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Community Journalism

A Concept of Connectedness

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The concept of *community journalism* long has been regarded as a specific practice of gathering, packaging, and distributing news in predominantly small, distinct geographic markets, with an emphasis on local news and information about community life. For many decades in the 20th century, “community journalism” was used as a synonym for “small-town newspapers.” Yet in the first decade of the 21st century, renewed interest in the cultural roles of journalism in community life has broadened the concept to something that reaches well beyond newspapers in small towns and includes various media in many different types of communities—special-interest magazines, online-only newsletters for professional communities, local independent radio, “hyperlocal” websites, and so on. Some of that interest has been assumed to represent a *stunde null* in the study of community journalism, with some scholars suggesting that the concept of community journalism is new and emerging. In fact, contemplation

of community journalism as a distinct concept can be traced back to at least the middle of the 20th century, and perhaps even to the formative days of journalism studies decades before that. Those early works were mostly essays or textbooks focused on professional practice; that is, most were primarily how-to texts rather than “why” texts, and most were written for students and professionals, not scholars looking to research the topic under any kind of theoretical framework. There are a few exceptions, of course. For example, Anderson, Dardenne, and Killenberg suggested in the mid 1990s that “news organizations, especially local newspapers, should occupy a prominent place in a community’s life and conversation. Viewing community as a place of inquiry asks journalists to consider what messages and dialogues are necessary to increase the perception of commonalities” (1994, p. 101). Those attempts at theory building have been instrumental in the maturation of community journalism as a distinct subdiscipline, and that focus has in turn attracted a small but dedicated collective of scholars and inspired several university-based initiatives.

The goal of this chapter is to analyze the original texts that focused specifically on *community journalism* as a distinct term. Later chapters will focus on the scholarly research that followed the development of the concept.

❖ ORIGINS

The term *community journalism* appears to have been coined in the 1950s by the late Kenneth R. Byerly, a newspaper publisher turned professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. After joining the UNC faculty in 1957, Byerly was assigned to teach a course called “Country Weekly Newspaper Production,” but it seems he didn’t care for the course title. In a personal letter to Jock Lauterer (one of Byerly’s students in the 1960s, and now a leading scholar in the community journalism discipline), Byerly said his dispute with the course title was that not all community newspapers were in the countryside, and not all of them were weeklies (Lauterer, 2006, p. xviii). The course was renamed “Community Journalism.” Byerly then used the term as the title of his 1961 textbook, a collection of observations and essays by him and scores of other community journalists. That book’s utility today is mostly as a historic document, as it is dated and was devoted

exclusively to newspapers in the U.S. Yet there is much in Byerly's book that transcends time, geography, and media forms.

Community Journalism was a comprehensive, mid-20th-century guide to newspaper publishing in small towns, suburbs, and distinct neighborhoods in large cities. It addressed practical matters: approaches to covering various types of local news (accidents, schools, obituaries, etc.), editing opinion pages (editorials, letters from the community, public service work), and managing the business aspects of a for-profit newspaper (public relations, advertising and circulation management, financial management, even strategies for starting or purchasing a newspaper). It was also a 400-page articulation of the distinctions between community journalism and marquee news media of the time—specifically, the large-circulation daily newspapers in major cities that were considered the paragons of the news industry. Those differences were most often framed in terms of the relationships between journalists and members of their audiences. In his preface, Byerly explained the concept of community journalism as such:

Community newspapers today are burgeoning in big city and suburban areas and have new strength in small cities and towns. They offer much in employment, satisfaction, income, service, and ownership. A reason for the success of these . . . newspapers is their "friendly neighbor" relationship with readers. This affinity also creates problems for community newspapers which differ from those of the metropolitan press. (1961, p. v)

Byerly's proposal that community journalism differs from metropolitan journalism was further explained throughout the book, but one passage provides a poignant summary: "Community newspapers have something that city dailies lack—a nearness to people. This is a great strength, and a great problem" (1961, p. 25). For all of us community journalism scholars, that notion of "a nearness to people" provides a common theoretical anchor.

From a research perspective, the study of community journalism is largely the study of the relationship dynamics between journalists and the communities they serve: it is concerned with the degree and implications of "connectivity" between journalism and communities. That connectivity has been tested in some research, such as one study that found that audiences have more regard for their local newspapers

than for newspapers in general (Lavrakas & Holley, 1989) and another demonstrating that editors of some small newspapers viewed ethics more in terms of responsibility to their communities than did some editors of large newspapers, who tended to view ethics more in terms of the professional reputation of the newspaper itself (Reader, 2006). That “nearness to people” can, Byerly argued, increase the community’s accessibility to the journalists (often described in terms of “bumping into them on the street”), which in turn can increase journalists’ sense of accountability for their behaviors within a community. It also can cause the journalist to be much less forthcoming with information that could be embarrassing or harmful to individual community members or to the community as a whole (a concept explored in some detail in the oft-cited University of Minnesota studies of Tichenor, Donohue, & Olien, 1980). As an example of that community-focused restraint, Byerly included in his book this explanation from the editor of a small Wisconsin weekly:

No weekly newspaper can live in close harmony with its readers and properly serve its community if it hears all and tells all. A daily reporter can record and report all of the personal exchanges in a council meeting, for example. The weekly reporter should use his own good judgment when mere personal conflicts arise—and he should print only that which is constructive.

This is not being dishonest with readers. It does not mean that the paper must cover up anything. It simply means that the whole truth should be the constructive truth—not petty palaver. (1961, p. 26)

Another example of the idea of “good judgment” appears in Byerly’s chapter on covering “Courts and Crime,” in which he addressed the pros and cons of publishing the name of a drunken driver who asked that his name not be printed (1961, pp. 83–87). On the one hand, Byerly argued, printing the names of offenders adds to the legal punishment in the form of public embarrassment, which could be harmful to the individual and (more importantly) his innocent family members. But Byerly also found that many editors argued in favor of publishing such names, and for various reasons: to deter crime, to ensure the accused gets a fair trial in the public eye, to alert the public to the misdeeds of their neighbors, to set the record straight rather than to allow the rumor mill to spread the news, and to demonstrate that the newspaper will not play favorites just because an offender

makes a personal plea to “keep it out of the paper.” It is that kind of routine, interpersonal dilemma, Byerly suggested, that journalists in large media outlets rarely must (or are willing to) consider. He argued that journalists working for larger media might, for example, simply fall back on legal arguments (the public’s *right to know*, rather than the community’s *need to know*), but smaller, local media also had to weigh the best interests of the community against the best interests of the individual members of that community. The broader standards of detached journalism could not simply be applied as a matter of course in such a close-knit situation.

❖ THINKING BEYOND “COUNTRY EDITORS”

Byerly may have coined the term *community journalism*, but the idea that journalism at the community level is different from regional/national/global journalism was hardly a new idea in the mid 20th century. The importance of local, community-focused media was celebrated by democracy’s early champions, not least among them Alexis de Tocqueville, who wrote in his *Democracy in America*:

A newspaper is an adviser one need not seek out because it appears voluntarily every day to comment briefly upon community business without deflecting your attention from your own. . . . So as men become more equal and individualism more of a menace, newspapers are more necessary. The belief that they just guarantee freedom would diminish their importance; they sustain civilization. (1835/2004, pp. 600–601)

Well into the middle of the 20th century, the work of the community press was similarly heralded as the backbone of democracy, as celebrated in occasional profiles of the “country editors” working in idyllic small towns. Those often romanticized accounts appeared in national magazines such as *The Saturday Evening Post* (Byers, 1937; “The Country Newspaper,” 1946) and *The Nation* (Conason, 1975). That romanticism also was captured in the memoirs of some renowned “country editors,” such as:

- William Allen White of *The Emporia Gazette* in Kansas. White’s editorial, “What’s the Matter With Kansas?” earned him

national attention, and his editorials against the Ku Klux Klan won him both deep admiration and seething scorn. His autobiography won a posthumous Pulitzer Prize in 1947.

- Henry Beetle Hough of the *Vineyard Gazette* on Martha's Vineyard, whose 1940 memoir *Country Editor* won critical acclaim across the nation. *The Atlantic Monthly* gushed, "This is an oasis book, the oasis exasperated journalists, editors, and printers dream of when their jobs begin to bind" (Hough, 1974, back cover).
- John Henry Cutler of the *Duxbury Clipper* on Cape Cod, whose first memoir, *Put It on the Front Page, Please!* (Cutler, 1960), was described by a *New York Times* critic as "one of the gayest weekly mirrors of New England small town life. . . . If you are planning to start a paper, by all means read Mr. Cutler's book. . . . In any event, you will find here a stimulating view of country life in America" (Cutler, 1965, back cover).

The romantic ideal of the country editor was tempered, of course, by anecdotes that were not at all flattering to the community press. Early critics of community journalism focused on the "friendly neighbor relationship" as something that threatened journalistic independence, arguing that it could lead to timidity and laziness lest journalists offend their "neighbors" with aggressive reporting of community conflicts. To many critics in the upper echelons of the profession, community journalism became a euphemism for the old-style "booster press" common in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Much of that criticism was, again, a result of assumptions by the elites of the profession that they were the ones who set the standards that all should follow. In his second memoir, *Cancel My Subscription, Please!*, Cutler (1965) recalled a letter he received from the editor of a national journalism trade magazine, scolding the small-town editor for not publishing the names of local residents arrested for drunken driving. Cutler's response was:

Why add to the penalty meted out by law? In a small town, who is punished more in this case, the offender, or his wife and children? If a town is small enough to support a friendly, neighborly paper, isn't it big enough to omit a name that would make publicity the worst part of the punishment? (Cutler, 1965, p. 136)

Framed as an ethical debate, the passage demonstrated that Cutler's concern in that situation was more for the effects of his journalistic choices on an individual member of the community than on the routines and standard practices of the broader journalism profession.

Comparisons within the community media provided more meaningful criticisms, many of which have been supported by anecdotal evidence of local journalists reporting on serious local problems. For example, the community media in and near Libby, Montana, did little to report on the asbestos poisoning in the community by a large vermiculite mine nearby, and the problem wasn't reported to any depth until Andrew Schneider of the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* broke the story in 1999 (Moss & Appel, 2001). There are also many newspapers and newspaper companies that invest very little in their newsrooms, and as such live up to the stereotype of what Lauterer (2006) calls "the bottom-feeders of community journalism" (p. 56). Lauterer, a strong advocate of community journalism in general and community newspapers especially, frankly acknowledges that "many small-town papers seem to attract and harbor the washed-out derelicts of our business; community papers at their worst become sort of a stale backwater for the flotsam and jetsam of journalism" (Lauterer, 2006, p. 44).

A noteworthy early excoriation of the "lazy community newspaper" stereotype came in 1964, when media critic Ben Bagdikian wrote a scathing rebuke of the "lazy editor" in *Harper's Magazine*. Although Bagdikian's scorn was primarily aimed at the publicity services that produced the ready-made propaganda that could be published as news copy, he did not spare the small-town newspaper editor who, facing a deadline and staring at an empty hole on a page, would go "fishing through the purple mats and yellow mimeographed canned editorials in his lower drawer, feeling for one exactly nine column-inches long" (p. 103). In the opening paragraphs of that essay, Bagdikian challenged the heroic mythos of the "country editor":

The unperishing myth of American journalism is the ideal of the small-town newspaper as the grass-roots opinion-maker of the nation, the last bastion of personal journalism, the final arena where a single human being can mold a community with his convictions and fearless iconoclasm. Needless to say, there are some small papers like this and they are marvels to behold. But the fact is that most small

dailies and weeklies are the backyard of the trade, repositories for any piece of journalistic junk tossed over the fence, run as often by print-shop proprietors as by editors. Mostly they serve as useful bulletin boards of births, deaths, and marriages (providing this news comes in by its own initiative); only in exceptional cases do they raise and resolve important local issues. When it comes to transmitting signals from the outside world, a remarkable number of these papers convey pure—that is, unadulterated—press agency. Its subject matter, which is printed both as “news” and as editorial comment, ranges from mouthwash to politics—usually right wing. (p. 102)

Bagdikian’s suggestion was to become a new unperishing myth of the profession—the belief that small-town journalism was somehow substandard to the big leagues, rather than just different. Yet even Bagdikian was careful to not use a broad brush to condemn all community newspapers, writing:

To imply that a small circulation automatically means surrender to boilerplate is unfair to a number of small dailies and weeklies which, whatever their politics, are plainly the product of diligent personal editorship, and precisely in those places where this takes courage because the editor does literally have to face his readers on the street. (p. 110)

Those “diligent” community journalists are not hard to find. State and regional journalism organizations give hundreds of awards each year to community media (newspapers, TV stations, online-only publications) that do noteworthy journalism at the community level.

The academy and the profession tend to feed that stereotype of the “lazy paper” with their own brand of hero worship for the big-league players of journalism and their international acclaim. That, too, is an old story. In 1909, for example, James E. Rogers wrote in *The American Newspaper*:

Obviously it is absurd to assert that a small four-paged country journal . . . in any way compares with the huge twenty-four paged daily of a large city . . . we find both as regards size and influence, that “the power of the press” rests absolutely with our cities and not with the country. (cited in Riley, 1938, p. 39)

Consider also this more recent example: In the months of hand-wringing in America over the 2007 sale of Dow Jones & Co. and its flagship *The Wall Street Journal* to global media baron Rupert Murdoch and his News Corp., nearly all of the commentary and analysis focused on whether Murdoch would meddle with the respected independence of *The Wall Street Journal*. Only a handful of the hundreds of such articles and essays even mentioned the two dozen-plus community newspapers also owned by Dow Jones via its Ottaway Newspapers subsidiary. Many of the Ottaway newspapers were respected community papers that had earned strong market penetration in their communities and frequent awards from state press associations. They also were immensely successful businesses. According to an article in *The Boston Globe*,

the Ottaway community publications posted operating profits of \$48.2 million last year on \$252.2 million in sales, outstripping the \$33.9 million in profits on revenue of \$1.1 billion for the Dow Jones operating group that includes the *Journal* and *Barron's* magazine. (Weisman, 2007, p. D1)

That is a 19% return from the Ottaway newspapers, compared to about 3.4% return from the company's flagships. Dismissing the community newspapers as "those silly little Ottaway papers" (Weisman, 2007), Murdoch vowed to sell off the community newspapers almost immediately after purchasing Dow Jones; his eyes were fixed on *The Wall Street Journal*. But one of the business owners in a New England community served by an Ottaway newspaper said to the *Globe*:

Certainly we're all talking about it, and we're all concerned about it. . . . The Ottaway papers tend to be local papers. They're not centralized. If any of these papers were to lose that local flavor, the readership would plunge. And that would create a void for the local advertisers. (Weisman, 2007, p. D1)

Coverage of the sale of Dow Jones can serve as an exemplar for the current schism between mainstream journalism and community journalism. It's a case in which the famous and powerful media mogul expressed more concern for prestige than for profitability, and the local business owner expressed more concern about the "local flavor" of a community newspaper than about who owned it.

❖ BUSINESS AS A HOLISTIC ASPECT OF
COMMUNITY JOURNALISM

The concerns of the local business owner about the flavor of a small-town newspaper illustrate another important criticism of community journalism—the close connections between the business side of the operation and the news side. Community journalism is usually much less rigid in regard to the “wall” between newsroom operations and business operations typically found at larger news organizations (An & Bergen, 2007). It is certainly far less adversarial, viewing advertisers not just as sources of revenue, but also as legitimate members of the community. Some community editors consider advertising to be editorial copy and will accept only ads that are appropriate for their readers, preferring advertisements from businesses within the community.

In his memoir, Hough suggested that approaches to advertising provided another example of how community journalism differed from the journalism of the major newspapers of his day:

On the face of it, the cost of reaching a million readers through country weeklies was greater than the cost of reaching a million readers through city dailies; and there were plenty of city dailies which claimed to cover not only entire states but regions of states.

It was a curious anomaly which found the *Gazette*, for instance, too costly a medium to be used by the nation’s largest and wealthiest corporations, yet a practical and economical medium for a small grocery store with an advertising budget of a hundred dollars a year. The truth was, of course, that there was no absolute advantage or disadvantage in respect to cost; there was simply a difference in the point of view. . . .

[O]ur advertisers were known to our readers as human beings, as individuals, and I think this tendency to personalize them—a tendency inherent in the treatment of news in a country weekly—was of more value than countless columns of disingenuous promotion copy could have been. (1974, pp. 265–271)

Aside from that advertiser-as-neighbor philosophy, organizational structure of community news operations also has played a role in the more accommodating attitudes community journalists may have toward their advertisers. Community media tend to

have small and undifferentiated staffs. Many community newspapers are run by only one or two people (in many cases, the owners). In such situations, the business aspects of community journalism benefit from being both flexible and personal, and the community journalist is faced with wearing many different hats. If there is a “wall” in many community media, it is a wall within the journalist herself. In his 1974 textbook *Community Journalism: A Way of Life*, small-town editor/publisher Bruce M. Kennedy described the business side of community journalism this way:

A community newspaper editor’s day is not strictly newspapering, for he is also a small-town businessman. . . .

[N]o newspaper can continue to publish the news, pictures, and advertising of a small community unless that newspaper also shows a profit. The editor brings his talents for journalism, his creative abilities, to the weekly newspaper; the businessman’s side of his nature, instinctive or acquired, brings the profit. It is a tribute to this distinguished profession that the weekly newsman can play both roles, striking this difficult balance of making a business profitable and a newspaper excellent and not have the two interfere with each other. (p. 195)

It is important to note that three generations of textbooks about community journalism—Byerly’s foundational text of 1961, Kennedy’s text of 1974, and Lauterer’s contemporary text first published in 1995—include chapters about the business concerns of a community news product. So do the community-editor memoirs mentioned earlier. Like the chapters discussing how best to cover local government, how best to include content reflecting on community life, and how to use the editorial page to spark public debate on all manner of issues, the chapters about managing the business aspects of community media focused largely on the connections between media and their communities. Hough alluded to that very point in his memoir, recalling when a larger daily newspaper tried to compete with the *Vineyard Gazette*:

The acute and direct competition came into our field when a neighboring daily decided that it would “cover like a friendly blanket” our towns and many others in order to offer some thousands of “rural and suburban circulation” for a price in the slave

market of mass advertising. . . . This daily believed that a familiar formula could be applied, that it was only necessary to print names, names, names, in order to enjoy circulation and the respect of readers. . . . The truth was that the traditional formula was idle and silly. The thing which makes people in small towns read their papers is news, and they have no interest whatever in names—even their own—which do not mean something at the time and in the context of town life. . . .

In the long run the daily's personal items were so padded and its general news so garbled that we had little to fear from the competition. No desk man ever troubled to learn the place names in our county, and the geography attributed to us was remarkable. (1974, pp. 267–268)

An important subtext of Hough's recollection is the issue of scale. Byerly, Lauterer, and many others have suggested that scale is a primary delineation of what is community journalism and what is not. In particular, the word "small" is ubiquitous in the literature: "small-town," "small circulation," "small staffs," "small radio stations," "small newspapers." The allusion is that community journalism cannot exist in larger media, and certainly not in national and international media. Attitudes toward the myth of the small (Is it of little consequence? Is it perhaps more "authentic," to evoke Walter Benjamin [1969]?) should be the focus of more intense scholarly consideration.

❖ BEYOND "BIG" VERSUS "SMALL"

Past and continued research into differences between "large" and "small" news media has been and will continue to be important, but such studies are not necessarily concerned with community journalism. The truth is that a reporter on the lead TV news team in a sprawling city could be much more connected to the community than a member of a three-person weekly newspaper operation in a town of a few thousand people. It may be more difficult for journalists serving large, pluralistic audiences to have strong connections to their communities, and it may be quite easy for such connections to be established by a reporter serving a small, homogeneous audience, but neither that difficulty nor that ease will alone dictate the strength of the connection.

Consider this hypothetical situation: When the graduate of a journalism school takes her first reporting job at a hyperlocal news website in a suburb where she has no personal ties, and then leaves the job after eight months having neither liked the community nor cared about its people, it would be difficult to say that she had strong connections to the community. Likewise, who can really argue that a journalist who has lived and worked his whole life in a single large metropolis cannot practice community journalism because he works for the most popular TV news station in that city?

For scholars in the social-scientific paradigm, such scenarios raise an interesting question: What is the operationalization of community journalism? Is it the size of the outlet, the size of the community, the attitudes of individual members of the community toward the journalist (and vice versa)? Is the fact that a national-politics blogger has only a few hundred readers all the evidence necessary to say that he is a community journalist? Organizational and audience size may be a useful metric in the study of community journalism, but it cannot be the only one.

Perhaps a more useful metric than size is content, specifically content classified as “community focused.” Traditionally, that has meant “local news,” but the concept of “local” is too confining in an age when many communities transcend physical proximity of the members. There are many examples of community journalism that serves such scattered collectives. Consider the *Small Farmer’s Journal*, a quarterly magazine published in rural Oregon and reaching like-minded readers around the globe, and at this writing entering its fourth decade of publishing; or the *Shambhala Sun*, a bimonthly magazine for devotees of Western style “engaged Buddhism.” An analysis of letters to the editor published in those two magazines revealed strong rhetoric of community, as if the magazines themselves served as the nexus of community, and all attached to it—writers, editors, advertisers, and subscribers—as members of those distinct communities (Reader & Moist, 2009). Obviously, such publications have no “local” to serve, but their content is focused entirely on their communities.

In communities of place, local information has been at the core of community media, regardless of whether that information is serious news or trivial gossip, courageous editorials or banal lists of property transfers. But it is the presence (perhaps the dominance) of the trivial and the routine that provide observable clues of community

connections; such information is rarely found, and certainly never with any frequency, in the pages or broadcasts of major news media. Gibbs (1995) suggested that local news is “people-oriented, location-specific news about such things as who won ribbons at the county fair, or when the city’s going to fix that big chuckhole on Main Street” (p. 33). Morton contended that community journalists are “chroniclers of local minutiae and the concerns of everyday life” (1990, p. 57). To be sure, serious news—coverage of local government and local courts, of conflicts between the powerful and the vulnerable, of crime and tragedy, of scandal and triumph—is also part of the mix. But in community media, even the serious has a decidedly local focus. Some analysts have noted that the coverage of news often thought mundane by big-league journalism standards (zoning board hearings, homecoming parades, comprehensive listings of even the most trivial police reports) is just as important, if not more so, to community life than large-scale, award-winning service projects aimed at revealing unusually large statewide and national problems (Morton, 1990; Sheppard, 1996).

How that community-focused information is gathered and processed is another distinguishing characteristic of community journalism. In community journalism, the audience is often quite involved in the procedure, with much content being suggested, requested, or even submitted by people in the community. Hence the typical publication in community media of check-passing photos, group shots of kindergarteners, reader-submitted essays and opinions, and galleries of pictures of family reunions or deer hunters with their trophies. In that regard, community journalism has long been a forum for so-called “citizen journalism” and interactive in a very real sense, even before the Internet came to be. Online communication has expanded and improved that interactivity, for certain, but it did not create it.

From a pragmatic standpoint, the small staffs of community media rely on citizen submissions to supplement what the staff could produce itself. But in many ways, such deference to what the community sees as newsworthy is at the core of the concept: community journalism typically places less value on the norms of the profession at large (as codified in most trade publications, college textbooks, and journalism school classrooms) than it does on the norms of the individual communities they serve. Bruce Kennedy, the small-town newspaper editor, put it this way:

It's rewarding to be part of nearly everything involving your community, the printable as well as the unprintable. It's flattering to have your opinions asked for, your counsel sought, whether you're really as wise as all that or not. You build many monuments in [the] newspaper business. Your newspaper and energy leave a wake of new buildings, successful projects, guidance, and direction. Helping others, boosting the community, the area, or "the cause" will become, like the Thursday paper days, endless. . . . Small-town newspapering is belonging. (1974, pp. 7-8)

❖ CONCLUSION

As a new generation of scholars refocuses on community journalism as a distinct part of the broader mass communication discipline, it is important to not only gather past research into a cohesive collection of studies, but to take that inquiry in new directions that study "connections" using a variety of methods and theoretical frameworks.

As with most things involving community journalism, however, that lament also is hardly new. In 1938, John Winchell Riley, Jr., of Rutgers University wrote in the *American Sociological Review*:

The typical country weekly, in addition to its personal journalism, its boiler plate fillers, its articles on extraordinary or exciting local events, is a series of chatty confidences about the town's everyday living. Its few pages are packed with columns headed "Local Items" or "Personals" or "People We Know." These columns contain all the miscellany of the community's ordinary and expected events: its births, marriages, and deaths; its comings and goings; its family and club changes; above all, the non-economic, leisure activities of its members. . . . Yet, the country newspaper, consistent and detailed register though it may be, has been given very little consideration as a possible source for sociological research.

Its desirability as a source is indubitable. Obviously such a paper has two advantages over most other sources available for the various kinds of community studies: In the first place, it provides material for the intensive study of trends from an historical standpoint; and this material is so consistent and repetitive in nature that, with the employment of proper precautions, it lends

itself in a number of ways to quantification. In the second place, the weekly offers the sociological investigator the possibility of avoiding any marked bias in his selection of material. Convenient as this source may be, however, its importance may be more questionable. This depends upon the accuracy of its data, and the degree to which they actually are consistent over time. Thus any estimate of its importance must rest upon a broader knowledge of the nature of the country weekly itself. (pp. 39-40)

Despite the contributions of several important and helpful studies over the past decades, the field of community journalism remains largely unexplored, and the depths uncharted. Scholars who are intensely interested in the role of journalism in communities should attempt to take up Riley's challenge, albeit 70-plus years after the fact, and against many entrenched institutional biases against the "silly little papers" that dominate the journalism world.

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Community Journalism Must Tackle Tough Local Issues ●

Linda Steiner

Community journalism is credited with representing, reinforcing, and even constructing community. The form speaks to, from, and about community, presumably bringing people together with an understanding of their shared frame of reference, and their responsibility for upholding it. Definitions of small-town/weekly/community (those terms are typically treated as equivalent) news media imply several common features, including relentlessly local content, limited orientation in size and geography, and local, independent ownership. Howard Ziff's (1986) distinction between "provincial" and "cosmopolitan" newspapers still holds: the former are grounded in local values, to be criticized only on behalf of other, deeply held communal beliefs. The latter insist on objectivity and stand above local values.

Nevertheless, both kinds of news organs share an inherent responsibility to gather and report stories of vital interest to citizens, including external threats and challenges as well as internal conflicts and tensions. Moreover, glowing praise of independent community weeklies often ignores that community newspapers increasingly are units of chains, edited by careerists without local roots, and written by people who don't know one another and rarely meet up at regional offices. They regularly produce special editions celebrating the "anniversaries" of the locality or newspaper, but often are unable to put contemporary problems into historical context. No less driven by bottom-line considerations than are urban dailies, owners of weeklies rarely spend money, or risk advertising revenue, to probe local tensions and deep-seated problems. Morris Janowitz's 1952 findings are perhaps all too relevant a half century later: community media foreground social and personal news, local volunteer associations, municipal services, and community involvement; they avoid or ignore controversy. Astute readers may resent all of that. Or perhaps, with their remote-controlled garage openers and far-flung social networks, readers neither care nor feel part of the community.

Community journalism too often exploits how "community" is a "warmly persuasive word . . . never to be used unfavourably," as

Raymond Williams put it (1983, p. 76). That said, taking community or community newspapers seriously requires critical examination of both concepts, specifically by questioning the prevailing notions of community undergirding local journalism. Even the “common” roots linking “communion,” “community,” and “communication,” as James Carey famously emphasized (1989, p. 18), do not make homogeneity the goal of community or democratic processes. That is, community spirit, to the extent it is desired, does not depend on denying interconnections to issues of the “outside” world, ignoring internal conflict, or excusing unpleasant realities such as religious bigotry or racism as part of local culture. If condescension toward community journalism is unwarranted, so is complacency from within community journalism.

Even small towns do and should include diverse people with different understandings and experiences. People committed to fellowship must appreciate diversity and make room for pluralism and argument. Vigorous intercourse among different people enriches community. Communities thus need local news institutions (whether printed, Web-based, or broadcast/cablecast) that engage citizens in animated, provocative discussions of their heterogeneity and diversity.

This is no brief advocating scurrilous personal attacks, unethical half-truths, or exaggerated contentiousness. But community journalists, if they are willing, can inspire critique and even investigation of local problems. Community journalists can engage people in civic processes and enlarge their political presence so they can actively respond to Carey’s stipulation that community institutions nurture citizens’ moral, political, and intellectual capacities.

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