

Weekly Newspapering: How Small-Town News Workers Decide What is News

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U.S. print newspapers are more than two decades into the emergent media era, and they continue to struggle with circulation and advertising revenue declines. However, print weekly newspapers across the United States have consistently remained viable to their communities. Drawing on newsroom observations and interviews with journalists, this study opens the door for more contemporary understanding of one of media's most understudied topics by examining how news gets produced in small, rural U.S. communities – a news segment that has largely been sheltered from the declines experienced by their larger brethren. This study, which applies the theoretical frameworks of community journalism and sociology of news to the production of three small, rural U.S. weekly newspapers and their journalists, details how news produced in small communities is influenced by internal and external constraints. Simply put, small-town news is a social phenomenon. At a time in which community newspapers, including the weekly print press, remain the go-to media choice for local news – indicating high levels of trust from readers – and the larger daily newspapers continue to face accusations of intentionally producing misinformation as well as deal with continuous annual declines in circulation and advertising revenues, this researcher posits that maybe other types of journalisms can draw upon, and benefit from, the practices, strategies, and norms employed in small-town weekly newspapering production.

U.S. print newspapers are more than two decades into the emergent media era, and they continue to struggle. In its study on U.S. newspapers that was reported in June 2018, the Pew Research Center found newspaper circulations and advertising revenue have continued to decline for most of the industry.

But despite the ongoing turmoil that characterizes the contemporary U.S. print newspaper industry, print community newspapers across the United States have consistently remained viable and relatively stable (Knolle, 2016; Gallagher, 2017 Radcliffe & Ali, 2017; Still Kicking, 2018) in the digital age. Additional non-academic investigation has suggested the news community newspapers produce still matters and is significant to people in the communities they serve

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(Dalton, 2017; Masters, 2017). Most recently, community newspapers received recognition for their viability when Art Cullen, co-owner of the Iowa weekly newspaper *The Storm Lake Times*, was awarded a Pulitzer Prize for his editorial writing in which he challenged the corporate agricultural industry (Pulitzer, 2017).

In general, community newspapers in the United States continually remain an under-investigated segment of the media industry (Lowrey et al., 2008; Hatcher & Reader, 2012; Radcliffe & Ali, 2017). The above descriptive findings show print community newspapers are still important, even in a technologically transformed media era. Yet despite the importance of community newspapers as highlighted above, few contemporary scholars have provided theoretical and conceptual insight into how news gets produced by weekly newspapers in small, rural communities in the United States.

Under the community journalism and sociology of news theoretical frameworks, and drawing on newsroom observations and interviews with rural journalists, this study aims to examine the key practices, strategies, and norms of news production for news workers at three small-town weekly newspapers. Ultimately, the purpose of this study is to serve as a contemporary exemplar for how external and internal influences affect how news gets produced in small, rural U.S. communities.

Contextual Framework

Community Journalism

The term ‘community journalism’ was coined in 1961 by Kenneth Byerly, a former newspaper editor (Lauterer, 2006). The concept is a bit ambiguous, and is often considered the work of weekly newspapers, small dailies, and sometimes the alternative press (Byerly, 1961). But Hatcher and Reader (2012) have contended that community journalism extends beyond geography and circulation sizes, arguing that community journalism also includes the press that helps connect people who share similar interests and cultures.

In the United States, print journalism began with pamphlets, most of which were religious and political in nature, distributed during the colonial era. However, as settlers began to head west, so too did printers and writers. The frontier press was born out of necessity for small towns in the West (Karolevitz, 1985). This type of newspaper was different than the newspapers produced in larger cities like New York and Philadelphia. The function of the frontier press was primarily boosterism – promotion of the small town. Western newspapers would print multiple-page broadsheets that promoted their towns to attract new residents. The content of this type of news was local, showing that the town was vibrant, but the ads were specific to the metropolitan cities back East where the newspapers were distributed. Eventually, as settlers and modes of transportation moved west, the need for the frontier press diminished. However, the small-town newspaper’s purpose of boosterism never died.

According to Karolevitz (1985), it was in the late 1860s that a distinction was established between two types of newspapers – weeklies and those serving larger audiences. Owners and publishers of weekly newspapers established The Weekly Newspaper Association, quickly followed by the formation of The National Press Association by the owners of large daily newspapers. The creation of these two news organizations created a division between types of journalism (Karolevitz, 1985) that have grown wider over the past 155 years.

The scholarly literature on community journalism, specifically the small-town weekly newspaper, is limited compared to scholarship that focuses on larger daily newspapers. Foundational understanding of community journalism falls upon the works of Byerly (1961), Kennedy (1974), Lauterer (2006), and most recently, Reader and Hatcher (2011). Over the years, scholarly literature on community newspapers has emerged and provided conceptual understanding of community newspapers and their functions within their communities, including creating a sense of social cohesion for local people (Janowitz, 1952; Yomamoto, 2011), helping a person integrate into a community (Ball-Rokeach, Kim, & Mattei, 2001), and to serve as a communication system among community members (Edelstein and Larsen, 1960).

In their research on the role of the local press, Stamm (1985) and Robinson (2013) found that the newspaper creates a sense of connectedness to a community. Stamm also has suggested a person's community civic involvement is influenced by his or her use of local media. Furthermore, Anderson (1991) has contended newspapers help create a sense of community for people simply by knowing everyone is reading about the same thing. Wotanis (2012) showed in her study on a newspaper moving its newsroom out of town that the weekly newspaper creates not only a sense of community, but it creates a sense of place for the audience.

Several scholars also have argued local community newspapers' simply hold different functions than their larger brethren in big cities (Schramm & Ludwig, 1951; Olien, Donohue, & Tichenor, 1968; Emke, 2001). Normative theory posits that a newspaper's primary function is to serve as a watchdog for the public in a democratic society (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2001; Bender, Davenport, Drager & Fedler, 2016), and it does this by adhering to rules such as remaining free of conflicts of interests with sources and organizational economic needs (Wasserman, 2010), as well as being objective and independent (Ward, 2010).

But research on the role of the local newspaper has shown that community newspapers are different, primarily serving as advertising platforms for local businesses and providers of information about the local people, places, and events (Abbott & Niebauer, 2000; Emke, 2001). Abbott and Niebauer also have suggested local newspapers tend to mirror their communities rather than criticize them. Furthermore, Emke (2001), has suggested the primary role of the community newspaper is to create a sense of unity. But there are scholars who have contended the functions of the local press extend beyond advertising and unifying. Hindman and Beam (2014) have argued that another role of the local press – which is often neglected due to resource constraints, but vital to civic engagement in communities – is to provide conflict-oriented public affairs information. Donohue, Tichenor, and Olien (1980) have also theorized another function of the community newspaper, and that is it serves as a “guard dog” when community members disrupt the community balance.

Despite being an ambiguous term at times, scholars have routinely recognized that the ultimate difference between community newspapers and larger daily newspapers is the nearness they have with their audiences. Byerly, Robinson (2013), and Hatcher (2014) have argued that community journalism is about its connectedness with the audiences it serves. Lauterer has even coined community journalism as the “personal approach” because of the nearness the journalists and news organizations have with their communities.

In trying to solve the problems faced by larger daily newspapers in the digital age, scholars have suggested that larger newspapers turn to the journalistic practices of community papers. Altschull (1996) argued that larger newspapers are undergoing a crisis of conscience and can learn from the community journalism's approach. Terry (2011) has argued that it is because community journalists do not embrace long-standing journalistic norms such remaining objective

and detached that they have remained viable to their communities in the emergent media era. Meyrowitz (1995) dubbed the concept “local journalistic logic” in his research on the community press. Simply put, Meyrowitz contended that community journalists are close enough to their audiences that they know what readers want and are not afraid of seeking local leaders’ and readers’ input on news coverage – an argument recently supported by Kirch (2016) in his study on community newspapers and their willingness to cover third-party candidates more than other media segments. Terry has also gone so far as to suggest the community journalism approach is the future of journalism: To survive, he says, larger media must learn to be fully engaged – living, working and actively participating in the community they serve.

However, other scholars have argued the small-town newspapering approach to journalism does operate within constraints, notably those is community structure. Scholars have paid particular attention to the effects of community pluralism – the degree to which a community is diverse in demographics, ideas, and beliefs – on news content and news production (Berkowitz & TerKeurst, 1999; Donohue, Olien, & Tichenor, 1997; Hindman, 1996). It might be argued that journalists working in a small and relatively homogeneous community are more influenced by its structure than are their counterparts at larger newspapers both because individual community journalists produce a greater volume of local content and because they are themselves local residents (Howe, 2009). Both factors ultimately might influence what does and does not get reported and published.

In general, community newspapers, specifically small, weekly newspapers, are an understudied field of the media industry, and scholars have argued they deserve more study (Emke, 2001; Lowrey, Brozana, & Mackay, 2008; Hatcher & Reader, 2012; Radcliff & Ali, 2017). At a time in which descriptive data show, and are highlighted above, local community newspapers are remaining important to the communities they serve despite a chaotic media landscape, and this researcher contends it is crucial to contemporarily theorize the practices, strategies, and norms employed by these media in order to further understand the news produced in small, rural communities – a segment of the media industry that seems to be surviving, some cases thriving, in the digital era.

Sociology of News

In an attempt to understand community newspapers and their news, this research draws from the sociology of news interpretive lens, which assumes that news is socially constructed (Roshco, 1975) – meaning external and internal forces influence news and how it gets presented. This approach, which began to emerge in journalism studies in the 1970s with the work of trained sociologists with an interest in news, focuses on how news is constrained by journalistic routines (Tuchman, 1978/1997; Fishman, 1980), relationships with sources (Sigal, 1973; Gans, 1979; Berkowitz, 2009; Schudson, 1989; Berkowitz and Beach, 1993), expectations of the news profession (Breed, 1955; Ryfe, 2012), organizational bureaucracies (Epstein, 1973), and newsroom interactions (Tunstall, 1971).

While the pool of scholarship aimed at understanding news and news production is rather large, this research is heavily guided by Shoemaker and Reese’s (2014) “Hierarchy of Influences” model in order to understand the forces that shape small-town weekly newspaper news content. Shoemaker and Reese have contended that news is influenced on four levels -- personal views and roles of journalists, newsroom routines, media organizations, external pressures, and media ideology.

While this researcher recognizes Shoemaker and Reese's (2014) levels of analysis of external pressures, media ideology, and individual, the researcher believes examining these levels is out of the scope of this particular research. Instead, this researcher has chosen to focus primarily on the levels of analysis of organization and routines in Shoemaker and Reese's model in order to better understand the factors that might affect small-town news content and the decision-making of news workers.

The Organization as Level of Analysis. The organization as a level of analysis, according to Shoemaker and Reese (2014), stresses that media content is produced in an organizational and bureaucratic setting. In order to understand how news is made, Schudson (1989) has argued that it is important to understand the social environment – the bureaucratic process of the news organization – in which it is produced. This level of analysis focuses primarily on the effects of ownership, economics, advertising, and organizational policies on news production.

Research has shown that the economic goals and requirements – maintaining audiences, building advertising revenues, following government restrictions, and staying within financial budgets – of a media organization affect news content (Epstein, 1973; Tunstall, 1971; Eliasoph, 1997; Bagdikian, 2004; Soley and Craig, 1992; Craig, 2004; Eckman and Lindlof, 2003). Type of media ownership has also been found to have an effect on news content (Roach, 1979; Lacy, 1991; Dunaway, 2008; Shoemaker and Reese, 2014).

Another influence explored within the organizational level of analysis is organizational policy. Sociologist Warren Breed (1955), in his classic study on news making, revealed that publishers and media organizations enforce rules, or policies as he calls them, of journalism. The rules, according to Breed, are learned through a socialization process, including watching what other journalists do or do not do.

Routines as Levels of Analysis. Under Shoemaker and Reese's (2014) model, routines as a level of analysis explore how news workers do their jobs. A considerable amount of scholarship has revealed the routine practices of journalists and media organizations (Tuchman, 1978/1997). In his ethnographic study of reporters, Fishman (1980) revealed that “the beat” provides guidance for journalists so that they know where to go and whom to see. Relying on sources is also a routine practice for journalists. Research has shown that the relationship between source and journalist is central to the production of media content (Sigal, 1973; Berkowitz, 2009; Schudson, 1989; Berkowitz and Beach, 1993).

Research Questions

While the literature detailed above on community journalism and sociology of news is far from exhaustive, the researcher feels the works are useful to readers as they explore the research presented in this study, which is intended to serve as a contemporary exemplar for understanding the production of news for small-town weekly newspaper news workers. Specifically, this research aims to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the key practices, strategies, and norms of news production for news workers at small-town weekly newspapers?

RQ2: How do the levels of influences outlined in the literature affect these news production practices, strategies, and norms for news workers at small-town weekly newspapers?

Method

This study, under the community journalism and sociology of news conceptual frameworks, and through the analysis of newsroom observations and interviews with news workers, aims to understand how external and internal influences affect how journalists do their jobs. For this study, the researcher observed the newsrooms and interviewed the news workers of three weekly newspapers in rural communities in southeast Iowa between December 2014 and January 2015. All staff members – a total of 19 – were interviewed because newspapers in small towns have few staff and often the editorial and the advertising departments overlap – meaning duties may be interchangeable. To protect their confidentiality, as well as the identity of the newspapers, pseudonyms, which are detailed in Appendix A, have been assigned to each news worker and newspaper.

To understand news decisions that people make in weekly newspaper newsrooms, the researcher used ethnographic methods that enable discovery of the perspectives of research subjects. Singer (2009) has argued that interviews and observations provide insight into the human element of news making. For this study, the researcher defined small-town weekly newspaper as a newspaper with a circulation of less than 5,000 published once a week in a town of fewer than 3,500 residents. The researcher selected as field research sites three small-town weekly newspapers to observe news production strategies and to interview news workers. These particular newspapers were selected as part of a larger research project, and they were accessible to the researcher on a daily basis.

All three newspapers have a different organizational structure, which created the potential for comparative analysis. For each newspaper site, the researcher observed two news cycles, equating to a total of six weeks of newsroom observations. In addition to observing the sites, the researcher conducted in-depth interviews with publishers, editors, reporters, photographers, and advertising representatives in order to understand news production in the community. Interviews were digitally recorded, and the researcher adhered to local Institutional Review Board guidelines.

The interview data and observation field notes were analyzed through the use of textual analysis, an inductive process of reading and re-reading and conducting line-by-line coding that is considered appropriate for qualitative data analysis (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). Guided by the community journalism and sociology of news literature, and as anticipated, thematic categories and patterns emerged from the data and provided meaningful insight about news workers and their news-making strategies.

Findings

As previous research has shown (White, 1949; Gans, 1979; Ericson, Baranek, & Chan, 1987; Heider, 2000), news workers' news production practices, strategies, and norms are a social construction. Interviews with and observations of weekly news workers in this study indicated that news in small towns is also a social construction, and it is constrained by organizational structure and routine practices of journalists. These constraints affect how news workers decide

what is news, whom they use as sources, how many stories they write, the rhythm of the work day and week, how many pages are in the upcoming week's edition, what and how many special sections are produced each year, and the overall morale of the newsroom.

Organizational structure – Ownership

Previous literature (Roach, 1979; Lacy, 1991; Dunaway, 2008; Shoemaker and Reese, 2014) has contended that different types of ownership might have different end goals. This study encompassed newsroom observation and interviews with news workers at two independently owned newspapers (*The Times* and *The Herald*) and a corporately owned newspaper (*The Bugle*). The findings reveal that ownership structure does influence the production practices, strategies, and norms for news workers at small-town weekly newspapers.

News workers said it is important for the newspaper to have local ownership or at least some form of local management. The local connection, they said, helps build support for the newspaper in the community. "I wished it still was locally owned. Everyone knew (previous owner), and that made everyone want to support him," said Carrie at *The Bugle*. "I think it brought readership in because he was local and everyone knew him. I think we would still have a printing press. More people would be employed, but times have changed."

Susan at *The Times* said local ownership builds trust between the newspaper and its readers. "They trust (owner) because he grew up here. He's a local boy. He's full of integrity, and he's fiercely loyal to his employees," she said. And for Randel, news editor at *The Herald*, the goals of a locally owned weekly newspaper are different from the goals of newspapers owned by larger corporations. "Weeklies are surviving because they are focused and they focus on their communities. The larger media, it's about greed," he said.

The findings indicate ownership structure also plays a significant role in how the news workers perceive the company's interest in the community. For the news workers at *The Times* and *The Herald*, having a local owner means the paper will produce relevant news content for its audience. Their perceptions are supported through the interviews with the local owners, who talked about their readers as friends and neighbors. These local owners said they feel they are as much a part of the community as they are recorders of what happens in the community. And it is that connectedness to their communities that seems to motivate them, according to the findings, which supports previous arguments made by Kennedy (1974) and Robinson (2013). One of the co-owners of *The Herald* said the readers are what have kept her holding on to the paper for more than a decade. She said she thought about selling the paper years ago because of personal reasons, but decided not to sell because she said the community needed the local paper. "We've had some pretty trying years ... but the community heard and told us not to sell. The community becomes your family, and I felt like if I left, I'd be hurting my family," she said.

The observations and interviews at *The Bugle* indicated that the change in ownership in 2001 and a consolidation process in 2009 impacted the news workers' perceptions of their jobs. The news workers said they and their newspaper face constant uncertainty. Since ownership changed at the newspaper, the staff has been reduced dramatically – from 40 to six. In the fall of 2014, the owner eliminated the pagination and layout design duties for the staff at *The Bugle* and transferred those duties to a central design studio in a different city. The news workers said they were told the transfer of duties was to help free up their time so that they could produce more local content. That, they said, had not been the case.

On Mondays, the local news workers at *The Bugle*, instead of writing stories, have had to watch the page layout process unfold on their computer screens in real time. They have to watch, they said, because the designers are technically talented but do not have an understanding of what is news to the local community. “Some weeks we’ve had really good-looking pages, but other times we would have liked them to be different,” said Derrick at *The Bugle*. “We watch to make sure the names are spelled correctly, which is one of our keys here.” Sandra at *The Bugle* explained that small details are important to small communities. For example, she said she was frustrated that not all of the obituary photos on the Family News pages were the same size. In small towns, she said, different sized photos have negative implications for how the community feels about the newspaper’s desire to be fair to all community members.

The changes, the news workers at *The Bugle* said, have affected their relationships with the owner and management. “There’s no social cohesion here right now. We all just come in and do our jobs and go home. There’s no camaraderie,” said Carrie of *The Bugle*. Sandra at *The Bugle* added:

The morale, it sucks. We’re losing our employees. . . . It’s not good. And the public knows because we don’t have the staff, we don’t have the coverage we’ve had in the past. Last month, subscriptions and payments began to be processed out of the area and people now send their checks to some place out of the state. It’s not a happy place to be right now.

Sandra at *The Bugle* said it became apparent to her the external outside management does not seem to understand the workflow of the weekly newspaper when they sent the entire staff to another city to learn the new computer system the week before Christmas – a time when there is limited staff and hours to produce the newspaper. “That was planned by someone who doesn’t understand weekly newspapers, I’m guessing,” she said.

Advertising

“How many pages are we going to have this week?” asked Randel at *The Herald* during a weekly editorial meeting. “It depends on the ads,” responded Kristen.

This interaction was the repeated opening line for the two weekly newspaper-planning meetings observed by the researcher at *The Herald*. While the other two newspapers did not have the same vocal exchange, the observations from this study suggested that the number of pages typically is determined by the volume of advertising and legal notices, thus affecting the space available for news each week.

The findings reveal that advertising and editorial content go hand-in-hand in weekly newspapering. The number of ads dictates page numbers for each edition, but the editorial content has implications for advertising. This was evident when Ellen at *The Bugle* talked about how the newspaper’s coverage of certain topics can and does offend some community members, particularly business owners, which leads to those community members choosing to not advertise with the newspaper. “Editorial content affects everything. There’s a lot of sensitivity in a small town, and it all comes back to advertising. When we had the official embezzle money, we have to tell that story, but then there is the other group like her family and friends. It’s a fine line between advertising and editorial content that can get pretty tough,” she said.

Weekly publishers were divided on the extent to which advertising revenue in small communities supports weekly newspapers. “Advertising is still good, but not as good as it used to be. Legals are still strong. Classifieds are still healthy in a county seat town. Craigslist hasn’t killed us,” said Dan at *The Times*. But Kristen at *The Herald* had a different opinion. “Advertising in a small community with a small business base, it’s not enough advertising to keep this business going. The big businesses have all cut way back on print advertising, so we are having to find unique ways to get that money,” she said. Advertising, Ellen at *The Bugle* said, is a challenge because small towns aren’t growing. “It’s tough. Businesses aren’t starting up all the time here. We might get one to two businesses a year, but in (a larger city), there’s a new one every day.”

Most of the news workers at *The Times* and *The Herald* contribute to finding and getting advertisements – for them, it is not an issue of following the long-standing journalistic norms of not blurring editorial and business needs and avoiding having conflicts of interests with sources or organizational economic needs, it is simply part of their job as community journalists. While producing the winter sports preview tab, James at *The Times* was not only in charge of writing the news stories and taking the photographs, he was also in charge of the advertisements for the entire special section.

At *The Herald*, it is not uncommon to hear the news workers talk about asking sources to buy advertisements while interviewing them for stories, especially stories created for special sections. Kristen at *The Herald* said the practice is good business sense because the journalist who knows a business owner is in the best position to ask for advertising support.

These results suggest that although advertising in smaller communities seems to be getting tougher, news workers believed small towns want to support their local newspapers. “They want the paper to continue, and they know that for that to happen they have to do business with us,” said Ellen at *The Bugle*, adding, “We really need to cut back on special sections. We did have a couple of years ago one (special section) every week. (Owner) doesn’t understand. They fill special section with canned copy. We can’t do that here. It has to be local copy for it to sell.” The special sections, which are considered moneymakers for all three weekly newspapers, do take their toll on news content, said Sandra at *The Bugle*. “Special sections are important. They make money, but it’s additional work for the writers,” she said.

Organizational policy

Each of these three small-town weekly newspapers have organizational policies and rules. Analysis of the data yielded three consistent themes related to organizational policies and rules. The first is deadlines. Weekly newspapers are published once a week. And while deadlines are important for most media, they are vital to small-town weeklies because these news outlets get one shot a week at producing a print product. At the newspapers in this study, the news workers all depend on each other to adhere to the deadlines because there is no one else in the newsroom who can report on the story and write about it. Furthermore, there is little hyperlocal wire copy to fall back on when there are news holes.

The second consistent policy is about not taking unnecessary time off from work. When one news worker at a small-town paper is absent from work, it can create an enormous amount of chaos and work for the other news workers. News workers at *The Times* joked about missing work on page layout days. “No one can die on Tuesdays,” said Leya. Weekly newspapers also have an unwritten rule when it comes to taking time off – news workers must

do their work before they leave for the time off. As Ellen at *The Bugle* prepared to be absent from the job for six weeks for a medical procedure, she detailed the work she had done in preparation for her absence: “I planned ahead. I looked at last year’s papers and called the customers to tell them I was going to be gone and did as much ahead stuff as possible,” she said.

Finally, the third consistent policy is that news workers at small-town newspapers must know how to manage time well without being micromanaged. The weekly newspaper journalists said they have learned how to do their jobs without hands-on editing and instruction from a line of editors and/or the publisher. The publishers and staffers said none of the news workers are micromanaged. For Dan, the publisher of *The Times*, micromanaging is “counterproductive.” “We have the right people, so I just let them do it,” he said.

The Herald is the only newspaper of the three weeklies that holds regular editorial meetings. However, the meetings seem to be less about managing and more about planning. The publisher of *The Herald* does not give instructions of how to do stories or what sources to talk to. Nor does she critique staffers’ work. Instead, meetings seem to be an opportunity to discuss what is happening in the community and to build camaraderie.

Routines

The newsgathering practices, strategies, and norms of news production for news workers in small-town weekly newspapers are highly routinized. Routine practices of news workers, according to the literature, enable journalists to deal with the unexpected (Tuchman, 1978, 1997). The findings in this study suggest journalistic routines might be even more influential on weekly newspaper journalists than for journalists in bigger cities because small-town weekly newspapers do not have the resources that larger daily newspapers often have, including a diverse readership and source pool, staff members, advertising opportunities, and money. Therefore, having set routines for each weekly newspaper news worker, and everyone knowing those routines, is vital to the production of the news in small towns.

Observations and interviews with news workers reveal a predictable rhythm of the journalists’ typical news week. The observations and interviews also reveal the similarity of the workdays and workweeks for the news workers, despite working and living in entirely different communities. The following is a typical observed workweek routine for most of the news workers at the three different newspapers:

- Monday: Finishing writing stories for the week’s paper and attending possible night city council meeting.
- Tuesday: Layout day, which means placing ads and content on the pages.
- Wednesday: Paper is published; catching up on stories from the previous week; writing Monday’s meeting story if need be; and attending possible night meeting.
- Thursday: Trying to spend time out of the office; conducting interviews; working on features; possibly attending government meeting in the evening.
- Friday: Preparing for the weekend and working on news stories.
- Weekend: Attending community events if necessary for content, particularly for photos, in following week’s newspaper.

Many of the news stories published in small-town weekly newspapers also are predictable. For example, all of the newspapers annually featured, or have featured in the past,

special sections and/or special pages – commonly referred to as “tabs.” Examples of topics include women in business; agricultural updates; salutes to local volunteers, doctors, farmers, cheer and dance squads; sports previews; a summer youth baseball page; home improvements; and fair results. These “tabs” tend to be published about the same time every year.

The findings show that these special sections, when built with completely local content, are a revenue source for the weekly newspapers. The local content is vital to attract local advertisers, said Ellen at *The Bugle*. “(Owner) doesn’t understand. They fill special section with canned copy. Oh lord, that doesn’t fly here.” Randel at *The Herald* talked during the 2015 yearly editorial planning meeting about how important the Little League summer tab is to the community. “It sells newspapers,” he reminded the rest of the staff.

The findings also suggest beat reporting is crucial to the production of news in small towns. As mentioned previously, staff resources are limited, so beat reporting becomes a guide for journalists in where to go and whom to see. The news workers for the three newspapers in this study all cover specific beats, particularly government beats. It is through these designated beats that the journalists, as Tuchman (1978) contended, know where to be, when to be there, and whom to talk to for specific information.

Tuchman (1978) also has contended that journalists typify news stories to help them understand how to gather news information for their stories. The findings of this study suggest Tuchman’s notion of typifications are useful to the production of news in small towns for news workers primarily because they are pressed for time. For instance, small-town news workers realize there are different kinds of news stories and they generally typify government and crime stories, as well as sports stories. By knowing what kind of stories they are working on – typifying – the news workers know what steps to take to complete their work. For example, the news workers all thought government and major crime stories need to be placed on the front pages of the newspaper and need to be written in time for the next edition if possible because they considered these stories “hard news.”

On the other hand, the news workers deemed “soft news” as not as urgent and were not in a rush to finish those stories or get them in the newspaper. By typifying news stories, the news workers also understood how to report on the stories. They knew to call ahead of meetings to find out what was expected to take place at the meeting and they knew whom to call the morning after the meeting for clarification and verification.

Time and Staffing

The findings suggest that routine news and news gathering practices, strategies, and norms are vital to the weekly newspaper for two main reasons that go hand-in-hand: limited staffs and limited time. *The Times* has six staff members, including four reporters; *The Herald* has six staff members, including three reporters and *The Bugle* has six staff members, including three editors who double as reporters. *The Times* and *The Bugle* have a full-time sports editor. *The Herald*, on the hand, relies on all three of its local reporters to cover the sporting events. News workers said they feared the communities would not be adequately served if they lost staff members because staffs are already stretched very thinly, even too thinly.

But the findings also reveal that the small staffs try to do the best they can with the resources they have. The news workers for this study repeatedly said they work between 40 and 60 hours a week. To get the news, Derrick at *The Bugle* said the staff makes adjustments. “If we can’t make meetings, we will leave a tape recorder. And sometime we just have to make phone

calls after the fact. It's not ideal, but it's a necessity with our staff and making the best use of our time," he said. And for James at *The Times*, being busy is just part of being a community journalist; he described a night of covering sports in which he traveled back and forth between two communities to get photos from four different games.

The once-a-week publishing day can also be a constraint on newsgathering practices for weekly newspaper journalists. For example, the staffs in the three communities attend nightly meetings on Monday nights. While they recognized the journalistic news value of timeliness, they noted that it is very difficult to turn a story around before publication day on Tuesday or Wednesday because by the time the meetings are over, the content deadline has passed. While balancing their duties as reporters, most of them also are responsible for page layouts and proofing of the pages. In addition, most events in small communities that create visuals for the paper occur on weekends. In addition to issues of timeliness, this creates workload issues for staffers, who also are responsible for handling the photos, including cropping them and writing captions.

But the findings also indicate that the small-town news workers understand the importance of often working long days Mondays through Fridays and attending weekend events in the community. They feel it is important to report on news in the community. And while they openly talked about missing being home with families, they also said doing those things are just part of the job.

Loyalty to the newspaper

As it turns out, most small-town newspaper news workers in this study are not drive-by journalists, meaning they are not at the newspaper to simply collect clips for their journalistic portfolios. In fact, most of the news workers interviewed for this study are veteran employees at their newspapers. For instance, Dan at *The Times* has been working in the weekly newspaper industry since 1977. Jane at *The Times* has been a reporter in the same community for 34 years. At *The Herald*, Elizabeth has been a journalist for weeklies since the 1970s, and Kristen has been working at the same newspaper for 19 years. And at *The Bugle*, Brian has been covering sports on and off in the community for 40 years, while Sandra has been in her position for 27 years. The other news workers ranged in employment from three to 10 years at the newspaper, and they all said they expected to continue to work for the paper for years to come or until they retire or leave the newspaper industry entirely.

The reasons why so many of the news workers have stayed at their newspapers vary, but the majority of the news workers attributed their longevity to being passionate about their communities. For all of the news workers, the communities they work in are the communities they call home. For the staff at *The Times* and *The Herald*, the commonality between members was their shared sense of loyalty toward their publishers, as well as the family-like environment in the work place. Also, most of the news workers said they enjoyed the flexibility of the job, including being able to take their car into the auto body shop on a Wednesday morning or being able to take their spouses and/or grandchildren to events that they are covering over the weekend.

Community Structure and Audience

The findings reveal that place, geography, and community structure also affect news practices, strategies, and norms of news workers in small-town weekly newspapers. Most of the literature on local media considers communities as places with physical geographical locations with distinct boundaries (Ball-Rokeach et al., 2001; Stamm, 1985; Byerly, 1961; Janowitz, 1952). But for Harley (1989), communities are more than just geographical locations depicted as points on a map. They also are social constructions (Massey, 1994; Anderson, 2006; Morley, 2009) made up of different languages, religions, politics, economics, and people.

News work at weekly newspapers is influenced by audiences. The three communities in this study have older populations, which local news workers say drives the decision to maintain a strong print product and not deliver the news strictly through the Internet or go digital first. “Not a lot of our citizens have computers in their homes, especially the elderly,” said Jane at *The Times*. Another news worker said community infrastructure, including access to the Internet, in rural areas is not reliable and is another influence on digital media opportunities for weekly newspapers.

The communities in this study also seemed to have a lot of native residents and long-term residents, which is significant because the residents know each other. They consider each other neighbors even if they do not live immediately next door. “There’s a connectedness to each other,” said Leya at *The Times*. And former community members are considered friends and neighbors even if they haven’t lived in the physical community for decades, said Sandra at *The Bugle*.

The findings suggest this sense of connectedness to the place and the people drives news topics that become what the staff of *The Herald* call “normal stuff” for weekly newspapers, including the societal news such as birth announcements, wedding announcements, obituaries, club news, church news, and crime blotters. “I consider what we do here as writing for the scrapbook, writing for the grandmas. It means something to people,” said James at *The Times*. Jane at *The Times* said news in the community is “whatever interests our readers.” News workers seem to understand that the “normal stuff” might not make the news in larger communities. “We are a small town, a small community. And in some cities it’s occasionally laughable news, but that doesn’t make it less important to our readers,” said Sandra at *The Bugle*.

The audience, the community, also dictates what does not go into the weekly newspaper. For instance, all three newspapers in this study will not run a story about suicide or even mention suicide as the cause of death in an obit. News workers at *The Herald* said they usually will cover crime-related events, but in one instance a story was not written because the news workers did not think it was in the best interest of the entire community. “There was a young man who was a drug leader in the community. We didn’t cover the arrest because it was so personal. There were so many connections,” said Kristen at *The Herald*. “We didn’t really know how to cover it because do you cover it? There might have been a story there, but we didn’t cover it because it was being taken care of. We chose not to go after it because they were so well known in the community, and it would have split the community.”

Discussion

Under the community journalism and sociology of news theoretical frameworks, specifically drawing from Shoemaker and Reese's (2014) "Hierarchy of Influences" model, this research explored how external and internal influences – as outlined previously – shape the news and news production in small towns. This study aimed to understand how small-town weekly newspaper news workers do their jobs.

In addressing RQ1, the data indicate the practices, strategies, and norms of news production for the news workers at the small-town weekly newspapers within this study are consistent and inconsistent with traditional journalistic practices and standards that are traditionally taught in journalism schools across the United States and followed by larger daily newspapers. These long-standing traditional journalistic practices and rules include: the press should be a watchdog for the public (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2001); journalists should have a clear understanding of journalistic news values such as impact and timeliness (Lanson and Stephens, 2007); journalists should be objective (Ward, 2010); and journalists should avoid conflicts of interest with sources and economic needs of the news organization (Wasserman, 2010). The interviews with and the observations of news workers revealed small-town news workers recognize the traditional journalistic norms of understanding of journalistic news values, the importance of writing a factual news story, as well as the reporter not being present in the storytelling.

However, the data also reveal several of the practices, strategies, and norms of news production for small-town news workers do not follow traditional journalistic rules and standards, which supports previous arguments made by Reader (2006) and Lauterer (2006). For example, the reporters' role in selling advertisements is inconsistent with the traditional journalistic norm of maintaining a separation between editorial and advertising needs. Also, when considering what is news, the small-town news workers often chose not to write certain stories, particularly crime and death stories, because the news could potentially negatively affect the community. This practice is inconsistent with traditional journalistic norms such as being objective and being a watch dog for the public. Another practice, strategy, and norm for news workers that is inconsistent with long-standing traditional journalistic norms is being actively a part of the community, particularly belonging to civic groups and organizations and serving on their governing boards. According to traditional journalistic norms, this active engagement between news worker and community violates the rule that reporters should be free of conflict of interest with sources, which is necessary in order for reporters and news organizations to adequately serve as watchdogs for the public.

Another key finding of this study is that external and internal influences – as detailed above in this paper – affect news production and news workers at small-town weekly newspapers, which addresses RQ2. Specifically, news production and news workers at weekly newspapers are influenced by the organizational and bureaucratic setting; routine practices of news workers and their news organizations. Because of these constraints, the key practices, strategies, and norms of news production for news workers are routinized and predictable.

While there are routine workweeks for the weekly newspaper news workers, the observations and interviews for this study also revealed the news workers in this study are aware the constraints influence how they do their jobs. Are they true believers of journalism in their communities? Yes, they believe that their roles as journalists and the functions of the newspaper are to be information sources and historians. But they also seem to be realists.

The news workers in this study recognize their smaller staffs mean they hold a wider range of responsibilities than their counterparts at larger daily newspapers. They understand that advertising revenue is getting hard to find, which means they must contribute to asking sources about advertising in the paper, which again is inconsistent with long-standing traditional journalistic norms. They also realize their community's structure – specifically their shrinking communities – plays a significant role in the struggle to generate advertising revenue and maintain circulations. Also, they know the ownership structure of the newspaper is influential to how they do their jobs.

All of this is revealed in their open discussions with each other and with this researcher of how they wished they could do more but they don't have the time, they don't have the staff, the pages in the current week's newspaper are dependent on how many ads are purchased, news is more dependent on proximity of the topic than timeliness, the special sections that are produced are because they generate revenue and yet the advertising is dependent on the amount of local news copy.

And while the news workers do not seem to like the fact that their resources are limited, they continuously seem to adapt and adjust. For these news workers, the willingness to adapt and adjust to their working environments is not about doing journalism the “socially accepted journalistic” way – the type of journalism that simply adheres to the long-standing journalistic norms mentioned above – it's about survival, trust, and remaining a part of the local community. Because many of them said no one else is going to report what is happening on the mainstreets of small towns, the votes taken by local governing boards, the youths participating in the Babe Ruth summer baseball tournaments or the 50th wedding anniversaries – all of the things they attributed to informing community members about each other and their community as a whole and ultimately creating a sense of community, a sense of place. Or in the words of one news worker, “We're not on the larger media's radar.”

Conclusion

The most prominent strength of this study is that it provides contemporary theoretical and conceptual insight into community journalism, specifically the small-town weekly print newspaper. Furthermore, this research clearly shows through an examination of production how small-town news is a social phenomenon. It details, through observations and interviews, how news produced in small communities in Iowa is influenced by internal and external constraints such as the newspaper's ownership structure and the routines held by the news workers.

However, this study was narrowly focused on Iowa weekly newspapers and further limited by the fact that data were obtained from just three papers. It therefore is difficult to generalize the ideas and arguments presented in this study. That said, the purpose here was never to generalize to the entire weekly newspaper industry, but rather to begin to further understand the production of news by one of the media's most understudied topics, which coincidentally contemporary descriptive data have shown (Knolle, 2016; Gallagher, 2017; Radcliffe & Ali, 2017) remains viable and stable in the chaotic media landscape. Furthermore, the insights provided through this study lay the groundwork for additional scholarly exploration of this particular approach to news, which this study shows is often different than the approach adopted by most larger daily newspapers.

At a time in which community newspapers, including the weekly press, remain the go-to media choice for local news – indicating high levels of trust from readers – and the larger daily

newspapers continue to face accusations of intentionally producing misinformation as well as deal with continuous annual declines in circulation and advertising revenue, this researcher posits that maybe other types of journalisms can draw upon, and benefit from, the practices, strategies, and norms of the small-town weekly newspaper journalism approach.

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APPENDIX A

The following information provides insight into the news workers' roles within their newspapers.

The Times

Dan – Owner
Jane – Editor
James – Sports editor

Molly – News writer
Susan – Writes societal news/obituaries
Leya – Advertising representative

The Herald

Kristen – Co-owner
Elizabeth – Managing editor and co-owner
Randel – News editor

Lisa – Page designer
Vanessa – Page designer
Angela – Advertising representative

The Bugle

Derrick – Managing editor
Brian – Sports editor
Sandra – Family news editor
Steven – Newspaper group managing editor

Carrie – Handles subscriptions and circulation
Mandy – Oversees legal notices/classifieds
Ellen – Advertising representative