

# Crafting a Community: Staff Members' Conceptions of Audience at a City Magazine

J. David Wolfgang\* & Joy Jenkins†

*News organizations often develop content that serves the interests of advertisers and audiences. City magazines, which cater to affluent readers while aiming to reflect their communities, provide an important site of analysis for this trend. This study used participant observation and interviews at a Midwest city magazine to understand how it used the relationship between editorial content and advertising to increase profits and serve readers and advertisers. The findings reveal how staff members discursively constructed their audience, commodified that audience as a product for advertisers, and understood the community they serve and their function within it.*

City and regional magazines, which draw a combined 3.5 million circulation in 66 markets around the country (City and Regional Magazine Association, 2017), have achieved profitability by informing, entertaining, and advertising to a desirable readership of educated, affluent readers (Burd, 1969; Hayes, 1981; Hynds, 1995b; Riley & Selnow, 1989). These publications have existed in the United States since the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Riley & Selnow, 1991) and proliferated in the 1960s and 1970s (Hayes, 1981). They emerged not only to serve as “urban survival manuals,” informing readers about how to enjoy their surroundings (Riley & Selnow, 1989, p. 3), but also to address challenges facing urban and suburban communities, such as unemployment, pollution, crime, and transportation issues (Hynds, 1995b).

Because of these publications' focus on targeting an imagined community (Anderson, 1983) of middle- and upper-class “consumers” and creating positive brand associations for their communities, many have emphasized entertainment and advertising over in-depth reporting (Greenberg, 2000). Even so, editors of city and regional magazines have cited their interest in pointing out community needs in coverage, taking stands on issues, and engaging readers in civic life (Hynds, 1995a; Jenkins, 2016b; Sivek, 2014). Studies have also shown that city magazines offer differing viewpoints from local newspapers (Hynds, 1995b), and their distinctive narrative and photographic approaches show potential for addressing community issues and engaging readers (Jenkins, 2016a; Sivek, 2014).

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\* Dr. J. David Wolfgang is an assistant professor of journalism at Colorado State University.

† Dr. Joy Jenkins is a postdoctoral research fellow at the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism.

These trends have not just affected city magazines. As journalism grew into a form of mass-circulated and broadcast content, the value of advertising and other revenue streams encouraged the consolidation of news organizations into corporate entities (Schiller, 1989) and a focus on media content not merely as information but also as commodity – a social good that can be sold (McManus, 1994). News organizations have begun to realize the value of not only cultivating and presenting diverse viewpoints but also promoting certain perspectives, notably “the dominant, though tiniest, stratus of the propertied class” (Schiller, 1989, p. 40). Therefore, news content prioritizes the needs of audience members who serve not only as readers and viewers but also as consumers. These changes could shift the nature of content production, the influence of advertising sales, and the relationship media organizations cultivate with their communities.

The journalistic duty to represent the public’s interest can conflict with the organization’s interest in generating profit, resulting in a natural tension that often ends with the organization downgrading or corrupting journalism (McChesney, 2013). Local journalists may face specific challenges, such as organizational policies that limit their ability to challenge the preferred meanings of powerful sources, as doing so could economically threaten their organizations (Berkowitz & TerKeurst, 1999). Additionally, the relationships between magazine producers and their advertisers tend to be more intertwined than other media, reflecting less formal relationships than networked practices (Gill, 2007).

The purpose of this study is to examine how staff members at a city magazine crafted an understanding of their community and used that understanding as a heuristic tool to develop content, advertising, and events that would appeal to their desired readership. This study used participant observation and interviews to address the influence of public and private interests on organization members’ audience construction and consider the implications of this conception of the imagined audience on the magazine’s perceived community role.

## **Literature Review**

In 1947, in response to growing disfavor with the powerful press during the Great Depression and World War II, the Hutchins Commission called for including social responsibility to the community as a journalistic norm. Since then, a number of researchers and journalism scholars have made similar statements criticizing journalism that fails to protect the public’s interest (e.g., McChesney & Nichols, 2010; McChesney, 2013; McManus, 1994). This self-creation of journalism as the fourth estate has led to developments in journalistic normative theory that establish roles of journalists based on the relationship between the journalist and the citizen — often centered on the influences of economics and politics on the part journalism plays in a democracy (Christians, Glasser, McQuail, Nordenstreng, & White, 2009).

### ***Journalists’ Conceptions of Audience***

Whether journalists pursue an audience-centered public service orientation or a market-centered orientation, they must consider the potential audience and opportunities to serve that group. With the limited direct interaction between journalists and their audiences, journalists develop alternative ways of understanding audience interests and needs, which may result in journalists falling back on the imagined audience — prioritizing assumptions and discursively co-constructed perceptions over concrete audience characteristics.

Gans (1980) found that editors at national news broadcasting organizations recognized several possible audiences and quickly dismissed the general “mass” audience perspective. Although editors recognized the fragmented state of audiences, they limited themselves to listening to feedback from small, select groups of individuals. These groups included their supervisors; a constructed audience of their family, friends, neighbors, and other social acquaintances; and a close audience of journalism colleagues who attempted to respond to the story from the perspective of a potential reader.

Sumpter (2000) found that when editors attempted to select stories for an unspecified mass audience, they negatively categorized the audience and how it would respond to the stories. However, if the audience were framed as nearer to the perspectives of the journalists themselves, the typifications were more favorable. Sumpter also found that as journalists climbed the organizational hierarchy as editors, they began to mimic the instinctive decision-making practices that appeared to guide the choices of the most senior editors. Journalists also used budget meetings as a forum for testing the reaction of the average unbiased reader to a proposed story and to discuss what content was most marketable. Given the social nature of the development of a conception of audience, focusing on how journalists, collectively within an organization, discursively construct a shared understanding of their audience is important. Additional research is needed, however, to address how these negotiations manifest in news organizations that might face even greater and more localized market influences.

Hagen (1999) found that journalists at a public service news organization attempted to imagine their audience as a collection of citizens looking to be educated and informed and interested in collective problems and issues. This approach led to a focus on enabling “the audience to perform their democratic rights and duties” (1999, p. 137). However, for commercial news organizations, the ratings or circulation of the news product is the most important indicator of what the audience wants from the product (Hagen, 1999). In this sense, the “audience becomes a product to sell to advertisers” (Hagen, 1999, p. 140), and the journalist’s mission is reduced from informing and educating to getting the public to watch and to continue watching.

Shoemaker and Reese (2013) see audiences as a commodity to be sold directly to advertisers by a commercial media entity. “To the extent that the desired target audience consumes the media products, content is then deemed attractive to audiences” (2013, p. 142). This means that the advertisers — through requests for a certain “audience” — can influence content choices and the ultimate conception of the audience for the journalist, which may limit the types of topics journalists address and the extent to which they fulfill their democratic function in a community.

Magazines connect with readers in distinctive ways from other types of media, often arising from the lack of “journalistic distance” between magazine editors and readers (Abrahamson, 2007, p. 669). With magazines, “They are often, indeed literally, the same people” (p. 669). In response, editors often design content specifically to reach these readers and incite them to “do something better or more enjoyably” (Abrahamson, 2007, p. 670). Indeed, magazine publishers spend much time and resources determining how to satisfy “the needs, desires, hopes, fears, and aspirations of ‘the reader’” (Holmes, 2007, p. 514). They do so by targeting a group of readers, creating content based on the interests of those readers, facilitating trust with readers, and responding to changes in readership and society (Holmes, 2007).

These reader communities can be understood in two ways. The first is the idea of an imagined community (Anderson, 1991). An imagined community refers to the means through which mass media not only inform or influence people in communities but also reflect

producers' conceptualizations of those communities. These conceptualizations suggest the ability of magazine producers to "construct meaning about the collective identity of the communities they serve" (Reader & Moist, 2008, p. 825), which reflects their assumptions about their audiences and what they desire to read. The second is a brand community, which suggests that readers congregate around a particular magazine because of its strong brand image, emphasis on reader interests, long institutional history, availability for public consumption, and competitive value (Davidson, McNeill, & Ferguson, 2007), with content production largely influenced by interest in maintaining a strong brand.

Editors might also appeal to a geographic location when considering readers. The Reiman Publications, a publisher of 13 magazines focused on cooking and crafts that relies heavily on reader-submitted content, have used rhetorical techniques to discursively construct an imagined community based on similar tastes and values, such as a focus on religion, "traditional" families, and a country aesthetic (Webb, 2006). *Texas Monthly* magazine, although aiming to present a multifaceted portrait of the state, constructed a Texan identity emphasizing white males, with non-whites and females portrayed in stereotypical roles (Sivek, 2008). According to interviews with *Texas Monthly* editors, "The need to attract a wealthy demographic [...] led to a shift in editorial content toward positive stories that supported that audience's lifestyle and attitudes" (p. 168). In constructing a community of readers, editors may focus less on shared interests, history, and culture and more on readers' ability to consume, which could subvert these publications' potential to fulfill their social responsibility and facilitate reader engagement.

### ***The Roles and Functions of City Magazines***

City magazines represent an "under-developed, under-researched" (Hynds, 1995b, p. 172) sector of the magazine industry in the United States (1995b). The predecessor to modern city magazines, *Paradise of the Pacific* (which became *Honolulu* magazine in 1966), was founded by King Kalakaua in 1888 under a royal charter (Riley & Selnow, 1991). However, *San Diego* magazine, founded in 1948, set the precedent for contemporary city magazines, aiming to serve as an alternative to other local media (Tebbel, 1969). Reflecting post-World War II population shifts, many similar magazines emerged. Readers sought out city magazines based on local pride, a desire for additional perspectives on cities, and for insights into where to spend their time and money (Hayes, 1981).

In catering to affluent audiences, city magazine content emphasized opportunities for shopping, dining, and entertainment (Riley & Selnow, 1989). By the late 1970s, lifestyle-oriented content dominated city magazines (Hynds, 1979). City magazines, however, showed potential to serve other functions. Comparing city magazines to other urban media, Burd (1969) suggested that they "seek to maintain a metropolitan image of the city, but crusade for as well as boost civic morale, and which appeal to a rather small, quality-minded elite who are influential in urban decision-making and move across political boundaries in the metropolis" (p. 319). Further, Burd suggested that articles in city magazines showed depth and perspectives that were often lacking in other media coverage of urban problems.

Recent incarnations of city magazines have negotiated among developing a community of readers, providing content those readers will enjoy, and maintaining the bottom line through issue sales and advertising. As a result, few city magazines "successfully mix serious reporting and commentary with guides to leisure-time fun" (Hynds, 1995b, p. 172). A textual analysis of five award-winning city magazines showed that they targeted an imagined community of affluent

readers with information about how to enjoy their cities through consumption, and although information about more challenging topics appeared, representations ultimately constructed a homogenous, idealized version of cities with few suggestions for solutions (Jenkins, 2016a). Similarly, Burd (2008) argued that city magazines remain “largely civic boosters rather than critical journalism” (p. 213). Greenberg (2000) attributed this emphasis to the need for contemporary media, in response to shifts in local, national, and global economic bases, to brand their cities. In this vein, Greenberg called city magazines “urban lifestyle magazines” that “fuse the identity and consumption habits of their readers with the branded ‘lifestyle’ of a given metropolitan region” (2000, p. 231).

However, city magazines may serve an enhanced role among local media, particularly as daily newspapers decline (Burd, 2008). City magazine senior editors have said that their publications provide user-manual-like instructions for understanding and experiencing cities as well as in-depth packages on local topics using distinctive visual and textual presentations (Sivek, 2014). City magazine editors have also described a need to offer both public service reporting and “private-service” content, or stories that not only interest readers but also provide environments for selling advertising (Jenkins, 2016b). These negotiations represent the influence of market concerns on editors’ decision-making as well as their desire to balance the content they perceive will make a difference in their communities with the information they believe readers enjoy (Jenkins, 2016b).

By emphasizing lifestyle topics, however, some city magazines have become corporate commodities, replacing coverage of controversial subjects and in-depth reporting with an emphasis on advertising and entertainment (Greenberg, 2000). These magazines have also become increasingly standardized. Economic pressures at the local level may play a role, affecting news organizations’ ability to provide information about local government and communities and enable citizens to make informed decisions (Williams, 2006). Journalistic autonomy may be influenced by news organizations, sources, and the local power structure, with journalists in more homogenous communities facing enhanced pressure to ensure their accounts fit within dominant understandings and preferred meanings (Berkowitz & TerKeurst, 1999).

Although local proprietors once typically owned local newspapers, they are now increasingly owned by chains, which tend to emphasize profits over quality journalism (Williams, 2006). Local news organizations have also faced competition from other media organizations and the introduction of new technologies, which in some cases has resulted in staff layoffs, acquisitions of other types of mass communication, and increased reliance on public relations content (Murphy, 1998).

As a result, capitalism has become a taken-for-granted aspect of local news operations, which increasingly address individuals as “consumers of goods and services rather than voters and citizens” (Murphy, 1998, p. 90). Although studies have addressed the effects of these changes on newspapers, other local media are also affected, including city magazines, which likely face similar pressures to draw audiences and advertising while competing with other news organizations. Additionally, as newspapers continue to lose readership, circulation, and advertising revenues, other types of community news organizations may fill informational needs (Burd, 2008), with city magazines potentially providing alternative opinions on issues, suggesting solutions, and encouraging dialogue (Hynds, 1995b; Jenkins, 2016a).

## **Research Questions**

To assess how journalists develop an understanding of audience and how that understanding relates to the role of the magazine in the community, the researchers focused on the following research questions:

**RQ1:** How do staff members at a city magazine discursively construct an imagined audience conception?

**RQ2:** How do staff members' conceptions of an imagined audience shape the magazine's perceived function in the community?

## **Method**

An ethnographic approach allows for exploring a city magazine staff as a culture-sharing and constructing group (Creswell, 2012). Immersion in an organization enables researchers to evaluate the day-to-day interactions of staff members and the “meaning of the behavior, the language, and the interactions” (Creswell, 2012, p. 90) they display. Understanding the culture of a particular city magazine, specifically the ideas and beliefs expressed by its staff members, can shed light on how they describe and consider their readers, how these considerations inform their decisions about content and programming, and ultimately, how they view their role in the city. This analysis, in turn, may help scholars better understand how other U.S. city magazine editors view their readers and publications as well as how media organizations balance serving readers, earning revenue, and fulfilling community roles.

The ultimate goal of ethnography is to “generate understanding and knowledge by watching, interacting, asking questions,” and then “reflecting after the fact” (Tracy, 2013, p. 65). This process allows the researcher to travel up and down the ladder of abstraction through iterative observation and interpretation — and provides an opportunity to continually refocus on the important aspects of the group and the areas that need closer observation.

Creswell described ethnography as a process through which the researcher focuses on the “shared and learned patterns of values, behaviors, beliefs, and language of a culture-sharing group” (2013, p. 90). Hence, it becomes necessary to focus on behaviors, language use, and the interaction of individuals. This ethnography attempts to discover the underlying beliefs and values through the behaviors and language of the group. Through detailed analysis and rich description, this form of ethnography should lead to an in-depth understanding and valuable findings originating from the meanings of participants.

### ***Site Description***

*Midwest Monthly* is a company based in a Midwestern university town of about 113,000 residents. The company's name has been changed to protect the identity of the organization. The company's flagship product, a city magazine established in 2005 that at the time of observation reached more than 64,000 readers, billed itself as the definitive lifestyle guide within the city (Media Kit, 2014). The magazine appealed to an audience of well-educated, socially engaged, active, and affluent members of the community (\$62,448 median income) (Media Kit, 2014). Each monthly issue of the magazine addressed a variety of topics, including homes, food and

wine, fashion, and health, as well as features on local politics, business, and other issues (“Midwest Monthly”, 2014).

In addition to the magazine, *Midwest Monthly* produced a magazine for local business executives, a magazine aimed at members of the senior community, a magazine for local Christian men, a community guide, a wedding magazine, and special supplements focused on food and dining. The company also periodically created specialized publications for local organizations, such as hospitals and education institutions. Further, the company hosted a variety of events for its readers and others in the community, including cooking demonstrations, dinner parties, health fairs, and a “best of the city” celebration. Lastly, the company maintained a website with articles from its magazines, blogs, event listings, and contests. At the beginning of the observation period, the company had a small staff consisting of a publisher, editor-in-chief, creative director, copy editor, editorial assistant, photo editor, graphic designers, and marketing and sales staff members.

Shortly after the research period began, the publisher announced that the organization had lost one of its largest advertisers, thus creating the need to cut costs and change the corporate structure. As a result, one employee was terminated and another earned a significant promotion (to associate publisher). Although this change was not expected as part of the initial research interest, it soon became one of the key events around which many of the happenings at the organization were focused.

In 2017, after the publisher was elected to the local county commission, he sold *Midwest Monthly*. The publisher continued to work as a consultant for the magazine, and his wife continued as the associate publisher and editor for two of the magazine’s auxiliary publications.

### ***Procedure***

The authors gathered data at *Midwest Monthly* over a three-month period in 2014. Data consisted of participant observation at the magazine; in-depth interviews; and analyses of documents, including magazine issues, editorial and marketing calendars, meeting agendas, and media kits. The authors attended staff meetings, special event committee meetings, and editorial meetings as well as observed daily tasks and attended the magazine’s “best of the city” event. The authors participated in 30 hours of observation and wrote about 70 pages of field notes.

Toward the end of the observation period, the researchers conducted in-depth interviews with four members of the leadership, editorial, and design staffs. Interviews ranged from 45 minutes to one hour and addressed staff members’ assessments of the company’s mission, the company’s audience, the company’s overall function in the community, and potential changes in the company’s readership and local role over the next five years. Interviews are “guided question-answer conversations” that have “a specific structure and purpose” (Tracy, 2013, p. 131) and help the researcher understand and examine complex phenomena.

Much of the discursive construction of meaning and the shaping of the organizational mission took place in the office and during staff meetings. Therefore, the researchers conducted interviews with current full-time staff members. The researchers chose to interview only individuals with direct oversight of editorial content, or in the case of the publisher, oversight of those who made editorial decisions. Although others might write content, from an organizational perspective, the individuals who oversaw the content development had more influence on the broader editorial direction of the organization, how to meet editorial objectives, and how understandings of the audience might shape those decisions. All interview subjects were granted

anonymity, and the media organization was also granted anonymity in order to encourage candor and earnest participation.

### ***Research Stance***

The researchers engaged in an observer-as-participant research stance. This lets the researcher be known to the participants without having to actively engage with those participants. The authors interacted with organization members through casual conversations but did not play an active role in the activities of the organization nor heavily influence the organization through their involvement. Many of the interviews were conducted using Tracy's (2013) description of "deliberative naïveté." By approaching the situation from a more objective perspective, the researchers allowed the interviewees to explain their experiences in their own words and from their preferred perspective, improving the confidence in the findings.

### ***Data Analysis***

The authors used a constant comparative approach to analyze the data from field notes, interviews, and documents. Constant comparison allows for simultaneous coding and analysis so as to develop theory in a more systematic way while remaining close to the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The researchers coded each incident in the data, compared incidents to identify related concepts, and then sorted the concepts into categories. This constant comparison of incidents allowed the researchers to discern the "theoretical properties" (Glaser & Strauss 1967, p. 106) of the categories, informing continued coding.

First, the researchers individually engaged in open coding (Corbin & Strauss, 1990), assessing the data line by line to identify similarities and differences. This was followed by axial coding, in which categories were related to their subcategories and continually developed (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). After the initial and axial coding processes, the researchers discussed their findings and revised their codes before revisiting the data. This collaborative approach to coding helps to guard against bias, develop new insights, and enhance theoretical sensibility (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Lastly, the researchers developed overall themes from the categories.

## **Findings**

The first research question focused on how journalists discursively constructed a shared understanding of their audience to develop content and an editorial strategy that best served this imagined community.

### ***Connecting Audience and Advertising***

*Midwest Monthly* focused on prioritizing the needs of advertisers before considering how audience members might use the editorial product. The organization also created an imagined audience member to personify the characteristics they believed best fit their model reader. Staff members consistently spoke of their efforts to connect this imagined audience member, whom they called "Lucy," to their advertisers through content and community events.

**Maintaining advertiser relationships.** The publisher suggested that the purpose of the organization was to bring the high-net-worth audience and advertisers together through content and events. For example, when discussing the role of special events the company sponsors, the publisher said, “Anybody that can spend \$125 to come to a dinner, anybody who recognizes the value of a fine scotch or fine cigar or a gourmet meal, it’s a very small sliver, but it’s a high-net-worth individual that [an advertiser] wants to be in front of.” The organization appeared to perceive its audience primarily through the potential to serve the needs of advertisers, as no other approach was observed. This purpose represented an emphasis on monetizing audience members by connecting them with advertisers, seeing them less as engaged community members and more as potential consumers.

When asked about the organization’s role in the community, the editorial assistant described one aspect of this function as giving advertisers access to potential audience members. She further described this as “giving them [advertisers] some love.” This statement recurred throughout observations of the organization and came to represent situations in which an advertiser had been loyal to the organization, and in return the organization tried to lead more customers to its business. This “love” could be achieved through featuring the advertiser in editorial content, highlighting that business at a sponsored event, or including the business in an email newsletter article or social media post. The editorial assistant stressed the importance of *Midwest Monthly* staying connected to the community, especially to local advertisers, as a means of “cheerleading them” and lending them the company’s support. The publisher’s public presence as an active community member influenced this construction of “community,” as his involvement was seen as a key way to cultivate relationships that spur connections between audience members and advertisers.

Events represented another way for *Midwest Monthly* to connect the audience and advertisers to make money — from both selling access to the event to audience members and access to potential customers to the advertisers. The publisher said in an interview, “The events were basically trying to give our advertisers direct access to our readers versus trying to reach them with an ad. [ . . . ] It’s all about face-to-face interaction.” At the first staff meeting following an organization-sponsored health fair, the publisher congratulated the staff on a successful event that drew more than \$10,000 in revenue from advertiser sponsorships. This success story represented the organization’s ability to bring a valuable audience directly to the corporate sponsor to the point where an advertiser was willing to pay for that access, therefore legitimizing the organization’s position as a connector of the two groups.

When discussing the upcoming “best of the community” event, staff members looked for ways to make the event worth the time and money of both advertisers, by connecting them to affluent customers, and the audience, by providing access to popular local businesses and free goods from those businesses. The company’s graphic designer described this dual role as not only providing advertisers with access to the audience but also ensuring that the organization maintained a strong relationship with those businesses. This position seemed to support a business model built not only on conveying a positive image of the community but also promoting the interests of other businesses.

**Prioritizing advertising.** The most important aspect of *Midwest Monthly*’s business was clear: cultivating advertising relationships. Although the editorial department, which included only three full-time staff members, used freelance writers and unpaid interns to produce content cheaply, the sales department employed six full-time paid advertising sales representatives.

When leading weekly staff meetings, the publisher routinely began with a segment called “Good news,” in which he asked the staff to share positive news. Although staffers often saw this “good news” discussion as an invitation to talk about positive happenings in their personal lives or to celebrate great work at the organization, the publisher specifically sought out advertising sales representatives to describe how much revenue they generated in the past week. It became clear that, to the publisher, “good news” was a synonym for “advertising sales.” Ultimately, the only observed way that staffers perceived of their audience was in relation to their ability to serve their advertisers.

**Imagining the community.** To meet the organization’s advertising and editorial goals, members constructed the typical audience member. However, because of the organization’s many products and the multiple ways staff members catered to the typical audience member, this imagined understanding of the audience was constantly discursively reconstituted.

To personalize the intended audience member, staffers at *Midwest Monthly* created the character of “Lucy.” Lucy was invoked both in meetings and interviews with staff members. The associate publisher/editor-in-chief said Lucy is a middle-aged, married woman with two high-school-aged children. She works part time, is active in her community and church, is interested in fitness, and has a household income between \$70,000 and \$80,000 a year. The median household income of the community was \$43,000 as compared to the national average of \$53,000 (United States Census Bureau, 2014). The publisher suggested that Lucy represented not an idealized reader (the community’s most affluent) but a “midpoint.” He said, “[Lucy] is pretty close to the median age of [the community], but also – every household has a female head of household who controls 92% of the buying power.” He said the concept of Lucy informed both editorial decision-making and advertising strategies.

Staff members used heuristic tools to help understand Lucy. The designer said he thought of his mother because she works part-time, is involved in her community, and attends church. The editorial assistant described her mother’s friends as her stand-ins for Lucy, but for some younger staffers and interns, defining Lucy was not so easy. The associate publisher/editor-in-chief admitted that younger staffers often struggled with speaking to Lucy as a reader and said the organization should improve staff training by focusing on how to serve Lucy. The associate publisher/editor-in-chief, however, referred to herself as a “former Lucy,” and the publisher said his wife and other women he knows could also be considered Lucy.

Beyond Lucy’s personal features, staffers attributed life purposes to her. The designer described Lucy as someone who is “always looking for ways to better improve (her) life.” This appeared to extend her personality to someone interested in self-fulfillment and betterment. One difficulty in defining Lucy was that staffers rarely received feedback from the audience. The editorial assistant said, “[the associate publisher/editor-in-chief] can tell me whether or not she thinks it’s appropriate for the magazine, but if I’m not finding out from the readers if they liked that story on saving up for your child’s college education, is it worth it or not?” There was an apparent disconnect between what staff members and readers considered quality editorial content. The editorial assistant, who moved to the community from a larger city and was in her 20s, would seemingly face challenges in producing content for the actual audience in the community when she did not hear from them.

Some staff members invoked their personal tastes while making decisions for the organization that seemed to contrast with Lucy’s interests. For example, in an editorial meeting, the editorial assistant and the associate publisher/editor-in-chief discussed an article on shopping.

The associate publisher/editor-in-chief deferred to the editorial assistant, asking, “Is there anything you’re feeling love for?” The editorial assistant recommended a feature on sandals because she needed new sandals and the article would be informative to her as well. This response showed that personal interests and needs also affected editorial decision-making. Rather than lose sight of the consistent view of Lucy, the greater threat was that staffers would think of themselves instead.

**What does Lucy want from *Midwest Monthly*?** In one staff meeting, the publisher suggested that staffers discuss what Lucy wanted from the company’s products and services. This led to staffers discussing whether Lucy preferred content that informed her about her community or content that provided her with opportunities to become more engaged in her community. Lucy was invoked in many discussions about services and content the organization should provide. The graphic designer described Lucy as wanting content that made her feel good, that bettered her life, and that was useful and relevant. The publisher invoked Lucy in discussions of possible editorial topics for email newsletters, asking, “Does Lucy give a shit?” about a local coffee shop closing. The publisher appeared to think the coffee shop did not meet the needs of Lucy’s demographic, and profiling its closure was not worthwhile.

**Who does *Midwest Monthly* want as Lucy?** The publisher and other individuals clearly had specific preferences for who Lucy should be. These preferences included community members with sufficient disposable income to engage with advertisers. In a special events committee meeting, the publisher insisted that the price of the ticket to an upcoming cigar dinner be increased from \$95 to \$125 in order to “weed out the riffraff.” This comment showed that the publisher wanted to cater to a high-income audience because of its potential to satisfy advertisers seeking to reach that demographic. The publisher also said that when meeting with some advertisers, he described Lucy and suggested that they picture her when considering their audience. He said of Lucy, “It’s not only about us to have a more clear focus, more succinct focus, but for our advertisers to have someone to market to.” Thus, Lucy served as a heuristic for multiple types of decision-making in the organization.

The organization recognized other plausible audiences. The editorial assistant described Lucy as the target but said many other types of community members actually read the content or engaged with the organization at its events. Because of this reality, *Midwest Monthly* hosted events catering to alternative audiences. For a summer barbecue event, the publisher encouraged staffers to consider Lucy’s husband as the target audience. However, the graphic designer admitted that Lucy would probably have to tell her husband about the event because her husband would not have heard about it on his own. The publisher even described the timing of the event as an opportunity to encourage Lucy to buy her husband a ticket for Father’s Day. This suggestion showed that although Lucy’s husband was the target audience, the marketing for the event was geared toward Lucy.

**The actual reader.** Despite efforts the company made to cater content and events to a specific clientele by using a particular voice and championing certain issues and interests, the ultimate audience was those who actually engaged with the organization. Although the organization did not make a consistent effort to understand these individuals, attending the “best of the community” event suggested that the actual audience likely differed from “Lucy.” The event was scheduled to take place on a Thursday at 5 p.m. to allow attendees to come straight from work.

Although “Lucy” was likely present at the event depending on how each staff member conceived of her, the attendees were diverse in age and gender. Although the organization admitted to making little effort to reach the under-35 audience, plenty of young professionals attended. A considerable number of men attended the event — not only those who came with their wives, who may have been “Lucy.” Finally, the event noticeably lacked racial diversity. The issue of race was not addressed in the construction of Lucy, but a stock photograph used in the office to represent Lucy depicted a white woman. The organization appeared to approach the event as an attempt to reach a large crowd that would inevitably include “Lucy” without solely focusing on her.

### *The Function of Midwest Monthly*

The second research question asked how staff members’ perceptions of their audience shaped how they discussed the magazine’s community function. *Midwest Monthly*’s perceived roles emerged through observations of the way the company differentiated its offerings to serve readers, the use of events to engage with audience members, approaches to content in the company’s print and online products, and discussions of the company’s overall identity and how it related to readers’ interests and needs.

**Reaching readers.** Although the company and the flagship publication shared the same name, *Midwest Monthly* offered a variety of products aimed at specific audiences, including a magazine for readers age 50-plus, a business magazine, and a Christian magazine. The company also produced several custom products, including a community guide; a restaurant guide; and online newsletters focused on food, wine, events, weddings, and other topics. Staff members clearly prioritized the flagship magazine over these products, but this focus could change in light of the magazine’s newfound emphasis on visitor’s-guide-like content, which was viewed as highly marketable to readers.

Events were another area of emphasis for the company, serving as a means to reach the average reader (Lucy) as well as the ideal reader (the community’s most affluent residents). Events focused on Lucy included a wine and chocolate event that featured “boutique-y things women are into,” according to one advertising representative, while events aimed at idealized readers included cooking classes and the \$125-per-plate cigar dinner. Even events aimed toward Lucy did not always emphasize what she could afford. The publisher mentioned an “inspiration house” furnished by advertisers from which readers could draw ideas but not replicate entirely.

The associate publisher/editor-in-chief said the company’s events emphasized the magazine as an “experience”: “That is really not just words on a page anymore. You’ve got to back that up with events and all sorts of digital. You are a tangible thing.” The designer said the events allowed people to interact with the company’s brand and “really put our company above just a magazine, which is important. [ ... ] They want extravagant things. Just something out of the ordinary.” The editorial assistant said events made parts of the magazine “real” for readers by taking “people right from the pages and puts them in front of the readers.” In this way, staff members saw the magazine’s function as offering readers access to important people in the community and making the magazine content “real” for readers while at the same time offering them an escape into a luxurious lifestyle.

**Organizational identity.** Discussions about content often indicated an overall identity negotiation at *Midwest Monthly*, as staff members seemed to have differing opinions about the types of content the magazine should emphasize. According to the editorial assistant, “We’re a lifestyle magazine. We’re supposed to make people happy. It’s the shopping, the eating, drinking, enjoying the culture and the arts, sort of the things that get you up and get you excited to go out and enjoy your town.” Thus, she said content did not suggest how to change readers’ lifestyle but offered a choice. For the associate publisher/editor-in-chief, this approach constituted “refrigerator journalism” that “invites people to take action, to learn something, to do something.” The publisher said the magazine should publish more articles that prompt readers to ask, “How can I take action?” Examples of “action” included buying kale at the farmers’ market and then using a magazine recipe to prepare it or reading an article on adventure sports and kayaking at a nearby river.

However, during a meeting in which staff members discussed what made the company distinctive among other local media (what they called their “uniques”), questions arose regarding *Midwest Monthly*’s mission. Staff members agreed that *Midwest Monthly* represented an authorized source for the best ways to enjoy the community. The publisher compared this role to a “community catalyst,” in that the magazine provided opportunities to engage with the community through cooking classes and events. Another editor, however, understood “catalyst” as offering town hall meetings through which readers could come together to discuss community change. This led to a debate about whether the magazine should focus on issue-oriented content or address only positive aspects of the community. Ultimately, the publisher asked, “Is it our job to do that?” and “Who are we going to be?”

In an interview, the associate publisher/editor-in-chief described examples when the magazine tackled “really gritty issues,” such as a drug problem in a local high school. She said these stories “made you feel like you’re impacting beyond giving someone a recipe or a date for an event. This changed some lives.” However, because of the magazine’s economic status and her new role as associate publisher, she said she had to focus on positive content that would increase subscriber numbers and make people feel good about the magazine and the community. The graphic designer agreed, saying, “We want to provide information about the community, but we also want to sell magazines. I think there’s a balance there in doing a public service and also making [Lucy] feel good.”

**Differentiation from the competition.** As part of this identity negotiation, the company aimed to distance itself from other publications in the community. The staff members discussed the authoritative voice of the magazine, in that the magazine’s selections of the best places to eat, shop, and spend leisure time have more legitimacy than those of other local media. This sense of entitlement was also evident in the company’s business decisions, serving as a way to cope with financial difficulties. For example, upon announcing that the magazine had lost its major advertiser to another publication, the publisher said that magazine offered more pages and a lower price to the advertiser, which might affect its long-term viability. The publisher saw this as a benefit, as he desired to eliminate that publication as competition. Although some news organizations may see competition as a way to drive enhanced reporting, the publisher clearly aimed to maintain a monopoly on his desirable readership and their preferred content.

## **Discussion**

Through observation of *Midwest Monthly*, the researchers explored how staff members discursively created an imagined audience and how their conceptions of this imagined audience shaped the magazine's perceived function in the community. The findings led to greater understandings of the ways the organization constructed its audience as a commodified product to sell to advertisers, how the organization developed a coherent pseudo-understanding of who that audience is, and how staff members created events and content to monetize that audience.

*Midwest Monthly* aimed to create and develop a positive image of the local community while helping to build relationships between consumers and local businesses; however, this function supported an understanding of the organization as a market-oriented journalism institution rather than one interested in serving the public's interest. At the same time, this model fit into the traditional understanding of audience among magazine journalists, who favor a niche market focus, in contrast to the traditional understanding of newspaper journalists, who emphasize a mass audience. This emphasis ultimately led to a city magazine focused on encouraging consumption and promotion among a particular demographic rather than addressing the broader community through news-oriented content.

### ***Public service versus market orientation***

Although *Midwest Monthly* may not represent the type of large corporate media conglomerate that Schiller (1989) warned about, it participated in a commodification of content and cultural production that can cause organization members to narrow their perspective to the point of legitimizing views that support only a narrow slice of the "propertied class" (p. 40). At *Midwest Monthly*, the publisher advanced viewpoints catered to a highly specific demographic or social class. Schiller referred to this dominance of a specific viewpoint as an ideology of the corporate, often a capitalist ideology, driving media. It was clear through observation that the publisher not only presented a specific ideology, but he also espoused a capitalist ideology valuing success in the private sector, and his content-production company played a vital role in the local marketplace. This ideology was evident not only in his unapologetic preference for championing the interests of local businesses, preferably advertisers, but also in his response to the loss of a local advertiser to another publication. Rather than seeing the other publication as a quality competitor, he preferred to see that company go out of business.

*Midwest Monthly* met all the qualities of a company shifting toward a more market-oriented journalistic institution. The company had increased the commodification of culture and news product, placed more emphasis on a marketplace orientation as opposed to serving the public interest, placed greater corporate pressure on employees, and decreased the amount of normative journalistic responsibility (McChesney, 2013; McManus, 1994; Baker, 2002). Ultimately, *Midwest Monthly* placed such a heavy focus on monetization that financial rationales permeated almost all decision-making at the company at the expense of possible public-service opportunities. This emphasis reflects the shifts occurring among other local news organizations, which, in the face of intramedia and technological competition, have resorted to commodified content (Murphy, 1998; Williams, 2006).

### ***Journalists' conception of audience***

Newspapers and television news stations typically construct an audience based on a small, select group of individuals, including their supervisors, friends, neighbors, family members, and

journalism colleagues (Gans, 1980). This heuristic is used in order to come closer to meeting the needs of as much of the audience as possible without speaking to anyone (Gans, 1980). For a corporate news organization like *Midwest Monthly*, the interest lies in cultivating a large, devoted audience that can be sold to advertisers without alienating a base of readers (Hagen, 1999). Although *Midwest Monthly* did not often attempt to speak to a mass audience, the imagined audience was used when a staff member invoked a friend or family member whom they believed adequately represented Lucy.

The practice of using people close to the journalist to aid in constructing the imagined audience member means that *Midwest Monthly*'s typification of the audience was likely more positive or active than if the staff members used an unspecified passive mass audience to build a typification (Sumpter, 2000). Typifications that are based on a mass audience are typically more negative than those based on individuals close to the journalist (Sumpter, 2000). At *Midwest Monthly*, Lucy was rarely ever spoken of derisively. This positive tone may result from staff members' tendency to consider Lucy within their own experiences and perspectives.

As staff members received more power and authority in the organization, they appeared to mimic the "instinctive decision-making practices" of the most senior staff members (Sumpter, 2000). When the editor-in-chief was promoted to the position of associate publisher/editor-in-chief, she began to speak with a more positive tone about meeting the financial needs of the organization through practices that blurred the lines between editorial and advertising. However, she spoke negatively of those practices at the beginning of the observation period.

The means through which staff members at *Midwest Monthly* constructed their audience mirrored the practices of magazines overall. The staff members, as Holmes (2007) suggested, aimed to target particular readers and create content based on their perceived wants and needs. Staff members used Lucy as a heuristic for gauging audience interest but did not regularly engage with the audience directly to determine whether these perceptions rang true. Indeed, in some cases, they actively eschewed reader interaction. This prevented the staff members from responding to changes in readership and the community. Rather, the staff members remained focused on Lucy and how to meet her needs, neglecting other members of the community.

### *Imagined communities*

The magazine staff members constructed a narrow imagined community (Anderson, 1983) of readers whose lives they sought to improve through content focused largely on lifestyle interests, such as dining, shopping, and events. Among other media, imagined communities reflect producers' conceptualizations and their ability to construct meaning about the identity of their readers (Reader & Moist, 2008). This is also the case at *Midwest Monthly*, where characterizations of readers guided staff members' day-to-day decision-making, whether in terms of content, event planning, or advertising. In the case of *Midwest Monthly*, while the associate publisher/editor-in-chief characterized herself as a former "Lucy" and the publisher suggested that Lucy resembled women he knew, other staff members relied on suppositions or comparisons to determine what Lucy might want. As a result, beyond gender, age, socioeconomic status, family size, and other basic characteristics, a deeper understanding of Lucy — and the magazines' readership overall — remained unclear. Further, the use of "Lucy" in organizational decision-making could be construed as a tool to privilege the organization's leaders, namely its publisher and associate publisher, as they both clearly connected themselves to Lucy, while other staff members interviewed relied on assumptions as a result of their age and perhaps social class.

Magazine staff members also focused on creating a “brand community,” which emerges around a product because of its strong brand image, focus on reader interests, institutional history, availability for public consumption, and attempts to outpace competitors (Davidson et al., 2007). Through its emphasis on defining company “uniques,” *Midwest Monthly* aimed to differentiate itself from other local media. Staff members focused on the company’s multi-platform focus, authoritative voice, and integrity. These attributes clearly indicated imagined readers, whom staff members assumed would value the opportunity to engage with the company through different products while turning to the company as an expert source for how to enhance their lives.

This emphasis has been present in other city magazines prioritizing “private-service” content suggesting ways for readers to experience cities through consumption (Jenkins, 2016b). Catering to a particular demographic might also subvert the company’s potential to build an imagined community based on realistic understandings of a geographic location. *Texas Monthly* magazine emphasized “positive stories that supported that audience’s lifestyle and attitudes” (Sivek, 2008, p. 168), rather than attempting to critique Texan identity. Likewise, rather than addressing problems in the community, *Midwest Monthly* relied on content that avoided challenging how readers might understand their community, resulting in a sanitized, hegemonic depiction of city life avoiding more challenging attributes or calls to action (Jenkins, 2016a).

### *City magazine functions*

The tension evident among staff members who disagreed whether *Midwest Monthly* should provide news and issue-oriented content or lifestyle content reflects a longstanding negotiation among city magazines. City magazines historically aimed to serve as “survival manuals” (Riley & Selnow, 1989, p. 3) for affluent readers through identifying where they could spend their substantial leisure time and money (Hayes, 1981). Through emphasizing positive aspects of communities, city magazines show potential to enhance civic morale and appeal to an elite readership influential in urban decision-making (Burd, 1969). However, magazines’ agenda-setting potential is largely dependent on moving beyond boosterism to offering critical journalism (Burd, 2008). *Midwest Monthly* has attempted to address these types of topics. With recent financial setbacks, however, staff members seemed to conclude that a more positive emphasis would be necessary for maintaining readership and revenues. This decision supports Greenberg’s (2000) contention that city magazines emphasize a branded, consumer-driven lifestyle and are more corporate commodities than geographic artifacts. It also reflects Berkowitz and TerKeurst’s (1999) finding that journalists working in more homogenous communities may experience enhanced pressure to appease dominant local social groups. Even so, city magazine editors have expressed a desire for their publications to provide in-depth reporting and use both coverage and commentary to galvanize readers to think differently or take action in communities (Jenkins, 2016b; Sivek, 2014), suggesting that if economic restraints were lessened or removed, city magazines might take on more significant journalistic roles in their communities.

The researchers focused heavily on meetings at the organization and attended only one community event during the term of the participant observation. Although the researchers became familiar with staff members and the structure of weekly meetings, there were few opportunities to observe the staffers outside of a meeting context. The research was also related to only one city and regional magazine. However, *Midwest Monthly* is a member of the City and Regional Magazine Association and follows standards set by the association, meaning that some

findings may be applicable to other member publications. Finally, *Midwest Monthly* covers one of the smallest communities served by a city and regional magazine, making it an ideal case for understanding the company's relationship with the community but less ideal for understanding relationships between larger communities and their city and regional magazines. Future research should consider not only the perspectives of staff members at geographically focused magazines but also their audiences to understand where their perceptions of the role and value of these publications converge and diverge. Studies should also address the production and content of publications like these in other countries and media systems. Finally, other types of local media, like city magazines, may play enhanced roles in their communities in light of the financial challenges facing local newspapers and are, therefore, worthy of evaluation, including alternative media, hyperlocal media, and collaboratively and community-created media, among others.

At *Midwest Monthly*, staff members have adopted an understanding of the media prioritizing both media products and audiences as commodities. Although the company creates publications that feature journalistic content, emphasizing how readers can better live, work, and play in their communities, the ultimate goal is to leverage the buying power of the public for the benefit of local businesses, particularly those with whom the company has relationships, and the company's own financial viability. Thus, as staff members considered their notion of "the reader," they emphasized someone who enjoys living in her community but seeks out the media for ideas about how to enhance her lifestyle through dining, shopping, travel, and other enhancements.

This study illuminates the tactics one local news organization used to respond to a significant financial challenge and demonstrated how these strategies affected not only journalistic roles and content but also the organization's conception of its audience and community role. Although staff members, particularly those in editorial roles, expressed a desire to positively impact readers' lives and encourage them to engage in their community, the topics through which they could pursue these goals were largely limited by economic considerations, potentially limiting their ability to fill informational needs, present alternative viewpoints, and spur dialogue. Therein lies the negotiation that this organization and likely other local media face in balancing the normative journalistic need to address their readers as citizens and to maximize their value as consumers.

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\* Researchers changed the name of the studied magazine and other identifying information in order to protect the identity of the organization.