

Cultural geography: Local news fosters audience attachment to spaces and places in the digital era

Christina Smith*

Despite the endless struggles that larger, daily print newspapers have battled for years—including circulation and revenue declines and increasing digital competition—geographically-bounded, small-town, weekly print newspapers across the United States continuously remain vital to their communities in the digital age, as they remain faithful to their fundamental function as providers of reliable and relevant news to their audiences.

This essay explores why these media remain relevant to their audiences in a global society. Ultimately, the researcher suggests geographically-bounded U.S. weekly print newspapers aren't facing the same struggles as their larger brethren, the daily newspapers, and audiences across the board want local news in the global and digitally-transformed era because the local content generates a sense of connectedness to a place for news consumers by socially, politically, and economically mapping out community landscapes in a way that helps them make sense of their worlds.

Introduction

Despite the endless struggles—including circulation and revenue declines and increasing digital competition—that larger daily print newspapers have been battling for years, geographically-bounded, small-town weekly print newspapers across the United States continuously remain vital to their communities in the digital age because they remain faithful to their fundamental function as providers of reliable and relevant news to their audiences (Abernathy, 2016/2019; Knolle, 2016; Radcliffe & Ali, 2017; Still Kicking, 2018; Cross, 2019). Also, recent descriptive data (Pew Research Center, 2019; Schroder, 2019) have revealed that despite globalization and technology transformations shaping news production and news access, news consumers still want local news – relevant information that pertains strictly to a certain locality. Ultimately, this researcher argues that audiences want newspapers to provide local news in order to help them create their sense of spaces and places.

* Dr. **Christina Smith** is an assistant professor of communication at Georgia College and State University, where she teaches journalism. Before getting her Ph.D. in mass communications in 2015 from the University of Iowa, she worked in the newspaper industry as a daily and weekly news reporter for more than 13 years. As a scholar, Smith's primary research interest focuses on community journalism, specifically the role of journalism in rural towns in the U.S.

Conceptual Framework

While the scholarly literature on geographically-bounded, small-town weekly print newspapers is extremely thin in comparison to the literature on larger daily newspapers, some theoretical insights on this media segment have emerged over the years, with particular focus on the roles and functions of the hyper-local press, including their service as builders of social cohesion between community members (Janowitz, 1952), as advocates for local economies (Edelstein and Larsen, 1960), as resources for helping new residents integrate into the community (Ball-Rokeach, Kim, & Mattei, 2001), and as promoters of community discussions (Lewis, Holton, & Coddington, 2014).

Cultural and Humanistic Geography Theoretical Perspectives

To help further understand *why* geographically-bounded, small-town weekly print newspapers remain important to their audiences and *why* media consumers across the board still want local news in the digital age, this researcher contends the theoretical perspective of cultural and humanistic geography offers worthwhile insight into further understanding the social phenomenon of the need of local news in the current globalized and technologically-transformed era. Guided by this interpretive lens, the researcher suggests geographically-bounded, small-town weekly print newspapers remain relevant in the digital age because their audiences continue to think of these news outlets as trusted, reliable sources of information that will help them feel attached to community spaces and places. Furthermore, audiences across the board want local news, despite their growing unlimited access to information because audiences want genuine connections to places.

Within geographic theory, there are two dominant paradigms (Buchanan, 2009): Physical geographers who see places as geographically-bounded locations and cultural and humanistic geographers who view places as cultural and social constructs, meaning they are shaped by layers of influences (Massey, 1994). For cultural and humanistic geographers, there is a distinction between space and place. Space tends to be regarded as a geographically-bounded location. On the other hand, place is a significant social space that holds meaning to a person. For Tuan (1977), a place “achieves concrete reality when our experience of it is total, that is, through all the senses as well as with the active and reflective mind” (p. 18). In other words, places are significant to people because of the attached experiences and meaning(s) they have put on them.

For cultural and humanistic geographers, meaning gets attached to a space through the intertwining of time with social, political, and economic influences (Massey, 1994; Couldry, 2003). Moreover, cultural and humanistic geographers believe news media are among the multiple layers that assist in converting a space into a place that holds meanings for audiences by mapping out people, traditions, institutions, and politics within communities (Figure 1). Understanding the construction of space and place is important, because ultimately, places are about the human experience – the connection people



Figure 1: Diagram details the cultural and social construction of “place” as understood by cultural and humanistic geographers.

have with other people, their hometown, their nation, and/or their past (Tuan, 1977; Buchanan, 2009).

The Newspaper's role(s) in Constructing Space and Place

Over the years, media scholars have examined the newspaper's role in creating this sense of connecting with and belonging to a space, and the construction of a place – a community with meaning to its members (Edelstein & Larsen, 1960; Ball-Rokeach, Kim & Matei, 2001; Buchanan, 2009; Robinson, 2013). At the hyper-local, geographically-bounded newspaper level, conceptual insights have emerged, showing media producers influence neighborhood place identity simply through the way in which they frame the news about people and places in the community and by the types of news stories they choose to publish or not publish (Martin, 2000); generate geographic knowledge by informing audiences through news topics and stories of community official and non-official leaders, community history, and community values (Howe, 2009); create senses of place through their news coverage by serving as community advocates, boosters, critics, and watchdogs (Cass, 2006); and help people stay connected to their communities through online and print subscriptions long after they've moved (Robinson, 2013).

Additionally, the extent to which small-town presses create meaning within places for audiences was captured in Wotanis's (2012) study of the impact of a local, small-town newspaper moving its newsroom out of the area that it served. The study showed community members felt senses of loss after the move, as the newspaper helped construct and maintain the identity of the town to which it belonged. Together, these studies on the local press show the significant impacts geographically-bounded, small-town weekly print newspapers, and local news in general, have in creating spaces and places for their audiences.

Cultural and Humanistic Geography in a Global World

Over the years, scholars have argued for the need to re-conceptualize the appropriateness of cultural and humanistic geography in a global world. For example, Morley (2000) has argued television globalizes the "home," and ultimately weakens a person's local connections. Couldry (2003) has contended there is no "place," but rather a global society that is made up of "places." Sylvie and Chyi (2007) claimed in their study on the role of geography in online newspaper markets that while the Internet opens doors for media organizations to very wide audiences, newspapers do not always win over those audiences, as their content isn't always relevant. Furthermore, Mersey (2010) concluded that because of the Internet, localities are no longer distinct from each other, and therefore, theoretical models that aim to understand media use, media production, and media roles in the community have become somewhat irrelevant in the emergent media landscape. More recently, Hess (2013) argued that in light of the changing media landscape, the concept "geo-social" might best be used to describe the way in which scholars understand how newspapers create senses of identity/identities for their communities without restricting them to specific geographical spaces.

In a Global World, Hyper-Local Print Newspapers Still Relevant

This researcher agrees with the above scholars that there is a need to constantly examine how technological and global changes impact media and their influences in creating spaces and places for audiences. And while the researcher believes it is important to recognize the influences of the Internet on a person's sense of space and place, the researcher contends that audiences of geographically-bounded, small-town weekly newspapers still heavily rely on the

print products over the digital versions, unlike larger newspapers that have continued to lose print circulation revenues (Schwartz, 2017; Still Kicking, 2018). This indicates geography remains a central concern in the production of news for geographically-bounded, small-town weekly newspapers. Therefore, theorizing the function(s) of the geographically-bounded, small-town weekly newspapers and audiences' desires for local news through the interpretive lens of cultural and humanistic geography remains relevant in the current technologically-transformed era.

Conclusion

While the above exploration of weekly print newspapers through the interpretive lens of cultural and humanistic geography is far from exhaustive, the purpose here was never to present a formal study on the topic. Rather, the researcher hopes this essay lays some groundwork for additional critical scholarly inquiry into *why* geographically-bounded U.S. weekly print newspapers are surviving, and in some cases exceeding expectations, as well as *why* audiences still want local news in the digital and global age. To help answer these *why* questions, the researcher suggests future scholarship should examine the news production methods currently employed by geographically-bounded U.S. weekly print newspapers through the interpretive lenses of cultural and humanistic geography. Understanding the practices in which these newspapers construct spaces and places for their communities and readers is vital, as it is these practices that enable this segment of the media industry to remain faithful to its fundamental function as providers of reliable and relevant news to audiences in the current media climate.

Ultimately, this researcher suggests geographically-bounded U.S. weekly print newspapers aren't facing the same struggles as their larger brethren, the daily newspapers. Audiences want local news in the global and digitally-transformed era, as local content generates a sense of connectedness to a place for news consumers by socially, politically, and economically mapping out community landscapes in a way that helps them make sense of their world. Simply put, the researcher argues that this sense of connection generates personal and social identities for readers, which provides meaning and purpose to their lives, motivates their behavior, and ultimately guides them in making sense of the worlds around them (Owens, Robinson & Smith-Lovin, 2010; Oyserman, Elmore & Smith, 2012). Furthermore, the researcher contends the insights into media influences on a person's sense of connectedness to spaces and places might provide valuable lessons to newspaper organizations struggling to survive the emergent media landscape.

References

- Abernathy, P. M. (2016). The rise of a new media baron and the emerging threat of news deserts. Retrieved from <http://newspaperownership.com/newspaper-ownership-report/>.
- Abernathy, P. M. (2019). The expanding news deserts. Retrieved from <https://www.usnewsdeserts.com/>.
- Ball-Rokeach, S. J., Kim, Y-C, and Matei, S. (2001). Storytelling Neighborhood: Paths to belonging in diverse urban environments. *Communication Research*, 28(4), 392-428.
- Buchanan, C. (2009). Sense of place in the daily newspaper. *Aetner*, 4, 62-84.
- Cass, J. (2006). Wonderful weeklies. *American Journalism Review*, 27(6), 20-29.

- Couldry, N. (2003) Passing ethnographies: rethinking the sites of agency and reflexivity in a mediated world. In P. Murphy and M. Kraidy (Eds.). *Global media studies: An Ethnographic Perspective* (pp. 40-56). New York: Routledge.
- Cross, A. (2019). Community newspapers not hopeless, but must adapt. *Wisconsin Newspaper Association*. Retrieved from <https://wnanews.com/2019/04/18/community-newspapers-not-hopeless/>.
- Edelstein, A. S. and Larsen, O. N. (1960). The weekly press' contribution to a sense of urban community. *Journalism Quarterly*, 37, 489-498.
- Hess, K. (2013). Breaking boundaries: Recasting the "local" newspaper as "geo-social" news in a digital landscape. *Digital Journalism*, 1(1), 48-63.
- Hess, K. (2015). Making connections: "Mediated" social capital and the small-town press. *Journalism Studies*, 16(4), 482-496.
- Howe, P. D. (2009). Newsworthy spaces: The semantic geographies of local news. *Aetner*, 4, 43-61.
- Janowitz, M. (1952). *The community press in an urban setting* (2nd ed.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Knolle, S. (2016). Despite 'doom and gloom,' community newspapers are growing stronger. *EDITOR & PUBLISHER*. Retrieved from <http://www.editorandpublisher.com/feature/despite-doom-and-gloom-community-newspapers-are-growing-stronger/>.
- Lewis, S. C. Holton, A. E., & Coddington, M. (2013). Reciprocal journalism: A concept of mutual exchange between journalists and audiences. *Journalism Practice*, 1-13.
- Martin, D. G. (2000). Constructing place: Cultural gemonies and media images of an inner-city neighborhood. *Urban Geography*, 21(5), 380-405.
- Massey, D. (1994). *Space, place and gender*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Mersey, R. D. (2010). Reevaluating Stamm's theory of newspapers and communities in a new media environment: Toward a new theory based on identifying and interdependence. *Northwestern University Law Review*, 104(2), 517-535
- Morley, D. (2000). *Home territories: Media, mobility and identity*. Routledge.
- Owens, T. J., Robinson, D. T., & Smith-Lovin, L. (2010). Three faces of identity. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 36, 477-499.
- Oyserman, D., Elmore, K., & Smith, G. (2012). Self, self-concept, and identity. In M. R. Leary and J. P. Tangney (Eds.). *Handbook of self and identity* (2nd ed.) (pp. 69-104). New York: Guilford Press.

- Pew Research Center (2019). For Local News, Americans Embrace Digital but Still Want Strong Community Connection. Retrieved from <https://www.journalism.org/2019/03/26/for-local-news-americans-embrace-digital-but-still-want-strong-community-connection/>.
- Radcliffe, D. & Ali, C. (2017). Life at small-market newspapers: A survey of over 400 journalists. *Tow Center for Digital Journalism*. Retrieved from https://www.cjr.org/tow_center_reports/local-journalism-survey.php.
- Robinson, S. (2013). Community journalism midst media revolution. *Journalism Practice*, 1-8. Still kicking: Small-town American newspapers are surprisingly resilient. (2018, June 21).
- The Economist*. Retrieved from <https://www.economist.com/united-states/2018/06/23/small-town-american-newspapers-are-surprisingly-resilient>.
- Schroder, K. C. (2019). What do news readers really want to read about? How relevance works for news audiences. Retrieved from <http://www.digitalnewsreport.org/publications/2019/news-readers-really-want-read-relevance-works-news-audiences/>.
- Schwartz, S. (2017). NNA survey: Newspapers still top choice for local news. Retrieved from <https://www.nnaweb.org/nna-news?articleTitle=nna-survey-newspapers-still-top-choice-for-local-news--1497279875--1575--1top-story>.
- Sylvie, G., and Chyi, H. I. (2007). One product, two markets: How geography differentiates online newspaper audiences. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 84(3), 562-581.
- Tuan, Yi-Fu. (1977). *Space and place: The perspective of experience*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Wotanis, Lindsey L. (2012). When the weekly leaves town: The impact of one newsroom's relocation on sense of community. *Community Journalism*, 1(1), 11-28.