

**Mr. and Mrs. John Doe announce the engagement of....
A study of the decline in reader-submitted content
in four Eastern Kentucky community newspapers**

Deborah T. Givens

Department of Communication
Eastern Kentucky University

317 Combs Building
521 Lancaster Avenue
Richmond, Kentucky 40475-3102

859-622-6564
E-mail: deborah.givens@eku.edu

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A study of the decline in reader-submitted content
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A content analysis of four community newspapers in Eastern Kentucky tracked over a 10-year period from 2000 to 2010 reader-submitted content in a variety of categories including wedding, anniversary, and birth announcements, “thank you” and “in memory” notices, letters to the editor, and community event invitations. The analysis documented that while some newspapers have shown growth in a few categories, overall there has been a substantial decline in the amount of reader-submitted content – especially in the more traditional “social” areas of birthdays, births, weddings, engagements, and anniversaries. At the same time, an overall increase in announcements of community and church events took place. Since there was little connection between whether or not a newspaper was charging for submitted items, it would appear that other factors are at work in the overall decrease in submitted content.

While reader-submitted content plays an important role in the development of community within a geographic area served by a newspaper, these types of items also represent one of the primary ways in which residents contribute to the newspaper. Often the submission of a birthday greeting will lead to more familiarity with the submission process, a greater interest in reading the newspaper, and subsequently the submission of additional items – a community news pathway. These types of social news items help in developing a participatory identity for the newspaper. As residents of a community lose this connection to the newspaper, it is an easy step to stop subscribing to and reading the newspaper. Follow-up interviews with the editors of the four newspapers documented a variety of factors impacting the decline in reader-submitted content with the number one cause identified as social media.

Rationale for the study

The challenges facing America's newspapers have been well-documented, especially in the recent decade with the growing impact of electronic media. Declining circulation figures coupled with shrinking advertising revenues have led to the closing of some newspapers while others have reduced publishing days or moved to online-only news outlets.

Most research tracking the decline had focused on large national and mid-sized regional newspapers. This paper reports on one portion of a study directed at developing an understanding of the economic status of newspapers in a 22-county, predominantly rural region of Eastern Kentucky primarily served by small, weekly, community newspapers. This exploratory research compared the status of small, rural community newspapers with the larger national newspapers whose declining economic situations were assumed to affect all print media. While community newspapers are businesses, and this study looked at business-related information such as circulation numbers and advertising trends, the study also looked at other trends such as reader-submitted content to develop a larger perspective of the status of the newspapers in their communities.

The thousands of small newspapers across the country serve a crucial role in the democratic process by providing information on community issues and a forum for discussion of the issues. But these small, often around 5,000 circulation newspapers, also play an important role in building and maintaining communities. This can be partially accomplished by providing government, school and other "hard" news. But smaller newspapers, especially, have traditionally also contributed to developing a sense of community by publishing the more "soft," or social, news – such as weddings, births, and anniversaries.

A content analysis of four weekly, community newspapers in Eastern Kentucky looked at the changes in reader-submitted content. A brief description of the overall project follows in order to provide an explanation as to how the four communities were selected to have newspapers representative of the region.

Methodology - Community newspaper case study design

The research project used the following design based on a case study method:

1. A preliminary longitudinal analysis was conducted of circulation figures for the 22-county region over a 10-year period, comparing newspaper circulation figures in 1998 and 2008. These years reflect the time just before the growth of the Internet when national media still held a relatively strong economic position, and then the period 10 years later when the “crisis” facing newspapers had become a national discussion. By gathering circulation information for the Kentucky region newspapers from these two time periods, it was possible to compare the circulation trends in the region with those at the national level. Through analysis of the data, a group of newspapers were identified for additional analysis and made up the embedded units of analysis. Gerring discussed this process of selection and noted that cases “chosen for case study analysis are identified by their status (extreme, deviant, and so forth) relative to an assumed population of cases” (2007, p. 13). This analysis of circulation provided key information for determination of the current status of community newspapers in the region and was also used, along with other data such as poverty rates, population, retail business numbers and geographic location, for the selection of four newspapers for additional study. Creswell called this a purposeful sampling strategy. “This means that the inquirer selects individuals and sites for study because they can purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study” (2007, p. 125).

2. Preliminary focused interviews were conducted with the editors of the selected newspapers to gather information on their views on the status of their respective newspapers including patterns in circulation, advertising, and content along with other factors seen as impacting the current and future status of the newspapers. Yin noted that focused interviews differ from in-depth, open-ended interviews in that they are usually shorter in nature, and usually follow a limited and prescribed set of questions, although the focused interview may still follow a more open method of interviewing than strictly structured interviews (2003, pp. 90-91). The purpose of the focused interview was to have input from the editors before proceeding to the next step in the data collection: qualitative document analysis of the newspapers. Information provided by the editors was used as an initial guide in the qualitative document analysis, helped control researcher bias in the content analysis, and provided a reflexive aspect to data collection.

3. This study employed qualitative document analysis, which allowed for a focus on the context, process, and emergence of the meanings and messages of documents (Altheide, 1996). Altheide defined qualitative document analysis as the “reflexive analysis of documents” (1996, p. 65). Key features of qualitative document analysis, and differences from traditional quantitative content analysis, included that qualitative document analysis had a research goal directed toward discovery and a reflexive research design, including a reflexive progression from data collection to analysis to interpretation. Another key feature, which was especially suited to the background of this researcher as a former community newspaper editor and publisher, was that the primary researcher in a qualitative document analysis project would be involved in all phases of data collection, analysis, and interpretation. While some categories may be predetermined, the data collection most often involved the emergence of categories. Another key feature was that in quantitative content analysis the data were recorded as numbers or

occurrences while in qualitative document analysis data were numbers AND narrative – with the emphasis on narrative (Altheide, 1987).

Issues of the newspapers were read to develop an initial coding protocol, which was revised during the research process due to the reflexive aspect of qualitative document analysis. A longitudinal dimension was added to the case study by analyzing newspapers in 2000 and 2010 – the beginning and end of the decade that saw major changes in the newspaper industry, the emergence and growth of the Internet, and the dominance of the “newspapers are dead” narrative in the national media.

4. After the gathering of circulation data, interviews, and qualitative document analysis, it was determined if other resources were needed. Although case study texts stress the need for a study design, the very nature of qualitative case study research includes the identification of additional data as the research process takes place. One of the researcher’s skills must be in determining when additional data are needed. As an example, the issues emerging during data collection pointed to a need for additional information regarding changes in reader-submitted content, which led to gathering data on charges for submissions and preparing additional questions for editors regarding social news.

5. Follow-up in-depth and open-ended interviews with editors. This allowed the researcher to ask additional questions about patterns identified from the data and talk further with the editors about patterns they saw in content and advertising. These interviews were participatory and open-ended in discussion, with the editors and the researcher introducing topics and offering observations as the discussion directed.

The sections of the data collection that specifically related to reader-submitted content are discussed below.

Pre-interviews of newspaper editors

Preliminary focused interviews with the editors of the selected newspapers were conducted to gather information on their views on the status of their respective newspapers, including patterns in circulation, advertising, and content along with other factors seen as impacting the current and future status of the newspapers. The purpose of the focused interview was to have input from the editors before proceeding to the next step in the data collection: qualitative document analysis of the newspapers. This protected against researcher bias in the content analysis and also provided a reflexive nature in the data collection.

One concern identified by the editors was a decline in reader submitted items – such as birth and wedding announcements – for publication in the newspaper. One editor noted that his newspaper had published only one social item in each of the two previous issues. While the same editor expressed concerns about how social media use, especially among younger residents, was impacting how people publicized personal news, he also noted that several of the recent submissions received at the newspaper had come from “younger” subscribers. The editor said he was monitoring submissions and considered them an important trend representative of the degree of community involvement in the newspaper.

Qualitative document analysis of newspapers

The next step in data collection employed qualitative document analysis to review the issues of each newspaper in 2000 and 2010 with the objective of identifying trends in advertising and content in an effort to determine what changes had taken place, what the current advertising and content status was for the newspapers, and the implications for the future viability of the newspapers. While qualitative document analysis can include some of the traditional features of quantitative content analysis, such as the recording of numbers or occurrences, those data are

only part of the analysis. Qualitative document analysis depends on narrative and a reflexive research design that moves from data collection to analysis and to interpretation and back to previous steps as needed. Another key feature listed was that the primary researcher be involved in all phases of data collection and that the expertise of the researcher in the area under study was part of the data collection process.

A deliberate decision was made to analyze all the issues for each of the two years for each of the newspapers – a daunting task of reading, coding, and analyzing over 400 newspapers. In traditional content analysis for weekly newspapers, the guidelines most often followed were established in the study “Sample Size in Content Analysis of Weekly Newspapers” by Lacy, Robinson, and Riffe and called for a random selection of 14 issues per year (1995). While this number and type of selection was satisfactory in studies looking to enumerate occurrences, it would not allow for the identification of emerging issues and trends. Weekly newspapers have a rhythm and an essence only identified by a deep reading over a time period. The pages will often include letters, photos, columns, and advertisements followed by responses to those initial publications, which are then followed by other responses – a dialogue in the community carried out on the pages of the newspaper. This would be missed in a random sample.

Altheide discussed the need for saturation sampling in some situations in relation to a study he conducted on network evening newscasts during the period at the beginning of the Iran embassy takeover in 1979. He explained that if conventional quantitative sampling methods had been followed, “important thematic patterns would have been lost” (1987, p. 70).

Copies for all four newspapers for the year 2000 were available through the University of Kentucky microfilm center. Print or pdf copies for 2010 were accessed at the newspaper reading room at the UK library, at county libraries, and from the newspapers in the study.

As previously noted, the qualitative document analysis provides for both the counting of numbers or occurrences and for narrative of the emerging categories in a study. For this study of weekly newspapers, a coding sheet was developed that allowed for counting of numbers of pages in each issue and percentage of advertising for each issue. These are two key elements in tracking the economic health of the newspaper. Also counted were occurrences of specific types of reader submitted content including: thank yous, memorials, birthday greetings, birth announcements, wedding and engagement announcements, anniversary announcements, obituaries, community calendar announcements, and community correspondents. The coding sheets also provided prompts for reviewing other aspects of each issue, such as placement of advertising, types of major advertisers, and special sections. In addition to counting the items noted above, the researcher also read and analyzed the newspaper issues to identify trends related to the status of the newspaper and those characteristics of the newspaper that appeared to be continuing or changing.

Reader submitted content – comparative analysis

The editor pre-interviews and the first readings of the community newspapers directed the researcher to a more in-depth analysis of reader submitted content. As noted in the pre-interviews, one editor said his newspaper had published only one social item in each of the two previous issues. Such a small number of social items reflected a fundamental change from what was for a long time the traditional content, especially on inside pages, of community newspapers.

In the early part of the century, a study of weekly newspapers in Virginia found that:

Personal items of the type, “The Jim Jones family visited the Martin Smiths Sunday,” together with news of births, marriages, deaths, and other personal items, regarded as so typical of the country weekly, were found to occupy 71 per cent (sic) of the human interest news space, and incidentally, one seventh of the entire newspaper space. (Reuss, 1939, p. 332)

Kentucky historian and recorder of rural life, Thomas D. Clark, also documented that the focus on social or personal items continued to be important in the middle of the twentieth century in his study of southern, country newspapers:

People wanted to know of the social doings of their neighbors. They wanted to be informed when and where preaching services would be held, who was sick and expected to die, who ate dinner away from home, who strange visitors were, where the local baseball teams were playing and with what results, when there would be barbecues, who the candidates were, what had happened at court day, what was going on at the courthouse, what kind of weather prevailed over the county, what crop prospects were, who had been arrested, and whose cotton had bloomed first. They wanted to read circus advertisements, news of violence, hangings, lynchings, stories of curiosities, of big snakes, of big potatoes, big hogs, and the strange antics of animals, and all the social gossip of courtings, marrying and births. ... It was to serve this everyday demand for local news that country papers resorted very early to the publication of names whether they made big news or not. (1991/1948, p. 23)

Fortunately, by the latter part of the century reports of lynchings and hangings were no longer found in community newspapers, and residents were turning to other media for weather reports and often even crime news, but “marrying and births” along with other submitted content still filled many pages of those community newspapers.

A 1999 report in the journal *Small Town* on “How to run a successful community newspaper and bring it into the 21st century,” listed 16 criteria, one of which was “share social and family happenings.” The author, who had over 40 years of experience with community newspapers, said, “Social news, weddings, births and obituaries telling what the deceased was proudest of achieving, etc., should appear in every issue” (Becker, 1999, p. 28).

Newspapers have traditionally included content prepared by the paid staff, such as news articles about local government, crime, accidents, sports coverage, business news, and features about local people and events. Submitted news would include a variety of items, some of which have traditionally been considered a form of advertising and for which there were charges, and

other items considered news. Examples of submitted content related to advertising would be “thank you” advertisements and “in memory” or “memorial” advertisements. The thank yous would come from families stating their appreciation to those who had sent flowers to a funeral or from a group, such as a local cancer society, thanking recent donors. Memorial advertisements were submitted by individuals to honor a deceased loved one – usually on anniversaries of the person’s birth or death. As noted, these types of submissions were usually paid – either at the regular per inch rate charged businesses or at a discounted or flat rate. These two types of submitted material were included in the analysis.

Other submitted material identified for the analysis included those of a more social nature, such as birthday, birth, wedding, engagement, and anniversary announcements. These items would often include a photo and would be published in a story form. Another category in the study was “announcements.” Although announcements most often are considered news, they usually are not gathered by the news staff but are most often submitted by publicity chairs of local organizations, individuals, local government agencies, and churches. Becker, in his list of 16 requirements for a good community newspaper, included as one category the regular publication of what he called community bulletin board notices, which he said were “essential to making a community newspaper useful and to making your community strong” (1999, p. 29).

Another type of submitted item, although falling under the opinion category, was letters to the editor. While not part of the regular news coverage, these did reflect citizens making the effort to write a letter and submit it to the publication – to become actively engaged with the newspaper and the community.

The columns submitted by “community correspondents” made up another category. These writers, who cover towns and neighborhoods in a newspaper’s coverage area, have been a

well-known and often popular part of community newspapers for many years. In his study of southern, country newspapers, Clark devoted an entire chapter to community correspondents. This researcher, who had over 20 years of experience in community newspapers, learned that omitting a community column could result in dozens of irate callers wanting to know what had happened. Community correspondents were sometimes paid a small amount per inch or a flat rate per column, but more often payment was only in the form of a free subscription and gifts at the holidays.

The final category – obituaries – perhaps appeared unrelated to the other more social or opinion categories, but it did reflect the importance local citizens and readers placed on the newspaper being an important “record” of milestones in people’s lives. With many newspapers starting to charge for obituaries in recent years to provide what some managers saw as a captive source of income, considerable controversy had developed over the practice. Family members or others responsible for making arrangements did have to authorize the release of information, whether the obituary was paid or free, so this category did reflect decisions made to have information provided to the newspaper.

Following are the comparative analysis charts for the four newspapers. For each category and for each year in the study, the number of occurrences was recorded. The average figures were calculated by using the actual number of issues, which varied according to availability as discussed in the circulation section. Finally, the change in the average per issue for the year was shown as a plus or minus percentage.

Reader Submitted Content – Comparative Analysis

Newspapers AAA and BBB

AAA 2000	Thank You	Memorial	Birthday	Birth	Wedding/ Engagement	Anniversary	Obituary	Announce- ment	Letter to editor	Community Corr.
TOTALS	42	20	127	53	64	21	377	1,332	113	388
AVERAGE	.84	.40	2.54	1.06	1.28	.42	7.54	26.64	2.26	7.76
AAA 2010										
TOTALS	36	21	27	11	38	17	275	1,486	151	278
AVERAGE	.71	.41	.53	.22	.75	.33	5.39	29.14	2.96	5.45
Change Totals	-6	+1	-100	-42	-26	-4	-102	+154	+38	-110
% Change	-15%	+3%	-79%	-79%	-41%	-21%	-29%	+9%	+31%	-30%

BBB 2000	Thank You	Memorial	Birthday	Birth	Wedding/ Engagement	Anniversary	Obituary	Announce- ment	Letter to editor	Community Corr.
TOTALS	20	11	86	35	76	7	379	1267	133	162
AVERAGE	.39	.22	1.69	.69	1.49	.14	7.43	26.40	2.61	3.18
BBB 2010										
TOTALS	5	8	50	33	33	7	422	785	48	0
AVERAGE	.10	.16	.98	.65	.65	.14	8.28	15.39	.94	0
Change Totals	-15	-3	-36	-2	-43	0	+43	-482	-85	-162
% Change	-74%	-27%	-42%	-6%	-56%	0	+11%	-42%	-64%	-100%

Reader Submitted Content – Comparative Analysis

Newspapers CCC and DDD

CCC 2000	Thank You	Memorial	Birthday	Birth	Wedding/ Engagement	Anniversary	Obituary	Announce- ment	Letter to editor	Community Corr.
TOTALS	60	30	97	34	63	18	182	550	89	72
AVERAGE	1.15	.58	1.87	.65	1.21	.35	3.5	10.58	1.71	1.39
CCC 2010										
TOTALS	30	28	55	20	27	8	238	844	31	71
AVERAGE	.63	.58	1.15	.42	.56	.17	4.96	17.58	.64	1.48
Change Totals	-30	-2	-42	-14	-36	-10	+56	+294	-58	-1
% Change	-45%	-0-	-39%	-35%	-54%	-51%	+42%	+66%	-63%	+6%

DDD 2000	Thank You	Memorial	Birthday	Birth	Wedding/ Engagement	Anniversary	Obituary	Announce- ment	Letter to editor	Community Corr.
TOTALS	65	19	90	77	125	28	446	405	89	75
AVERAGE	1.25	.37	1.73	1.48	2.40	.54	8.58	7.79	1.71	1.44
DDD 2010										
TOTALS	14	13	38	21	68	16	233	617	55	137
AVERAGE	.28	.26	.75	.41	1.33	.31	4.57	12.1	1.08	2.69
Change Totals	-51	-6	-52	-56	-57	-12	-213	+212	-34	+62
% Change	-78%	-30%	-57%	-72%	-45%	-43%	-47%	+55%	-37%	+87%

Reader submitted content – narrative

The pre-interview observation of one editor that the number of submitted social items was declining was supported by the analysis of the four newspapers. In three of the categories most strongly associated with “social” news – birthdays, births, and weddings/engagements – all four of the newspapers showed a decline in submissions. In the category of anniversaries, three of the newspapers showed a decline in submissions, and the fourth newspaper had the same number, although an extremely low number: only seven submissions each in 2000 and 2010. Many of the declines were substantial – as high as 79 percent. One newspaper had published 127 birthday announcements in 2000 but only 27 in 2010. Birthday announcements had also declined significantly at the other three newspapers – 57 percent, 42 percent, and 39 percent.

All of the newspapers showed a decline in thank yous, from a high of 78 percent to a low of 15 percent. For memorials, two of the newspapers had a decline, one had no change, and one posted a small increase of 3 percent. While all the newspapers had larger numbers of thank yous, the number of memorials published was not high for 2000 or 2010.

A slightly different type of reader submitted content analyzed was the letter to the editor. Although opinion oriented, these types of articles still required the writer to actively participate in the community newspaper by composing and submitting the letter. Another characteristic of letters to the editor was that newspapers did not charge for these, so cost was not an issue. In three of the newspapers, the number of letters to the editor declined at rates of 64 percent, 63 percent, and 37 percent. One newspaper showed an increase of 31 percent.

For community correspondents, two of the newspapers had a decline with one of those moving from an average of three community correspondent columns in 2000 to none in 2010. The other two newspapers showed an increase – one small and the other 87 percent.

One category of submitted content – announcements – stood out as three of the four newspapers posted increases and because this category had, by far, the largest number of submissions. Announcements included general events and church notices.

The final category was obituaries, which, as noted above, on the surface appears to be an unusual type of submitted content but does reflect family members of the deceased taking action to have the notice published. Two of the newspapers had a decline, 29 percent and 42 percent, and two posted increases, 11 percent and 42 percent.

Charging for submitted items had become more frequent – some newspapers charged based on size of the photo, others charged for the article, and others charged only if a personal greeting was included. For example, if a photo of a child had an accompanying article that listed basic information such as name, age, parents, and party information, there would not be a charge. But, if the same photo and information also included a greeting such as “Happy Birthday to the sweetest girl in the world,” some newspapers would charge.

Comparing the increases and decreases to changes in charging policies at the four newspapers showed that the implementation of a price charge before 2010 was not indicative of a decline. As an example, for the two newspapers that had a decline in number of obituaries from 2000 to 2010, one had not charged in 2000 or 2010, and the other had not charged in 2000 but had instituted a significant charge by 2010. As another example, the newspaper identified as AAA had never charged for births, weddings/engagements, or anniversaries, but showed significant declines in all three categories. In the birthdays category, the same newspaper had started charging by 2010 and showed a decline in that category also. The newspaper identified as BBB also had not changed the policy for charging from 2000 to 2010 – the policy was to only charge if a personal greeting was included in the text – but still saw a decline in the birthday,

birth, and wedding/engagement announcements. Newspaper CCC had charged for all social items with the exception of 50th anniversary announcements in 2000 and 2010, and it, too, saw a decline in all four “social” categories. Newspaper DDD had charges for some items in 2000 and 2010 but also did not charge in either year for birth announcements if submitted within six months of the birth or for 25th or 50th anniversary announcements. The newspaper also did not charge for one announcement related to a wedding – either the engagement or the wedding. Again, in all four “social” categories, regardless of whether there were or were not charges, the number of submissions declined.

The issue of the implementation of charges was not applicable for the category of community correspondents. In fact, these writers for the newspaper were sometimes paid by the column inch or at a flat rate per article. More often, the writer was rewarded by having his or her name in the newspaper every week, maybe with a photo, and by a free subscription. The importance of these small payments should not be overlooked. At the newspaper which lost all community correspondents over the 10-year period, new owners had stopped providing free subscriptions to the correspondents. On the opposite side, the other newspaper that showed a decline in number of correspondents had provided free subscriptions in 2000 and continued to do so in 2010. The newspaper that showed an increase in number of community correspondents had a small per column payment for writers in 2000 but had stopped that practice by 2010.

From the analysis of submitted content, it appeared that while some newspapers had shown growth in a few categories, overall there had been a substantial decline in the amount of reader submitted content – especially in the more traditional “social” areas of birthdays, births, weddings, engagements, and anniversaries. At the same time, there had been an overall increase in announcements of community and church events. Since there was little connection between

whether or not a newspaper was charging for submitted items or was or was not paying correspondents and increases and decreases in submissions, it would appear that other factors were at work and responsible for the overall decrease in submitted content.

Additional narrative for content related to newspaper status

As discussed previously, qualitative document analysis moves beyond counting predetermined units to allow for a deeper reading of the material. One trend identified during the study related to the “look” of the newspapers. Changing technology in the print industry affecting the appearance of newspapers was not news. When the linotypes were replaced with typesetting equipment in the 1960s and 1970s and newspapers replaced their old presses with new offset units, newspapers became much cleaner looking and featured more photos and artwork. The revolution brought about by computers and digital cameras had resulted in more changes, with even the smallest newspapers featuring full color on multiple pages and intricate designs on advertising and editorial sections. Computers also made it easier, and less costly, to access state and national articles, photos, and graphics, making the newspaper less dependent on locally submitted content. The newspapers in the study looked more like large dailies in the state and across the nation, but at the same time they were losing some of the individuality and local orientation previously prominent. Perhaps the more McPaper look, like a *USA Today*, did not encourage community participation in the newspaper through submitted content.

The “social” submitted content also appeared to not receive prominent placement in the newspaper pages – often relegated to back pages or sections. One newspaper for a brief period started putting large, decorative borders around births and birthdays in an effort to give them more prominence. The practice made the items look more like advertisements than editorial content and somewhat overwhelmed the photos and articles.

As discussed previously, weekly newspapers have a rhythm and an ongoing dialogue, which were especially revealed through the analysis of two full years of newspapers in this study. Following his study of Virginia newspapers, Reuss said:

Seasons play their part in the scheme of rural life. Predominant activities vary from season to season. The content of weekly newspapers reflects this fact by significant differences in the types of material presented in the various months. Advertising, for example, was highest in December when people were being urged to shop for Christmas, and lowest in February when trade was reduced by the effects of wintry weather. (Reuss, 1939, pp.333-334)

An unexpected finding from the analysis of the four newspapers in this study, and in opposition to Reuss' observation, was a general decline in pages and advertising between Thanksgiving and Christmas. The researcher's experience in over two decades of community newspaper publishing was similar to Reuss's findings: The weeks before the Christmas holiday saw issues with large numbers of pages, and, in fact, the largest newspaper of the year was in December with the publication of greeting card ads to the community from businesses, organizations, elected officials, and even individuals and families. The four newspapers in the study saw declines in all categories for December: number of pages published down 22 percent; number of pages of advertising down 28 percent; and number of pages published in the issue before December 25 down 43 percent. On the surface, the December declines would appear to be related to the slight overall decline seen in advertising, but these figures showed the decline to be much more substantial in December. From reading the issues, it was apparent that the biggest decline was in the greeting ads, which have many of the same attributes as "social" submitted content. Even though the businesses and individuals sending the greetings were paying advertising prices, these greeting ads were of a more personal nature, a community tradition, and were evidence of the business owners, community leaders, and residents celebrating together.

The next stage of the data collection was extended interviews with the editors. Using the data from the qualitative document analysis, an interview guide was designed. To allow for a more open discussion, the guide established topics to be discussed but did not have questions that called for short answers. The key issues and trends that emerged in the interviews are discussed in the following section.

Editor interviews

The four editors of the newspapers selected for additional study were each interviewed at the office for his or her newspaper. One of the strengths of the case study design used in this study became quickly evident in each of the post-interviews with editors. By having the pre-interviews, during which the editors were asked to discuss key threats, trends, and issues they were seeing in relation to their individual newspapers, and during which the researcher explained the design and purpose of the study, a collaborative, circular study style was established. It was obvious from the types of statements made by the editors, such as, “I’ve been thinking about...,” or “Since our conversation...,” or “When looking at the past issues, what did you find about...,” that they had spent time reflecting on their individual newspapers, their communities, and issues related to community newspapers. This created an environment for a more in-depth discussion with a sense of collaboration rather than interrogation.

It was evident from the interviews that the decline in most categories of submitted content was something the editors had been monitoring, but all were somewhat surprised by the size of the decline and how many types of submitted content were impacted. Several reasons for the decline were offered, but all of the editors identified one primary cause – the Internet. Discussing the decline in submitted birthday photos and articles, one editor said, “You know what I attribute it to? Facebook. I really do. That’s your youth showing up. Weddings and

engagements the same way. We use to get two column write ups of weddings. We never get that.” Another editor also pointed to Facebook as contributing to the decline in submission of social news, saying that when someone had a new baby, pictures were soon posted on Facebook – even photos of his own grandchildren, although their photos were also published in the newspaper on their birthdays. Another Internet site, Topix, which had sites for community and where people could post anonymous comments about any topic, was identified as contributing to the drop in submissions in the category of letters to the editor. “They can go on Web sites like Topix, not put their names to it and say anything they want,” one editor said. “With the newspaper has to be fact based. And include their name and address.”

Community correspondents – columns submitted regularly from a person writing about the happenings in a specific neighborhood or region of a county – had declined at two of the newspapers, remained almost the same at one newspaper, and increased at the fourth. At the one newspaper that had seen an increase, the editor was somewhat ambivalent. On one hand he saw the columns as another form of local content, saying, “My thought is that I try to be as local as possible. The country letters are better than state news releases.” At the same time, he was not sure if the country letters should be continued. “It’s always at the back of my mind should I continue with them or let them die off slowly,” the editor said. “We use to run a page of everyone who went to the hospital. Kind of like country letters. People are really touchy. Now don’t run because people went to hospital and their homes were robbed. Same with country letters. If people go on vacation, there’s a problem. That’s an issue, too. Those communities aren’t as tight as they use to be. They don’t really care who visits who.” Another editor said that looking back to the ‘50s, every little community had a column that was sent in to the newspaper. “Actually, we’ve made a big push to get people to send in columns,” the editor said.

A third editor provided an explanation for the decline in community correspondents at his newspaper. The editor said that at one time the newspaper had writers from communities all over the county, but by 2010 it was down to two – and those two were writing about more general topics rather than writing about a specific community. He said that several years before, in an effort to make the newspaper content more professional, correspondents had been asked to not include scripture or other religious “talk” in their columns. If such material was included in the columns, it was edited out. This decision by the newspaper management resulted in many of the correspondents quitting writing. The editor said that there had been some discussions about bringing back the community correspondent columns, adding it was something that may be looked at more “down the road.” One option he thought would be more workable would be to have a column from a community run on a monthly rather than weekly schedule, for example having a monthly page of community writers.

As noted in the narrative of the qualitative document analysis of submitted material, some of the newspapers had started charging or had increased the charges for some categories of submitted content. The editor at one newspaper that charged for several types of items, after reviewing the decline rates for his newspaper, said he thought “prices on some of the submissions need to be looked at.”

Just as the Internet was blamed for many of the declines in submitted content, one editor also credited new technology with increasing the number of event and church announcements the newspaper was receiving. “I really think that computers helped out a whole lot,” the editor said. “Instead of calling [announcements] in or bringing them in, they email me and it’s done. I say thank you and appreciate you sending. I can have it done in 20 seconds opposed to going three or four steps.”

For the category of obituaries, one editor attributed the decline at his newspaper to instituting a charge for publishing the notices. “When [we] did away with free obituaries and people could not go [to the newspaper] and see something about everyone who died – we really took a hit then,” he said.

After reviewing the changes related to submitted content for his newspaper, one editor said, “We put ourselves out here as a hometown newspaper, and if our social aspect is down, then involvement in the paper is not what it used to be. Then it is something we really need to work on.”

Opportunities and threats

Despite optimistic statements made in all of the interviews about the opportunities provided by the Web to attract new readers and to compete with larger media by being able to post breaking news, editors still had concerns, especially about younger generations not adopting a print newspaper habit. “The Web is going to really be something in the future,” one editor said. “All of my subscribers are getting older. The younger ones, just like birth announcements and weddings, they have a different avenue that is more readily available to them. They don’t have to deal with me, they go directly to Facebook.”

The link between the newspaper and the people of the community was also identified as the key component to strong community newspapers. One editor said, “We’re trying to build the thought that this is the community’s newspaper. We want them to take ownership in it editorially.” Another editor expressed a similar view, saying, “I think that one thing that’s going to be key to any community newspaper’s survival is going to be maintaining that touch...keeping in touch with community.”

Future research

Based on the results in this study of community newspapers and their current status as compared to national media, the following topics are recommended for future research.

-Additional research on connecting community newspapers with the communities they serve and on examining the ways in which the two are interconnected. This also suggests the need for community media scholars to seek out partnerships with rural sociologists and other scholars researching in the area of communities and sustainability.

-Additional research into ways to create community newspapers that are more participatory in nature and more actively involve citizens in creation of content, from increasing submissions of social news items to providing ways for readers to interact on the Web site by posting blogs, video, and photographs. This could also combine research on the history of community correspondent columns and how they relate to a modern form of writing – blogging – with the goal of revitalizing the correspondents through newspaper Web sites.

Implications for the future of community newspapers

One of the advantages of a case study research strategy is that it allows for using mixed methods in the research process, which leads to having data that look at the problem from a variety of perspectives. This in turn aids the researcher in the attempt “to capture the complex reality under scrutiny” (Denscombe, 1998, p. 62). One of the key findings that emerged was that the newspapers in the study were taking advantage of technology to produce publications that were full of photographs, graphics, and color and looked very similar to their larger cousins – the daily newspapers. They also were looking more like those larger newspapers in that social news – from weddings to birthdays – were disappearing from the pages. Perhaps more than the loss of locally-owned businesses or the movement of the younger generation to the Internet, this decline

of the social news was representative of a loss of involvement by the citizens in contributing content to the newspaper. Instead, the community newspaper had become another publication talking TO the residents, sending information, rather than the instrument of communication AMONG the residents of the community.

The importance of these types of submitted items to the success of community newspapers had long been identified by scholars and by many community journalists. In his review of rural, southern newspapers in the early part of the twentieth century, Kentucky historian Clark advised, "It was good practice to publish every birth, marriage and death, and to print obituaries in great numbers" (Clark, 1991, p. 24).

Social news items are not just important for how they can benefit the newspaper. An Iowa extension sociologist discussed the role of social items in an article entitled "Why care about small town newspapers?"

City people love to make fun of the "folksy" quality of small town papers. They chuckle about items like the following: Mr. and Mrs. Wilbur Wombe of Lake Mills are the proud parents of a daughter, Lisa Marie. Grandparents are Mr. and Mrs. Delbert Wombe of What Cheer and Mr. and Mrs. Riley Richter of Keswick, great-grandparents are...great-great-grandparents are...Jacob Houser and grandsons of Belle Plaine were Monday callers in the Cathy Schmidt home... Elise Smelser was released from St. Joseph's Hospital in New Hampton Friday.

However, what readers often don't realize is that by reporting the daily life events of local people, newspapers serve an important function in community life. Small town papers can reflect, affirm and even help build a positive community atmosphere. (Besser, 1994)

While the social news items played an important role in the development of community within a county or region, these types of items also represented one of the primary ways in which the residents contributed to the newspaper. Often the submission of a birthday greeting would lead to more familiarity with the submission process, a greater interest in reading the newspaper, and subsequently the submission of additional items. These types of social news items helped in

developing a participatory identity for the newspaper. As residents of a community lose this connection to the newspaper, it will be an easy next step to stop subscribing to and reading the newspaper entirely.

The decline at the four newspapers of greeting advertisements during the Christmas season also pointed to a decline in residents and business owners seeing the newspaper as a social communication system for the community and instead only identifying with the newspaper as an official or business entity.

This loss of the participatory role of the residents in contributing content may be one of the biggest threats facing community newspapers. For the long-term success of community newspapers, even if they take on some other form that uses a platform such as the Internet and become known as community media, and also for the long term health of the communities served by these newspapers, the key may be to focus on a process through which citizens are more partners in the creation of the news outlet. In James W. Carey's ritual model of communication, the readers and residents participate in the creation of the community media (Carey, 1989, p. 18). A move to bring the community more into the creation of the news publication could be seen as newspapers giving up their independent, watchdog role, but newspapers have always been somewhat schizophrenic – having a role to play in maintaining a democratic society, a duty to present the news, an ideal of objectivity to maintain...all while tied to a business model dependent on advertising and subscriptions. Just as community newspaper publishers and editors have always had to balance reporting independently with the need to pay for the product through selling advertising, they can also find ways to make the community a partner in producing the publication while still maintaining that necessary editorial independence. This reclaiming of the social aspect of community newspapers could be a key contributor to future success.

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