

Research Report

Survey of Community Newspaper

Editors in Canada

Ivan Emke
Social/Cultural Studies
Sir Wilfred Grenfell College
Memorial University of Newfoundland
Corner Brook, NL
A2H 6P9

709-637-6200, ext. 6322
709-639-8125 (fax)

iemke@swgc.mun.ca

March 2003

This survey was funded by the New Rural Economy project on Social Cohesion in Rural Canada. For more information about NRE, check out the web site: <http://nre.concordia.ca/>

The report was prepared by Ivan Emke, with assistance from Heather Legge, Joanne Morgan and Christine Abbott. The survey was sent to 622 editors of community newspapers, largely from rural areas. The results are based on 205 responses.

The report follows the structure of the survey, providing the results. For each question, there is a note such as “(n=196).” This means that 196 respondents answered that particular question. Not all respondents answered all questions.

Information about your Newspaper

1) What is the name of your newspaper? _____

2) How many *copies* of each issue are distributed? (n=196)

The answers to this question ranged from 400 copies to 71,000 copies. The mean (or average) number of copies distributed per issue was 7,537 copies. However, there were several very high circulation newspapers which skewed the average. The median number of copies was 3,444. (The median refers to the mid-point of a distribution, meaning that there were as many above 3,444 as there were below 3,444.)

3) How does the distribution rate compare to five years ago (check one):
(n=197)

Much higher	9.1%
Somewhat higher	27.4%
About the same	38.1%
Somewhat lower	23.4%
Much lower	2.0%

It is obvious that the community newspaper is still important to the general public as a source of information. Although the internet and television are major sources of information, the community newspaper is still important, as shown by the fact that over three quarters of editors reported stable or increasing distribution rates over the last 5

years, a time when the internet has been rapidly expanding its horizons. On the other hand, being more pessimistic, about a quarter of the newspapers are experiencing a drop in their distribution rate.

4) What is the estimated *readership* of the newspaper? (n=170)

Answers to this question ranged from 350 readers to 160,000 readers. The mean estimated readership of the newspaper, as reported by editors, was 15,942 readers. The median was 7,500 readers. Putting the aggregate data for circulation and readership together, it is estimated that there are about 2.1 readers per copy.

5) Which of the following appear in your newspaper:

	<i>Every issue</i>	<i>Every other issue</i>	<i>Once a month</i>	<i>Less than once a month</i>	<i>Never</i>
An editorial (n=199)	76.4%	3.0%	4.5%	7.5%	8.5%
Letter to the editor (n=204)	73.0%	11.8%	8.3%	3.9%	2.9%
Opinion columns written by local people (n=199)	58.3%	7.0%	10.1%	15.6%	9.0%
Locally-written columns about local history (n=198)	29.3%	7.1%	19.2%	31.8%	12.6%
Columns from local schools (n=198)	25.8%	16.7%	25.3%	19.7%	12.6%
Columns written by local service groups (e.g. Lions) (n=201)	23.4%	18.4%	19.9%	19.9%	18.4%
Religion columns written by local people (n=198)	26.8%	5.6%	13.1%	24.2%	30.3%
Reports from municipal or regional councils (n=202)	59.4%	19.3%	11.4%	4.0%	5.9%
Provincially or nationally syndicated columns (n=202)	29.2%	6.4%	4.0%	9.9%	50.5%

The most common types of content, of those in this list, were editorials and letters to the editor. Close to three-quarters of the papers include these in every issue. The next two content types were opinion columns written by local people and reports from municipal or regional councils. Both of these types of content are unlikely to be found in other

media.

6) About how many local news stories do you publish per week? (n=188)

The answers to this question ranged from 1 local story per week to 125 local stories per week. The mean number of local news stories published per week was 20 stories. (The median was 15.5 stories.) This number indicates the emphasis that weekly newspapers place on local coverage.

7) What are the most common topics (or themes) in local news stories (please rank the top three topics/themes)?

	Number 1 (n=157)	Number 2 (n=156)	Number 3 (n=154)
Community events	54.1%	19.2%	6.5%
Economics/development	18.5%	14.1%	10.4%
Other	7.6%	2.6%	3.9%
Local people	7.0%	19.2%	13.0%
Education/schools	3.2%	6.4%	13.6%
Police/court/crime	3.2%	7.1%	6.5%
Human interest	2.5%	10.3%	11.7%
Sports	1.3%	17.9%	27.3%
Local history	0.6%	0.6%	1.3%
Access to services	0.6%	0.6%	0.6%
Environment	0.6%	1.3%	3.9%
Advice	0.6%	0.6%	1.3%

As expected, the most common theme in local news stories was related to community events (one of the central values of community newspapers). However, it is interesting to note that the second most common theme relates to economics and development, thus illustrating the role which such newspapers can play in the discussion of development initiatives for their community.

8) What are the most important primary sources for *local* news for your newspaper (please rank the top two sources)?

	Number 1 (n=158)	Number 2 (n=150)
Private citizens	41.1%	28.0%
Local politicians	32.3%	30.7%
Local service/voluntary groups	15.2%	17.3%
Other	4.4%	1.3%
Local advocacy groups	3.8%	5.3%
Local businesses	1.3%	4.7%
Economic development workers	0.6%	4.7%
Civil servants	0.6%	4.0%
Government press releases	0.6%	2.7%
Corporate press releases	0%	1.3%

Private citizens are rated as slightly more important sources than local politicians, when it comes to local stories. Civil servants, economic development workers and government departments (through their press releases) tend to be less important as sources. This might be an area that they would wish to work on, in order to improve their communication with smaller communities.

9) Approximately what percentage of the spatial layout of the newspaper is devoted to advertising? (n=198)

The answers ranged from 0% to 80%. The mean percentage of spatial layout devoted to advertising was 53.5%. (The median was 55%, which is very close to the mean.) This shows the obvious importance of advertising revenue for community newspapers.

10) What percentage of advertisers fit into the following categories:

	Mean	Highest Answer	Lowest Answer
Local business (n=171)	54.6%	100%	0%
Regional business (n=170)	12.7%	75%	0%
Government agencies (n=171)	11.9%	80%	0%
Provincial/national business (n=170)	10.6%	50%	0%
Professional services (n=171)	5.5%	30%	0%
Other (eg: churches) (n=171)	3.3%	30%	0%

The importance of the local scene is shown here by the fact that over 54% of advertising is focused on local businesses. Indeed, without community newspapers as a vehicle, it is not clear how local businesses would find cost-effective locations for advertising. In this way, community newspapers can increase the local capacity of a community.

11) Are other newspapers distributed in your coverage area (check all that apply)? (n=202)

National newspapers	73.8%
Other community newspapers	72.8%
Provincial newspapers	69.3%
Other papers	1.0%

Most community newspapers operate in a context which includes competition from other newspapers, including other community newspapers.

The Role of your Community Newspaper

12) In your experience, what do readers want from your newspaper? (n=203)

Coverage of local news/sports	53.7%
Local coverage of past and upcoming events/happenings/people	36.9%
Other	9.4%

According to the editors in this survey, it appears that their readers are interested in news with a focus on the local community coverage.

13) How do readers express these wants (check all that apply)? (n=204)

Discussions with the editor	95.1%
Discussions with other staff members	76.5%
Letters to the editor	64.7%
Buying or not buying advertising	33.3%
Buying or not buying a copy	29.4%
Indirectly (eg: columnists)	19.1%
Other methods	7.8%

The relationship between readers and editors and newspaper staff is relatively close, as discussion is the primary way in which editors learn about the desires of readers.

14) How would you characterize the relationship between your newspaper and the community (check one)? (n=201)

Very supportive	62.2%
Somewhat supportive	28.9%
Neutral	6.0%
Somewhat adversarial	0.5%
Very adversarial	1.0%
Other	1.5%

This response further illustrates the close relationship between community newspapers and the communities and people they serve. Over 90% of editors felt that the community was either very supportive or somewhat supportive. This is a high degree of support, given the general public ambivalence regarding the media in our current society. This may also reflect a rural ethos, where local media institutions are still seen to have some value.

15) What is the *primary* source of local information for people in your community (check only one please)? (n=173)

The community newspaper	81.5%
Informal discussions with others	15.0%
Television stations	1.7%
Community bulletin boards	0.6%
Radio stations	0.6%
Other	0.6%

While this might seem like a self-serving answer, editors do clearly believe that the primary source for local information for their community is the community newspaper.

16) Please indicate whether you agree or disagree with the following statements:

	<i>Strongly agree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Unsure</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Strongly disagree</i>
The community newspaper plays an important role in a region's economic development (n=203)	47.3%	37.9%	10.3%	4.4%	0%
The most important goal of a community newspaper is to maintain journalistic integrity, even if it means having to criticize local leaders (n=204)	56.9%	35.3%	4.9%	2.9%	0%
Sometimes community newspapers have to champion particular development strategies (and dismiss others) to help the community to develop appropriately (n=198)	18.7%	38.9%	15.7%	23.7%	3.0%
Community newspapers should consider the possible effects on the region in deciding whether to cover certain stories (n=202)	9.9%	33.2%	8.4%	33.7%	14.9%
The role of a community newspaper is different from the role of a provincial or national daily newspaper (n=205)	76.6%	17.6%	1.0%	3.4%	1.5%
This community would not be as successful if there was no community newspaper (n=200)	40.5%	32.5%	17.0%	9.5%	0.5%
The rise of the internet and e-mail is changing how community newspapers operate (n=205)	21.0%	42.9%	11.7%	21.0%	3.4%

I was quite interested in the responses to this set of questions, as they related to the editors' perceptions of their role in balancing the needs of the community along with the requirements of journalistic objectivity. While the majority of the editors believed that their newspapers played an important role in the economic development of their region (and had helped their community), nevertheless the majority also believed that

journalistic integrity was the most important goal of a community newspaper. Two of the statements prompted rather split opinions. For “Sometimes community newspapers have to champion particular development strategies (and dismiss others) to help the community to develop appropriately,” 58% either agreed or strongly agreed and 31% disagreed or strongly disagreed, with 16% being unsure. A second statement also resulted in some polarization of opinion: 43% agreed or strongly agreed that “Community newspapers should consider the possible effects on the region in deciding whether to cover certain stories,” and 49% disagreed or strongly disagreed. It would be very interesting to see how the editors of larger-market urban newspapers would score on these statements.

Information about your Newspaper's Coverage Area

17) What are the three major industries in your newspaper's coverage area?

	First major industry (n=202)	Second major industry (n=189)	Third major industry (n=158)
Resource industries (eg: logging, fishing, agriculture)	54.0%	37.0%	17.7%
Manufacturing	25.7%	23.8%	25.9%
Tourism	9.9%	12.2%	16.5%
Business/service (eg: retail)	6.4%	11.1%	24.7%
Public/Government services	4.0%	15.9%	15.2%

As anticipated, the most important industries in these communities (most of which are rural) focus on resources, followed by manufacturing. In all of the communities with populations below 26,000, the resource sector was judged as being the most important.

18) How many people live in your newspaper's coverage area? (n=192)

The answers to this question ranged from 400 people to 700,000 people. The mean (or average) number of people living in the newspaper's coverage areas was 27,658 people. The median population is 12,000.

19) What are the major challenges facing your community? (n=197)

Economic development and status/competition from larger centres	37.6%
Population issues (eg: outmigration/aging population/exodus of the young)	16.2%
Government infrastructure/services/taxes	13.2%
Issues with growth (eg: too fast, too much)	11.2%
Unemployment/loss of jobs in the community	10.2%
Amalgamation of communities with cities	7.6%
Other	4.1%

A cross-tabulation of the most important industry in a community and the editors' evaluations of the major challenge of the community shows clearly that areas with resource industries as the major source of employment consider economic status and development to be the major challenges. In addition, population issue appear to be a problem in these communities. However, it seems that regardless of industry, editors rate economic problems to be the greatest challenges.

20) In terms of social cohesion, is the community more cohesive or less cohesive than it was five years ago (check one)? (n=194)

Much more cohesive	5.2%
Somewhat more cohesive	32.0%
No difference	32.5%
Somewhat less cohesive	29.4%
Much less cohesive	1.0%

There was no clear consensus on this question, with 37% of editors believing that their community was more cohesive and 30% finding that the community was less cohesive. About a third of respondents reported no changes in community cohesion in the past five years.

Personal Information

21) How many years have you worked in community newspapers? (n=204)

The answers to this question ranged from 1 year to 51 years. The average amount of time that editors have been working in community newspapers was 15 years, 3 months.

22) What type of training or formal education did you complete before entering the industry (check all that apply)? (n=199)

Other degree/diploma	41.2%
Journalism diploma/certificate	30.2%
Apprenticeship training	14.6%
Journalism degree	13.1%
Other	13.1%

23) Why did you choose this industry as an occupation? (n=190)

Challenging and interesting work/enjoyment of journalism and writing	46.3%
Job opportunity/connections/family business	20.5%
Other	18.4%
Community involvement	14.7%

The most commonly-cited reason for choosing journalism relates to the challenge of the job and the enjoyment of being involved in reporting and writing.

24) Do you live in the newspaper's coverage region? (n=203)

Yes	91.1%
No	8.9%

If yes, how many years have you lived in the region? (n=176)

The answers to this question ranged from under 1 year to 70 years. The average amount of years that editors have lived in their newspaper's coverage area was 19.75 years.

25) Do you use the internet and e-mail as a part of your work? (n=203)

Yes	96.6%
No	3.4%

If yes, what do you use the internet and e-mail for (check all that apply)?

Background research on stories (n=203)	80.3%
E-mail correspondence with writers (n=203)	77.3%
E-mail correspondence with readers (n=203)	76.4%
Publication of an on-line version (n=203)	47.8%
News tips (n=203)	45.3%
Newspaper content (eg: jokes) (n=202)	26.7%
Other (n=203)	22.7%

It is obvious that the internet and e-mail play an important role in running a community newspaper. Almost 97% of editors use these tools in creating their newspapers, and many are thinking of new ways to integrate the tools into their work (as the next question shows).

26) Do you have plans to increase the use of the internet and e-mail at your newspaper? (n=201)

Yes	61.2%
Not sure	24.9%
No	13.9%

If yes, what new uses of the internet and e-mail are you planning? (n=196)

Creating or upgrading website/increasing use of e-mail	32.7%
Not sure/possibly	25.5%
No new uses	14.3%
Publishing or expanding on-line issues, past and present	10.2%
Other	10.2%
No elaboration	7.1%

It appears that the smaller communities use the internet and e-mail just as much as the larger centres. Smaller communities may not be as dependent on the internet, however, as some editors from these communities still do not use the internet or e-mail in compiling the weekly newspaper.

27) If you have any additional comments about the role of community newspapers, which you think we should include in our study, please feel free to note them below: (n=84)

Other	40.5%
Create identity for the community/promote leadership and community change	35.7%
Keep the community informed of local happenings/events/news	23.8%

Many editors (almost 36%) seem to feel that community newspapers should take an active role in the community by acting as a leader and contributing to community identity and cohesion. Conversely, almost 24% of editors feel that newspapers should take a somewhat more passive role, where the newspaper simply reports news and events. Obviously, many editors feel that community newspapers are important in creating community identity.

Please contact me if you have any questions or comments regarding this

research: Dr. Ivan Emke
 Social/Cultural Studies
 Sir Wilfred Grenfell College
 Memorial University of Newfoundland
 Corner Brook, NL, A2H 6P9

Phone: 709-637-6200, ext. 6322
 Fax: 709-639-8125
 E-mail: iemke@swgc.mun.ca