights movement. On the opinion pages, this relationship translated into contributions by *Venstre* MPs and government ministers. Thus, the integration minister, Bertel Haarder, contributed a *kronik* on the assimilation of asylum seekers into the labor market (Haarder, 2002, p. 11), while the environment minister, Hans Christian Schmidt, wrote one in support of recycling beer and soda cans (Schmidt, 2002, p. 8). Nevertheless, *Jyllandsposten* also published critiques of government policies from all parts of the political spectrum, including contributions from opposition politicians (Andersen, 2002, p. 10) and unemployed people attacking benefit cuts (e.g. Lembcke, 2002, p. 11).

Out of 87 columns and commentaries, *Politiken* had no contributions written by journalists, though it did publish a syndicated column by Belgian Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt (2002, p. 2). *Politiken's* opinion pages distinguish themselves from those of the other two Danish broadsheets analysed here in a couple of ways: First of all, *Politiken* is traditionally centrist in political orientation, and its editorials were almost always critical of the current government. However, the contributions from "outsiders" published on the opinion pages reflected a similar range of positions and voices to that featured in *Jyllandsposten*: Again, there were pieces by government ministers (Kjær, 2002, p. 3) but the pages also featured a column from a student speaking out against Danish involvement in Iraq (Madsen, 2002, p. 2) and a long letter from a consultant bemoaning Danish bigotry (Tjørnehøj, 2002, p. 8). Secondly, *Politiken* also distinguishes itself by featuring the longest *kronik* of all the Danish newspapers — up to 2,100 words and often tangential to the news agenda. This was certainly evident in the sample, as when a writer of erotic literature wrote about her experience as a punk (Tamer, 2002, p. 9) and a Muslim woman wrote about the religious moorings of Danish values (Tønnsen, 2002, p. 3).

Finally, *Berlingske Tidende*, the oldest newspaper in Denmark, and of conservative ilk like *Jyllandsposten*, was the only paper to have regular columnists. The regular columnists are senior journalists on the paper. Their columns, which appear three days a week, are brief, each individual piece shorter than any of the commentaries written by members of the public. These columns are mostly opinionated responses to other contributions on the same page, or criticisms of coverage in the other Danish broadsheets. *Berlingske's* columns share the conservative orientation of the editorials, and therefore differ from the mix of opinion characterising the contributions from the public on *Berlingske's* pages. Altogether, these columns made up 16 out of 69, or 23 percent of all contributions. Because of their brevity, however, they took up less than 8 percent of the total space on the page in the period examined.

Given the more extensive opportunity for public participation provided by the Danish model, the individuals who contributed commentaries came from a wider spectrum of society. While the political elites — members of Parliament, professors, and pundits — made their opinions known on the Danish pages, they were by

no means the only voices. Thus, students were frequent contributors to the pages, as were teachers, musicians, actors, the unemployed, NGO workers, and individuals who were simply identified by their names, rather than by their professional status. A tourist guide critiqued new plans for a national opera house in *Berlingske Tidende* (Kaiser, 2002, p. 8), while a bank clerk called for a reconsideration of the government policy on child custody in *Jyllandsposten* (Bang Mortensen, 2002, p. 10).

The Danish papers appear to support more inclusive debate that encourages public participation both in the context of production and reception. Rather than being written by professional journalists, the Danish opinion pages are peopled by individuals who are articulate experts in particular areas on the basis of lived experience or professional background. However, it is not evident that Danish opinion pages are truly representative of the public. The contributors need to possess extensive cultural capital (cf. Bourdieu, 1984, p. 2) to participate. It is not enough for them to attain the competence to decode the cultural texts of opinion pages, which is all that is required of British newspaper readers. To participate in the context of production, writers require a fluency in its language, which is necessary to produce well-written, compelling, and accessible commentary.

## Conclusion: Different strokes, different folks

The paper has suggested that British newspapers have a "top-down" and professionalized vision of public debate in mind, inspired by liberal democratic theories, and encouraging participation only in the context of reception. The Danish model, grounded as it is in deliberative democratic principles, seeks to include a wider variety of voices and experiences. As such, it is committed to discursive participation both in the context of reception and production. The Danish newspapers' reliance on members of the public for their contributions means that the discussions of the opinion pages are not constituted narrowly by an insider culture, but made up of a greater variety of voices. The Danish model does open up a space for contributions that lie outside the conventional news agenda. Sometimes these contributions are tedious and narrow in their appeal, but sometimes they allow for regular people to provide fresh perspectives or contribute to knowledge. The greatest contribution of the Danish model is to create a platform for active public intellectuals, and thus drawing on the insights of experts outside the narrow range of the journalism profession. While the Danish model doesn't do away with inequality of access, it at least tries to address it through the best method available to journalists: By opening up the pages to the readers.

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## Footnotes

1. While *The Guardian* is known to be left-leaning, *The Times* is typically viewed as center-right, and *The Telegraph* is traditionally seen as right-wing.
2. A similar argument is made by journalists in the U.S. in relation to letters to the editor — see Wahl-Jorgensen (2001).
3. Nevertheless, in all of Jespersen's examples of significant interventions into the public debate by regular citizens, as in those of journalists on the other Danish broadsheets, the contributions that were viewed as most influential were ones that changed the direction of a debate already firmly rooted in the dominant news agenda, rather than introducing entirely new topics into the discussion.
4. Between October 21 and November 3, 2002. Sunday newspapers were excluded from this analysis because some of the papers have adopted entirely different formats for their Sunday editions. This fact should be taken into account when considering the quantity of columns and commentaries, though the balance between contributions by columnists and "outsiders" is probably similar in Sunday papers to the distribution in regular editions.
5. Approximate circulation figures for the newspapers analyzed here:

<i>The Times</i> :	688,000	<i>Politiken</i> :	140,000
<i>Daily Telegraph</i> :	970,000	<i>Berlingske Tidende</i> :	150,000
<i>The Guardian</i> :	404,000	<i>Jyllandsposten</i> :	180,000

(Sources: <http://www.do.dk/>, accessed March 15, 2003; <http://www.tcsmedia.co.uk/html/newsletters/Feb2003.pdf> accessed March 2, 2003).

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# Quality reporting under different ownerships: A case study

By Nerissa Nelson

## Introduction

Critics have long pointed out the dangers of market concentration in all sectors of economy. Finance, service, and manufacturing industries have been affected by concentration of control over the years, and consolidation in these industries continues to grow. One motivation for this trend is the push to be competitive in the global market economy. It is more cost effective and efficient for a company to gain control of a market segment or market share in the same industry rather than devote time and money planning on ways to develop or expand market share in the face of competition<sup>1</sup>. The media industry is no exception to this type of pressure. Issues of media concentration have been widely discussed in the literature. The pros and cons of whether “bigger is better” is still being questioned by critics and industry analysts. If considerations for shareholders, marketing, profit, and competition are first and foremost in management’s decision making process, then how might these factors affect, or not affect, the outcome of the news product?

One particular aspect that continues to be studied in the newspaper industry is the relationship between type of ownership (independent vs. corporate) and product quality.

As the literature reveals, numerous studies have contributed to the general debate of ownership and its effects on product quality. There is much diversity among these studies with regard to how quality is conceptualized and operationalized. Not surprisingly, their findings are quite mixed<sup>2</sup>. While these studies have made important contributions to the debate, the question of ownership and its impact on product quality still remains.

This study adds to the existing body of data by examining changes in product quality, specifically the quality of reporting, of a small Midwestern newspaper, the *Stevens Point Journal*, after it was bought in 1997 by the Thomson Corporation, thus losing its status as an independent family-owned business (three years later, Thomson sold the *Journal* to the Gannett Corporation). A content analysis was used to compare the coverage of the local school referendum issue of the Stevens Point Area Public School District in the *Journal* both before and after the buyout. Additional information was obtained by interviewing two current and two former employees of the *Journal*. Since these individuals do not constitute a representative sample, their information will be incorporated as mere anecdotal evidence in the Discussion section.

## Literature review

There are three overall positions related to the effects of media concentration on product quality. One camp argues that media concentration results in reduced competition and the placement of excessive economic and editorial power in the hands of a few companies, thereby posing a threat to a free press<sup>3</sup>. Others contend that concentration actually improves newspaper performance because of increased resources resulting in more editorial vigor<sup>4</sup>. Still some researchers say there is little difference between ownership types and product quality<sup>5</sup>.

Some studies have explored foreign ownership and its impact on media content. One study by Hollifield examined the effects of

foreign ownership on media content through a content analysis of Thomson and non-Thomson owned newspapers<sup>6</sup>. Based on previous research indicating more coverage was given to issues related to the parent company, Hollifield found that foreign ownership did not have an impact on her hypothesis that “foreign-owned newspapers would be more likely than domestically owned newspapers to carry stories about their home country.”

A more recent concern in the industry is the increasing reliance on marketing within newspaper organizations to determine product quality. Randy Beam’s research on the marketing orientation of newspapers discusses the trend of relying on readership research to shape news content<sup>7</sup>. He found that when uncertainty increases as to how to serve readers, the push toward a marketing orientation strengthened within an organization. This approach to product quality from a marketing perspective conflicts with the professional journalists’ expertise and knowledge of disseminating information.

The difficulty of determining what constitutes product quality was also explored by Gladney<sup>8</sup>. Based on standards of newspaper excellence<sup>9</sup>, he surveyed readers and editors and asked them to rank the list of standards from least to most important. He found both editors and readers agreed that strong local news coverage, accuracy, and good writing were the three most important factors in news content.

Other media studies have looked at aspects of product quality and how they affect their audiences. For example, Neuman et al., explored how the media reported critical issues and communicated these issues to the public, and how the public perceived and used this information in the context of political meaning<sup>10</sup>. While their approach may not have focused on media conditions, their study design integrated content analysis, surveys, interviews, and experiments to understand how the media and the public interact to create meaning. The authors found that the media issues they studied (e.g., AIDS, election coverage, Apartheid in South Africa) focused more on specifics and looked at a snapshot of time, while the audience was less interested in details and more concerned about how these issues might impact their lives.

Other factors, such as the intricate relationship between newspaper organizations, its community, journalists, and news sources, have also been studied within the context of product quality. Berkowitz and TerKeurst examined the relationship between journalists and news sources within the framework of communities and their newspapers<sup>11</sup>. They interviewed reporters and sources from front-page stories of newspapers in a Midwest state. The authors found the journalists’ interpretation and reporting style of the community was, to some degree, controlled by the nature of the community, and that a community’s power structure and cultural influences shape the decision making process and news coverage of the newspaper.

Tied to the issue of product quality is news coverage and how well it is produced. One such study by Post et al., investigated the coverage of a radon problem in a region of Pennsylvania<sup>12</sup>. Part of this three-phase study included measuring the quantity and level of news coverage of the radon issue. Results indicated that although much was written on the radon issue, the coverage was superficial. One of the factors that contributed to the superficial coverage was

the large number of event-oriented articles, which is defined as reporters reacting to situations in a passive manner without investigating an issue further.

Based on the previous literature and findings from these studies, the question of ownership and its effect on product quality still remains. This study attempts to determine whether ownership status affects the quality of reporting by posing the following research question:

Compared to the coverage of the ongoing school referendum debate under independent ownership, did the quality of reporting change under chain ownership?

In order to answer this question and to place it in its proper framework, some background information of the *Stevens Point Journal* and information on the school referendum issue is provided here.

## Background

In July 1997, the privately held *Stevens Point Journal* board voted by a slim margin to sell its paper to the Thomson Corporation. Approximately 56 percent of the *Journal* shareholders agreed to the sale, but the remaining 44 percent opposed it. Frank Leahy, publisher of the *Journal* at the time of the sale, cited difficulties in maintaining the financial strength needed to continue the *Journal*, and felt the sale to Thomson for approximately \$17 million was necessary in order to keep up with changing times<sup>13</sup>. Shareholders who opposed the deal did not want to lose local ownership and preferred an inside buyout from one of the stockholders, but they could not match the offer by Thomson. Since an inside buyout did not occur, those who approved the sale felt Thomson was in a good position to continue the tradition of the *Journal* being a community newspaper.

After the sale to Thomson in 1997, changes in editorial policies, such as advertising on the front page of the paper and some staff turnover, took hold at the *Journal*. A few longtime employees of the *Journal* left after the transition and, in 1999, started a weekly newspaper based in Stevens Point called the *Portage County Gazette*. The people who started the *Gazette* wanted to bring back the "locally owned, locally written" community-focused news they felt was lost when the *Journal* sold to Thomson<sup>14</sup>.

Circulation of the *Journal* from 1990-2000 decreased, but not by much. The *Portage County Gazette* currently has a circulation of 5,000 a week, up from 2,500 when it started. This may explain

the slight decrease in circulation of the *Journal* in recent years as shown in Table 1.

When Thomson purchased the *Journal* in 1997, the company already owned seven newspapers in Central Wisconsin, including the towns of Appleton, Sheboygan and Fond du Lac. This newspaper cluster (Central Wisconsin Strategic Marketing Group) also included the *Marshfield News-Herald* and the *Wisconsin Rapids Daily Tribune*. These three

towns — Marshfield, Stevens Point and Wisconsin Rapids - are within a 35-mile radius. Thomson's newspaper reign was short lived. In 2000, it sold its Central Wisconsin newspaper cluster to the Gannett Corporation.

## School referendum issue

The school referendum issue has quite a long history and has been the center of controversy and debate since 1994. There are several issues Stevens Point area schools have faced over the years, including space needs, technology upgrades and repairs, school projects, new transportation facilities, alternative school reconstruction or relocation, and secondary school construction. The school board has brought these issues to referendum over the years to seek acceptance from the community for approval to move forward. The first referendum proposed in 1994 requested a total of \$39 million. There were three questions on the referendum that included the purchase of land to construct a second high school (\$24,313,000), upgrades and repairs of technology equipment, and access for students with disabilities (\$13,038,900), and the construction of a new transportation facility (\$2,000,000). Voters approved the second question on the referendum — to upgrade and repair technology — but rejected the other two questions. This raised taxes in the community by 29 cents per \$1,000 equalized value, which in essence means that a homeowner with a property value of \$50,000 had to pay \$14.50 more in taxes per year. Since the 1994 referendum vote, proposals in subsequent referenda have been rejected as a whole. In 1996, the school board issued an advisory (non-binding) referendum asking the community its opinion on whether they wanted one or two high schools in the community due to space needs and project enrollment increases.

Table 2 provides a brief chronological history of the school referendum from 1994-1998. Each question on the ballot pertains to one aspect of the referendum. Some expenditures were approved, but the entire referendum budget has never been accepted except for that of April 1998.

**Table 2. Referendum History:**

Date	Cost	Vote	Purpose
December 1994	\$24,313,000	Fail	Two high schools & land
	\$13,038,900	Pass	Technology upgrades
	\$2,000,000	Fail	Bus garage
November 5, 1996	Advisory	Fail	One high school
	Advisory	Pass	Two high schools
September 9, 1997	\$29,150,000	Fail	Land & new high school
	\$2,643,855	Fail	Operating costs
	\$6,340,000	Fail	Remodeling of existing schools
	\$124,014	Fail	Operating costs
April 7, 1998	\$2,180,000	Fail	New Alternative school
	\$143,635	Fail	Operating costs
	\$965,000	Pass	Construction of chemistry classrooms at high school
	\$47,000	Pass	Operating costs

(source: Stevens Point Area School District)

**Table 1.**  
**Stevens Point Journal - Net Paid Circulation Figures 1990-2000:**

Year	Circulation
1990	14,104
1991	14,210
1992	14,345
1993	14,271
1994	14,220
1995	14,109
1996	14,047
1997	14,019
1998	14,053
1999	13,856
2000	13,553

Source: Stevens Point Journal - Circulation Department. July 2001

## Method

Two sets of news articles were selected for this study. Each set covered a 13-month period: The “pre-set” covered the period from January 1, 1996 through January 31, 1997, when the *Journal* was still under independent ownership. The “post-set” covered the period from August 1, 1997 through August 31, 1998 — the period after the take-over by Thomson, which occurred in July 1997. Only substantial articles, those over 100 words in length, were selected for the study. A total of 127 school referendum articles were examined. Sixty-nine of these articles were published under independent ownership (pre-set), while 58 of them appeared under Thomson’s ownership (post-set).

Articles were included regardless of the section in which they occurred: front page, local, business, sports, and any other special or feature section, including editorials.

Articles that related to the referendum issue, such as enrollment projections, space needs, and teacher retention or layoffs, were also included even if the referendum was not specifically mentioned. However, letters to the editor regarding the school referendum issue were excluded from this study.

Articles were categorized and analyzed as a whole. Evaluating the entire article, as opposed to a word, sentence, or paragraph, retained the flow of the article without losing the context of the story. In order to ascertain the quality of the news reporting, the articles were analyzed according to three criteria: Sourcing, reporting style, and contextualization.

## Sourcing

Mencher distinguishes two types of sources: physical sources, such as documents, newspaper clippings and, in some cases, direct observation; and human sources, which encompass both official sources (e.g., government officials and spokespersons for organizations) and unofficial sources (e.g., private citizens and on-the-scene observers)<sup>15</sup>. This study focused only on the latter: official and unofficial human sources. Any references to documents, memos, or other physical data supporting the school referendum issue were not reflected in the sourcing data. For both official and unofficial human sources, a further distinction was drawn between those identified by name and those that were not. Coding of human sources thus included four categories: 1) official, identified by name, 2) unofficial, identified by name, 3) official, not identified by name, and 4) unofficial, not identified by name.

Each of the above four sourcing categories was measured in two ways: (a) by counting the number of different sources per article (sources/article) and (b) by counting the total number of references per article attributable to particular sources (references/article). Thus, a multiple reference to a given source was recorded as one source per article, while it resulted in a multiple count with regard to the references per article.

## Reporting style

Reporting style in this study was based on the distinction made by Post et al. between articles that are “self-generated” and those that are “event-oriented”<sup>16</sup>. In self-generated articles, reporters initiate and actively investigate an issue. Self-generated stories may cover an issue or a pattern of multiple events over a period of time, or they may look at a single event from multiple perspectives with an emphasis on causes and solutions. In event-oriented articles, reporters simply respond to an occurrence, such as a press release,

announcement, or official meeting. In contrast to self-generated articles, with their emphasis on “how” and “why” questions, event-oriented stories address “what” or “who” questions. Event-orientation is a reactive approach to reporting: Reporters receive their information mainly from events or official meetings and tend not to gather additional contextual information or to go beyond those particular occurrences in some other ways.

Articles in which reporters investigated the story or issue being reported were coded as “self-generated.” Articles which simply provided facts pertaining to official meetings, announcements, or press releases were coded as “event-oriented.” It was possible that articles included a combination of both event-oriented and self-generated components. For example, this would occur, when a story started with the details from a particular event, such as a school board meeting, but then took on a broader view and addressed questions readers might have about a certain issue that was discussed at an event.

## Contextualization

Inspired by Neuman et al., this study includes contextual information as a criterion by which to ascertain the quality of reporting<sup>17</sup>. By helping readers to better understand the issues being reported, contextual information adds value to news stories.

Contextualization was assessed by counting the number of pieces of contextual information contained in an article. A “piece” of contextual information was defined as a statement, or related cluster of statements, pertaining to a particular fact or event which was likely to facilitate readers’ comprehension of the current referendum issue — by shedding light on its historical background, the larger social implications, or related developments in other communities or the larger polity (state, nation). Since an article could include none, some or a substantial number of such pieces, contextual information was coded by degree — as either *none*, *minimal* (one to three pieces) or *substantial* (more than three pieces).

## Results

Since the goal of this study was primarily to gauge the quality of reporting of the school referendum issue under different ownerships, only methods of descriptive statistics are employed. Methods of inferential statistics in this case would be inappropriate because no sampling is involved. As Table 3 reveals, the takeover by Thomson resulted in a slight change with regard to sourcing.

### See Table 3 on page 17

A break-down of the referenced sources by type of sources — official versus unofficial sources, with each further subdivided into those that are identified by name and those that are not — yields no surprises: In line with the total source data, official sources were utilized, on the average, slightly more frequently under independent ownership than under Thomson. Unofficial sources were far less frequently tapped into. When they were used, they were almost always identified by name, and the figures were slightly lower for the pre-set than for the post-set.

It is conceivable that the figures found in this study are affected by a difference in average article length between the two sets. However, a comparison of the average article length, measured in terms of the average number of paragraphs per article, shows that this is not the case: With 69 articles and 1,215 paragraphs in the pre-set, and 58 articles and 1,076 paragraphs in the post-set, the

**Table 3.**  
**Results: Comparison of Pre-Set and Post-Set Data:**

Variables	Pre-Set Independent N=69	Post-Set Thomson N=58
<b>Sourcing</b>		
All sources/article	3.1	2.8
OFF/article*	2.6	2.0
- OIN/article*	2.2	1.7
- OUN/article*	0.4	0.3
UNOFF/article*	0.529	0.735
- UIN/article*	0.5	0.029
- UUN/article*	0.7	0.035
References/article	7.7	6.9
<b>Reporting Style</b>		
Self-Generated	18.8%	22.4%
Event-Oriented	63.8%	70.7%
Combination	17.4%	6.9%
<b>Contextualization</b>		
None	63.8%	67.2%
Some	36.2%	32.7%
- Minimum	36.2%	29.3%
- Substantial	0%	3.4%

- \* OFF - All official sources
- \* OIN - Official sources identified by name
- \* OUN - Official sources not identified by name
- \* UNOFF - All unofficial sources
- \* UIN - Unofficial sources identified by name
- \* UUN - Unofficial sources not identified by name

average number of paragraphs per article is 17.6 and 18.5, respectively.

Reporting was mostly event-oriented — both before and after the Thompson takeover. In 63.8 percent of the articles included in the pre-set, and in 70.7 percent of the articles in the post-set, reporting was exclusively event-oriented. In contrast, self-generated reporting, either by itself or in combination with event-oriented reporting, was found in 36.2 percent (pre-set) and 29.3 percent (post-set) of the articles. The change in reporting mode was thus rather mild: While, under Thompson, event-oriented reporting was 6.9 percentage points higher (in relative terms, this constitutes an increase of 10.8 percent), the number of articles containing at least one element of self-generated reporting had decreased by 6.9 percentage points (or, in relative terms, a decrease of 19.1 percent).

In either set, most articles failed to include any contextual information. The figures for both sets were almost identical. With 36.2 percent (pre-set) versus 29.3 percent (post-set), articles published prior to the Thomson takeover scored slightly higher on the “minimal contextual information” category; the drop after the takeover,

in relative terms, amounted to a decrease of approximately 20 percent. This decrease was reduced to about half when the numbers of articles containing any contextual information (minimal or substantial) were compared: 36.2 percent for the pre-set versus 32.7 percent for the post-set.

### Discussion

With 69 articles published before and 58 articles published after the Thomson takeover, the extent of coverage of the local school referendum in the *Stevens Point Journal* was substantial under both ownerships. This finding does not come unexpected given the results of the study. With regard to the quality of news coverage after the Thomson takeover, the outcome was less predictable. Most of the theoretical literature on media concentration would suggest a decrease<sup>18</sup>.

Quality in news reporting, which was at the heart of this study, was quite similar under both independent and chain ownership — with only slight differences in certain categories. Sourcing, no matter whether expressed in terms of sources per article or total references per article, had decreased by not more than 10 percent under Thomson. A similarly mild decline was found with regard to articles containing some measure of self-generated news. The decrease in contextualization was equally unimpressive.

The absence of a significant decrease in the quality of reporting reveals that the surprise does not lie so much in the absence of such a drop but rather in the fact that the quality of news reporting, under independent ownership, was already low to begin with.

The results show all three quality indicators to be low: On the average, reporters relied on 3.1 sources per article under independent ownership, with the vast majority (2.6 sources or 84 percent) being official sources. Almost two thirds of the articles analyzed fell into the exclusive event-oriented category.

The same proportion was found with regard to contextualization: Close to two-thirds of the articles did not include even a single piece of information that would help the reader to understand the school referendum issue in light of its history, related developments in similar communities or its larger social implications. None of the articles included a substantial degree of contextual information.

Why was the quality of reporting in the *Stevens Point Journal* already low before the Thomson takeover? The *Journal*, under independent ownership, was struggling financially to stay competitive in the newspaper industry. The publisher cited difficulties in maintaining the financial strength needed to continue the paper, which prompted the owners to put the paper on the selling block even though some of the shareholders rejected the idea and wanted it kept under local control. Quality news coverage is more time consuming, and therefore more costly to produce than the type of reporting that relies heavily on wire stories or official sources<sup>19</sup>. In the case of the school referendum issue, it is likely that this type of reporting was not feasible given that the *Journal* at the time was struggling economically.

Why did the quality of reporting in the *Stevens Point Journal* remain low after the takeover by Thomson? Some authors contend that newspapers are primarily democratic institutions with business interests being a secondary concern. Proponents of such a position will be hard pressed to explain why the quality of reporting in a chained-owned newspaper, such as the *Journal*, is so low. If the democratic function were the overriding principle in the industry, one could expect news articles pertaining to local issues, such as the referendum issue studied here, to have far more depth. An eco-

conomic framework is far more suited to providing a satisfactory explanation.

The goal of any newspaper, whether independent or chain-owned, is to sell newspapers and make a profit. This is particularly true for larger newspaper corporations, such as the Thomson Corporation. Thomson acquired the *Stevens Point Journal* for one reason: By adding this newspaper to its regional cluster, it would complement the market groups already held by Thomson (i.e., *Marshfield News-Herald* and *Wisconsin Rapids Daily Tribune*) and provide more strategic advantages with the addition of the *Stevens Point Journal*. In order to be as profitable as possible, a newspaper needs to follow two principles: It must offer a product that people will buy, and it must do so at as low a cost as possible.

This, as the data in this study indicate, the *Stevens Point Journal* under Thomson ownership, does to almost the same extent as under its previous independent ownership. What, then, may explain the low quality of its news reporting? One possible explanation for the poor quality in local news coverage is that Thomson was unwilling to spend the money to improve the quality of news reporting. Producing high quality news is expensive. It takes time to gather information from a diversity of sources, to actively investigate stories and to look for contextual information. Thomson's shift in business interests in the late 1990s toward online information services may also explain low quality reporting. Focusing on short-term profits would be more attractive to potential buyers than investing in the *Journal* over the long-term.

That the above explanation is more than just speculative is supported by interview responses from both current and former employees of the *Stevens Point Journal*. The interviews, which were designed to elicit information pertaining to policy changes as well as staffing and training issues, suggested that Thomson had been following a policy intended to produce more stories in a shorter amount of time and for less money. Management made it known to its reporters that working in their offices was preferred to venturing out into the community and tapping into a variety of sources. Thomson also tried to include more local news in the *Journal* by soliciting area businesses to write their own columns. This type of "news gathering" cost Thomson no money at all and provided "local news" to fill the paper. Quality, however, was most likely lacking, considering community members and not professional journalists wrote these stories.

As a simple case study examining the quality of reporting, in terms of sourcing, reporting style, and contextualization at one small local newspaper, it adds yet another piece of data to the already existing body of knowledge in this field and thus helps create a clearer picture of the overall situation.

To deepen our understanding further, future research, as Demers suggests, may need to include studies that examine the complexity of broader changes in organizational structure, and not just those limited to chain and independent owner variables<sup>20</sup>. Exploring these complex organizational structures from other frameworks, such as a political economy perspective, may provide further insights into the history and changing landscape of media organizations, as well as a better understanding of how power plays out in complex news organizations and impacts product quality.

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# Creating a bold venture in community journalism education: The Ayers Family Institute for Community Journalism

By Chris Waddle

First comes the birth. Then comes the christening to name and to define and to rear the child into the fold.

The Ayers Family Institute for Community Journalism is a brand new baby. It is the non-profit offspring of a foundation formed by the owners of Consolidated Publishing, Co., publishers of *The Anniston Star*.

Every naming ritual in human societies has the effect of reaffirmation for the body of people who sponsor the child. So those of us in Alabama behind the Ayers Family Institute are redefining the beating heart of heartland journalism.

We not only propose to teach community journalism. By extension we take on the serious responsibility on behalf of mass media to insert some meaning behind it when we include in the name of this child, "Community Journalism."

There's something really serious and soulful behind that term. And like all deep experiences, this process promises both to reform and to restore how the profession of journalism has come to see itself in hometown papers.

Accessibility, continuity, and intimacy are the most important elements in those newspapers readers identify with home. That was an opinion by *Anniston Star* Chairman and Publisher H. Brandt Ayers, quoted by *The Willits News*, a National Newspaper Association and California Newspaper Publishers Association member.

An insightful thread of contemplation within the Ayers Institute about community newspapering is a fresh, bright, new way of looking at our collective life in journalism. Our profession wants and needs such a leadership idea for our collective reinvigoration. The Ayers Family Institute for Community Journalism may be the little child that grows up to lead.

Practitioners and academics in journalism and mass communications, take note! Yet who are we in Anniston, Ala., to make such bold declarations? Few community newspapers have landed on as many lists of quality journals.

*The Columbia Journalism Review* cited *The Star* as 30th among all U.S. newspapers in excellence, regardless of size. In fact, however, *The Star* was one of only two with less than 100,000 circulation on the list. Selection was based on writing and reporting quality, integrity, accuracy and fairness, vision and innovation, and influence in community as well as the broader journalistic and public world.

*The American Journalism Review* featured *The Star* along with its chairman and publisher, H. Brandt Ayers. Author James V. Risser, in the piece titled "The State of the American Newspaper, Endangered Species," commented, "Something special is being lost" as the newspaper industry consolidates and the ranks of inde-

pendent newspapers are thinning. Risser included *The Star* in his article for surviving when other newspapers lose their community ownership. He quoted from a *Star* front-page letter by publisher Ayers, declaring to the world, "We're not for sale — not for \$50 million, not for \$100 million."

*TIME Magazine* twice named *The Star* to its quality newspaper listings. One *TIME* headline read, "Big Fish in Small Ponds." Publisher Ayers and his wife, Josephine, promptly threw a party and handed employees a can of sardines tied in a bright, red ribbon. The magazine later called *The Star* one of the best little newspapers no one ever heard of. For publication Ayers said, "We could make more money by putting out a weak newspaper, but that would short-change the people of Anniston and our region. Anyway, who wants to be remembered just for making money."

Dismayed at the decline in shoals of such sardines in journalism, the Anniston publishing family decided to buck the trend of passage into oblivion. The Ayerses and his sister, Elise Ayers Sanguinetti, along with her husband, Phillip, have agreed to an eventual stock transfer in the company inherited from their dad, Harry M. Ayers, whose own father had been publisher in the Northeast Alabama county of Calhoun.

The Ayers Family Institute for Community Journalism is the late-in-life offspring in a family of newspapers established in 1883 with an antecedent named *The Hot Blast*. The New South editor Henry Grady prompted the nameplate on a visit to Anniston, called The Model City even then, when he saw the local iron foundries sending sparks into the community night. The hometown imagery, Grady is reported to have said, should also stimulate the paper's editorial leadership.

Newspapers merged and grew and acquired sophistication in Anniston, Ala., as everywhere. By 1912 the new baby of that time was *The Anniston Star*. To this day, however, a small nameplate of *The Daily Hot Blast* that started it all still appears on the lower right hand corner of *The Star*'s editorial page.

Quest for continuity of the community newspaper tradition inspired the creation of The Ayers Family Institute. As an educational entity, the Institute, along with its supportive foundation, expects to be exempt from state and federal taxes at the death of the owners. Despite the beginning of change in the U.S. Tax Code, such taxation or the fear of it or the life insurance premiums on key members of newspaper families for tax-paying purposes at death has been a stimulus in the decline of local newspaper voices throughout the country.

Another word present at the creation of The Ayers Family Institute for Community Journalism has been *perpetuity*. The owners not only look back on this history with fondness, they have every expectation of everlasting-ness for the media properties they own. Besides *The Star*, those include *The Daily Home* of

Talladega, Ala., and the weeklies, *The Jacksonville News*, *The Cleburne News*, *The St. Clair Times* and some other ventures. There's an online division for each publication.

The Institute also models for the whole nation of community newspapers a way toward the same continuity and perpetuity. Preservation of the community voice in every heartland place so accustomed stands out as a democratic ideal. The need for preservation comes at a time when homogenization and pasteurization of the media are far, far along, aided by Federal Communications Commission and congressional IRS legislation and even the human instinct to take the money and run.

The family behind the institute named for the Ayerses has estimated it is foregoing \$50 million to \$100 million by directing the gradual dedication of stock to the foundation. Largely to honor that decision, the American Society of Newspaper Editors in April gave what was only its second industry leadership award to Brandt Ayers.

That ceremony at the ASNE convention in New Orleans underscored what the development of The Ayers Institute will mean for the furtherance of journalism education, a chief goal in the creative purpose.

The Institute's charter will allow numerous educational ventures in extending journalism as a force for a civil society, including global involvement.

The Southern Center for International Studies in Atlanta has agreed to a partnership, resulting in an October conference on international news coverage. Funded by the Knight Newspaper Foundation and others, the site will be Jacksonville State University, a short drive from *The Anniston Star*. The point will be to gather editors of the global news report picked up by community newspapers and read in the heartland. The program is slated for broadcast on PBS-TV. Location of the program alone will make the Ayers Institute's point that global news is — or at least ought to be — a local story in community newspapers.

The Public Journalism Network, among other potential educational partners, prominently seeks joint projects with The Ayers Family Institute for Community Journalism.

The developing relationship with the Journalism Department in the College of Communication & Information Sciences of the University of Alabama clearly draws the most critical interest from community journalism educators. The Institute and University expect to cooperate in the establishment of a graduate program taught in the newspaper headquarters of Consolidated Publishing Co., publishers of *The Anniston Star*.

We believe our baby is unique. Of course every proud parent thinks that way. Yet we know of no other accredited graduate degree in community journalism offered from a class setting that also is a professional newspaper. The company's daily and weekly siblings and online division will share in child-rearing. If we ever have a chance to complete the convergence with radio and television, we certainly will.

The University of Alabama is the alma mater of both Elise Sanguinetti and Brandt Ayers, majority shareholders in Consolidated Publishing. The University's journalism department is the significant regional producer of academically trained members of the mass media. Its successful graduate program alumni are prominent in professional and academic journalism — in practice, in research and in teaching.

A conversation with the dean of Communications & Information Sciences, Dr. Culpepper Clark, and the chairman of

the journalism department, Dr. Ed Mullins, began more than two years ago. Talks often expanded into three-way communications with attorneys for the University and estate counsel for the Ayers and Sanguinetti families along the way.

For most of the talking, the only known fact was that some formal relationship almost surely would result from a partnership. Questions far outnumbered that one positive assertion.

Would the University own the newspaper? It would not, a fact widely misunderstood by the public even today. The owners preferred a Poynter Institute arrangement of the sort that has kept *The St. Petersburg Times* independently owned and operated for all these years since the death of its founding editor and publisher. Nelson Poynter's first impulse, we are told, was to bequeath his paper to his alma mater, Yale University. He withdrew from that idea for fear those trustees might one day dispose of the property that he wanted to see retained in a community relationship in perpetuity, our big goal — eternity.

Why was The Ayers Institute for Community Journalism needed? It was conceived as the mediating institution between newspaper and University, the point of creative impact. Since it will seek other partners for other ventures — as in the case of the Southern Center for International Studies — the Institute had multiple reasons to come into being.

Would the educational purpose beckon journalists who already are members of the profession? Without permanently excluding the possibility, the biggest prospect features the establishment of an on-premises graduate school for what are likely to be beginners or near-beginners in journalism.

Would the school function in Anniston or a three-hour drive away in Tuscaloosa, already the site of undergraduate and graduate journalism education? The uniqueness of the project grew from the marriage of a working professional news operation with a high-quality academic program run by an experienced faculty but within a community setting. The problems and issues and opportunities for learning community-based journalism determined the school would locate in Anniston. The discussion settled on the image of newspaper office as a "teaching hospital." The metaphor is an apt model since the University of Alabama System operates a separate Birmingham university that is so insinuated with a world-class hospital complex as to be inseparable.

The questions and answers leading to the creation of The Ayers Family Institute seem so simple now. Negotiations never approached the protracted nature of talks between Israel and Palestinians. Yet the labor pains for the Institute's creation were real. Focus on solutions was shaped by the ultimate issue of how to finance a childhood for the new creature. Family bequests eventually will move Consolidated Publishing stock into the supporting foundation for residual, ongoing support. But what happens in the early years?

The breakthrough moment occurred while defining the answers and seeking to finance the start-up. The potential source of initial funds is the Knight Foundation. Dean Clark, Dr. Mullins and I had flown to the Knight offices in Miami to apply for a \$50,000 project-planning grant while continuing our joint discussions. Talks already had been intense with the family members, the lawyers and Ed Fowler, vice-president for operations of Consolidated Publishing, Co.

After greeting Hodding Carter III, Knight's chairman, the three of us moved to a conference with Eric Newton, Knight's grant officer for journalism projects. Newton commented that he had

never seen a really successful project emerge between a university and newspaper in a big way like we were proposing. He was impressed we had at least kept the conversation open as long as we had.

High in a downtown office building, we were on eye level with Miami's wintertime visitors — the "snowbirds" who actually were Ohio vultures down for the season. The setting seemed wholly inauspicious as we somewhat crossly raised the by-then familiar issues of who, what, where, and how as if our academic discussions reflected the old formula for writing a newspaper story topped with an Associated Press lead.

I couldn't see the point of an academic relationship that didn't make use of the newspaper as campus. My academic discussion partners couldn't at the moment see beyond the successful undergraduate and graduate programs they oversaw in Tuscaloosa. Reflecting on our mutual frustration, Dean Clark said the project shouldn't be so hard to design since the University offered a Master of Fine Arts degree away from its campus at the Alabama State Shakespeare Theater, Montgomery. A division in his own school even let graduate students in library science earn a master's degree at a University extension center in Gadsden, which is much closer to Anniston than to the University of Alabama campus in Tuscaloosa.

Well, that's it! That's the answer, I said, recognizing the breakthrough moment when the head of the baby crowns.

We'll create something entirely new, I proposed. We'll design a professional graduate program for University faculty to teach in our newspaper office in Anniston on an honors basis with a community journalism curriculum funded by Knight.

The foundation grants officer chimed in that his chairman and board could get really excited about something so one-of-a-kind with the prospect for improving American democracy by showing how to keep smaller, independently operated newspapers alive. The whole room in Miami also agreed journalism education could use some similar enlivening.

The moment was as though the darkly forbidding birds soaring outside the Knight windows had turned into angels.

Not every moment has been sunshine and haloes. The difficulty of conversation between a university community and a professional journalism community is nothing to cheer the soul.

We quickly learned back in Alabama that the partnership talks had occurred overlong without direct participation by Tuscaloosa faculty members who would run the courses and without Anniston editors and managers who would serve as adjunct teachers. They also would oversee the students in their hands-on journalism experience.

We conceived a degree program that would train a community journalist holistically in reporting, writing, editing, photography, and design but also in production, marketing, distribution, advertising, and business office skills. We wanted our first graduating class to have the collective skills to go out and start their own new business together. We would need a non-compete clause, I quipped, so they couldn't start another newspaper in *Anniston Star* territory.

There was no doubt the newspaper employed the talent to impart and that the University faculty had the academic skills to match. What happened next was a large joint meeting in Anniston to lay all the merger issues onto the table and to start an action plan. The result was a set of four joint task forces with co-chairs from the university and newspaper company in the topics of cur-

riculum, finance, admissions, and instructional issues. After the first general meeting and additional work by the four groups, we met again on campus in Tuscaloosa. By then I was able to say, with a second from Dean Clark, that there was now no longer any doubt that the Ayers Family Institute for Community Journalism would cooperate with the University of Alabama in the Anniston graduate school.

The baby was born.

*The Columbia Journalism Review* printed one of the birth announcements. In its article titled, "A Big Plan to Stay Small," the *Review's* Liz Cox described the strategy as keeping Consolidated's newspapers from becoming just an undistinguished link in a long corporate chain. The writer also learned this from the publisher: "The mission for the Ayers Family Institute, Brandy Ayers says, is to diminish the distance between newspapers and the neighborhoods they cover."

The University of Missouri School of Journalism followed by sending its faculty member Judy Bolch to the newspaper for interviews on a book. The Missouri faculty plans a volume on what's right about American journalism, with a chapter devoted to Anniston. Professor Bolch, Houston Harte Chair in Journalism, did a live-in visit at Consolidated's airy new \$16 million headquarters for in-depth interviews to be part of the Missouri report.

Before our new baby reaches toddler stage — before the first class of University of Alabama graduate students walks into *The Anniston Star* newsroom — we have much more talking to do back and forth between journalism professionals and academics. We anticipate drawing upon the whole joint-discipline profession — practitioners and academics — across America to get everyone's input.

The obvious starting point is simply to ask each of us to define what we mean by the term "community journalism." As with so many words and phrases reduced to jargon by long usage, the exactitude of meaning gets lost.

I once proposed to a vice president of a major mass media conglomerate that ASNE should rename its Small Newspapers Committee and call it the Community Newspaper Committee. Size is not meaningful when some big newspapers are so inferior and some with less circulation look like mice that roar. What ought to matter to the body of professional editors, I proposed, was the bonding relationship between a newspaper and its readership. Together they may form a community that projects a dignity beyond small size.

The corporate executive used the old cultural argument that size does matter. It can't be helped if "small" implies inferior, he said, because after the metro class and medium-sized dailies, all the rest of the papers are at the bottom of the heap. His view.

Besides, he argued, some very big papers in his corporation and others consider themselves community newspapers.

Yes, well, maybe on that. *The Wall Street Journal* gathers around itself the investor class. But you'd have to look on those readers more as a national interest group poring over service information and news of record than as a community with much commonality beyond making money. *USA Today* has amassed a readership actually displaced from community — people like hotel guests, hospital patients, dorm residents, and road warriors — an audience more than a community. *The New York Times* historically covers global capitals better than the five boroughs of its hometown yet can from time to time rise to the level of community newspaper.

The whole nation was forged by the events of 9/11 into a single community. When *The Times* undertook to write an individualized and stylized obituary with photo of every victim, the meaningful undertaking represented not only community journalism but also the Civic Journalism that is a staple of community papers. The editors of *The Times* and other major media outlets often decry Public Journalism, as the form also is called, as too activist and participatory to be good journalism.

Despite past opinions about dabbling in the civic arena, *The New York Times* wisely did not decline any one of its numerous Pulitzer Prizes for 9/11 coverage. *The Times* stories and photos were soulful and healing and appropriate to the kind of community bonding heartland newspapers accomplish daily and weekly. The national newspaper from New York accepted its special community role whether or not its editors recognized the act of bonding it had performed in the process.

After growing up in the West, and working in the South and judging the New England Newspaper Association contest this year, I can attest that community newspapering is where you find it. And you can find it in every contour and region of America.

No, size doesn't matter in community newspapering. Nor location. Nor ownership, although the independent voices and personalities of editors and publishers do lift their publications above mere numbers and regimented, syndicated ownership to embrace readers and sometimes to brace them.

I resigned from my last corporate-owned newspaper on a point of honor. The publisher insisted we win a Pulitzer — or else! We won two. But one was for investigating the deadly 1981 Hyatt Hotel disaster in Kansas City. After the prize ceremony I left for a paper 10 times smaller where the publisher said he was more interested in the welfare of readers than in winning prizes for investigating their disasters.

That paper was *The Anniston Star*, where the founding statement on the editorial page declares it is the duty of the newspaper to serve as the attorney for the most defenseless of its readers. And now the same culture is giving birth to The Ayers Family Institute and is birthing the discussion of what community journalism really, really means.

I believe we will end up declaring that community journalism is that bonding between reader and newspaper that occurs when a genuine caring relationship replaces the singularity of a publisher's impure profit motive. Every good paper must make money, naturally, to be good. It's the goodness that is the motive and goal rather than profit in the best community newspaper. The proprietor would rather experience community than to become ever richer at the expense of readers either through exploiting them or through cheating them on the quality of publication.

In our academic relationship that new understanding of community journalism makes mass communication into a "helping" or "caring" profession — journalists more like firefighters...police officers...doctors and nurses than like the old understanding of a cross between social historians of current events and business proprietors.

In a speech to the summer Journalism Institute of Jacksonville State University, I told rising young communicators they should survey that campus for its police academy...its nursing school...its emergency workers training...and its Department of Communications and consider the common purpose.

All the helping professions are first responders to civic threats and emergencies. All function in healing, sometimes with doctoring and sometimes with the scalpel of a surgeon or investigative reporter. All keep local society safe through problem solving and walking the beat like a cop to safeguard the institutions of civil society.

When I was a kid, I wanted to be a fireman and ride the big red truck with the spotted dog like my Uncle Harris, the heroic fire chief of his town. Then I got hit by a car and wanted to be a policeman to stop bad drivers. When I got tonsillitis, I wanted to be a doctor like Dr. Jimmy who made me better. And I always wanted to be a teacher, to improve the lives of others with knowledge.

I'm glad I followed journalism, I told the Jacksonville State audience, because my career allowed me to do all those things.

The caring profession of community journalism is healer, rescuer, civil guardian, and educator.

The concept percolates through the developing graduate school curriculum at the Ayers Family Institute for Community Journalism.

When a local district attorney went too far in dragging an *Anniston Star* reporter into serving as witness instead of public observer, we obtained a writ to quash the subpoena. Then we invited the DA to lunch at the paper with the editorial board. We explained why the First Amendment requires an independent distance between journalist and law enforcement for the sake of credibility. It's an exquisite argument for the communications profession that sees itself on the side of law and order. I looked around the lunch meeting and said to myself that was a room where some journalism grad students should be present. Then they'd learn by seeing, hearing and participating — by osmosis and example — the intricacies of relationships in the journalism of community.

Prominent in our Institute's curriculum is a weekly set of seminars to replicate that community-meets-newspaper atmosphere with ministers, politicians, peace officers, environmentalists, corporate leaders, community activists, and the unheralded community leaders who shape any community regardless of election or selection or official title and designation.

We also expect to incorporate the intricacies of community with its successes and tragedies and rewards and problems and even its wonderfully plain, ordinary, everyday life in a core course of community journalism.

While University of Alabama faculty will shoulder the rigorous classroom load for students, their professional journalism partners will oversee hands-on experience like a professor of medicine conducting grand rounds in a teaching hospital.

The question is not whether our Institute has found a marketplace for our idea. We have. The first class will enter our grad school in a year.

The issue isn't whether other heartland newspaper proprietors should follow our lead. Some already are, and more should.

The problem isn't an excess of zeal and idealism on our part. It is whether the rest of mass media can grasp the inspiration for good community life through journalistic vigor.

The potential prize looms magnificently in the future of the civil society of American democracy in the heartland.

For when we preserve and build community newspapering, we create a bond that also builds community.

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# grassroots editor

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