

Glue, Oil and Web: The Role of Community Newspapers

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Abstract

One of the enduring institutions in many Canadian rural communities is the weekly community newspaper. Although such newspapers have been challenged by new technologies and consumption practices, they still play a unique role as a forum for local issues. This study began with the assumption that one element of communication is the maintenance of culture across time. Using that definition, one can ask if community newspapers assist a locality in defining itself, celebrating its values, promoting development, and cultivating a sense of social cohesion.

The data for this paper is taken from two surveys of a sample of editors of community newspapers in Canada. The first survey was conducted in January/February of 2001, and it included 205 editors. The survey collected information on the content of the newspapers as well as the relationship between the newspaper and the community. The second survey, with 203 responses, was conducted in spring/summer of 2006. The paper offers snapshots of the survey results, affirming both the cohesive potential and the limited power of community newspapers.

The paper contextualizes the data by evaluating how these newspapers operate in rural communities, as glue, oil and web. As glue, they help to hold a community together and enable it to talk to itself. The metaphor of newspaper communication as oil implies that a vibrant communications process will act as a lubricant for developing social cohesion. Just as patterns of trust and cooperation may assist economic trade, patterns of communication can enable social relations. Finally, the metaphor of the web implies that communications can be seen as lines of influence and interaction. Community newspapers can help to build and maintain the connections of trust necessary to link members of the community.

Introduction

"I am the friend of the family, the bringer of tidings from other friends... I am for and of the home... I am the lives of my readers. I am the country newspaper" (Bristow Adams, cited in Schramm and Ludwig, 1951: 314).

"The assumption that media communication is part of the social control process is as old as the media themselves. The theatre, the printing press, the cinema, radio, and television were all introduced in an atmosphere of ideological debate about what they should and should not communicate and how they might aid in development of better citizens" (Tichenor et al., 1980: 238).

Glance through almost any recent analysis of rural Canada and you will find a familiar litany of challenges: out-migration, globalization, resource depletion, governance issues, demographic trends, political marginalization, and so on. In the face of these problems, we might well wonder what it is that holds small communities together. Why are many communities still seen as a place of great value and importance to their residents? What is it that roots these communities so solidly?

There are institutions which may act as a glue for communities, in the process promoting social cohesion and identity. One of these institutions, and the subject for this paper, is the weekly community newspaper. Not all rural communities have their "own" newspaper, but for those who do, it is an institution which warrants far more study than it has received. It is important to reflect on the role of community newspapers, especially in the development of a region and in the cultivation and maintenance of social cohesion and identity.

Despite the focus of our culture on new technologies, newspapers still play an essential communicative role. While television news may predominate as a source for national and international news, it is newspapers which continue to be the major source for local and regional news (Stempel, 1991). In a community which has no newspaper with a local or regional focus,

then widespread communication about events is only possible through bulletin boards or newsletters put out by a school or church or municipal body. In such a case, the efficiency of the communication is questionable.¹ Indeed, the community newspaper becomes so important as a part of a rural landscape that it may often be ignored as a force in itself. For example, in a study on community mobilization around the proposed closing of a school, Phipps (2000) used letters to the editor of the local paper as primary data and yet failed to include the newspaper itself as one of the "resources" which people could mobilize in their campaign. Without a newspaper, one could legitimately question whether such mobilization would have been possible. According to the Canadian Community Newspaper Association's figures, 74% of adults read the last issue of their community newspaper, whereas only 57% had read the last edition of their local daily (CCNA, 2006). (The highest readership was in Saskatchewan, where it was 83% of all adults.) This is close to the figures from a much earlier study by Kubas, who showed that about 79% of Canadians read at least one community newspaper in an average week (1981: 20). This shows a general resilience in the readership for community newspapers.

My interest in the role of community newspapers began with participation in the New Rural Economy project.² This larger study involves research in 32 rural field sites across Canada. In summer 2000, field research was conducted in 20 of the sites. This included a communications inventory, taking account of the various technologies of communication

¹ In this study, 81.5% of the editors stated that the community newspaper was the primary source of local information for their communities. Beyond the self-serving nature of this response is the likelihood that outside of bulletin boards, school newsletters, and word of mouth, community newspapers are the only significant source of local information.

available in the communities. The study found a strong relationship between leading status of a community (as defined by census measures) and the presence of a community newspaper. This was the strongest of the relationships in that section of the inventory, and thus was quite intriguing. The finding sowed the seeds for some questions about the role that newspapers might play. Of course, correlation is not (unfortunately) causation. But the influence may well be bi-directional, and cyclical. A community with a strong newspaper has a more efficient communication system, making development discussions more fruitful and thus feeding into the continued strength of the communication system.

Fortunately, we had gathered some community newspapers from the field sites, so the next step was to do some preliminary content analysis. What was in these newspapers? Was it all little league baseball and lost cats? Or were there legitimate items of substance which were being presented? In fall 2000, materials from 12 field sites were analyzed. The sample was very limited, which made any conclusions uncomfortably tentative. But we did find that there was significant coverage of areas related to economics and development, to education, and of course to community events (Emke and Sheppard, 2001). In the sample, we did not find that the most vibrant and active newspapers always came from a community with leading status. For example, the four most extensive community newspapers were from two leading and two lagging communities. However, there was a relationship between capacity level and the amount of local advertising in the newspapers. (As stated below, one of the roles of community newspapers relates to their function as advertising vehicles.) Other findings were also intriguing enough to prompt us to work on the possibility of a more thorough content analysis of community

² Directed out of Concordia University, the project is focusing on changes in rural Canada. The

newspapers in the future.

From this focus on content emerged an interest in the role of the editors of community newspapers. Clearly, the perceptions of an editor may not correlate with his/her actions, or with the interpretations of the reading public, but it is a place to begin. Do editors use their newspapers to actively contribute to the development of the community? Do they simply observe and report what they saw? Do they use their power to cultivate social and economic investment in the community? What role do community newspapers play in fostering social cohesion? Are they the effect of social cohesion? Are they the cause? Do they build community capacity? This paper arises out of these questions, using the findings of two mail questionnaires of editors (spaced five years apart) to begin to answer some of these issues. But before moving to the findings themselves, it is useful to state some of the working assumptions regarding communication itself, and to refer to some of the brief literature on community newspapers.

Communication Theory

“However the work is done, communities are stronger when citizens learn the truths of community life from the local paper and as the community newspaper illuminates and clarifies community values” (Becker, 1998: 29).

One of the tenets of this paper's theoretical position on communication is to see it as two sets of functions. It can be focused on the transmission of messages across space, and those who emphasize communications (plural) and telecommunications are centered on these goals. However, as Carey argued, communication also has a ritual function, in that it involves “the creation, representation and celebration of shared values,” and it is through the use of communication that communities are "created, maintained, and transformed" (Carey, 1985: 33).

website, for more information, is: <http://nre.concordia.ca>

In this view, communication is the process, the maintenance of a community over time is the product.

This assertion of communication as a process of construction is a crucial assumption of this study. Communication creates a common stock of knowledge and experience which lubricates social action within a community, and which maintains a community over time (Becker, 1998, Hindman, 1998). McLeod et al. (1999) make the link between developing action plans for a community and the strength of local communication networks: "Through communication, citizens acquire information about issues and problems in the community and learn of opportunities and ways to participate" (McLeod et al., 1999: 316). But communication can have both centripetal and centrifugal forces. Centripetal forces pull communities together, in the creation of a local audience, and then a mass audience. Traditional mass communication forms such as radio, newspapers, and television do this in the creation of a national audience, with large numbers of people watching the same thing at the same time. Centrifugal forces act in a tangential direction, by bringing together specialized groups of people who are geographically separated. An example of this is seen in the creation of "narrowcasting," which focuses on small audiences of individuals with narrowly-defined interests. With newer technologies, the scope of communication may move from the regional and national to the global. The internet's strength is in the nurturance of these small communities of interest, and thus it acts largely as a centrifugal force. Within this dichotomy, community newspapers act largely as centripetal forces, drawing communities together.

Thus, the assumption of this research is that a community newspaper can function as a central focal point for the discussion of local issues. In order to test this assumption, this study

explores the role of community newspapers in local identity and local economic development from the perspective of the editors. A number of questions flow from our curiosity about this relationship: Do the newspapers see themselves as playing a part in the region's development? If so, what is this role? Or is their function to simply report what happens? Furthermore, do editors have to weigh issues of maintaining journalistic integrity and objectivity, against the desire to promote development strategies and spur local leaders into action? Can local newspapers critique development thrusts without also demoralizing those involved, or appearing to be biased?

Stamm (1985) argued that newspapers were important in fostering ties to the community. There are a number of different types of ties which they foster, including ties to place, ties to process (participation and involvement), and ties to structure (a sense of identification, interaction, status). However, it is assumed that newspapers contribute to more than simply flows of information. For example, Davidson and Cotter (1997) studied the relationship between newspaper readership and a psychological sense of community. They found a correlation between the two variables, although the direction of causation was not clear (it was considered to be a bi-directional process).

In addition, long-term commitment to a community is fostered by local communications. Residents use communications to form beliefs and attitudes about the community and this affects their commitment to stay in an area or their desire to leave the area. This intentional preference to stay in a community is higher in small communities, and it is possible that "newspapers may play a more direct role than social interaction in forming beliefs about a community, particularly beliefs about community assets" (Jeffres et al., 1987: 639). Furthermore, communication clearly helps to mold opinions and sentiments, but it is also related to actions (Jeffres and Dobos, 1984).

Sometimes a region is not able to successfully mount a project for reasons which may relate to internal communication deficits and difficulties. In other communities, the presence of a local newspaper is able to contribute to the bonding and bridging social capital of the community.

Functions of Community Newspapers

An unbiased newspaper that raises issues early, follows them over time, and facilitates consideration of alternative solutions to local problems and issues can set a climate of public civil discourse that encourages innovation (Flora et al., 1997: 635).

When social researchers focus on newspapers, they are generally most interested in the large daily newspapers which predominate in urban regions (which is usually the residence of the researchers as well). However, there is a small literature on weekly community newspapers, especially in relation to their functions within the community. From the early research onward, it has been assumed that the functions of a weekly newspaper are different from the functions of a daily (Olien et al., 1968; Schramm and Ludwig, 1951). Small communities have fewer interest groups and more informal communication channels (including a great deal of face-to-face interaction.³ Since the news in a weekly is not tied to time deadlines (as is the case with dailies), the role of a weekly is more of an overview. One of the editors in this survey wrote: "The fact that most small-town papers are weeklies allows reporters and editors to deal with sensitive issues (murder, accidents, etc.) with more compassion without an evening deadline on their shoulders."

According to Abbott and Niebauer, community newspapers serve two important

³ Other small-scale communications formats may also serve similar functions. In a study of community discourses in Australia and New Zealand, Liepins (2000) makes reference to the value of materials such as school newsletters in maintaining a sense of "community" or social connection.

functions: "to provide advertising to support local businesses... [and] to provide community information" (Abbott and Niebauer, 2000: 101). Their conclusion is based on a study of community newspapers in Iowa. Both of these functions refer to community newspapers as "reflectors" of a community, rather than as active and critical participants (which will be argued below). Nevertheless, these two functions should be discussed in more detail.

First, it is clear to any occasional reader of rural weeklies that the central focus of the paper is on local content. In an early meta-study of community newspapers (which summarized the results of 24 studies), Schramm and Ludwig referred to this local content as a process of "socializing" people in the community (1951: 301). Mainstream sociology has generally accepted the idea of mass media as an agent of socialization; likewise a local media provides a local socialization experience. They conclude that "if the large daily does a better job in socializing its readers with respect to their relation to the larger community, the weekly does a better job of knitting together its readers with the little misunderstandings which are the essence both of communication and community" (Schramm and Ludwig, 1951: 314).

A second function mentioned by Abbott and Niebauer is that of local advertising. The number of local businesses which purchase advertising can be seen as a sign of the level of support for the community newspaper; in a way, it is an indicator of the level of commitment, at least of the local business community (Becker, 1998). The rise of local business interests may have helped to spur the rise of local newspapers, as circulation areas often match the trading areas for commercial enterprises. One effect of the internet, however, may be a decline in local advertising revenues. If local businesses go to online promotions, and start to seek markets outside the local area, they may withdraw some of their advertising from the community

newspapers. Even if local businesses upgrade and redefine themselves as regional entities (or global entities), their likelihood of maintaining the same advertising presence exclusively in the local media is low. Advertising revenue is clearly important to media, both small and large. Popular general circulation magazines such as Look, Life, Colliers, and the Saturday Evening Post had large circulations, but went out of business because of the lack of advertising revenue.

These two functions may be well-documented. However, the role of a community newspaper goes well beyond local information and advertising. For example, newspapers can play a role in the maintenance of services, and in the community's continued perceptions of the value of certain services. McIntosh et al. (1999) relate how newspapers can act as a significant intermediary between public perceptions of rural hospitals and the hospitals themselves. Their study outlines the different stories of two struggling rural hospitals, one of which received extensive sympathetic newspaper support and one of which did not. The former hospital survived and the latter was closed down. "Coverage of hospital-related events by these newspapers not only reflects the relationship between the hospital and the newspaper as organizations, but also the public's relationship with the hospital" (McIntosh et al., 1999: 230).

In relation to the functions of community newspapers, it is also useful to consider whose perspective is being taken. The readers may have one view of a newspaper's function, the advertiser another, the local politician a third view, a local service group a fourth view, and so on. The survey discussed in this research is largely concerned with functions from the point of view of the editor. Over 30 years ago, Olien et al. (1968) performed a somewhat similar study, asking the editors of newspapers: "What, in your opinion, are some of the main things your newspaper does for this community?" The top listings were: provides news, information;

business and civic promotion; provides opinion, leadership, education; development of community identity (self-image, "mirror of community"); advertising; interest arousal. Fully 24% of the editors of weeklies saw the development of community identity as one of the main things their newspaper did, whereas only 9% of the editors of semi-weeklies and dailies noted this. In general, editors of weeklies were more likely than their counterparts at dailies to identify the development of community identity to be important. As the authors concluded: "Weekly newspapers may not only have different functions in their communities, but their editors may be among the first to recognize these differences" (Olien et al., 1968: 250).

However, one must also recognize that community newspapers (and their editors) are not independent critics, but are a part of the power relationships in the community, and are affected by community conditions. Indeed, the social location of the editor/publisher in the community power grid will have an effect on the reporting in the newspaper (Olien et al., 1968: 245).⁴ Edelstein and Schulz (1964) pointed out that community newspaper editors often played a leadership role within their communities. An important question they asked in their own research (and which we could ask of our own sample) was: "How much of the editor's behavior is guided by journalistic norms, his sense of community identification, or his perception of the power structure of the local community and its needs?" (Edelstein and Schulz, 1964: 223).

If, as some argue, editors are leaders in their communities then they will reflect the agenda of the local power structure. With respect to this, Hindman (1996) sees a central role of community newspapers as "system maintenance," to support and uphold community norms and community institutions. But do newspapers achieve this stabilizing outcome by eliminating

⁴ Olien et al. (1968: 249) found some support for the hypothesized pattern that those editors with power status were less likely to report conflict than editors without power status.

dissent? "Considerable evidence suggests that part of the function of weekly papers is to maintain a state of tranquillity, thus avoiding social disruption of small community relationships" (Tichenor et al., 1980: 55). A community newspaper may downplay local internal conflicts, but include more coverage of conflicts involving external groups. According to D. Hindman, "Although conflict among internal groups may be disruptive to the functioning of a small community, conflict between community leaders and outside groups may serve to enhance local solidarity by rallying the community against a common "enemy" (1996: 709). Thus when covering conflict with external actors, newspapers contribute to the maintenance of the community system. Indeed, a certain amount of social cohesion may be demonstrated and cultivated through this definition of a common outside enemy.

However, the argument that community newspapers function largely as an agent of system maintenance is short-sighted. The reporting of conflict, even if it is conflict with outsiders, equalizes the information available to competing interests, and can serve to redistribute power. Furthermore, if community newspapers functioned to maintain systems, then we would expect that communities with local newspapers would be the **most** resistant to change. Conversely, a study by Flora et al. (1997) found that "localities with projects were more likely to have an unbiased newspaper," among other attributes. This shows some significant contribution of newspapers to actual economic development initiatives. Unbiased reporting involved the inclusion of a number of different viewpoints (which might conflict) in the newspaper's coverage of issues. This reporting provides a legitimacy to a number of alternative solutions. The presentation and discussion of these alternatives serves to move the community dialogue forward, giving the newspapers a pro-active function.

Thus, to conclude this section and revisit the paper's assumptions, there are three major functions of community newspapers: (i) providing local information (the mirror of the community); (ii) offering a space for advertising support (focused on local commerce); and (iii) evaluating options for the community's future (a pro-active visioning stance, sometimes bordering on normative reportage, which is focused on alternatives and options for a community).

The Surveys of Community Newspaper Editors

If we want to know what editors think, then the first obvious step is to ask them. Conducting in-depth interviews with a suitable number of editors would be an expensive proposition. Thus constrained by money and time, a mail questionnaire was designed in 2001 which would cover a variety of these issues. A list of community newspapers was derived from several sources (including the internet as well as the funeral industry, which makes widespread use of community newspapers). Weekly newspapers in cities of over 75,000 were eliminated from the list, as the focus of the first sample was to be on rural newspapers. The sampling frame then comprised 818 newspapers from across Canada. A questionnaire was sent to 648 randomly-selected newspapers from this list, in either English or French (depending on the language of the newspaper).⁵ Twenty-six of the questionnaires were returned due to an address change or the closing of the newspaper, making a total of 622 possible respondents. The analyses in this paper are based on 205 responses which have been received, representing a 33% response rate. The

⁵ This was a stratified random sample, stratified by province. In some provinces there were few papers; for example, there were only three in Prince Edward Island, so all three received a questionnaire (a 100% sample), whereas other provinces had many papers (so approximately 78-79% were sampled).

second survey, in 2006, was mailed to just over 870 addresses, yielding 203 responses.

The questionnaire was divided into four major sections. The first covered information about the newspaper, the subscription levels, the content, the major sources of news tips, and some data about advertising. The second section focused on the role of the newspaper, including perceptions of what readers wanted, the relationship between readers and the newspaper, and the extent to which the editors tried to influence the community development agenda. The third section requested data on the newspaper's coverage area, such as the major industries, the population base, and the major challenges in the region. The last section focused on personal information, such as training and why the person chose to work in community newspapers, as well as some questions on the use of the internet and e-mail in their daily work activities. For the most part, the two surveys contained the same questions, although the second one had a few additional areas of inquiry. However, this paper focuses on only those areas which overlapped. In addition, and as can be expected, this paper is based on only a few of the questions from the surveys. Copies of the questionnaires are available upon request.

All of the provinces and territories are represented in the sample, although some regions are better represented than others. Most of the respondents operated newspapers in English (83% in 2001, 82% in 2006). In terms of circulation, the median number of copies distributed per issue in 2001 was 3,445 (3,950 in 2006) . Due to the presence of several very high circulation newspapers which were distributed free to all households in a region, the mean was skewed, making the median a better representation of the size of the subscriptions. The range for the surveys went all the way from 106 copies to 107,000!

As mentioned above the questionnaire was attempting to get a sense of how editors saw

their role in the community, but in the process we asked about the communities as well. It was not expected that this would necessarily provide objective data about the communities, but it provided a sense of how (and whether) the editors think and talk about their locations. For example, the questionnaire asked about the level of social cohesion in the communities. Table I provides the results.

Table I: "In terms of social cohesion, is the community more cohesive or less cohesive than it was five years ago (check one)?"

| In percentages | 2001 | 2006 |
|------------------------|------|------|
| Much more cohesive | 5.2 | 13.7 |
| Somewhat more cohesive | 32 | 33 |
| No difference | 32.5 | 34 |
| Somewhat less cohesive | 29.4 | 16.8 |
| Much less cohesive | 1 | 2.5 |

In the least, it can be noted that the majority of the respondents were able to offer an evaluation of the cohesion of their communities. This indicates a level of engagement and interest in the social dynamics of the region. Later analyses will look for correlations between those communities considered to be more cohesive and the activities and content of the newspapers.

The discussion of the survey results below will center around two major question areas:

the “what” question (related to content), and the “why/how” question (how editors perceive their role within the community and whether they are more driven by journalistic goals or normative social goals).

Content of the Newspapers

This section relates to the first stated function of community newspapers, which is to disseminate community information. The questionnaire sought confirmation of whether the newspapers in the sample focused on local information and used local sources. To begin, the newspapers published a median of 15.5 local news stories per week (20 in the 2006 sample). In addition, the content of most newspapers included editorials, letters to the editor, local opinion columns, and reports from municipal councils. Editors were asked how frequently they published certain types of content. Results are noted in Table II.

Table II: Types of content which appear *every issue*

| In frequencies | 2001 | 2006 |
|---|------|------|
| Editorials | 76.4 | 78.2 |
| Letters to the editor | 73.0 | 72.8 |
| Opinion columns by local writers | 58.3 | 46.4 |
| Reports from municipal or regional councils | 59.4 | 49 |
| Columns from local schools | 25.8 | 22.4 |
| Columns about local history | 29.3 | 29.3 |
| Columns written by local service groups | 23.4 | 19.5 |
| Provincially or nationally syndicated columns | 29.2 | 18.3 |
| Religion columns written by local people | 26.8 | 23.6 |

Note that the types of content which appear most regularly foster the discussion of local issues.

For example, both editorials and letters to the editor appear in every issue for about three-quarters of the sample. This indicates a significant space for debate and feedback regarding local concerns. Similarly, the survey asked the editors to rank the top three most common topics (or themes) in their local news stories. By far, the ones with the most mentions were "Community events," "Economics/development," "Sports," "Council/local development" and "Local people."

The editors were then asked to rank order the two most important primary sources for local news. The most important source was private citizens, followed by local politicians and local service and voluntary groups. These three were clearly the front-runners in terms of sources of news in both waves of the survey, well outstripping the standard sources for metropolitan dailies (such as news wire services, press releases, and government and corporate public relations professionals). The results of these two previous questions help to illustrate the community focus for the editors; their primary themes are local and their primary sources are local as well.

Even the forms of feedback from readers tend to be of an informal nature, with 95.1% of the editors in the 2001 survey noting that readers expressed their desires for the paper through informal discussions with the editors (93.5% in 2006). This was the most important source of reader feedback which was mentioned, followed by "discussions with other staff members" (76.5%). The answers to the above questions provide confirming evidence that one of the primary functions of these community newspapers is as a space for local information dissemination.

The Role of the Editor and the Newspaper in the Community

The second major area of questions to be analyzed in this paper related to the editors' perceptions of the role of their newspaper (and themselves) in the community. First, the questionnaire asked outright about the relationship between the newspapers and the community, as shown in Table III.

Table III: "How would you characterize the relationship between your newspaper and the community (check one)?" (n=201)

| In percentages | 2001 | 2006 |
|-------------------------------------|------|------|
| A very supportive relationship | 62.2 | 66.7 |
| A somewhat supportive relationship | 28.9 | 26.9 |
| Neutral | 6.0 | 3.5 |
| A somewhat adversarial relationship | 0.5 | .5 |
| A very adversarial relationship | 1.0 | .5 |
| Other | 1.5 | 2 |

Clearly, the editors who responded were overwhelmingly of the opinion that the relationship between their newspaper and their community was a supportive one. Naturally, the issue of self-selection bias makes generalizing these results problematic, as not all of those newspaper editors contacted completed a survey. It is possible that only those editors with a supportive relationship with the community were predisposed to answer the survey. Nevertheless, this result does indicate that whatever pro-active stance these editors took in their coverage did not seem to negatively affect their relationship with the community.

The questionnaire provided a list of seven statements regarding the role of community newspapers, and the respondents were able to check off whether they strongly agreed, agreed, were unsure, disagreed, or strongly disagreed with the statements. This provided a sense of the

editors' perceptions of their role.

First, it was accepted that the role of a community newspaper was different from that of a provincial or national daily newspaper. The statement was "The role of a community newspaper is different from the role of a provincial or national daily newspaper." Fully 94% in 2001 agreed or strongly agreed with that sentiment (in fact, over 76% were in strong agreement, the most significant consensus of all of the items).

Second, the role of the newspaper in economic development was confirmed. Editors were asked to respond to the statement: "The community newspaper plays an important role in a region's economic development." Over 85% agreed or strongly agreed with that assertion in 2001. In 2006, the figure was 87.5%. . A third statement was: "This community would not be as successful if there was no community newspaper." Again, there was strong agreement with this, with 73% agreeing or strongly agreeing in 2001, 74.7% in 2006. These two results indicate the editors' perceptions of an important economic development role for their newspapers.

Several statements were constructed to relate directly to the possible tension between pro-active reporting which takes a clear stance and the need for journalistic objectivity. In a sense, community newspapers have one foot in both camps, being both community voices as well as members of an industry which prides itself on being fair and even-handed. One rather prescriptive statement which referred to this tension was: "Sometimes community newspapers have to champion particular development strategies (and dismiss others) to help the community to develop appropriately." Here the results were more split, with 57.6% agreeing or strongly agreeing (65.6% in 2006), and 26.7% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing (16.6% in 2006). Nevertheless, it is significant that the majority of respondents agreed with the statement, which

included rather strong normative language (such as "champion" and "dismiss").

However, in a further statement there appears to be more hesitation about this prescriptive role: "Community newspapers should consider the possible effects on the region in deciding whether to cover certain stories." To agree with this statement might mean to go against a strict journalistic ethos to bear witness, speak the truth, and damn the consequences. Just under half of the sample (43.1%) agreed or strongly agreed (37.3% in 2006), and 48.6% disagreed or strongly disagreed (52.5% in 2006). So, while the community newspaper editor is a part of the power structure of a community and may be interested in promoting certain development strategies, there is still an expectation of many of them that they have responsibilities to report the truth, even if it harms the region.

In a similar vein, the survey included the statement: "The most important goal of a community newspaper is to maintain journalistic integrity, even if it means having to criticize local leaders." Fully 92.2% agreed or strongly agreed with this (in fact, well over half -- 56.9% -- strongly agreed) – in 2006, 90.5% agreed or strongly agreed. In this response we see the dominance of the journalistic ethos over parochial concerns with protecting local sensitivities. Table IV contains the full results of the previous statements. Data from 2006 is in brackets.

Table IV: "Please indicate whether you agree or disagree with the following statements:" (all presented as percentages)

| | Strongly agree | Agree | Unsure | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
|---|----------------|----------------|---------------|--------------|-------------------|
| The community newspaper plays an important role in a region's economic development | 47.3 (49) | 37.9 (38.5) | 10.3 (9.5) | 4.5 3 | 0 0 |
| The most important goal of a community newspaper is to maintain journalistic integrity, | 56.9 (58.8) | 35.3 (31.7) | 4.9 (3) | 2.9 (5.5) | 0 (1) |

| | | | | | |
|---|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| even if it means having to criticize local leaders | | | | | |
| Sometimes community newspapers have to champion particular development strategies (and dismiss others) to help the community to develop appropriately | 18.7 (22.2) | 38.9 (43.4) | 15.7 (17.7) | 23.7 (12.1) | 3.0 (4.5) |
| Community newspapers should consider the possible effects on the region in deciding whether to cover certain stories | 9.9 (9.7) | 33.2 (27.6) | 8.4 (10.2) | 33.7 (35.2) | 14.9 (17.3) |
| The role of a community newspaper is different from the role of a provincial or national daily newspaper (2001 only) | 76.6 | 17.6 | 1.0 | 3.4 | 1.5 |
| This community would not be as successful if there was no community newspaper | 40.5 (42.9) | 32.5 (31.8) | 17.0 (14.6) | 9.5 (9.1) | 0.5 (1.5) |

The Role of the Newspaper, or "what kind of a dog is this?"

This mixture of normative standards along with the journalistic ethos raises the old question about the role of the local press -- is it a watch dog, a lap dog, or a guard dog for the community? Does it tend the fences and launch tirades against the outsiders? Or does it build horizontal linkages as well? Does it help community members to not only celebrate what they have, but also think about what they need to do to move forward? Olien et al. (1995) addressed this question and concluded that they are not watchdogs, as that would assume that they speak from some position outside of local vested interests, and that is not possible for a media which relies so heavily on local advertising and community subscriber support. But they are not lap dogs either, as they try to balance competing local and non-local interests.

Rather, the community newspapers operate as guard dogs. They are not as likely to

criticize structures and systems as the particular performance of certain roles within the system, or certain programs. For example, a community newspaper may not uphold a specific council decision, but it does not question the legitimacy of council to make decisions. But as guard dogs they also critique outside interferences and identify external threats. Olien et al. ask:

(W)hence comes the notion of the editorially outspoken small town editor? While that notion may to a certain extent be mythical, much of the conflictual energy in small towns is directed toward what are seen as external threats. The guard dog behavior of the press in a consensus community becomes especially apparent in editorials castigating external acts of higher levels of government that go against the grain of dominant local feeling (Olien et al., 1995: 309).

Thus, the guarding is ritualistic and reinforcing, and not investigative.

Effects of the Internet on the Role of Newspapers

The context of community newspapers includes the rise of the internet, of course, and the questionnaire includes some questions about internet usage. Some might argue, on the face of it, that community newspapers are in a precarious position in relation to the rise of the internet -- that they may be "swamped" by the internet. However, this may not be the case. As Stempel et al. pointed out, reliance on a medium and the use of a medium are not the same thing (2000: 71). While people may use the internet, they may not rely on it for certain types of information which they still seek. In their study, they found that "those who use the Internet were more likely than those who don't use it to be regular newspaper readers and regular radio listeners" (Stempel et al., 2000: 75). This was true across all demographic variables. Thus the internet is not "stealing" readers from newspapers and the effects of the internet may be felt more by television stations than by other mass media.

The questionnaire asked respondents to agree or disagree with the statement that: "The rise of the internet and e-mail is changing how community newspapers operate." The majority of

the respondents (63.9%) agreed or strongly disagreed (78.6% in 2006), and 24.4% disagreed or strongly disagreed (but only 11.6% in 2006 – which may indicate a building acceptance of the role of the internet). However, almost all of the sample used the internet and e-mail as a regular part of their work and 61.2% expected that their use of these technologies will increase. The most frequently mentioned uses were for background research (80.3%, 95% in 2006), e-mail correspondence with readers (76.4%, 93% in 2006) and with writers (77.3%, 89.5% in 2006). Just under half (47.8%) of the editors stated that they published an on-line version of their newspaper in 2001. This had risen to 68.8% in 2006.

One barrier to increased use of the internet as a way to disseminate information is to find a way to sustain the activity. On-line newspapers suffer from a difficulty in financing, as well as a continued preference of many readers to have the printed version of a newspaper rather than the online version (Mueller and Kamerer, 1995). However, one realistic on-line value of community newspapers would be to sell a version to expatriates who wish to keep up with their home communities. The Minnedosa Tribune of Manitoba does this, by selling an online service for a yearly subscription price. The cost to the newspaper is another \$1,500 to \$2,000 per year, but with over 400 subscribers, the paper makes money on the service. However, it is not expected that local people would ever want to go to the web for their local news (cited in Abbott and Niebauer, 2000: 111).

There is, nevertheless, a connection between a newspaper's reliance upon advertising and the rise of on-line commerce, in that one reason for moving more functions on-line would be the ability to accept advertising copy via the internet. A number of newspapers in this study specifically noted that use of the internet (even though it had not been included as an option).

Similarly, one reason why community newspapers may be slow to go on-line would be that their content sources would not tend to provide information on-line. When the major sources of stories involve interaction with local individuals, there is little value in news tips which come from on-line sources. Larger dailies, which rely on wire and on-line services for information and story feeds, will have more reason to move on-line in more of their functions, than will weekly community newspapers.

Furthermore, the relevance of the internet to small communities is still problematic. The internet challenges the older place-based definitions of community. Jones states that “communities are not places to be, to engage in conversation (from the mundane to the momentous), they are groups of people seeking to achieve particular goals” (1997: 10). In internet “communities,” there is an inversion of traditional communities. In cyber-society, communities belong to groups of people. The internet does not “create” a community, but informs us that there are others “out there” who are “like us,” and so we seek them out. However, in traditional society, groups of people belong to communities. The community newspaper is one way that the sense of “belonging” to a community is celebrated and maintained over time.

Conclusions

Newspapers have been seen as seeking to create, to reinforce and to extend feelings of interdependence and identification held by members of a community (Stamm and Fortini-Campbell, 1983: 1).

This paper has often returned to the theme of the important role of community newspapers as a unifying force for a community. A fear regarding the rise of the internet is that the new technology will be a force to strengthen vertical linkages and weaken the horizontal

linkages within the community. However, by creating links to the broader world, both the internet and newspapers may strengthen both vertical and horizontal linkages and increase the store of bridging social capital in a community. In addition, community newspapers can help in integrating new people into a community, and may be able to expand the "radius of trust" in a region.⁶

One continuing concern relates to the effects of the close relationship between editors and their communities. Are there negative implications of this relationship, regarding the ability of newspapers to provide realistic and creative solutions to problems? Will a constant positive spin affect the possibility of even seeing the need for changes? In a pessimistic vein, Olien et al. observed that "one might conclude that the small community press may be dysfunctional for social change in the very communities where change may be most crucial for future growth and prosperity" (1968: 251). If newspapers are focused on protecting community institutions, will this inhibit changes? On the other hand, as this survey has illustrated, editors are guided by professional standards which require some allegiance to balanced reporting and the publication of information regardless of the consequences. The editors in this study were engaged, reflective, and conscious of their potential role in the community. They, and their newspapers, clearly contributed to the maintenance of their communities over time.

The last question of the 2001 survey was an open-ended one which stated: "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." Some of the answers on the surveys

⁶ It would be interesting to test if those communities with newspapers are better at integrating newcomers into their community (partly as a result of the newcomers' better knowledge of the community from reading the newspaper).

illustrated the infectious zeal of the editors in their positions. It is appropriate that this paper ends with the words of some of the editors themselves.

Rather than help shape opinions as do our national brothers, CNs [community newspapers] reflect the nature of a community. They document its highs & lows, contributing in some ways to both, & can act as a force for change, as well as provide an historical record of rapidly dwindling rural life. But more than this, they provide a large voice for people who, through geography, often are forced to speak softly -- we are a big stick in some ways, but velvet lined.

Newspapers are in many cases the only source of recorded history -- that is a very important facet of all communities -- it helps generations to come learn about who they are & where their town came from.

As a rule, newspaper people in small communities think they are more important to the well-being of the community than they are. Also, as a rule, people in a small community don't realize how important their local newspaper is to the well-being of their community.

Communities that don't have one [a community newspaper] appear to lack focus and an identity.

Because local councils and school boards have no "opposition" critics, the newspaper often has to play that role. It never wants to direct an issue, but it can throw them out in to the public arena and let the public choose whether it should carry on or not.

The death of our community newspaper would spell the death of the last thread of cohesiveness our community retains. Regional government has stripped away all sense of community that was built up over the years since incorporation as a village.

The more pervasive the national and regional media (print and electronic) the more important the community press becomes, if communities are to retain their sense of separate identity and local goals and values!

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