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## **Weekly newspapering : Iowa's small-town newspapers, their news workers, and their community roles**

Christina Carolyn Smith  
*University of Iowa*

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WEEKLY NEWSPAPERING: IOWA'S SMALL-TOWN NEWSPAPERS,  
THEIR NEWS WORKERS, AND THEIR COMMUNITY ROLES

by

Christina Carolyn Smith

A thesis submitted in  
partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the Doctor of Philosophy degree  
in Mass Communications in the  
Graduate College of  
The University of Iowa

August 2015

Thesis Supervisors: Associate Professor Emerita Jane B. Singer  
Professor Daniel A. Berkowitz

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Graduate College  
The University of Iowa  
Iowa City, Iowa

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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Ph.D. Thesis

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This is to certify that the Ph.D. thesis of

Christina Carolyn Smith

has been approved by the Examining Committee for the  
thesis requirement for the Doctor of Philosophy degree  
in Mass Communications at the August 2015 graduation.

Thesis  
Committee:

---

Jane B. Singer, Thesis Supervisor

---

Daniel A. Berkowitz, Thesis Supervisor

---

Brian Ekdale

---

Steven Hitlin

---

Vanessa Shelton

To my family, especially DJ

This just in: *journalism is not dead*. It is alive and kicking in small towns all across America thanks to the editors of weekly newspapers who, for very little money and a fair amount of aggravation, keep on telling it like it is.

Judy Muller  
Emus Loose in Egnar

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## ABSTRACT

Through the use of the interpretive lenses of sociology of news, identity, and community roles, this research aims to understand the approach to journalism by small-town weekly newspapers. The research explores how small-town weekly newspapers in rural America are faring in the current emergent media environment. Are these newspapers surviving the digital age or are they experiencing the similar hardships larger daily newspapers are facing, including revenue and circulation declines, and in some cases product elimination?

The research also investigates whether or not the small-town journalism approach is different than it is for larger daily newspapers by theoretically and conceptually examining the routine practices of news gathering used by news workers, the identity formations of weekly newspaper journalists, and the journalists' and community members' perceptions of the weekly newspaper's role in the community. To accomplish this, the researcher has used quantitative and qualitative research techniques, including a large-scale survey directed at weekly newspaper publishers, a thematic content analysis of weekly newspaper content, and in-depth interviews with news workers and community members, to conduct an analysis of news production in small towns in Iowa.

Focusing on small-town weekly newspapers is crucial because the close, frequent and often personal interactions of small-town journalists with their audiences create the potential for a more direct effect on community members' everyday lives. In addition to contributing to the understanding of small-town community news production, this research offers news industry leaders and practitioners insight into a different, more personally engaged, approach to journalism.

## PUBLIC ABSTRACT

This research aims to understand how news gets produced in small, rural communities in Iowa. Through the use of a state-wide Internet survey, an examination of weekly newspaper content in three weekly newspapers in southeast Iowa, and newsroom observations and interviews with journalists at three small weekly newspapers in southeast Iowa, this study explores how well weekly newspapers in Iowa are doing in the digital age, how the weekly newspaper journalists do their jobs, and what the communities think of their weekly newspapers.

This study reveals that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to journalism. The approach to journalism done in small, rural towns in Iowa is different than the journalism approach adopted by the journalists who work for the larger daily newspapers. Ultimately, this study reveals that Iowa's weekly newspapers are surviving the digital age, despite a chaotic media environment, because the newspapers and news workers are aware of who they are, what their purposes are, and who their audiences are.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

The room was full of veteran reporters, including award-winning journalists who had made it their life's work to uncover and tell the news that mattered. When they heard that the newspaper was going to use its resources to focus on reporting more local community news, they sarcastically laughed. They joked that journalism was going to resort to covering Little League baseball games and story time at the local library. I was among those in the room, and I, too, laughed. I recall thinking *that* was not the journalism I grew up aspiring to do – the Woodward and Bernstein journalism I grew up hearing my parents and journalism professors talk about. I, like many others in the room, turned my nose up at *that* journalism and scoffed.

Upon graduating in August 2008 from the University of Alabama's Knight Fellowship in Community Journalism master's program, I returned home to southeast Nebraska and began working for my hometown newspaper, *The Nemaha County Herald*, a family-owned weekly with a circulation of about 1,200. I remember thinking that the job would be a great opportunity to show southeast Nebraskans what professional, unbiased journalism looked like – the journalism I learned in my formal university training and had been encouraged to do for years at larger daily newspapers.

For the first few months in my new position at the weekly newspaper, I lived a professional life of frustration. I had been taught that the only news that mattered was news that required detachment and in-depth investigation – anything else simply filled the white space, the holes in the newspaper on a “slow news day.” My publisher and editor at the small weekly would give me assignments to take high school sports photos and to write stories that I thought equated to fluff news. I remember writing those stories but thinking

that during my spare time, I would comb through documents and look for the juicy controversial news that reflected conflict within the community because, in my mind, that was the only kind of news that mattered. And in my mind, since I was a journalism-school educated and professionally trained objective journalist, I knew what the readers in this small town wanted and needed: the in-depth investigative news, the news that stirred the community's pot.

I worked for the weekly newspaper for more than two years. Yes, I did do some investigative journalistic work. There is room for it in small towns, and neither my editor nor my publisher expected me to ignore it. They did, however, expect me to become engaged with the residents, who were my friends and neighbors, and to reconsider what kind of journalism made an impact in the local community.

During these years, my passion for journalism was strengthened. The stories that reminded me why I value journalism would never land on a daily newspaper's front page. But these are the stories that matter the most in a small town. They are about a major employer closing its doors, children excelling in school, the farming couple married for 75 years, the family pig that fetched the most money at the annual 4-H livestock premium sale, the new laundromat opening on the south side of town, and the two blocks of a residential street set to close for repaving. These are the stories that matter because these are the stories about family, friends, and neighbors that directly affect and inform the normal everyday lives of the people in the community, including the journalists who live in and cover that community. These are the stories that matter because these are the stories that also shape the community's identity for individuals and for the collective.

My years of experience in the daily and weekly newspaper industries have taught me

there is no one-size-fits-all approach to journalism: The small-town approach to journalism is different than the kind done by large dailies. For years, large daily newspapers in the United States have struggled with ongoing economic and identity crises, but it appears small-town weekly newspapers might not be affected in the same way by contemporary challenges and uncertainties. This research aims to understand where the differences may lie.

### **Purpose of this Dissertation Research**

The purpose of this research is to explore how small-town weekly newspapers in rural America are faring in the current emergent media environment. Are these small weeklies facing the revenue declines and the elimination of print products experienced by larger newspapers? Or have they been able to maintain their long-standing identities, practices, and community roles in the digital era? If the latter, what strategies are these newspapers employing to ensure that they survive and possibly even thrive?

Larger daily newspapers have been extensively studied by media scholars and used as a basis for theory building and testing. In contrast, there is relatively little scholarship on community journalism, and most of it is primarily descriptive in nature. This research aims to extend the scholarship on community journalism by using the theoretical perspectives of sociology of news and identity to examine, understand, and explain the approach to journalism in small-town weekly newspapers. The research also seeks to explore how the small-town journalism approach is different than it is for larger daily newspapers by theoretically and conceptually examining the routine practices of news gathering used by news workers, the identity formations of weekly newspaper journalists, and the journalists' and community members' perceptions of the weekly newspaper's role in the community.

To accomplish this, the research has used multiple research techniques to conduct an analysis of news production in small towns in Iowa, including a large-scale survey directed at weekly newspaper publishers, a thematic content and textual analysis of small-town weekly newspaper content, in-depth interviews with news workers and local community members, and observations of weekly newspaper newsrooms.

This dissertation research will add long-term value to the overall understanding of community journalism. Focusing on small-town weekly newspapers in small communities also is crucial because news and the people who produce it have the potential to impact, at the grassroots level, everyday lives. Although all media carry the potential to affect public opinion (Weaver, 1998; McCombs, 2014), the close, frequent and often personal interactions of small-town journalists with their audiences create the potential for a more direct effect on community members' everyday lives and views of the world around them.

In addition to contributing to the understanding of small-town community news production and news workers, this research offers an opportunity to provide news industry leaders and practitioners insight into a different, more personally engaged approach to journalism. This potential understanding of small-town weekly newspapering might ultimately help other media organizations similarly survive – maybe even thrive – in the emergent media era.

### **Context for this Dissertation Study**

Print newspapers in the United States continue to struggle in the digital era (Barthel, 2015). In its 2014 study on newspapers that was reported in April 2015, the Pew Research Center found that newspaper circulations fell again, despite experiencing slight circulation increases between 2010 and 2013 (Barthel, 2015). Ad revenue for print newspapers also

continued to decline in 2014, a trend that began in 2006, according to the Pew report (Barthel, 2015).

But despite the ongoing turmoil that characterizes the contemporary newspaper industry, community newspapers across the United States remain viable (Robinson, 2013) and relatively stable (National Newspaper Association, 2014) in the digital age. Non-academic investigation has suggested that the news community newspapers produce still matters and is significant to people in the communities they serve (Pew Research Center, 2015). According to a 2013 Community Newspaper Readership study conducted by The Reynolds Journalism Institute on behalf of the National Newspaper Association, 67 percent of residents in small towns in the United States read community newspapers (NNA, 2014). In its study on local news, conducted in association with the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, Pew (2015) reported that nine in 10 residents in the three cities studied follow local news closely, with about 50% of the overall sample saying they follow it very closely. Two-thirds say they talk about local news reported in the local paper with other community members a few times each week.

According to a Pew Internet and American Life Project report released in September 2012, small-town residents rely on and prefer traditional media, including the local newspaper, over digital formats (Miller, Raine, Purcell, Mitchell, & Rosenstiel, 2012). People in small towns rely on the local paper for civic information, including community events, taxes, zoning, local government, and crime. Most said they would be concerned if the local newspaper no longer existed (Miller et. al., 2012).

In general, community newspapers have not been investigated nearly as much as their big-city or national brethren (Lowrey, Brozana, & Mackay, 2008; Reader & Hatcher,

2011). But the above descriptive findings show print community newspapers are still important, even in a technologically transformed media era. Yet despite some previous academic research into community journalism, few contemporary scholars have tried to address the question of *why* community newspapers remain viable and stable in today's chaotic media atmosphere. Therefore, this study will add conceptual rigor and methodological diversity to the already established scholarly and descriptive work on community newspapers.

### **Dissertation Roadmap**

This dissertation incorporates applicable research questions and research methods in each of the subsequent chapters. The following is a roadmap, as well as a brief description of each chapter, for this dissertation research project:

***Chapter 2: Literature review*** – This chapter provides the necessary theoretical context in which this study lies. In addition to a historical background of community journalism, including the small-town press, the chapter explores the literature pertained to the theoretical perspectives – sociology of news, identity, and community – helping to drive this research.

***Chapter 3: What is the current state of Iowa's weekly newspaper industry?*** – This chapter offers a description and analysis of the researcher's statewide survey of weekly newspaper publishers, including their perceptions of their newspapers and their own identities as the people at the helm.

***Chapter 4: What is in the local weekly paper?*** – This chapter reports on the results of a content and textual analysis of three weekly Iowa newspapers conducted in late 2014. It focuses in particular on the nature of the content and the sources used.

***Chapter 5: How do small-town news workers decide what is news?*** – This chapter, under the sociology of news theoretical framework, explores the key practices, strategies, and norms of news production for news workers at three small-town weekly newspapers. Using an ethnographic case study approach, it draws on newsroom observations and interviews with news workers to examine how external and internal influences affect their news production practices, strategies, and norms.

***Chapter 6: Who are the small-town news workers?*** – This chapter examines the news workers in three small Iowa communities through the interpretive lens of identity theory. Again drawing on newsroom observations and interviews with news workers, the chapter aims to understand the self-perceived identity(ies) of a weekly newspaper journalist and how those self-conceptions affect news production practices, strategies, and norms.

***Chapter 7: What does the community think of its newspaper?*** – Through an analysis of interviews with selected community members, this chapter explores what community sources in three small Iowa towns think of their local newspaper and its role within the community.

***Chapter 8: Key findings and conclusion*** – This chapter ties together the major concepts, theories, and analyses that have emerged from the statewide survey of weekly newspaper publishers; the content and textual analyses of the three weekly papers; the ethnographic case study of weekly newspaper news workers and their newsrooms and the interviews with community members. Taken together, these data address the study's research questions and paint a multi-faceted picture of weekly newspapers in Iowa and the journalists they employ. This chapter also addresses why it is important to understand the industry and its current state. It concludes with the researcher's views about the future of the

small-town weekly newspaper in Iowa within the larger media landscape.

## **Chapter 2: Literature review**

This chapter provides the theoretical context in which this study lies. It also provides the historical background of community journalism, including the small-town press. In addition to the literature on community journalism, the chapter explores the literature on the theoretical perspectives – sociology of news, identity, and community – that have helped drive this dissertation research.

### **Community Journalism**

Although a community-based approach to journalism dates at least to colonial days in the United States (Karolevitz, 1985), the contemporary term “community journalism” was coined in a 1961 book by former Montana newspaper editor Keith Byerly (Lauterer, 2006). Byerly outlined how to do a form of journalism that today is commonly described as the work of weekly newspapers, small dailies, and sometimes the alternative press.

Print journalism began in the United States with the production and delivery of one-page pamphlets, most of which were religious and political in nature. However, as settlers began to head west, so too did the printer and the writers. The frontier press was born out of survival 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 journalisms (Karolevitz, 1985) that has grown wider over the past 150 years.

The scholarly literature on community journalism, specifically small-town weekly newspapers, is limited compared to scholarship that focuses on larger daily newspapers. Contemporary understanding of community journalism rests on three foundational works, by Byerly (1961), Kennedy (1974), and Lauterer (2006). All three are written as handbooks primarily aimed at people who want to do community journalism. They are descriptive and normative in nature, seeking to describe rather than try to understand the phenomenon taking place. The books do provide insight into the approach of small-town weeklies and other community newspapers but are not intended to yield a conceptual understanding of community journalism.

But some scholarly literature on community newspapers has emerged over the years. Media scholars have provided theoretical insight into community newspapers and their roles within their communities. In his foundational work on the community press, Janowitz (1952) found that the community newspaper creates a sense of social cohesion for local people. Community media have also been considered crucial to a person's integration into a community (Ball-Rokeach, Kim, & Mattei, 2001). It has also been argued that weekly

newspapers serve as a communication system among community members (Edelstein and Larsen, 1960).

In theorizing the role of the community newspaper, Stamm (1985) argued that a person's connectedness to and involvement with her or his community is interdependent with her or his local media use. Newspapers have been found to help construct communities through the use of common languages, common values, and simply through the act of knowing that everyone in the same community is reading the same thing (Anderson, 2006). Community newspapers also create a sense of connectedness to a community for people when they are miles away from a place they care about (Robinson, 2013).

Normative theory takes into great consideration the role of the media in a democratic society (Christians, Glasser, McQuail, Nordenstreng, & White, 2009). Under this perspective, the long-standing journalistic tradition is that the press – the newspaper – is supposed to serve as the fourth estate watchdog for the public (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2001). The rules, standards, and norms adopted by most journalists at larger daily newspapers and often printed in journalism textbooks suggest that in order for journalists to be successful, they must follow the journalistic norms such as having a clear understanding of journalistic news values such as impact, timeliness, novelty, proximity, and human interest (Lanson & Stephens, 2007). Also, in order to be effective fourth estate watchdogs for the public in a democratic society, the journalists must be objective, accurate, neutral, independent, factual, and fair (Ward, 2010). Also, journalists and news organizations must be free of any conflict of interest with sources and organizational economic needs in order to adequately perform their public duty as watchdog (Wasserman, 2010).

Scholars also have contended the functions of the local community press are

different than those of larger daily newspapers (Schramm & Ludwig, 1951; Olien, Donohue, & Tichenor, 1968; Emke, 2001). More specifically to community journalism, research on the role of the newspaper has shown that community newspapers tend to serve two functions: to advertise opportunities that support local businesses and to provide local community information (Abbott & Niebauer, 2000; Emke, 2001). According to Abbott and Niebauer, community newspapers generally reflect their communities rather than actively criticize them. Emke (2001), in his study of Canadian weekly newspapers and their editors, also contended the primary role of the community newspaper is to unite the community and the editors contribute to maintaining that sense of unity.

However, for Donohue, Tichenor, and Olien (1995), another function of the community newspaper is to, at times, serve as a “guard dog.” In their research on the community press, they found that the community press tends to avoid reporting on conflict that occurs in the community. However, when necessary, they concluded, the local newspaper will sometimes serve as a watchdog over the influential community members who have and/or groups that have over stepped their boundaries – exerted too much power – and disrupted the community balance.

The relationship with the audience is ultimately what distinguishes the small-town weekly newspaper from larger newspapers. Byerly (1961), who considered weeklies and small daily newspapers as community journalism, describes community newspapers as the bloodline of the community. He argued that community journalism is about the newspaper and its journalists belonging with and to a particular town; such newspapers, he said, are the voice of their community. For Kennedy (1974), community newspapers also are about their nearness to the people they serve. He noted that community journalists not only write about

people in the community but they also live among the people they write about, creating a very intimate relationship with their audience.

Lauterer (2006), who has taught courses on community journalism at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, has described community journalism – a term he applies to newspapers with circulations up to 50,000 – as a personal approach because of the level of investment that journalists and news organizations have in the communities they serve. For him, a town without a newspaper is like a church without a pulpit. More recently, media scholar Sue Robinson (2013) wrote that community journalism is about a nearness to people. She claimed that community journalism creates a sense of “home” for people and therefore remains viable.

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 community journalism’s approach of acknowledging its community attachment. For Altschull, large media need to accept that the professional practice of detachment is not always in the best interest of the community; rather, the newspaper’s role is one of influence as well as voice. Terry (2011) has agreed, suggesting that 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.

For Terry (2011), community journalism is not a theory or a method of how to do journalism. It is an attitude. Community journalists burrow themselves into the communities they write about, and they are not only surviving but also even thriving in an emergent

media environment because they are not constrained by journalistic norms such as objectivity and detachment (Terry, 2011). This proposed research will seek to empirically test and potentially extend these ideas from Terry and Altschull about community journalism and community journalists.

However, other scholars have argued that the small-town newspapering approach to journalism does operate within constraints, notably those of the 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.

Despite this handful of community journalism studies, weekly newspapers have not been the subject of much scholarly attention and deserve more study (Emke, 2001; Lowrey, Brozana, & Mackay, 2008; Reader & Hatch, 2011). In a meta-analysis of the community journalism literature, Lowrey et al. found just 108 published articles on community journalism between 1995 and 2005. Even an appropriate definition of what constitutes community journalism has been elusive, and the door remains open for more theoretically and conceptually grounded scholarship on this type of journalism (Lowrey et al., 2008).

### **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 a social phenomenon (Roshco, 1975) – meaning external and internal forces shape what becomes news and how news gets presented. This approach focuses on how news is constrained by relationships with sources, expectations of the news profession, organizational bureaucracies, and newsroom interactions.

Studies about news production began to emerge in the 1970s with the work of trained sociologists with an interest in news. Research under the sociology of news perspective has examined and revealed what is news and how news gets produced. For example, Sigal (1973) found that reporters and sources engage in symbiotic relations – meaning reporters rely on sources for information and sources rely on reporters to get their messages out to the public. Journalists also compete with one another while simultaneously maintaining supportive occupational networks (Tunstall, 1971).

News is influenced by organizational requirements and goals, including viewership counts, advertising revenue, and restrictions placed on media companies by the government (Epstein, 1973). Journalistic routines also are influential, as Tuchman's (1978, 1997) seminal study of news and journalists showed; these routines include contacting specific sources for specific stories and writing similar stories in similar formats in order to manage day-to-day dealings with news. Biased coverage can result because of the influence of journalists' assumptions about how society should operate (Gans, 1979).

More contemporary research within the sociology of news perspective has revealed that journalists are not coping well in an emergent media environment because their long-standing journalistic habits such as the informal learning of how to do journalism from peers; their reliance on the journalistic investments such as time and learned skills to get

ahead in the industry; and the long-standing constitutive rules of the industry such as being objective constrain their roles as journalists (Ryfe, 2012).

While there is a sizeable amount of scholarship that explores and seeks to understand what is news and how news gets produced, the present 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. According to Shoemaker and Reese, news is influenced on a number of different levels. They consider these levels of influences as levels of analysis. Personal views and roles of journalists are considered the basic level of analysis, while the influences of newsroom routines, media organizations, external pressures, and media ideology make up the higher levels of analysis that shape media content.

While this researcher recognizes Shoemaker and Reese's (2014) external pressures and media ideology levels of analysis, the researcher believes examining these levels is out of the scope of this research. Instead, this researcher has chosen to focus primarily on the following levels of analysis 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:

- Organization
- Routines
- Individual

#### *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 explores the organizational structure of a media company, focusing 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). Epstein found in his study that these organizational constraints also influence journalists' sense of autonomy. However, Gans (1979) and Sigal (1973) revealed in their studies on news production that constraints of news organizations merely indirectly affect news-making decisions. Gans and Sigal found that a more direct influence came from the structure of the organization, in which news content producers and revenue producers were clearly defined and differentiated.

That economics would influence news should not be surprising considering the objective for most news organizations is to make a profit, and producing media content is often expensive. Newspaper content can be influenced by advertisers (Soley & Craig, 1992; Craig, 2004), and some business models in the digital age have blurred advertising and editorial content (Eckman & Lindlof, 2003). In more contemporary times, the use of native advertising, which is advertising sponsored content produced to appear as editorial content, has increasingly been adopted by traditional media outlets as a way to generate more revenue (Coddington, 2015).

Type of media ownership has also been found to have an effect on news content. A

considerable amount of scholarship has been devoted to studying the impact of media ownership on news content. At a time when media companies were becoming more chain-owned, Roach (1979) argued that group ownership of newspapers would result in less diversity of news content.

In a comparative study on news content found in newspapers under group ownership and independent ownership, Lacy (1991) found that allocation of resources and editorial space differed between media ownership types, perhaps because news organizations under different types of ownership have different goals. More recently, in her study on media ownership and political news content, Dunaway (2008) found that corporate media ownership affected the quality of news coverage of the 2004 U.S. Senate race in Colorado by being less likely than privately owned newspapers to produce issue-related news content. Shoemaker and Reese (2014) have contended that privately owned media companies might be more willing to take risks because of owner interest, while corporately owned media organizations would be more likely to avoid risky behaviors and engage in activities shown to be profitable.

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, a former journalist, are often unwritten and are rarely discussed by journalists. Rather the rules are learned through a socialization process, including watching what other journalists do or do not do, reading their newspapers, and receiving positive and negative feedback from supervisors. Breed also found in his research that journalists comply with these rules because of ambition to get

ahead in the industry, pride to get the news first, feelings of obligation to others, and fear of not following the rules.

### *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. In her influential ethnographic study on news production and news workers, Tuchman (1978, 1997) showed that journalists stick to news routines because doing so enables them to deal with the unexpected. In her newsroom observations and interviews with journalists, Tuchman discovered the rhythm of the news work, including the need to contact the same sources for particular stories; the need to structure similar types of stories in the same formats; and the need for journalists to categorize types of stories in order to know how to report and write them.

Other media scholars have also explored how news workers do their jobs to ensure that news gets produced. Dunwoody (1997) revealed in her study on science writers that journalists who work the same news beat collaborate and share the same story elements despite producing individual work. According to Dunwoody, journalists employ this strategy so that there is a shared understanding of the news of the day.

In his ethnographic study of reporters, Fishman (1980) explored the newsgathering practices of reporters and other news workers. He studied the phenomena of "the beat." Fishman revealed that the beat provides guidance for journalists so that they know where to go and whom to see. The beat, he claimed, provides a stable supply of news for reporters. He also argued that, "the world is bureaucratically organized for journalists" (p.51) because beat and general assignment reporters follow work practices that allow them to interact with

already-established bureaucratic structures, including neighborhood associations and government agencies.

Relying on sources is also a routine practice for journalists. It is important to understand the source/reporter relationship because the content produced through this relationship has the ability to shape public opinion and ultimately shape the ideology of a society (Berkowitz, 2009). Schudson (1989) contended the story of journalism is the story of the interaction between journalists and their sources. Journalists learn about events and issues through sources, so the relationship between source and journalist influences what becomes news (Berkowitz & Beach, 1993) and is central to the production of media content.

Studies that examine the relationship between sources and journalists have found that sources may even influence the news more than other journalists. Sigal (1973) argued that news is what the source says it is. In his study, Sigal discovered the symbiotic relationships between government officials and news workers. He found that officials and reporters were interdependent – journalists were dependent on officials for news, and officials were dependent on journalists to get their messages out to the public. Tunstall (1976) also found that journalists and sources engage in a unique relationship. In his study, he revealed that journalists and sources are engaged in an “exchange for publicity.” Ericson, Baranek, and Chan (1987) also have argued that news becomes a social construction because of the interaction between reporters and sources.

### *Individuals as Level of Analysis*

Little research has considered journalists as individuals. However, Shoemaker and Reese (2014) have argued that the individual as a level of analysis is important to recognize and is the focus of Chapter 6 of this dissertation work. The individual as a level of analysis

explores how journalists' personal attitudes, behaviors, and identities such as gender, race, and age influence their roles as media producers. Shoemaker and Reese have contended changes in media environment, including the rise of independent journalists and bloggers not affiliated with specific news organizations, create a need to explore how personal beliefs, backgrounds, attitudes, and identities are affecting journalists and their media content production.

Most of the literature on the identity of journalists explores professional identity (Gans, 1979; Soloski, 1989; Schultz, 2011; Deuze, 2005; Donsbach, 2009). For example, Gans revealed in his study that journalists' experiences shape their news judgments, as well as that they base their newsgathering practices on their inherent assumptions about the world around them. In his investigation into the psychology of journalistic news decision-making, Donsbach argued that journalists have two general professional needs that drive their decisions – “a need for social validation of perceptions and a need to preserve one's existing predispositions” (p. 131).

In his comparative study on journalists around the world, Weaver (1998) argued that the relationship between the backgrounds of journalists and what news they report is important to understand because what gets reported could influence public opinion. While scholars have not overly studied the effects of journalists' personal identities on their news decision-making, some scholars have considered how personal attitudes and demographics influence news content. For example, Peiser (2000) found that personal agendas or beliefs of journalists do often influence media content. It has also been revealed that the journalist's gender strongly impacts source selection, which affects news content (Armstrong, 2004). While he did not discuss the implications of the results concerning education of community

newspaper editors in his survey, Emke (2001) did find that most Canadian weekly newspaper editors, 41.2%, held other degrees or diplomas outside of journalism, while 30.2% of his respondents reported having a journalism degree or certificate.

More recently, Ryfe (2012) has argued that journalists need to be aware of making personal connections with their audiences. He did not use the word “identity,” but argued that for journalism to survive in the emergent media era, journalists need to learn to publicly accept, and apply, their personal beliefs, backgrounds, experiences, characteristics, and attitudes – personal identities – to their roles as journalists.

Another theoretical perspective found within the large body sociology of news and fits within the context of this study is Gans’ (1979) belief that there is no such thing as objectivity and that news contains values based on journalists’ assumptions about the world around them. For Gans, journalists cannot do journalism without using their experiences to help guide them in their jobs. Through an in-depth analysis and observation of leading national news organizations, Gans identified six such underlying assumptions, which he termed “enduring values,” found in the news. He labeled them small-town pastoralism, individualism, moderatism, ethnocentrism, altruistic democracy, and responsible capitalism. The following details each of the “enduring values”:

*Small-town pastoralism* – This value takes into consideration rural and anti-industrial life. Under this value, being a small community is acceptable, needed, and wanted.

*Individualism* – This value holds individual freedom and self-made people in high regard.

*Moderatism* – This value declares that excess is not encouraged.

*Ethnocentrism* – This value proposes that Americans value their country above all

other nations.

*Altruistic democracy* – This value considers democracy is the best form of government. It suggests government officials should be unselfish and citizens should be actively engaged with their governments.

*Responsible capitalism* – Under this value, economic growth is considered a positive and government regulation of economic growth is considered a negative

These values, which are often found between the lines and require interpretation, are a form of latent content (Berg & Lune, 2004). Journalists believe them to be cultural values held by the audience, for whom the news is written, but they also are held by journalists themselves (Gans, 1979). Gans argued that if a story either validates or threatens one or more of these values, it makes the news.

Although no studies apply Gans' framework to weekly newspaper content could be found, other scholars have elaborated on Gans' perspective in ways that proved useful here (Reese, 2009; Willis, 2010). In his chapter on Gans' work, Reese provided historical context and biographical insight into his perspective on how news gets made. Reese's ultimate argument was that Gans' work is a prime example of how news is a social construction. Willis, in his book about how news influences politics and government, laid clear Gans' ultimate argument that the values journalists hold are in fact the values held by mainstream America.

## **Identity**

Because there has been little research into how news might be influenced by a journalist's personal background, beliefs, and attitudes, and because what has been done suggests this understanding is crucial, this research studies small-town weekly newspaper

workers at the individual level of analysis (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014).

Existing literature on community journalism suggests it is worthwhile to theoretically and conceptually examine journalists in small towns as people who constantly wear multiple hats, including news worker, community member, and booster. In order to understand small-town weekly news workers, this research turns to the identity literature within sociology and social psychology. The researcher did not find scholarship that examines how news workers do their jobs through the interpretive lens of identity.

According to Owens, Robinson, and Smith-Lovin (2010), people have multiple identities, which are important to understand because they provide meaning and purpose to people's lives. Identities also motivate behavior, including how one acts and carries oneself in particular situations, as well as what a person might and might not value (Oyserman, Elmore, & Smith, 2012).

According to the identity literature, an identity can be internalized and/or socially constructed, meaning environments and experiences shape a person's identity (Owens et al., 2010; Oyserman et al., 2012). In the article, "Three Faces of Identity," Owens et al. claimed that there are four major characteristics of identity types and people constantly hold identities from all four identity types. The four identity types and their definitions, according to Owens et al, are:

- *Personal* – This identity is based on the social classification of an individual into a category of one (Rosenberg, 1979). An example of this identity is: I am a mom.
- *Role* – This identity relates to the social position a person holds in a larger social structure. An example of this identity is: I am a journalist.

- *Category-based* – This identity is based on perceived membership in a socially meaningful category. An example of this identity is: I am a member of the Brownville community.
- *Group-based* – This identity is based on actual membership in a bounded, interconnected social group. An example of this identity is: I am a member of the local Chamber of Commerce.

In understanding and explaining identity formations, two foundational theories have emerged. Identity Theory (IT; Stryker, 1968, 1980), rooted in sociology, posits that a person has multiple identities, but the identities are arranged in a hierarchal salience structure. In any given situation, the most salient identity of a person will emerge based on the context of the situation.

The core assumption of Stryker's (1968, 1980) identity theory is that a person has classified himself/herself as an occupant of a role. Therefore, the salient identities that emerge, according to this theory, are identities that guide what a person does; these roles tell a person what to do in a particular situation (Stets & Burke, 2000). According to IT, a person comes to know what actions and meanings are associated with identity roles through socialization with other people and environments. For Stryker, all of the identities a person holds remain intact even while the salient identity is being used.

The other major theory often used to examine identity is Social Identity Theory (SIT). Tajfel's (1981, Tajfel & Turner, 1986) SIT suggests that people hold personal and social identities. However, according to this theory, people are motivated to establish and maintain positive social identities. Social identities might be formed because of a person's age, ethnicity, religion, and geography (Owens et al., 2010).

In order to establish positive social identities, identities that situate people within a larger society (Owens et al., 2010), people first self-categorize. They decide what social groups they may or may not fit into. After self-categorizing, people then compare themselves to particular groups in order to know where they belong. The core of this theory emphasizes group membership. People join groups that confirm their social identities. However, it is also important to recognize that people avoid groups that do not reaffirm their social identities. The groups to which a person belongs, according to SIT, become considered the “in-group,” while the groups that are not aligned with their social identities are considered the “out-groups” or the “others.” The motivation behind showing favoritism toward the in-groups, and being critical of the out-group, is self-enhancement (Owens et al., 2010).

On the surface, it might appear that these two theories are different. Identity theory looks at identity and how it relates to what a person does, or how a person performs a role, in a situation, while social identity theory is concerned with how identities reflect who one is. However, some identity scholars insist that IT and SIT are more alike than different.

Stets and Burke (2000) have contended that the difference between the two primary identity theories is more about theory language than about what the theories are actually trying to understand or explain. The scholars claimed that if the two theories were combined, social psychology would have a stronger conceptualization of the self – a person’s core anchor – and how the self uses identities. What Stets and Burke ultimately argued is that having a strong social cognition theory would lead to a better understanding of how people process identities and their motivations for employing an identity, including self-esteem, self-efficacy, and authenticity. And for Oyserman et al. (2012), an identity(ies)

is a mental construct that is shaped by the context in which it is developed. For them, understanding the social cognition – the mental processing – of an identity is very important. While Oyserman and his fellow scholars do not propose a formal identity theory, they claim that to really understand identities, researchers need to turn their attention to learning and understanding people’s mental processing of identities.

There are critics of identity research, particularly of the word “identity” as used by scholars rather than the theories per se. Brubaker and Cooper (2005) have contended that studying identity is very important but the word “identity” has become too ambiguous. They have claimed that the word is no longer used for its original purpose and has evolved to hold too many different meanings, so that the concept has lost its strength. Rather than using the umbrella term “identity,” they have argued that scholars should use words that are associated with what they are actually searching for or studying. Brubaker and Cooper propose that scholars should use terms such as identification/classification, self-understanding/social location, and commonality/groupness/connectedness instead. These concepts, they have argued, are more useful and meaningful.

Media scholars who have explored the role of identity have focused primarily on one kind of identity – the professional identity of journalists (Soloski, 1989; Deuze, 2005; Donsbach, 2009; Schultz, 2011). While the research does not examine the journalist’s professional identity through the perspective of identity theory or social identity theory, the concepts emerge in the literature. Most of the literature has focused on journalism as a profession guided by professional norms invoked by individual journalists, group socialization, their sources, and organizational constraints (Soloski, 1989; Deuze, 2005; Donsbach, 2009; Schultz, 2011). The literature does not seem to take into consideration that

journalists are people, and according to the identity literature found in sociology and social psychology, people have multiple identities, including personal, role-based, and social identities that motivate their behavior.

It is important to consider professional identities when studying journalists, but it is also important to consider other types of identities journalists may or may not hold, given that identities motivate behavior and tell people what to value (Oyserman et al., 2012). In order to truly understand journalists, scholars need to understand practitioners' identities and how those identities might or might not influence them as journalists, which gets to the core of Shoemaker and Reese's (2014) individual as level of analysis.

Considering identities of small-town weekly news workers in this research is especially worthwhile because most of the established research has focused on news workers for large media organizations, as indicated in the previous chapter. What it means to be a journalist in a small town may or may not be the same as what it means to be a journalist working for a major daily newspaper. The journalists who work for small-town weeklies may have different types of constraints, influences, and freedoms than their big-city counterparts.

This researcher uses Stryker's (1968, 1980) identity theory to explore what it means to be a community journalist. The literature has descriptively shown that being a small-town newspaper worker entails being someone who lives, works, votes, pays taxes, and socializes in the same community. IT provides the researcher with some understanding of how to ask the small-town weekly newspaper worker certain questions and what to observe. It also guides data analysis. IT hypothesizes that people have multiple identities; therefore, according to this theory, community journalists have multiple identities. The theory informs

an understanding of which identities of the small-town newspaper worker are more salient than others, and in what general occasions and specific situations certain identities become particularly salient.

The researcher also drew on Tajfel's (1981, Tajfel & Turner, 1986) social identity theory to explore how small-town newspaper journalists compare themselves to other journalists. The research is interested in whether news workers of small-town, rural newspapers hold a social identity as a particular type of journalist. It is important to understand this aspect because possible findings might suggest that the expectations of and for small-town newspaper journalists, including resources, training, and education, are different than they are for journalists who work for larger newspapers. This is potentially significant because this might be one place where the differences lie between the weekly newspaper approach to journalism and the approach to journalism adopted by larger daily newspapers.

The findings offer the potential to make a unique contribution to the understanding of small-town weekly news workers by connecting theory to what is now almost entirely a descriptive body of work. The concept of identity emerges quite often in the community journalism literature, even though the writers do not refer directly to it or to the different types of identities people carry. For example, Cass (2009) descriptively explores what it means to be an editor of a newspaper in America's Deep South. Using evidence obtained through in-depth interviews, she shows the challenge editors face in deciding which identities they want to invoke. The editors talk about remaining "objective" in their reporting on community issues – a professional role-based identity – while at the same time recognizing that they are a member of the local Baptist Church – a group-based identity – to

which some of their sources also belong.

In his book about community journalism, Byerly (1961) describes the role of a local newspaperman – someone who lives in a particular community – which can be seen as a personal identity and/or a group-based identity. But the journalist also “pounds the pavement” to be a businessman, a role-based identity, in the same community.

Another theory situated in the body of identity work that fits within the context of this study is Role Strain Theory (Goode, 1960). Role identities, which are sometimes referred to as subidentities (Miller, 1963), are part of a person’s core or total identity. Role identities, like other identity types, provide meaning for how one should behave or act in a particular social setting (Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, Snoek, & Rosenthal, 1964). Goode’s theory, however, posits that people have difficulty fulfilling their role obligations within social structures. Within the body of literature on role identity(ies), role strain is sometimes referred to as role conflict (Biddle, 1986). Scholars have noted it is important to understand role conflict because this difficulty with balancing, or the inability to balance, multiple roles can potentially have physical and psychological consequences on people (Merton, 1957; Goode, 1960; Coser, 1974). Role Strain Theory also suggests that people seek out ways to reduce the conflict between roles – role strain. Goode, the theory’s founder, has suggested there are several types of role strains that people feel, and they try to reduce the effect in various ways.

But there are critics of the idea of role strain or role conflict. Marks (1977) has argued that engaging multiple role identities boosts individual resources like energy, security, and ego gratification. He also contends that holding multiple role identities can actually improve a person’s physical and psychological well being. And Thoits (1983) found

in her study on social identities and social isolation that people who hold numerous identities are under less psychological distress and do not necessarily undergo role strain or role conflict.

While the literature detailed above on community journalism, the role of the newspaper, sociology of news, and identity is far from exhaustive, the researcher feels the works are useful to readers as they begin to understand community journalism, specifically small-town weekly newspapers. The researcher also feels the literature is useful to readers as they explore the research presented in this study, which aims to understand journalism in the context of the production of news for weekly newspapers and their news workers.

The subsequent chapters of this dissertation will address specific research questions as they pertain to specific elements of the production of news and news workers in small, rural communities. The detailed theoretical frameworks noted throughout this chapter will help guide the researcher in understanding the research data and in answering each of the remaining chapter's research questions.

### **Chapter 3: What is the current state of Iowa's weekly newspaper industry?**

To help understand weekly newspapers and their news workers, the researcher applied a variety of research methods. This chapter reports on the findings of a statewide census of weekly newspaper publishers in Iowa, conducted in November and December 2014 by means of an online survey; subsequent chapters report on findings obtained through additional methods.

#### **Methodology**

The exploratory survey of Iowa's weekly newspaper publishers had two purposes. One was to find out how well Iowa's weekly newspapers were doing in the digital age. The other was to gain insights into the perceptions of Iowa weekly newspaper publishers about the content they provide, their role as publisher, and the role of their newspaper within the community.

A survey is a useful tool to collect, describe, explore, and explain data that pertain to large populations of people (Babbie, 2013). The researcher chose to survey publishers rather than other news workers because they were able to provide information concerning both their newspaper finances and editorial decisions made by their news staffs.

Drawing from Emke's (2001) survey of Canadian weekly newspaper editors concerning newspaper content and the relationship between newspaper and community, information for this research was sought through open- and closed-ended questions about the financial situation, ownership structure, circulation increase or decrease, and content of each newspaper, as well as its history within its community. The publishers also were asked about their perceptions of the current weekly newspaper climate and the future of the weekly newspaper industry in Iowa, as well as their levels of community involvement.

Demographic information also was collected about respondents' education and training levels.

The analysis of the survey data provided a point of comparison for data obtained through the content analysis detailed in Chapter 4. It also served as a baseline for questions asked during interviews with news workers and community members, which are explored in chapters 5-7.

Names and contact information for Iowa weekly newspaper publishers were collected from the Iowa Newspaper Association membership directory, which was made available to the researcher from the INA in the fall of 2014. Membership in the INA is not mandatory for newspapers, but most Iowa newspapers are members. The INA directory listed 249 weekly newspapers as members in the fall of 2014; however, some publishers were associated with more than one newspaper. In these instances, the publisher was asked to participate just once but was able to comment separately on different properties he or she owned. In all, 161 unique individuals were initially invited to participate in the survey.

Participation was requested in multiple phases, as recommended by Dillman, Smyth, and Melani (2009). First, an email was sent to publishers as advance notice of a request to participate in an Internet survey on weekly newspapers. A second email asked the publishers to participate in a University of Iowa Qualtrics web-based survey, estimated to take 15 minutes to complete, and a third email was sent to initial non-respondents as a reminder of the importance of their participation in the study.

Two changes to the initial plan were necessary. First, because half a dozen publishers were no longer associated with the newspapers listed in the INA membership directory, the researcher removed those publishers from the distribution contact panel on Qualtrics,

leaving a final respondent pool of 155 publishers.

A more substantive change involved shortening the original survey in order to boost the response rate. After the first three emails described above, only 48 publishers had completed a survey, a response rate of 30.9%. A condensed version that could be completed in five minutes or less was then emailed to the remaining 108 non-respondents. Another 10 publishers completed the shortened survey, for a total of 58 respondents, a 37.4% response rate for the two versions of the survey combined.

Confidentiality was ensured for all survey participants and their responses, following guidelines of the University of Iowa Institutional Review Board, which approved the human subjects research for this dissertation study. All research data were stored in a locked drawer in the researcher's office on the university campus.

Descriptive statistics were used to analyze responses to the closed-ended questions, providing an overall picture of weekly newspapers in Iowa and the perceptions of their publishers. To analyze the open-ended responses, the researcher read and re-read each response, conducting line-by-line coding in order to identify thematic categories and patterns. This inductive process is considered appropriate for qualitative data analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

An in-depth analysis of the data and the implications they have on the weekly newspaper industry in Iowa will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 8 of this dissertation. The survey data were used to address the following research questions:

RQ1: How are Iowa's weekly newspapers faring in the digital age?

RQ2: What are publishers' perceptions about their communities and how best to serve them?

RQ3: How do publishers think of their own role and the role of their newspaper within their communities?

The initial survey was divided into seven major themes. The first theme involved markers of newspaper success; a question asking how publishers believed Iowa's weekly newspapers in general are doing in the digital age was followed by questions about individual newspapers, including financial success, advertising revenue, devoted advertising space, and circulation levels. The second theme focused on digital media, online products and the use of social media to promote products. The third theme covered ownership and ownership structure, while the fourth focused on content, including news topics and news sources. The fifth theme concerned the role of the newspaper, including what publishers believed their readers wanted from the newspaper, the relationship between newspaper and community, and the roles and functions of community newspapers. The sixth theme focused on identity issues, including behavior as a publisher; questions also covered responsibilities. The seventh theme involved demographic information such as education and training, as well as years as a publisher; respondents also were asked why they chose to work in community newspapers. A complete copy of the survey is provided in Appendix A.

The short survey was divided into four themes. The first asked questions concerning how Iowa's weekly newspapers in general are doing in the digital age and information about individual newspapers, including financial success, advertising revenue, devoted advertising space and circulation levels. The second topic focused on ownership and ownership structure. The third topic focused on behavior as a publisher and asked questions about responsibilities as publisher, questions regarding identity and satisfaction of position within newspaper. The fourth topic focused on demographic and personal information such as

education, years as a publisher, training and why the person chose to work in community newspapers. The short survey eliminated questions concerning digital media use, content, and role of the newspaper. The questions used in the short survey are noted in Appendix A.

## Findings

As previously stated, the researcher had to create and distribute two surveys to publishers in order to boost the study’s response rate. Because of that, categories within the following findings have incorporated the two studies. The categories that show combined data results are: how weekly newspapers in Iowa are faring in the digital age; ownership of weekly newspapers; identities, roles and responsibilities of weekly newspaper publishers; demographics and personal information of weekly newspaper publishers; and an open-ended question concerning additional comments about weekly newspapers. Although there were some response differences between the two surveys, responses to the shorter survey broadly supported the findings from the longer initial survey. Because the two surveys had the same audience and asked the same questions, with the exception of omitted questions in the short survey as explained above, the researcher has folded the data results of both surveys in the below findings section.

*How are weekly newspapers in Iowa faring in the digital age?*

### Table 3.1: General Success in Digital Age

Statement: In general, Iowa’s weekly newspapers are faring well in the digital age (n=54)\*.

Answer	Response
Strongly Agree	7
Agree	36
Neutral/Don’t Know	8
Disagree	3
Strongly Disagree	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>54</b>

\*Note: Data represent a combination of two questionnaires.

**Table 3.2: Specific Success in Digital Age**

Statement: My own newspaper is faring well in the digital age (n=54)\*.

<b>Answer</b>	<b>Response</b>
Strongly Agree	11
Agree	36
Neutral/Don't Know	1
Disagree	6
Strongly Disagree	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>54</b>

\*Note: These data represent a combination of two questionnaires.

The first survey theme considered how publishers believe weekly newspapers in Iowa are faring in the digital age. Table 3.1 indicates widespread agreement that they are doing well, with 79.6% (43 of the 54 respondents who answered the question) agreeing or strongly agreeing. An even larger majority feels their own newspaper is doing well, despite the chaotic media environment that seems to be creating crises for larger daily media, as shown in Table 3.2.

**Table 3.3: Current Financial Success**

Statement: My newspaper has been financially successful over the past year (n=50)\*.

<b>Answer</b>	<b>Response</b>
Strongly Agree	9
Agree	31
Neutral/Don't Know	7
Disagree	3
Strongly Disagree	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>50</b>

\*Note: These data represent a combination of two questionnaires.

**Table 3.4: Financial Success Compared With Five Years Ago**

Statement: My newspaper is financially better off than five years ago (n=50)\*.

<b>Answer</b>	<b>Response</b>
Strongly Agree	11
Agree	13
Neutral/Don't Know	13
Disagree	11
Strongly Disagree	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>50</b>

\*Note: These data represent a combination of two questionnaires.

Similarly, a large majority said their own newspaper had been financially successful over the past year, as noted in Table 3.3. However, Table 3.4 shows a range of views about the financial state of their newspaper compared with five years ago, with fewer than half agreeing that their paper is better off than it was in 2009 and 26.0% (13 of 50 respondents) selecting the “Neutral/Don't Know” option.

**Table 3.5: Current Advertising Revenue**

Statement: My newspaper currently has strong advertising revenue (n=50)\*.

<b>Answer</b>	<b>Response</b>
Strongly Agree	6
Agree	27
Neutral/Don't Know	8
Disagree	9
Strongly Disagree	10
<b>Total</b>	<b>50</b>

\*Note: These data represent a combination of two questionnaires.

**Table 3.6: Advertising Revenue Compared With Five Years Ago**

Statement: The advertising revenue for my newspaper compared with five years ago has ... (n=49)\*

<b>Answer</b>	<b>Response</b>
Increased significantly	8
Increased slightly	10
Stayed About the Same	15
Decreased slightly	15
Decreased significantly	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>49</b>

\*Note: These data represent a combination of two questionnaires.

The publishers also were asked about current advertising revenue (Table 3.5) and advertising revenue compared to five years ago (Table 3.6). Just over two-thirds (33 of 50 publishers answering the question) said their newspaper or newspapers currently had strong advertising revenues, but they again were less buoyant about the situation compared with five years earlier. Slightly more than a third said advertising revenue had increased during the period, while 32.6% (16 of 49 respondents) said it had declined either slightly or significantly; another 30.6% (15 of 49 respondents) said advertising revenue had stayed about the same.

Thirty-nine publishers also responded in the initial survey to an open-ended question about the percentage of his or her newspaper devoted to advertising space each week. All provided a mix of news and advertising, though the ratio varied. Most said advertising consumed between 41% and 60% percent of the newspaper each week. Fifteen respondents reported devoting between 21% and 40% percent to advertising each week, while two respondents said between 61% and 80% of their space went to advertisements.

**Table 3.7: Newspaper Circulation Compared With Five Years Ago**

Statement: The circulation of my newspaper compared with five years ago has ... (n=49)\*

<b>Answer</b>	<b>Response</b>
Increased significantly	2
Increased slightly	7
Stayed About the Same	11
Decreased slightly	26
Decreased significantly	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>49</b>

\*Note: These data represent a combination of two questionnaires.

In response to a question about circulation of weekly newspapers (Table 3.7), more than half (29 of the 49 respondents) said their circulations had decreased compared with five years ago. However, nine respondents reported increases in circulations of the weekly

newspaper(s) they own and 11 respondents reported the circulations for their newspapers stayed about the same.

*Digital media use by weekly newspapers*

**Table 3.8: Online Presence**

Statement: We plan to improve our online presence in the coming year (n=39).

<b>Answer</b>	<b>Response</b>
Strongly Agree	2
Agree	19
Neutral/Don't Know	12
Disagree	4
Strongly Disagree	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>39</b>

**Table 3.9: Requiring Payment for Online Content**

Statement: Readers of our online product have to pay to access our content (n=39).

<b>Answer</b>	<b>Response</b>
Yes, for all content	4
Yes, for some content	5
No	15
Not applicable	15
<b>Total</b>	<b>39</b>

While larger daily newspapers are figuring out ways to ramp up their online presence on the Internet, weekly newspapers seem to remain focused on their print products. Although a majority do have active websites, they remain print-first institutions, according to their publishers. However, most said they planned to improve their newspapers' online presence in the coming year (Table 3.8), with only six of 39 respondents indicating they had no plans to do so; another 12 were unsure. Slightly less than a quarter of the respondents said online readers currently are required to pay for some or all content (Table 3.9).

**Table 3.10: Social Media Use to Promote News**

Statement: My newspaper uses social media to promote news (n=39).

<b>Answer</b>	<b>Response</b>
Often	13
Sometimes	17
Rarely	5
Never	4
<b>Total</b>	<b>39</b>

**Table 3.11: Social Media Use to Obtain Information**

Statement: My newspaper uses social media to obtain important information (n=39).

<b>Answer</b>	<b>Response</b>
Often	6
Sometimes	17
Rarely	11
Never	5
<b>Total</b>	<b>39</b>

Weekly newspapers do have a social media presence, which is somewhat more widely used to promote news than to obtain it, as shown in Tables 3.10 and 3.11. However, a sizable minority of respondents indicated they rarely or never use social media in these ways.

**Table 3.12: Effect of Internet**

Statement: The Internet has changed the way our newspaper(s) operate(s) (n=40).

<b>Answer</b>	<b>Response</b>
Strongly Agree	8
Agree	21
Neutral/Don't Know	6
Disagree	5
Strongly Disagree	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>40</b>

In general, like larger daily media, weekly newspaper publishers report that the Internet has changed the way they operate (Table 3.12). Nearly three-quarters agree with this

statement, while only five disagree; another six were unsure or didn't know.

*Ownership of weekly newspapers*

**Table 3.13: Ownership Structure**

Question: How would you classify the ownership structure of your newspaper? (n=50)\*

<b>Answer</b>	<b>Response</b>
Family owned	19
Individually owned	17
Corporately owned	12
Group ownership	1
Other (please elaborate)	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>50</b>

\*Note: These data represent a combination of two questionnaires.

In response to a yes/no question about ownership, more than half of the publishers reported they have sole ownership of their newspaper(s). Asked to classify their newspaper's ownership structure, publishers were primarily divided among individually owned, family owned, and corporately owned (Table 3.13). Group ownership and partnership also were reported by one respondent apiece.

Responses to an open-ended question about number of newspapers owned indicated that most publishers owned just one (23 of 45 respondents), two (8 respondents) papers, or three (2 respondents) – “just the one, thank the Lord,” one publisher wrote. Seven publishers reported owning or having ownership in four or more weekly newspapers; three publishers said they were not the owners; and another two said they did not know how many newspapers they owned or the question was not applicable.

Length of ownership of Iowa's weekly newspapers seems to vary a great deal, with responses ranging from “don't” own it to “Our family has owned this Newspaper since 1890.” Of the 44 responses to this question about ownership, nine publishers said they had owned their newspaper(s) for 24 or more years. One respondent recalled taking over on a

particularly memorable day: “December 25, 1980. I didn’t realize it would be a lifetime commitment!!!” Another 22 publishers said they had owned their newspaper for more than a dozen years. One publisher reported owning the newspaper for six to 11 years; and only nine reported they had owned the paper for five years or fewer.

*Content in weekly newspapers*

**Table 3.14: Relationship Between Newspaper and Community**

Question: How would you describe the relationship between your newspaper and the community? (n=40)

<b>Answer</b>	<b>Response</b>
Very Strong	18
Moderately Strong	20
Neutral/Don’t Know	2
Moderately Weak	0
Weak	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>40</b>

In order to understand what news topics publishers cover in their weekly newspapers and what topics they perceive as important, it is useful to first highlight how they described the relationship between their newspapers and their communities. All but two of 40 respondents described the relationships as either very or moderately strong, and none described it as even moderately weak (Table 3.14). This belief that they enjoyed strong relationships with their readers offers insight into how well they might believe they know what matters to people in their communities.

**Table 3.15: What Readers Want**

Question: In your experience, what do your readers want most from your newspaper (n=40)?

<b>Answer</b>	<b>Response</b>
Coverage of local news/sports	31
Coverage of past and upcoming local events/happenings/people	8
Other (please elaborate)	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>40</b>

This survey of Iowa weekly newspaper publishers sought to confirm a contention in earlier research on community journalism: that one of the primary functions of a community newspaper is to disseminate community information. The data indicated that virtually all of Iowa’s weekly newspaper publishers do in fact believe that what their readers want most in their local paper is coverage of their own community; 31 of 40 respondents said readers most want local coverage of news and sports, while another eight said they wanted coverage of local events, happenings or people (Table 3.15). One respondent added that what readers want most is, “a good balance of local, state, governmental public notices, and lifestyle and leisure news.”

**Table 3.16: News Topics**

Question: How important is it to report on the following topics (n=40):

Question	Very Important	Important	Somewhat Important	Not Important	Unsure	Total
Community events	40	0	0	0	0	40
Local people	39	1	0	0	0	40
Education/schools	35	5	0	0	0	40
Sports	29	8	2	1	0	40
Government	23	14	2	0	1	40
Agriculture	18	17	2	0	3	40
Human interest	17	19	3	0	1	40
Business	16	19	3	0	2	40
Crime	13	17	6	0	4	40
History	9	19	6	1	4	39
Advice	1	2	8	18	11	40
Other topics	1	3	0	1	0	5

To obtain more details about the nature of local news, survey respondents were asked what specific news topics they consider important (Table 3.16). All 40 respondents said reporting on community events was very important. Also viewed by a large majority as very important was coverage of local people (39 publishers), local schools and education (35 publishers) and local sports (29 publishers). Most also considered other local topics at least somewhat important, but the greatest ambivalence was over “advice,” which 18 publishers

indicated was not important to provide. Crime and history also elicited notably mixed responses.

**Table 3.17: Inclusion of News Topics**

Question: How often do you include the following topics in your newspaper (n=40):

Question	Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	Don't know	Total
Community events	40	0	0	0	0	0	40
Local people	36	3	1	0	0	0	40
Sports	35	3	0	1	1	0	40
Education/schools	30	9	1	0	0	0	40
Government	17	18	3	2	0	0	40
History	16	10	11	3	0	0	40
Agriculture	11	15	12	2	0	0	40
Human interest	11	23	6	0	0	0	40
Business	10	21	9	0	0	0	40
Crime	9	17	10	4	0	0	40
Advice	0	3	8	22	7	0	40
Other topics	6	1	1	0	0	1	9

To determine if the publishers' perceptions of what news topics were important paralleled what they believed was actually published in the weekly newspaper, respondents were provided a list of topics and asked how often those topics were included (Table 3.17). Publishers indicated that their newspapers always included community events; local people, education/schools, and sports also were widely covered. The table indicates other regular content areas, as well, including agriculture, business, government, and human-interest stories. Most said "advice" was rarely or never included. Other topics publishers reported they include in their newspapers, included opinion columns, obituaries, social news, feature photos, submitted photos for youth sports, civic organization reports, health news, commentary/columnists, and health news.

**Table 3.18: Types of Sources**

Question: How important is it to include the following types of information sources in your newspaper (n=40)?

<b>Question</b>	<b>Very Important</b>	<b>Important</b>	<b>Somewhat Important</b>	<b>Not Important</b>	<b>Unsure</b>	<b>Total</b>
Local businesses	25	15	0	0	0	40
Local service groups	23	15	2	0	0	40
Private citizens	20	18	2	0	0	40
Local politicians	11	20	7	1	1	40
Economic development experts	5	20	10	1	4	40
Government press releases	5	14	14	2	5	40
Advocacy groups	4	15	9	3	9	40
Other information sources	2	2	0	1	0	5

The literature also has shown journalists in general rely more heavily on sources that are easy to access, primarily official sources including people, news releases and records. In this study, weekly newspaper publishers were asked how important they felt it was to include a range of information sources in their newspaper (Table 3.18). Data from 40 respondents indicated that most publishers considered local business, local service groups, and private citizens to all be very important sources. However, opinion was divided about a range of other sources, including government press releases, advocacy groups, and economic development experts.

*Roles of weekly newspapers*

**Table 3.19: Role of Newspaper**

Statement: Please respond to the following statements about the role of a community newspaper (n=40):

Question	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total
The community would suffer if there was not a community newspaper	32	7	1	0	0	40
Weekly newspapers serve a different role within their communities than larger daily newspapers do in their communities	31	7	1	1	0	40
The weekly newspaper plays an important role in a community's economic development	21	17	2	0	0	40
The newspaper plays a role in integrating residents in the community	19	18	3	0	0	40
An important goal of the newspaper is to maintain journalistic integrity, even if the newspaper has to criticize the community and/or its members	19	12	7	2	0	40
The newspaper plays a role in creating social cohesion in the community	18	19	3	0	0	40
Weekly newspapers consider possible consequences to the community when deciding whether or not to cover certain stories	11	21	6	2	0	40

As previously stated, one of the primary functions of the community newspaper is to inform residents of local news and events. Publishers also were asked about their perceptions of the role of a community newspaper. While none of the respondents strongly disagreed with the importance of any role (Table 3.19), several roles attracted particularly

strong support. A large majority of publishers reported they “Strongly Agree” with the following statements: “Weekly newspapers serve a different role within their communities than larger daily newspapers do in their communities,” “The community would suffer if there was not a community newspaper,” and “The weekly newspaper plays an important role in a community’s economic development.” On the other hand, in relation to the other statements concerning the role of the community newspaper, the findings also suggest there is some degree of ambivalence being expressed by the publishers toward social cohesion and consequentialist thinking in their responses of “Agree” with the statements that “Weekly newspapers consider possible consequences to the community when deciding whether or not to cover certain stories” and “The newspaper plays a role in creating social cohesion in the community.”

**Table 3.20: Function of Newspaper**

Question: How important is it for your weekly newspaper to ... (n=40)

Question	Very Important	Important	Unsure	Somewhat Important	Not Important	Total
Get information to the public in a timely manner?	30	8	0	2	0	40
Stay away from stories where factual content cannot be verified?	27	7	3	3	0	40
Concentrate on news which is of interest to the entire community?	19	16	0	4	1	40
Provide analysis and interpretation of complex problems?	12	23	2	2	1	40
Investigate local government?	9	24	2	5	0	40
Develop intellectual and cultural interests of the community?	7	18	6	9	0	40
Provide entertainment and relaxation?	6	17	4	12	1	40
Be an adversary of business by being constantly skeptical of their actions?	3	1	7	10	19	40
Be an adversary of public officials by being constantly skeptical of their actions?	2	5	6	12	15	40
Discuss national policy?	1	4	7	11	17	40

Publishers also were asked to indicate how important they believed the various roles of their weekly newspaper to be. Of the 40 publishers answering the question, a majority reported that they felt it was very important for their weekly newspaper(s) to “Get information to the public in a timely manner” and “Stay away from stories where factual content cannot be verified” (Table 3.20). A majority also deemed it important for their weekly newspaper(s) to “Provide analysis and interpretation of complex problems,”

“Provide entertainment and relaxation,” “Investigate local government,” and “Develop intellectual and cultural interest of the community.” However, a majority felt it was considerably less important or even unimportant for their weekly newspaper(s) to “Discuss national policy,” “Be an adversary of public officials by being constantly skeptical of their actions” or “Be an adversary of business by being constantly skeptical of their actions.”

*Identities, roles and responsibilities of weekly newspaper publishers*

**Table 3.21: Publishers’ Behavior**

Question: To what extent is your behavior as a publisher guided by ... (n=45)\*

Question	Heavily Guided	Moderately Guided	Neutral	Weakly Guided	Not Guided	Total
Your perception of the community’s needs?	30	11	2	2	0	45
Your role as a community member?	22	18	3	1	1	45
Your sense of professional identity within the community?	21	15	7	0	2	45
Your perception of the community’s shared values?	20	20	4	1	0	45
Business needs?	19	16	6	3	1	45
Journalistic norms?	13	17	10	4	1	45

\*Note: These data represent a combination of two questionnaires.

To help understand the perceived identities, roles, and responsibilities of Iowa’s weekly newspaper publishers, survey respondents were asked several questions about their behavior as publishers, about balancing responsibilities of publisher with those of community member, and about why they work in community newspapers. Forty-five publishers responded to a question asking the extent to which their behavior as publishers was guided by a range of factors. Most said their professional behavior was heavily guided

by a “perception of the community needs,” by a “sense of professional identity within the community,” and by their “role as a community member” (Table 3.21).

A large majority also said their perception of the community’s shared values guided their behavior, with responses evenly divided between “heavily” and “moderately” guided. On the other hand, it should be noted that all of the statements received “neutral” responses from two or more publishers, and at least one reported being only “weakly guided” – or not guided at all – by each of the possible behaviors listed. However, four said they were weakly guided or not guided by business needs and five said they were weakly guided or not guided by journalistic norms.

Thirty-four weekly newspaper publishers also answered an open-ended question in the initial survey and short survey about how they balanced their responsibilities as publisher with their position as a community member. Although responses varied greatly, they suggest these publishers wrestle – sometimes with great tension – with the fact that they are rooted in the community they serve as business people and as journalists.

Publishers revealed some of the conflicts – the challenges – that arise from what they see as a need to negotiate between their roles. One risk is becoming too involved with the community, which ultimately can affect perception of news stories:

I get involved in activities or organizations in the community in order to get to know people and get a handle on what the community wants from the newspaper. It also helps to be involved to generate story ideas and get information. However, there is a fine line in becoming too involved thus making it harder to stay neutral and zapping all my time so I choose my involvement carefully. I feel we need to cover the news no matter what or who is involved and if you're friends with everyone it's hard to separate, especially if a friend asks you to keep something out.

Resource constraints – including limited time, staff, and money – also create challenges, as indicated in this response:

I try to be involved in the community by serving on boards, volunteering for committees, participating in events, and being an active Chamber [of Commerce] member. There are instances in which it is easy to over-extend myself, due to the size of my staff and my responsibility for 2 community newspapers in 2 different towns. It is also difficult to be active in both communities, and one has received more of my time than the other one. In that instance, I rely on my staff to be the face of the newspaper in the community.

The majority of the responses revealed that the role of publisher and community member are at some level intertwined for Iowa weekly newspaper publishers. This sense of entanglement between roles was evident in the response, “We do what we can to help local groups and organizations get the word out about events being held in the community. We also are active in the local Chamber [of Commerce], plus we as individuals actually host and organize several community events,” adding that his father, co-owner of the paper, also curated and raised money for the local veterans memorial.

The following two statements show how the roles of publisher and community member are seen to go hand-in-hand:

Since we are in a small town, the publisher will be involved in community groups/activities they might avoid in a larger community. Every volunteer a small community can find is desperately needed. We use our newspaper to help the community grow in whatever way we can.

The press is free only when it is able to be economically viable. We require businesses to buy ads for commercial announcements but we are generous with our news coverage when they do – a little bit goes a long way. It is important in a small town to be engaged and involved. I and my staff members are or have been active volunteers on the library board, park board, Chamber board, Rotary board, Kiwanis, Optimists, Extension Council, community foundation and school committees. We can cover these with a unique [angle] but it would be a conflict of interest to serve as mayor or on the city council, school board or other major elective position. We have a reporter at every city council and school board meeting and seek the truth, come where it will, cost what it may. The mission statement of our newspaper is “to provide dependable, accurate information in a family-friendly way to help build and support our communities.”

Another publisher flat out described the roles as being one and the same, writing,

I see the two as intertwined. Our newspaper finds, reports and publishes news that residents need to know to be well informed and contributing member of the community. The newspaper needs to cover both good news and bad, but it also needs to promote the community by regularly reporting on life in the community – not just governmental affairs. At the [name of the newspaper], we follow a philosophy espoused by historian Will Durant: “Civilization is a stream with banks. The stream is sometimes filled with blood from people killing, stealing, shouting and doing the things historians usually record, while on the banks, unnoticed, people build homes, make love, raise children, sing songs, write poetry and even whittle statues. The story of civilization is the story of what happened on the banks. Historians are pessimists because they ignore the banks for the river.” We try to focus as much on what is happening on those banks as we do on what is happening in the river.

While their roles are often entangled, most of the respondents indicated they have been able to adapt to life as publisher and community member in a small town.

Compartmentalizing their roles enables some publishers to establish a balance between publisher and community member. They do this by mentally and physically separating the two from each other and not allowing the responsibilities to blend together, as exemplified in the following response:

My goal is to keep them somewhat separate. Our newspaper focuses on hard and soft news, and the overall goal is to put out a quality product, while not letting my personal needs get in the way. I believe it is important to understand the role of community and journalism. Journalism is designed to educate and inform the community. My role in the community individually is to be a good steward by getting involved with charities, and personal development.

Similarly, another publisher highlighted efforts to avoid conflict of interest:

I am very aware of my position as publisher, and as such I make sure there is no conflict of interest in my involvement in the community. I seek to be an advocate for all community endeavors.

For some publishers, in order to balance life as a weekly newspaper publisher in a small community means they must establish institutional and/or personal policies. One

publisher explained that this was possible “by being involved with community events but not becoming a leading role in particular organizations.”

Another example of establishing policies as guidelines for balancing roles came from a publisher who described a policy of not personally reporting on certain topics but instead assigning such stories to a reporter not involved in the story:

I try to be honest throughout the process about what is appropriate for print and what needs to be published. I help plan lots of events and work on various fundraising committees and use the newspaper’s resources (advertising space, my column, news stories) to support those events. At the same time, I don't hesitate to assign a reporter when something is going wrong with groups that I have served with. I then try to educate the group or organization on what they've done and why we have to publish it.

Another respondent also described implementing a rule to enable consistent management of the roles of publisher and community member:

I have established a policy that if I'm attending an event as a community member and haven't been informed of it for the news side, I'm a community member, not reporter. If they want coverage, at the least they could make the phone call or email about it. If I find something out from the church bulletin or through EMS training, I'm operating as a parishioner or EMT, not reporter. I've had to explain that to others.

Publishers also rely on journalistic norms to help them balance their roles as publishers and community members. For example, several publishers described leaning on the need for journalistic objectivity to help them manage their roles, as shown in this response:

I try to hear both sides of a story and don't side with either publicly. I avoid being involved in community politics.

Other publishers indicated reliance on truth-telling norms, as demonstrated by these two separate responses:

In a very small town it can be difficult to separate yourself, because you may be serving on a committee or be a member of a group that is going to get bad

press. You have to be honest and tell the truth. Once you fudge the truth, no one will ever believe you again.

Truth and integrity are of top importance. If the community realizes you operate with integrity, even when they disagree with your point of view or actions, it solidifies your role as member of the community.

Although most of the publishers acknowledged the strains of balancing or attempting to balance their roles as publishers and community members, some said they do not attempt to control the relationship between the two roles:

Tell it like it is and let the chips fall! It's hard to report on the negative at times but if it's an important story to the community, we tell it!

Another publisher said there rarely are problems in finding the right balance:

They seldom are in conflict. What's good for me as a community member is generally good for me as a publisher.

**Table 3.22: Work Motivations**

Question: How important are each of the following to you in terms of why you work in community newspapers? (n=45)\*

Question	Very Important	Important	Unsure	Somewhat Important	Not Important	Total
The chance to help people	23	17	1	4	0	45
Freedom from supervision	19	13	2	3	8	45
The amount of autonomy you have	17	13	8	1	4	43
Job security	9	17	4	6	9	45
Editorial policies of the organization	7	17	8	6	7	45
The chance to develop as a journalist	6	14	3	12	10	45
The pay	1	17	3	11	13	45

\*Note: These data represent a combination of two questionnaires.

In addition to questions concerning behavior and balancing responsibilities,

publishers also were asked to indicate the importance of various factors in their reasons for working in community newspapers. Although responses varied, factors that a majority of the 45 respondents to this question deemed very important include the chance to help people, freedom from supervision, and the level of professional autonomy (Table 3.22).

Although many publishers indicated all of the factors were at least somewhat important in their decision to work at community newspapers, there was relatively little weight given to “the chance to develop as a journalist” and to pay. Most said pay was only somewhat important or not important at all.

**Table 3.23: Job Satisfaction**

Question: All things considered, how satisfied are you with being a publisher of a weekly newspaper? (n=45)\*

<b>Answer</b>	<b>Response</b>
Very satisfied	26
Moderately satisfied	17
Unsure	2
Moderately dissatisfied	0
Very dissatisfied	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>45</b>

\*Note: These data represent a combination of two questionnaires.

The findings suggest the respondents are highly satisfied in general with being a publisher of a weekly newspaper. Among the 45 who answered a question about their satisfaction with their role, all but two claimed to be either very or moderately satisfied (Table 3.23). None of the publishers reported being either moderately or very dissatisfied.

*Demographics of weekly newspaper publishers*

This section aims to paint a broad picture of the type of people who are publishers of weekly newspapers in Iowa. Demographic information related to education, training and longevity in community journalism was collected. Questions about education and years working in community journalism, along with a question about job satisfaction, also were

asked in the short survey. Again, responses were similar to those obtained from respondents to the longer questionnaire.

Forty-two publishers answered an open-ended question asking how many years they had worked in community newspapers. A scale used to interpret the data indicated most community newspaper publishers tend to remain in the industry for many years. Only five respondents said they had worked in community newspapers for 10 years or fewer, 23 reported working for 11 to 30 years, and 14 reported they had worked in community newspapers for 31 years or more, including one who had worked in community newspapers for 50 years.

**Table 3.24: Education**

Question: What is your highest educational level completed before working with weekly newspapers? (n=45)\*

<b>Answer</b>	<b>Response</b>
High school diploma or GED	10
Vocational, business, or technical school	6
Associate of arts or sciences degree	1
Bachelor’s degree	22
Graduate degree	3
Other (please elaborate)	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>45</b>

\*Note: These data represent a combination of two questionnaires.

Most of Iowa’s weekly newspaper publishers are college-educated, with 25 of 45 respondents holding a bachelor’s degree or higher (Table 3.24). Another 17 have a high school diploma, GED or vocational training.

**Table 3.25: Journalism Courses**

Question: Have you taken classes in journalism at a college or university? (n=45)\*

<b>Answer</b>	<b>Response</b>
Yes	20
No	25
<b>Total</b>	<b>45</b>

\*Note: These data represent a combination of two questionnaires.

**Table 3.26: College/University Degree**

Question: If you graduated from college or university, in what field was your degree? (n=38)\*

<b>Answer</b>	<b>Response</b>
Journalism	9
Another communications field	4
Business	8
A field other than journalism, communications or business	7
Did not graduate from college or university	10
<b>Total</b>	<b>38</b>

\*Note: These data represent a combination of two questionnaires.

However, among those who indicated they graduated from college or university, the majority of them reported they did not major in journalism or another communications discipline or had never taken a journalism course at the collegiate level (Table 3.25).

Only slight more than a third of the publishers (13 of 38 respondents) indicated that they held a degree in journalism (nine respondents) or another communications field (four respondents). Eight of the 38 publishers reported holding a business degree and seven reported they held a degree from a field other than journalism, communications or business (Table 3.26).

*Additional Comments From Publishers Concerning Community Journalism*

The final question of the survey asked publishers whether they wished to add anything about community journalism or their responses to the questionnaire, and 16 did.

Their responses were filled with mixed emotions toward community newspapers. The comments by in large indicated publishers value their communities, their newspapers, and community journalism as an industry, as reflected in these three statements:

Regardless with what happens with the digital age, newspapers will always be important to the communities they serve.

Working with community members is priceless.

Our national, award-winning newspaper probes the tough questions but does it gently, while telling people's stories and lifting up the value of community. We are disturbed that when we have posted a reporter vacancy with the placement departments at four (year) colleges and universities, we consistently get no applications. Young people still need to be able to read, write and express themselves clearly. It is hard work but a noble profession that enhances lives.

Other responses provided insights into publishers' views of the impact of the community newspaper, its place within the community structure, and its role as a local information source, as well as the challenges and rewards of ownership.

Two of the publishers indicated concerns about the weekly newspaper industry. One reported preparations for ownership changes, writing:

I'm hanging on by my fingernails, but have put in place a sharing agreement with another area newspaper that just might be the saving of me. I think anyone who has not been bought out by a corporation will be out of business in 3-8 years. I just hope I can find a sucker to buy this place so I can retire.

Similarly, another publisher wrote,

The young business owners use Facebook and their websites to advertise and do not read the newspaper. They see no connection of the newspaper to the community and therefore do not care if it is there or not. I see the newspaper lasting for several more years but not far beyond that.

But other comments supported the weekly newspaper industry, including those from these three separate publishers:

Right now weekly papers are strong in the market place. They are holding

their values and if run correctly, meaning turning a profit, are sellable. I see them being around for a long time.

Community weekly newspapers remain strong and viable today despite all the challenges of electronic and Internet competition.

While the newspaper industry, as a whole, is going through some serious changes, the importance of a community newspaper remains. With a small town, a community newspaper is often the only regular source of local news. The “big city” media won’t cover anything in your community unless it is something quite extraordinary (“big” news).

Although the majority of the publishers communicated their passion for their newspapers and their communities, additional themes emerged. Publishers shared ideas about the functions and roles of community weekly newspapers, ranging from serving as a local booster or advocate, to creating social cohesion, to establishing or reflecting a collective identity.

The ability of the weekly community newspaper to create a sense of social cohesion was highlighted by the publisher who wrote:

I truly believe that a local newspaper holds a community together more than any other factor in a town. It reminds every one of the readers every week what the strong and weak points of the town are and how to improve on both. Reminds its readers who they are, what their connections are and what their accomplishments are, every week.

To the same point, another publisher wrote,

Community journalism – particularly weeklies and small dailies – is an essential element of a successful community. Without a strong newspaper a community cannot reach its potential. Newspapers provide cohesion and a community agenda that help the community grow.

Publishers also mentioned the role of helping a community establish a sense of identity, as shown by the comments from these two publishers:

The community identifies with its newspaper, I believe, and as such it relies heavily on what is printed week after week.

I am a firm believer that a successful newspaper in a small town has a positive impact on the town itself. It helps create local economic boosts that wouldn't happen without it. They say when a newspaper closes in a small town, the town is on a scary track as well.

However, several publishers also mentioned the challenges of working in weekly newspapers. One expressed concern with the growing older population in the community, writing:

“I do see that as the older citizens pass on that I am losing my customer base.”

Another publisher described a continuous problem of the community expecting too much from the newspaper:

My biggest ongoing problem over the years has been with the all-too-common perception of a newspaper as a service rather than a business.

Media competition also was a concern, for instance for the publisher who wrote:

All though we have been the official County and City Newspaper for more years than I have been here, small towns are tough in the modern age. We have 3 other local newspapers and 1 local shopper, so they don't have to advertise with us.

Finally, one publisher voiced a concern about the need to avoid offending the community, writing:

You have to be careful about what you print because if you offend certain people you can lose advertisers and subscribers. Both of which it takes to keep the doors open.

## **Discussion**

The purpose of this chapter was to explore how Iowa's weekly newspapers are doing in the digital age, as well gain a deeper understanding of the weekly newspaper publishers and their perceptions about their jobs, their newspapers, and their communities. Specifically, this chapter raised the following research questions:

RQ1: How are Iowa's weekly newspapers faring in the digital age?

RQ2: What are publishers' perceptions about their communities and how best to serve them?

RQ3: How do publishers think of their own role and the role of their newspaper within their communities?

In general, the data reveal that Iowa's weekly newspapers are continuing to survive and their print products remain their primary focus in the digital age, which addresses RQ1. The newspapers are not necessarily thriving in the current chaotic media environment, but their publishers remain optimistic that their newspapers will continue to operate in the future and remain viable in their communities. A number of publishers also seem optimistic about the future of the weekly newspaper industry in Iowa as a whole, as was evident in their open-ended responses about community newspapers at the end of the questionnaire.

In response to RQ2, which is concerned with the publishers' perceptions about their communities and how best to serve them, one of the key approaches to maintaining a weekly newspaper in a small community seems to be ownership structure. Most of the weekly newspapers in Iowa appear to be locally owned, according to the findings. Local ownership is significant because it means the owners live in the same communities where they work. This connection seems to help them understand the audience wants and needs from the local newspaper. However, length of ownership varies among the publishers, but most of them have owned their newspapers for years.

The longevity in ownership might also contribute to the response from publishers that they felt the relationship between newspaper and community was strong, as the majority of the publishers reported having a "very strong" or "moderately strong" relationship with their audiences. The relationship between newspaper and audience is important to recognize

because a stronger relationship indicates that the publishers are better able to understand what kind of news is important to their communities. The publishers believe their communities want information that is local, including local events, people, school news, sports, and government news. These findings concerning what publishers believe their audiences want parallel the answers they provided in terms of what they believe their newspapers actually publish. This is important to recognize because it suggests that these publishers think they are in tune with their audiences, which helps guide them in knowing how best to serve their communities.

In response to RQ3, which dealt with how the publishers think of their own role as publisher, most of the publishers think of themselves as not only working as newspaper publishers in the community, but also being a part of the community. For a large majority of the publishers, their identity as a community member is a big motivator for them to do their jobs as a publisher. The findings reveal that the publishers believe their behavior as publisher is heavily guided by their perceptions of the community's needs, and less so guided by business needs or their sense of maintaining their professional identity within the community.

RQ3 was also concerned with the publishers' perceptions about the role of the weekly newspaper in the community. In response to this question, the majority of the publishers perceived the role of the newspaper in a small community as being different than the newspaper serving larger communities. The majority of the publishers also believed the role of the newspaper was to provide information and interpretation of complex issues the communities face, as well as provide entertainment to their audiences and investigate their local governments. On the other hand, the majority of the publishers did not think a primary

role of the newspaper was to report news that was not relevant to the local community or be an adversary of public officials and local business owners.

The next chapter explores the kinds of news that is presented in small-town weekly newspapers. This information can enhance understanding of how well the publishers' perceptions reflect what is actually published in their newspapers.

## **Chapter 4: What is in the local weekly paper?**

This chapter explores the content published and the types of messages presented in weekly newspapers by exploring the results of a content and textual analysis of a sample of Iowa's weekly newspapers. The purpose of the content analysis was to generate data that would be helpful in understanding what is in Iowa's weekly newspapers. For example, the researcher wanted to know whether the newspapers were full of local events, such as library story time and Little League baseball games, or whether there was a more extensive range of content such as investigative government news stories.

The data presented through the content analysis also helped the researcher explore to what degree the local weekly newspaper produces and publishes local community information by examining the proximity of the story to the community and the location of the sources used within the stories. Specifically, the analysis helped inform the following research questions:

RQ4: Who produces the content for the local weekly newspaper?

RQ5: To what degree does the local weekly newspaper produce and publish local community information?

RQ6: What types of news stories are most prevalent in the local weekly newspaper?

RQ7: How often are certain types of news stories produced and published in the local weekly newspaper?

RQ8: What are the most common news topics published in the local weekly newspaper?

RQ9: What types of sources are most often used in the weekly newspaper?

RQ10: To what degree does the local weekly newspaper produce and publish news

stories with conflict?

### **Methodology: Content Analysis**

A content analysis is “any technique for making inferences by systematically and *objectively* identifying special characteristics of messages” (Holsti, 1968, p. 608, *emphasis in original*). The researcher conducted a quantitative content analysis of three weekly newspapers in Iowa. To protect the identity of the newspapers and their communities used in this study, the researcher has given each newspaper and its community a pseudonym. These given names are also used in chapters five, six, and seven.

Prior to conducting the formal content analysis, the researcher informally read through a collection of 19 weekly newspapers from across the state of Iowa that had been collected by the researcher’s university. This informal analysis indicated the common news story topics and news story types that are often found in weekly newspapers and were used in the formal content analysis.

For the formal content analysis, the researcher relied on a selective sample of weekly Iowa newspapers published in July and October 2014. These newspapers were also the same papers the researcher visited and studied in the ethnographic portion of the study, which is highlighted in subsequent chapters of this dissertation. Eight issues from each of three weekly newspapers were included in the sample. The researcher analyzed issues from July and October in order to avoid editions that feature extensive, full-page predictable news such as fair coverage and back-to-school news that often time cover entire front pages. Any special sections produced by the newspapers and inserted into the analyzed editions were excluded in the content analysis.

The unit of analysis for the content analysis was full news articles that were longer

than three paragraphs and were presented on the front page of the newspaper, as well as the stories' jumps (continuations) inside the newspaper. A total of 37 news articles were analyzed, with 14 articles analyzed for one newspaper; 10 articles for the second newspaper; and 13 articles for the third newspaper. All articles were analyzed according to a preset coding scheme created by the researcher, and intercoder reliability tests were conducted with one other person who was familiar with print newspapers. Intercoder reliability coding tests for all coded items did reach the acceptable Scott's Pi agreement of .75 or higher for coding reliability in content analyses (Scott, 1955).

Manifest content – information that is easily visible, countable, and catalogued (Krippendorff, 2013) – measured was:

- Story with staff byline/without staff byline
- Headline/title and subheading (if applicable)
- Dateline of story
- Proximity of news story to community (local, regional, state, outside the state)
- Type of story (issue, unexpected event, entertainment, editorial/opinion)
- Topic of story (government/politics, crime, disaster/accident, business/economy, people, sports, arts/entertainment, etc.)
- Type of source(s) within news story (government employee, political official, educator, private individual, public record, press release, etc.)
- Geographic location of source (local, regional, state, outside the state)

In addition to understanding what is in Iowa's weekly newspapers, the results of the content analysis also were used to serve as a baseline for the research project's textual analysis, which was guided by Gans' (1979) belief that news contains values based on

journalists' assumptions about the world around them. Therefore, the textual analysis aimed to understand whether or not weekly news workers hold enduring journalistic values, which as Gans believes, are used to inform how journalists view their communities. Complete copies of the coding sheets used in the content analysis are included in Appendix B (news stories) and Appendix C (news sources) of this dissertation.

Both the context from the content analysis and textual analysis were useful in understanding the ways in which weekly newspaper reflect their communities, information that was then useful in talking with journalists about their perceptions of the newspaper's role and their decision-making strategies concerning why they write about certain topics and talk to certain types of sources.

Before exploring the findings of the content analysis, this chapter provides context about the newspapers analyzed and the communities in which they are situated. These particular newspapers were selected as part of this dissertation research because of their proximity to the researcher. All three newspapers were located within 60 miles of the researcher, which made them accessible on a daily basis, and fit the researcher's definition of small-town weekly newspaper – circulation of 5,000 or less and in a community of 3,500 or fewer residents. The following are descriptions of each of the newspapers, which have been given pseudonyms, and their communities:

*Newspaper A – The Times*

*The Times*, a county seat newspaper, is the result of consolidation of two weeklies in the same rural community in eastern Iowa. A broadsheet published on Wednesdays, it is owned by a native resident of the community. The owner also owns several other newspapers in eastern Iowa, one of which is produced and published out the same office as

*The Times.*

The six-member staff features an editor/reporter/publisher, a reporter, a sports reporter/editor, a proofreader, and two staffers who wear both editorial and advertising hats – a reporter/advertising manager and an advertising sales representative/graphic arts designer.

*The Times* has a circulation of about 3,750. Although it has a visible website, the site is not updated regularly. In 2014, the sports reporter/editor launched a Facebook page for the newspaper to share videos and photos with the community.

#### *Community A -- Brownville*

*The Times* is located in Brownville in eastern Iowa. Brownville, nestled between three metropolitan communities, was incorporated in 1840 and currently has about 3,200 residents. It is the county seat and features a mayor-council with appointed city manager form of government. In the center of this community is a town square that surrounds the county's courthouse and is home to numerous retail, service, and professional businesses. In this community, the leading economic industry is agriculture.

This community boasts a reputable K-12 school system, a public library, senior living options, several fast food restaurant chains, locally owned eateries, banks, a law enforcement facility, a growing industrial park, a full-service grocery store, discount stores, and a hospital.

In recent years, Brownville has invested nearly \$30 million in local infrastructure improvements, including building a new fire station and a new middle school, updating streets and utilities, renovating the elementary and high schools, expanding the local municipal airport, and improving the aesthetics of its downtown streetscape, according to

the town's website. Seventy-three new housing constructions permits were granted between 2001 and 2012, according to city-data.com.

The 3,221 people reported in the 2012 U.S. Census as living in Brownville constituted 1,394 households and 842 families. The average household size was 2.25 and the average family size was 2.90. Among the total households, 39.6 percent were non-families, and 48.6 percent were married couples living together; 29.4 percent of the households included children under age 18 living at home. Nearly 18 percent of the households had someone aged 65 or older living alone.

The median age for Brownville, in 2010, was 42.3 years, with 25.5 percent of residents aged 45 to 64 and 20.8 percent aged 65 or older. Another 23.6 percent were aged 25 to 44, and 24.3 percent were under 18. Only 5.9 percent of the community's residents were aged 18 to 24. Among Brownville's residents, 51.7 percent were female.

Of those living in this community, 2010 Census data indicated 97.9 percent were white, 1.4 percent were Hispanic or Latino of any race, 1.0 percent were of two or more races, and 0.3 percent or fewer indicated any other racial background.

The median household income for Brownville in 2012, according to city-data.com, was \$47,813, lower than the state's median household income of \$50,957 for the same year.

Crimes reported between 2001 and 2012, according to city-data.com, included four rapes, 17 assaults, 40 burglaries, 216 thefts, nine auto thefts, and three reports of arson.

There were no murders or robberies reported during the period.

#### *Newspaper B – The Herald*

*The Herald* is a broadsheet published on Thursdays in a rural community in southeast Iowa. Two long-time residents of the community own the newspaper. The women

also own a newspaper in a town east of the community, and that newspaper is produced in the same building as *The Herald*.

*The Herald* has a circulation of about 1,184. Its staff features a publisher/reporter, an editor/reporter, a reporter, a proofreader, a graphic design artist, and a sales representative. Like *The Times*, *The Herald* has an online presence that gets updated only occasionally.

#### *Community B – Auburn*

*The Herald* is located in Auburn, which was founded in 1878 and currently has about 1,400 residents. It is located in the southeast region of Iowa and is about 25 miles from a metropolitan community. This community features a mayor-council form of government. While the community embraces its three-block main street lined with retail, service, and professional businesses, the leading economic industry is agriculture.

Auburn boasts a reputable public K-12 school system, a private religious school, a 39,000-square-foot recreation facility, locally owned eateries, banks, a cooperative telephone association, a public library, a full-service grocery store, a volunteer ambulance service, and a volunteer fire department.

The 1,408 people reported in the 2012 U.S. Census as living in Auburn constituted 608 households and 357 families. Similar to Brownville, the average household size was 2.24 and the average family size was 2.96. Among the total households, 41.3 percent were non-families, and 47.2 percent were married couples living together; 28.9 percent of the households included children under age 18 living at home. Someone aged 65 or older lived alone in 17.8 percent of the households in Auburn.

The median age for Auburn in 2010, was 42.5 years, with 25.5 percent of the residents aged 45 to 64, and 21.4 percent aged 65 or older. Another 22.2 percent were aged

25 to 44, and 24.1 of the residents were under age 18. In Auburn, 6.8 percent of the residents were between the ages of 18 and 24 and more than 53 percent of the community's residents were female.

Of those living in this community, 97.3 percent were white, 1.8 were Hispanic or Latino of any race, and 1.6 percent were from two or more races. Other races were reported by 0.5 percent of the residents or fewer.

The median household income for Auburn in 2012, according to city-data.com, was \$44,992, lower than the state's median household income of \$50,957 for the same year.

#### *Newspaper C – The Bugle*

*The Bugle* is a broadsheet published on Wednesdays in a rural community in eastern Iowa. The newspaper is owned by one of the nation's largest media corporations. At the time of the study, the newspaper did not have a publisher. Management of the newspaper was overseen by a regional media director based in a community about 75 miles from *The Bugle's* office, along with a local group editor who also served as editor/reporter of a weekly newspaper about 12 miles from *The Bugle*.

*The Bugle* has a weekly circulation of about 2,018. In addition to the two off-site managers, its staff includes a managing editor, a sports editor, a family album editor, an advertising director, and two front office clerks. In addition to their editor duties, the managing editor, sports editor, and family album editor also are dedicated reporters. The staff for *The Bugle* also often contributes content to another community weekly newspaper for a town about 15 miles from *The Bugle's* office.

As of fall 2014, *The Bugle* did not lay out its own pages, as that duty had been assigned to a graphic artist in a metropolitan community 75 miles away. Like the other two

newspapers in this study, *The Bugle* does have an online presence, including a sporadically updated website and a Facebook page.

### *Community C -- Nemaha*

*The Bugle* is located in Nemaha, which was incorporated in 1859 but has served as the county seat since 1845. The community is located about seven miles north of a major U.S. interstate and about 30 miles from two different metropolitan areas. Nemaha currently has about 2,500 residents. The community holds a mayor-council form of government. Like Brownville, Nemaha also has a town square in the heart of the community. Nemaha's town square surrounds a city park but also houses several retail, service, and professional businesses.

The leading economic industry in the community is farming, but manufacturing is also important, as two major international manufacturing companies are located a few miles south and east of the community. Nemaha also boasts a motel, bowling alley, local outdoor recreation opportunities, a competitive school district, a Carnegie library, a hospital, several locally owned eateries, banks, a full-service grocery store, and a discount retail store.

The 2,528 people reported in the 2012 U.S. Census as living in Nemaha constituted 1,059 households and 648 families. the average household size was 2.31 and the average family size was 2.94. Among the total households, 38.8 percent were non-families, and 45.2 percent were married couples living together; 30.5 percent of the households included children under age 18 living at home. Someone aged 65 or older lived alone in 17.2 percent of the households in Nemaha.

The median age for Nemaha was 41 years. In this community, 26.2 percent were aged 45 to 64, and another 18.1 percent were aged 65 or older. As in the other two

communities, the percentage of residents aged 18 to 24 was a relatively low, at 6.9 percent in Nemaha; another 24 percent were aged 25 to 44, and 24.9 percent were under age 18.

Nemaha's gender make-up in 2010 was 47.9 percent male and 52.1 percent female.

Like the other two communities, Nemaha was overwhelmingly white (97.3 percent), though this community had a slightly larger Hispanic or Latino of any race population, at 2.8 percent of the total. U.S. Census data from 2010 indicated 0.7 percent of the population was of two or more races, with another 0.6 each African American and Native American. Asians and those from other races each constituted 0.4 percent of the population.

The median household income for Nemaha in 2012, according to city-data.com, was \$46,903, lower than the state's median household income of \$50,957 for the same year.

Between 1997 and 2010, 56 new house construction building permits were granted, also according to city-data.com.

In general, all three communities have a median income lower than the overall state average, as well as the national average. All are overwhelmingly white, even higher than the average in what is already one of the 'whitest' states in the country. All have significant populations of older people living alone, and the median age is higher than average for Iowa, as well as the nation overall.

## **Findings**

Publishers responding to the survey described in the previous chapter indicated that community weekly newspapers are filled with hyperlocal information. The content analysis of the three newspapers included in the ethnographic portion of this study – described in subsequent chapters – sought to identify support for this claim, as well as to gain a deeper insight into what is actually published in the weekly newspaper.

**Table 4.1: Type of byline used by each newspaper**

	<b>Staff byline</b>	<b>No byline</b>	<b>Total</b>
<i>The Times</i>	9	4	13
<i>The Bugle</i>	8	6	14
<i>The Herald</i>	7	3	10
<b>Total</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>37</b>

Staff bylines are one indication of local content, and the content analysis suggests that each of the three papers does publish hyperlocal news content each week, as indicated by the large volume of locally bylined stories (Tables 4.1). Although several stories had no bylines, suggesting some news stories may not be produced locally, caution about such an interpretation is warranted. As discussed in more detail later, news workers at these newspapers indicated during interviews with the researcher that many do not put bylines on their news stories because they believe everyone in the community simply knows who they are. Additional information about motivations and incentives for including or not including a byline is provided in Chapter 8.

The researcher also was interested in what kind of news gets produced by weekly newspapers. Guided by previous studies of media content, (Berkowitz, 1990; Berkowitz & Beach, 1993), the researcher identified three basic story types: issue, unexpected event, and entertainment. For this study, an issue story was defined as “hard news stories related to improving daily life, guiding people’s decisions, providing information about on-going community debates.” Unexpected event stories covered “crime, accidents, disasters.” Entertainment stories included “soft news stories, human interest stories, personality profiles.” The coding sheet for this study also listed “editorial/opinion” and “other” as possible story types, although the researcher did not identify any stories fitting those categories.

**Table 4.2: Type of stories found in each newspaper**

	<b>Issue</b>	<b>Unexpected event</b>	<b>Entertainment</b>	<b>Total</b>
<i>The Times</i>	9	2	3	14
<i>The Herald</i>	7	-	3	10
<i>The Bugle</i>	6	4	3	13
<b>Total</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>37</b>

Table 4.2 highlights the number of stories by specific story types, as well as the frequency of types of stories in each of the newspapers analyzed. The researcher found that hard news stories that guide people’s decisions or provide information about the community, primarily local government-related stories, were the most prevalent news articles. These findings suggest the idea that the function of the weekly newspaper is to inform the community, particularly with an emphasis on civic value and the residents’ roles in democracy, which has been highlighted by previous studies (Abbott & Niebauer, 2000; Wakefield & Elliott, 2003).

The six unexpected event stories identified in this study included crime stories – from vandalism to fraud by a local government employee – and three disaster stories, which covered a windstorm and flooding in the communities. Vandalism might be considered one of the pettiest crimes to commit, but the crime was front page news because it involved the vandalizing of local high school homecoming floats and occurred a day ahead of the community’s homecoming parade – making it controversial breaking news. On the other hand, the government fraud story appeared to be a follow up to an ongoing issue in the community. The entertainment stories, which are considered “soft news” by journalists, were primarily feature profiles of events and people in the communities, including a fundraising campaign, the local county fair lineup, and volunteers needed to support a local organization.

**Table 4.3: Proximity of types of stories found in newspapers**

<b>Type of story</b>	<b>Local (within town)</b>	<b>Regional (within county)</b>	<b>Total</b>
Issue	10	12	22
Entertainment	7	2	9
Unexpected event	2	4	6
<b>Total</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>37</b>

Proximity of the story to the community also was analyzed, as it is another aspect of “localness” in coverage. The front pages of all of these newspapers were 100% local, meaning the coverage was either within the town where the newspaper office is located or within the county. Two of the three newspapers are the newspapers of record for the counties in which they are published and the third newspaper considers the entire county as part of its readership. Not surprisingly, many of the articles focused on the county and not just the town in which the newspaper is located (Table 4.3). Most of the issue-related news stories focused on county government and issues, and the unexpected event stories also related to the entire county. However, the entertainment stories tended to be focused on the specific towns in which the newspapers were published.

**Table 4.4: Proximity of story topics found in newspapers**

<b>Topic of story</b>	<b>Local (within town)</b>	<b>Regional (within county)</b>	<b>Total</b>
Government/politics	6	6	12
Arts/Entertainment	4	-	4
Crime	2	2	4
People/person	2	1	3
Public moral problems	2	-	2
Education	1	1	2
Energy/environment/recreation	1	-	1
Sports (school-related)	1	2	3
Health	-	2	2
Business/economy	-	1	1
Disaster/accident	-	2	2
Other	-	1	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>37</b>

In addition to what type of stories were being published, the nature of the topics covered in these weekly newspapers also was analyzed in an effort to understand the mix of lighter weight content, such as Little League baseball games and story time at the local library, and “hard hitting” materials such as investigative news stories.

As mentioned previously, topic categories were identified through the preliminary analysis of 19 weekly newspapers, which was done prior to this formal research study, from across Iowa. Table 4.4 reveals the story topics identified in the content analysis. It should be noted that the three newspapers whose stories were content analyzed did not published any stories about welfare, science, or religion on their front pages during the period studied. Most weekly newspapers have a designated page focused on religion, including church calendars and messages from local religious leaders, making such content less likely to appear on the front page. Welfare and science-related news topics may be less likely to appear unless they have a local angle, though the reasoning behind editorial news judgments cannot be determined from the content analysis considered in this chapter.

The data reveal that the front-page content of weekly newspapers is primarily focused on news about government and politics (Table 4.4). Most of the topics are covered at a local (community) or regional (county) level; again two of the three newspapers in the content analysis are the papers of record for their counties.

Government and political news topics, primarily government meetings, are a dominant topic for these weekly newspapers, supporting information obtained from the publishers' survey described in Chapter 3. However, survey respondents also indicated they felt it important that the newspaper report news about local people. The content analysis revealed local people – private citizens – are not often the focus of the front-page news stories in the newspapers analyzed.

The finding that the largest single topic category was government and politics is in line with the literature related to larger newspapers, which has indicated that government stories tend to be the most widely reported, both because of the bureaucratic nature of news (Fishman, 1980) and because of professional norms related to perceptions about the journalist's role in democratic society (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2001).

The data here therefore suggest that journalistic norms, practices, and strategies applied by news workers of larger newspapers might also be applied by news workers of smaller communities. That said, this finding also should be interpreted with caution. The interviews described in subsequent chapters indicate weekly newspapers include what journalists call “the normal stuff,” content published every week on the inside pages of the newspaper such as social news, religion news, sports news, the business directory, and school news. The informal analysis described above indicates that Iowa weekly newspapers do commonly include specific pages dedicated to such topics. However, this content

analysis considered only content on the front page (and its continuation inside the newspaper). The absence of school or sports or business news on the front pages should not be taken to indicate such topics are not covered elsewhere in the paper week in and week out.

**Table 4.5: News sources and their proximity to the community**

<b>Type of source</b>	<b>Local (within town)</b>	<b>Regional (within county)</b>	<b>State</b>	<b>Out of state</b>	<b>Total</b>
Political official (elected)	11	15	1	-	27
Government employee	9	8	1	-	18
Special interest group rep	8	3	5	-	16
Educator/School official	6	2	1	-	9
Private individual	5	3	2	-	10
Public record	4	2	-	-	6
Private business person	1	2	2	1	6
Online resource	-	-	1	2	3
Press release	-	2	-	-	2
Other	-	-	-	-	-
<b>Total</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>97</b>

Another aspect of “localness” can be identified by looking at the sources used by weekly newspaper news workers in their reporting. Table 4.5 indicates sources also were either local (community) or regional (county). The sources from outside the local and regional areas were primarily members of special interest groups, mainly consultation groups hired by the local governments to assist with issues of planning and finances.

The primary sources used for weekly newspaper front-page news stories were government employees and elected political officials (Table 4.5), not surprising as most of the stories were about government issues. However, these data suggest a conflict with the views of the publishers obtained in the survey described in the previous chapter. The publishers indicated they perceived local residents as important sources for news, but the content analysis revealed that private individuals were used as sources less often than

government employees and elected political officials. Again, this finding replicates the information gained from studies of larger newspapers, which indicates reporters generally rely on official sources for government-related news stories and rarely turn to private individuals for such stories (Fishman, 1980; Sigal, 1973).

There are a couple of additional points of interest from the data collected on sources used by weekly newspapers. First, as also suggested by the byline data presented in Table 4.1, weekly newspaper news workers seem to report and write their own news rather than simply rely on press releases for news content. The content analysis indicated very few press releases were used; when they were, it was mostly for supplemental reporting, such as providing official statements in news stories about crime. Second, the source-related data indicates weekly news workers do conduct some level of investigation as part of their reporting for some stories, rather than simply relying on people as sources, as was found in the data revealing that public records were used to inform news stories.

**Table 4.6: Conflict found in news stories by each newspaper**

	No	Yes	Total
<i>The Times</i>	13	1	14
<i>The Herald</i>	10	-	10
<i>The Bugle</i>	8	5	13
<b>Total</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>37</b>

Whether or not there was conflict in weekly newspaper news stories also was of interest. Only six incidents of conflict were coded (Table 4.6), most of them in *The Bugle*, the only corporate-owned paper of the three newspapers in this study. The conflict revealed in one story published in *The Times* involved county officials who disagreed about funding of county roads. The conflicts revealed in *The Bugle* were about a criminal act of a public official, the need for a possible new athletic complex, a vote to admit the local school

district into a new sports conference, an incident of vandalism, and a state politician campaigning in the county.

### **Textual Analysis**

Once the content analysis was completed, the researcher conducted a qualitative textual analysis, another technique that is widely used to help understand media messages (Frey, Botan, & Kreps, 1999). A textual analysis enables researchers to break down and label data in order to find and establish patterns, themes, and concepts within media content (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002).

This qualitative textual analysis was guided primarily by Gans' (1979) theoretical perspective that news contains values based on journalists' assumptions about the world around them. As previously stated in Chapter 2, Gans identified six journalistic assumptions – “enduring values” – in his research. Those “enduring values” are: small-town pastoralism, individualism, moderatism, ethnocentrism, altruistic democracy, and responsible capitalism.

Gans took an impressionistic approach to exploring the notion of journalistic enduring values, and it is important to recognize that his set of values do not fit the weekly newspaper context perfectly. Nonetheless, the framework proved helpful in understanding the news content printed in the weekly newspapers studied here.

Journalists are cultural ideologues, meaning they have the potential to influence public opinion and citizens' perceptions of the world (Berkowitz, 2009). Such influence might be even more significant in smaller communities because of the impact weekly newspaper journalists might have on the everyday lives of local people.

### **Methodology: Textual Analysis**

For the textual analysis, the researcher examined the same newspapers. However, in

addition to examining the same articles used in the content analysis, the researcher also loosely considered all of the news content in the issues analyzed. The researcher read and re-read each news item, conducting a story-by-story analysis of the news presented. Of particular interest were the events, issues, and people written about in the news stories; the way those events, issues, and people were described. Thematic categories and patterns emerged from the data as anticipated, thus providing insight into news values found in weekly newspaper news content.

The findings suggest that weekly news workers do hold enduring journalistic values, which inform how they envision their communities. The textual analysis also served as a baseline for interview questions with news workers concerning the central cultural values reflected in the newspaper content.

## **Findings**

Although useful, Gans' set of values does not fit the weekly newspaper context perfectly, in large part because he conducted his research in national newsrooms and based his ideas on observations there. The textual analysis for the current study suggested that some of his enduring values do not apply to the weekly newspaper. However, weekly newspaper news workers do base their reporting on their inherent assumptions of the world around them, specifically their local communities. Ethnocentrism, altruistic democracy, responsible capitalism, small-town pastoralism, and individualism are all values identified through the textual analysis of the three small-town weekly newspapers studied here – though some in a slightly different form than Gans described.

Perhaps the most obviously relevant enduring value in weekly newspaper journalism is small-town pastoralism. Small-town news workers promote rural, small-town life by

simply reporting continuously on small details and happenings in their communities. Their stories generally tend to suggest that the community works well together and that community members believe they are all in it together. This value is revealed in front-page stories about such topics as fundraising efforts to help a local community member, area festivals, and the county fair. The value also is evident in how the news is presented. For example, titles and other identifiers of sources and subjects are not always included, as they are in larger daily newspapers, indicating that small-town news workers assume everyone in the community already knows these people.

Much of what is found in the weekly newspaper, particularly on the front page, probably would not make the pages of a daily newspaper. For example, a large photo of a utility payment box being relocated to another side of the building ran on the front page of one of the weekly newspapers studied here, as did the complete county fair schedule. Neither of these items would make the front page of a larger daily newspaper. But in rural communities where a large number of residents are 4-H members, news about the fair has a big impact.

Ethnocentrism emerges as a value for small-town weekly newspaper news workers because the content is so predominantly local, as described above. However, where Gans in his study of national news media related the concept to the valuation of journalists' own country, this study shows its relation to valuation of journalists' own community. All of the front-page news stories analyzed in this study were focused on the communities in which the newspapers are published. Judging by what news workers deemed the most important stories of the week – those worthy of being placed on the front page – their own communities were of primary value to them.

Similarly, the texts examined here also indicate a locally oriented emphasis on altruistic democracy. The primary news topic on the front pages studied here were government-related news stories, indicating weekly newspaper news workers deem it necessary to provide information about local government issues to help community residents be active in local decision-making processes. In addition to enabling readers to be knowledgeable community members, this type of news also keeps audiences informed about how their local elected officials are acting, which ultimately is designed to keep the elected officials acting responsibly.

To some extent, the value of responsible capitalism also is revealed in the weekly newspaper content. While Gans considered journalists' perceptions of labor unions and consumer organizations under the value of responsible capitalism, he also contended that journalists value economic growth. Small-town news workers value economic growth. Several stories were published about the communities moving forward with million-dollar projects, about groundbreaking ceremonies taking place, or about working together to find funding for projects. Although not formally part of this study of front-page content, the newspapers also publish a business directory on the inside pages each week. Interviews with the publishers, described more fully in Chapter 5, indicate that the directory is considered not only a form of advertisement but also a service to the community, with listing fees set relatively low.

Gans' idea that journalists believe government regulation hinders economic growth also was obvious in the reporting of two stories from two of the communities. A story about possible reduced window hours at the local post office cited government financial concerns, while a story about 21 forced layoffs at a local business began by detailing the role of falling

commodity prices. These examples suggest an attempt by journalists to blame government policy for negative economic impacts at the local level.

Finally, the value of individualism also is embedded in the content of small-town weekly newspapers. Although there were relatively few stories about individuals doing extraordinary things on the front pages of the newspapers analyzed, numerous inside stories showcased the good deeds of those who help their communities, as well as items about successes achieved and milestones reached by residents. Although the interviews with news workers described in the following chapters indicated much of this inside content is provided by readers, the journalists still are the ones deciding that it is worth publishing. They see it as news of community value.

As mentioned earlier not all of the enduring values could be identified in the weekly newspapers content analyzed here. Notably absent was content related to the value of moderatism, the idea that journalists are biased against extremism and excess.

## **Discussion**

This chapter aimed to understand the content published in small-town weekly newspapers. Specifically, the chapter raised the following research questions:

RQ4: Who produces the content for the local weekly newspaper?

RQ5: To what degree does the local weekly newspaper produce and publish local community information?

RQ6: What types of news stories are most prevalent in the local weekly newspaper?

RQ7: How often are certain types of news stories produced and published in the local weekly newspaper?

RQ8: What are the most common news topics published in the local weekly

newspaper?

RQ9: What types of sources are most often used in the weekly newspaper?

RQ10: To what degree does the local weekly newspaper produce and publish news stories with conflict?

Based on the data concerning bylines, which shows who produces the content for the local weekly newspaper and addresses RQ4, the staffs of the weekly newspapers are the primary producers. In observing the content in this study, the researcher did not find a single article on the front page written by someone outside of the newspaper staff. This implies that the articles of these weekly newspapers are produced locally.

The findings of this study also suggest that the topics of the content of weekly newspapers are hyper-local in nature, which addresses RQ5. While not all of the stories were published within the town where the newspaper office was located, all of the stories published were concerned with people, places, and events within the local county. The most common types of stories found on the front pages of the newspapers, which RQ6 and RQ7 are concerned with, were issue-related news stories – these are the hard news stories that are intended to improve the lives of community members, as well as help guide their decision-making within the community.

The most common news topic published in the newspapers within this study, which concerns RQ8, concerned government and politics, according to the findings. There were also several stories concerning crime and arts/entertainment. Other stories published fell in the news topic categories of: disaster/accident, business/economy, public moral problems, health, education, recreation, people/person, and school-related sports. However, there were no stories published concerning welfare, science, or religion

RQ9 was concerned with types of sources most often used in the weekly newspaper. Sources used by the journalists at these three weekly newspapers tended to be official sources, primarily elected and government officials. Very few local residents who are not officials were used as sources. This finding contradicts the questionnaire findings (discussed in Chapter 3) concerning publishers' perceptions of types of sources used in weekly newspapers. The findings of the questionnaire suggest that publishers believe local residents are important sources for weekly newspaper news. However, the content analysis showed journalists rely on very few local residents as non-official sources.

The findings of this study also suggest that the three weekly newspapers analyzed do not often produce and publish news stories that feature conflict, which addresses RQ10. In fact, of the 37 total news stories analyzed, only six stories were coded as having conflict within the story. Those stories were about disagreements between county officials on construction plans, the sentencing of a local public official charged with theft, a local school board debating whether or not to allow another area school into the district, vandalism occurring during the local school district's homecoming week, and a state lawmaker visiting the community. This finding supports the argument made by Donohue et al. (1995) that the community press tends to avoid reporting on conflict that occurs within the community, but when necessary, the newspaper will serve as a "guard dog" over influential community members, including government and elected officials, who have stepped out of line and disrupted the balance within the community.

As for the textual analysis, the findings suggest that some of Gans' (1979) enduring values do not apply to the weekly newspaper. However, the findings do suggest that weekly newspaper news workers do incorporate their inherent assumptions of the world around

them in their reporting of local news. The researcher identified small-town pastoralism, ethnocentrism, altruistic democracy, responsible capitalism, and individualism as values represented in the news content of the three small-town weekly newspapers in this study. The enduring value most relevant to weekly newspapers is small-town pastoralism. This is evident through the continuous reporting of the small community and presenting the news in a way in which it appears the small town is cohesive.

The next chapter begins an investigation of the people who produce the weekly newspaper news content. It examines key practices, strategies, and norms of news producers in small, rural communities in Iowa.

## **Chapter 5: How do small-town news workers decide what is news?**

This chapter, under the sociology of news theoretical framework and through the analysis of newsroom observations and interviews with news workers, explores the key practices, strategies, and norms of news production for news workers at three small-town weekly newspapers in eastern Iowa. The research also aims to understand how external and internal influences affect these production practices, strategies, and norms. Specifically, the newsroom observations and interviews with news workers were used to help answer the following research questions:

RQ11: What are the key practices, strategies, and norms of news production for news workers at small-town weekly newspapers?

RQ12: 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?

RQ13: From the small-town news worker perspective, what is the role of the weekly newspaper in the community?

### **Methodology**

While there has been some research conducted on small-town weekly newspapers as previously discussed in Chapter 2, most of the body of literature within the sociology of news theoretical framework considers journalists at larger news outlets. Therefore, this research aims to extend the community journalism literature by trying to understand how small-town news workers decide what is news.

For this study, the researcher observed the newsrooms of the three newspapers described in great detail in Chapter 4. Interviews also were conducted with the newspapers'

news workers in the three rural communities detailed in Chapter 4 – all located in the southeast region of Iowa – in December 2014 and January 2015. The researcher interviewed all staff members at the newspaper, generating data that provided unique perspectives about the constraints of news in small towns. All staff members were interviewed because as described in greater detail below, newspapers in small towns have few staff and often the editorial and the advertising departments overlap – meaning duties may be interchangeable.

To understand news decisions that the people who make them in weekly newspaper newsrooms, the researcher used ethnographic methods that enable discovery of the perspectives of research subjects. Interviews and observations provide insight into the human element of news making.

Ethnographies are the studies of people within their own environments (Singer, 2009). They often involve using multiple research techniques, including field site observations and in-depth interviews. Singer has argued that ethnographies provide a holistic approach to understanding people. Ethnographic studies on news production and news workers, much like this research project, are still needed (Cottle, 2007). Previous ethnographies have provided invaluable insight into the production of news, revealing journalists follow daily routines (Tuchman, 1978); news is bureaucratic in nature (Fishman, 1980); journalists are highly competitive with each other (Tunstall, 1971); and journalists are extremely source dependent (Sigal, 1973), among other insights.

However, researchers need to be aware of the method's weaknesses. Cottle (2007) has argued that in ethnographic research, external forces that shape news production are often ignored, managerial positions are often overlooked because of lack of access, and questions of how an ethnographic researcher knows what she knows tend to get asked by

critics. Parameswaran (2001) says that through self-reflexivity, researchers can address such challenges.

For this ethnographic study, the researcher selected as field research sites three newspapers that fit her definition of a small-town weekly newspaper – a newspaper with a circulation of less than 5,000 published once a week in a town of fewer than 3,500 residents – to observe news production strategies and to interview news workers. The goal was to gain insight into what strategies news workers use in their news decision-making and how small-town journalists perceive their own identities, which is detailed in Chapter 6.

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. Although she was not able to visit *The Times* on Tuesdays because of teaching obligations, she did speak with news workers about their Tuesday work and schedules. *The Herald* is closed on Wednesdays, a long-standing tradition, so the researcher did not visit on those days. The researcher also did not visit *The Bugle* one Wednesday because staff were in a personnel meeting with company officials and the researcher was not invited to attend. However, she did follow up with the news workers about the meeting.

In addition to observing the sites, the researcher conducted in-depth interviews with editorial news workers – including publishers, editors, reporters, and photographers – in order to understand news production, news workers, and their perceptions of the role of the newspaper in the community. And as mentioned before, newspaper advertising representatives also were interviewed and observed.

Informal conversations were recorded through field notes and formal interviews

were digitally recorded. All research data was stored in a locked drawer in the researcher's office on the University of Iowa campus. The researcher transcribed digital audio recordings of the semi-structured interviews and open-ended questions with news workers once all fieldwork was completed.

A total of 19 news workers were involved in this study, either through observations and/or interviews. To protect their confidentiality, as well as the identity of the newspapers, pseudonyms have been assigned to each news worker and newspaper. The following information provides insight into the news workers' roles within their newspapers.

### *The Times*

Dan – Publisher and owner of the newspaper; writes government news stories, crime stories, the weekly police blotter, and other news

Jane – Long-time employee and is the editor and content producer of another weekly newspaper owned by the publisher of *The Times* that is housed in the same building

James – Sports editor and writer

Molly – News writer; produces some government meeting news, but devotes most of her attention to human-interest stories concerning the people, places, and events within the community

Susan – Tends to the office's front desk; deals with incoming mail, subscriptions, societal news, religion news, and obituaries; proofreader

Leya – Advertising representative and page designer

### *The Herald*

Kristen – Publisher and co-owner; covers a city council in the area; fills in where needed

Elizabeth – Managing editor and co-owner; news writer, primarily covers government news, but often writes feature stories

Randel – News editor; news writer and proofreader

Lisa – Works part-time as proofreader and page designer for another weekly newspaper owned by the publisher of *The Herald* that is housed in the same building

Vanessa – Works part-time as page designer; produces kids' activity page for newspaper

Angela – Advertising representative; works from home

### *The Bugle*

Derrick – Managing editor and reporter

Brian – Long-time sport editor and reporter

Sandra – Long-time family news editor and reporter

Steven – Group managing editor; oversees multiple weekly newspapers in the area

Carrie – Long-time employee who tends to the front desk; handles subscriptions and circulation; her job duties were undergoing major changes

Mandy – Long-time employee who originally was a content designer, but her duties were undergoing major changes and she was beginning to oversee legal notices and classified advertisements

Ellen – Advertising representative

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 & Corbin, 1990). Guided primarily by the sociology of news literature, and as anticipated, thematic categories

and patterns emerged from the data and provided meaningful insight about the identities of news workers, which is highlighted in Chapter 6; their news-making strategies; and their perceptions of the newspaper's role in the community. The interviews and observations helped extend and contextualize the findings of the statewide Internet survey discussed in Chapter 3, as well as the content analysis and textual analysis of newspaper content focused on in Chapter 4.

## **Findings**

The findings of this study show news workers' news production practices, strategies, and norms are a social construction. Interviews with and observations of news workers indicated that news in small towns is constrained by organizational structure, routine practices of journalists, and community structure. (The constraints of news in small towns created by journalists as individuals – their identities – will be discussed in depth in Chapter 6). 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 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 say 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. That gets in the way of the focus. Rather than them focusing on their local community, they are focused on money. They need to move away from that cookie cutter approach and stop worrying so much about the bottom line,” 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 maintain a focus on the local. 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. “If I didn’t do it, the paper probably wouldn’t be here,” said Dan

at *The Times*, who owns the paper. 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. I considered walking out a few years ago, 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. Nearly three and a half years ago, the staff fell to eight and at the time when the researcher was observing the newspaper and its staff, the newspaper had six staff members. The office’s printing press and design studio, which remain visible, have been shut down and operations moved to another city in Iowa. 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*. “There are times we believe a picture wasn’t played up the way we would have done it or not cropped the way we wanted it. 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 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. In addition to change in ownership in recent years, the newspaper’s on-site general manager died unexpectedly in 2014 – causing more uncertainty among the staff. “There’s no social cohesion here right now. (General manager) was that glue. 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. The (newspaper) editor job (at another newspaper under the same ownership) was eliminated last fall and that work was distributed to me and (another newspaper worker at *The Bugle*) without additional compensation. We have more work but same pay scale. (Owner) is carving bits of us off. Our second story is empty. There’s an office and conference room upstairs that sit empty. The pressroom is cold and dark and empty and haunting. 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. So much uncertainty right now.

But being under corporate ownership does have its benefits, the news workers at *The Bugle* said. “We get health insurance and paid vacation,” said Mandy at *The Bugle*. Sandra at *The Bugle* added the newsroom received new computers and an updated computer system.

But she also added 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. Ellen at *The Bugle* said she also has noticed that it is becoming harder to obtain advertising in the community. “I used to go \$2,000 to \$3,000 over goal. Now, if I go \$100 or \$200 over goal, I’m like ‘yay.’”

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. Getting \$2,000 in additional revenue a month here is hard to do. I have to find new reasons for someone to advertise.”

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. He said he did get a commission for the advertisements, which was a perk to the job. At *The Times*, some of the news

workers pitch in to help call for sponsorships for special pages that support a special cause such as the hometown Christmas weekend in December.

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.

For *The Bugle*, advertising is a driving force behind news production. This becomes apparent when news workers talk about the special sections the newspaper produces each year. While working on a special edition about weddings and brides, Sandra at *The Bugle* said, “It’s hard for this county (to do this section) because the wedding industry isn’t big here and it’s hard to find advertising to support it.”

This study suggests 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. Some don’t sell. 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, and we’re already stretched pretty thin,” she said.

*Organizational policy*

Each of these three small-town weekly newspapers does in fact have organizational policies and rules. Analysis of the data yields 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 weeklies because weeklies get one shot a week at producing a product. At the newspapers in this study, the news workers all depend on each other to adhere to the deadlines because there is little hyper local wire copy to fall back on when there are news holes. The news workers depend on the other news workers to get their jobs done and on time.

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 that 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: “It’s a good time to be gone because it’s a slow time of year. 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. And she also seemed sympathetic toward her coworkers for her time off. “It’s not like you’re on a line and someone can pick up the work for you,” she said.

Finally, the third consistent policy revealed through this study is that news workers at small-town newspapers must know how to manage time well without being

micromanaged. The weekly newspaper journalists in this study 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. They know how to do their jobs, and if they don’t cut corners, we’ll get along just fine,” he said. *The Times* does not hold weekly staff editorial meetings. The publisher said he has an open-door policy and when new workers need to talk, they talk.

*The Bugle* also does not hold regular editorial meetings. The editor says that does not seem to affect the overall product. The two staffers have “both been here for so many years. They know what they need to do and know how to do it. They don’t need a lot of direction, which is a good thing. And they both do a good job,” 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.

During her observations of interactions with news workers, the researcher never observed or heard staff members asking each other questions about news value or indicating story ideas were off the mark. The news workers rely on their fellow journalists to know the news in the community and how to get the story done. There were no visible time clocks in any of the newsrooms. There were no publishers or editors checking to see who was or was not at their desk. Weekly newspapering really depends on the journalists to manage their own schedules and their own story budgets.

## *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 news in small towns and weekly newspaper journalists than for news and 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 in this study provide a glimpse into the predictable rhythm of their typical news week. The observations and interviews also reveal the similarity of the work days and work weeks for the news workers, despite working and living in entirely different communities. The following are three examples of observed routines of three news workers at the three different newspapers:

### News worker at *The Times*:

- Monday: Finishes writing stories for the week's paper and attends possible night city council meeting.
- Tuesday: Layout day, which means placing ads and content on the pages.
- Wednesday: Day begins around 6:45 a.m., with trips to two post offices in two different towns within the readership area to pick up mail and drop off bundles of newspapers for counter sales; catches up from the previous week;

writes Monday's city council meeting story if need be and attends possible night meeting.

- Thursday: Catches up on writing and reporting.
- Friday: Deals with subscriptions, including updating subscriptions for new/renewal/need to renew; works on news stories.
- Weekend: attends community events if necessary for content in following week's newspaper.

News worker at *The Herald*:

- Monday: Catches up on emails from the weekend and writes sports stories for the following week's newspaper.
- Tuesday: Finish news content for the week's paper; brings food for the weekly company pot luck; builds pages for the week's sports sections and proofreads pages.
- Wednesday: The newspaper is closed, but attends meetings/community events if necessary.
- Thursday: Attends editorial meeting to plan for following week and catches up from previous week.
- Friday: Prepares for the weekend and works on news stories.
- Weekend: Attends sporting events and, if necessary, other community events for content for following week's newspaper.

News worker at *The Bugle*:

- Monday: Writes obits; observes layout and design; proofreads pages and makes necessary changes.

- Tuesday: Catches up with all that does not get done on Monday; invoices obits.
- Tuesday: Writes news stories; prepares for following edition and delivers newspapers to stores.
- Wednesday and Thursday: Tries to spend time out of the office; conducts interviews; writes column; works on features and family page news; possibly attends government meeting in the evening.
- Friday: Makes sure copy is to layout designer by 5 p.m.
- Weekend: Attends community events for content, particularly photos, for the following week's paper.

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. 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 special pages and/or sections, commonly referred to as a “tab” by journalists because of the tabloid format, tend to be published about the same time every year. For example, home improvement special sections are created in the spring and fall; the annual fair tab is published in late summer or early fall depending on when all county fair results are known; and sports previews, which can be full-blown tabloids or special pages depending on the season, are published one to two weeks prior to the season opening.

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. It has to be local copy. If we don’t, the next year I can’t sell it.” 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. For instance, for *The Times*, Dan covers city hall, the courthouse, local police, and the county sheriff’s office. Molly at *The Times* is in charge of covering the local school board and writing feature stories. The other newspapers also do beat reporting. Derrick at *The Bugle* covers the local city council and the county board of supervisors, while Sandra at the same newspaper covers a local school board and a city government in a town nearby. 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. Because of typification, sports writers also knew they had to get comments from coaches after the games and had to visit particular websites to collect stats for their news stories.

#### *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 – several days before publication day. 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 and having to work weekends and nights, they also said doing those things are just part of the job. More details are provided in Chapter 6.

*Loyalty to the newspaper*

As it turns out, most small-town newspaper news workers 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 news workers at *The Times* and *The Herald*, the commonality between the news workers was their shared sense of loyalty toward their publishers, as well as the family-like environment in the work place. For the advertising representatives at all the newspapers, while it's getting tougher to find advertising revenue, they said they enjoyed the challenges presented with the job and the potential to make a decent living. 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, Kim & Matei, 2001; Stamm, 1985; Byerly, 1961; Janowitz, 1952). But for Harley (1989), communities are more than just geographical locations depicted as points on a map (Harley, 1989). They also are social constructions (Massey, 1994; Morley, 2009) made up of different languages, religions, politics, economics and people.

In this study, location and audience of the communities seem to influence news and news production. For example, the three communities are rural and relatively close to larger metropolitan areas. They have a large number of community residents who travel to larger, nearby communities for work. Several of the news workers said this has implications for the local businesses, which affects the advertising opportunities and revenues, in turn affecting the space available for, as described earlier, news content. “The people go to work in (metropolitan area) and they shop there, which means they don’t shop here,” said Leya, an advertising representative, of *The Times*. News workers at *The Herald* also said their community has many residents who work in the larger metropolitan area about 20 miles away.

Large box stores also have opened up within the communities and/or on the outskirts of larger metro areas that are accessible to local residents. These economic developments have affected small-town businesses, which again, ultimately affects advertising revenue and in turn affects news content.

News work at weekly newspapers also is influenced by audiences. The three communities in this study have older populations, as described in Chapter 4, 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 is another influence on digital media opportunities for weekly newspapers. She said technology is not as reliable in the rural communities as it is in larger metro areas. “We sometimes get really bad cell phone coverage out here. It’s not always good,” said Kristen at *The Herald*.

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*. “We do get obits of people who haven’t lived here for 40 years, but we print them because someone is going to remember them,” she said.

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. They like to know about their neighbor’s hobbies. They

want to know about the people.” 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 said the newspapers try to avoid filler content that does not have a relevant angle to the community. “I decide based on whether or not it is going to be interesting to the public,” said Dan at *The Times*. Sandra at *The Bugle* also said the audience is always in mind when considering filler content. “I want it to be useful to the readers. Even if I get to using filler, I want it to be useful,” she said.

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**

This chapter aimed to understand how small-town weekly newspaper news workers do their jobs. Specifically, the researcher wanted to know the following:

RQ11: What are the key practices, strategies, and norms of news production for news workers at small-town weekly newspapers?

RQ12: 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?

RQ13: From the small-town news worker perspective, what is the role of the weekly newspaper in the community?

Addressing RQ11, 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, which are detailed in Chapter 2, 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 & Rosenstiel, 2001), journalists should have a clear understanding of journalistic news values such as impact and timeliness (Lanson & 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. 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 chapter is that external and internal influences – as detailed above and outlined in the literature in Chapter 2 – influence news production and news workers at small-town weekly newspapers, which addresses RQ12. 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; and by individual attitudes, behaviors, and identities, an influence that will be explored in depth in Chapter 6. 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 adheres to the long-standing journalistic norms mentioned above – it's about survival and remaining a part of the local community. Because many of them said, and this relates to RQ13 and the role of the weekly newspaper in the community, no one else is going to report what is happening on the main

streets of small towns, the votes taken by local governing boards, the youths participating in the Babe Ruth summer baseball tournaments or the 50<sup>th</sup> 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. Or in the words of one news worker, “We’re not on the larger media’s radar.”

In the subsequent chapter, the researcher explores who the news workers are at small-town weekly newspapers. Specifically, the chapter aims to understand the identities the news workers hold and how those identities do or do not affect their jobs as news producers in small, rural communities.

## **Chapter 6: Who are the small-town news workers?**

Using the interpretive lens of identity theory, this chapter draws on analyses of newsroom observations and interviews with news workers to examine who the small-town news workers in Iowa are. The aim here is to understand the identity(ies) of a weekly newspaper journalist in a small town and how self-perceived identities affect news production practices, strategies, and norms. The observations and interviews were helpful in answering the following research question:

RQ14: How do the self-perceived identities of small-town weekly newspaper journalists affect their news production practices, strategies, and norms?

### **Methodology**

Guided by the literature on identity, the researcher analyzed and interpreted the data 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 & Corbin, 1990). The literature guided the researcher toward thematic categories and patterns related to the identities of news workers, which provided meaningful insight into the people who work in small-town weekly newspapers. Chapter 5 provides more details about the ethnographic method used here.

### **Findings**

The findings of this study support the identity theories detailed in Chapter 2. The news workers in small towns wear multiple hats, including news worker, community member, spouse, business owner, and advocate, to name a few. As Stryker's (1968, 1980) Identity Theory predicts, the small-town news worker also holds multiple identities – personal, role-based, category-based, and group-based. The findings also reveal that

personal, role-based, and group-based identities tend to have the most influence on how these news workers do their jobs in small towns. The findings also support Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, 1981; Tajfel & Turner, 1986), which suggests that people not only hold personal identities, they also hold social identities. Finally, the findings indicate that small-town news workers struggle to balance the multiple role identities they hold.

While there is considerable overlap among primary identity types, the following sections use particular points made by the interviewees to illustrate the ways they see themselves and the issues those self-perceived identities raise.

*Prominent, but not exclusive, identity: Personal*

Personal identities of the news workers in this study became apparent through the observations of and interviews with the news workers. These identities – which are constructed through personal beliefs, backgrounds, experiences, characteristics, and attitudes of the news workers – do motivate their behavior and influence how they do journalism in their communities.

One example of how personal identities affect how the news workers do their jobs was revealed in a conversation with Molly at *The Times*. Molly is a retired lawyer, and said her age and personal interests influence what she writes about and how much effort she puts into her reporting and writing. Because of personal interests, Molly is not thrilled about writing stories about the local school board, and she often puts those assignments on the back burner and doesn't exert a lot of energy in her writing, she said. Instead, she prefers to write about subject matters she is interested in, including history and economics, so she tends to write more feature stories about people and groups. "I'm completely my own boss. All I have to do is keep (publisher) happy. We are very frank with each other. I don't have to

be here if I don't want to be here. Stuff just has to be ready when it needs to be," Molly said.

Molly at *The Times* also avoids writing about controversial issues, especially in her weekly editorial columns, because they do not interest her. "I'm not interested in arguing. I don't want to argue in the paper with people," she said. And because of her age, she makes considerable effort to find balance between her personal life and her professional life, which ultimately helps her decide how many stories she will work on at any given time:

I don't like being tired anymore. When you get to be 63 you'll know what I mean. You have a certain amount of energy and you have to think about how you're going to divvy it up. You do what you choose to do with limits. I used to spend a lot more effort here. Maybe it was because I was younger and didn't know what to do. But that's not what I want to do with my time anymore.

Molly also has a personal relationship with the publisher at *The Times*: he is her brother, so her experiences with, and attitude toward him also influence how she approaches her job. For her, the job is very personal. In a conversation with this news worker, she spoke affectionately about her brother as if she stayed in her job solely because she wants to help him. "(Publisher) does a really good job. He doesn't get any time off. He just works, works, works," she said.

Personal identities also influence why small-town news workers do what they do. For example, Dan at *The Times*, Molly's brother, was born and raised in the community in which he owned the newspaper for nearly two decades, and his father was the previous owner. He said it was his father who inspired him to be a newspaper man. "He was a great writer. He taught me to work hard, be on time and get (the story) right," he said.

But the most common personal identity, which motivates all of the news workers who were part of this study, is the fact that they live in the community in which they work. Jane at *The Times* has lived in the community she covers as a journalist since 1975, and has

been working for the newspaper for 34 years. That connection, the experience and background and personal feelings, helps her understand her community, she said. “We’re not anonymous here. We know everyone and they aren’t just acquaintances. They are our friends. You know who your subscribers are. You grieve when they die, are joyous when someone has a baby,” she said.

Sandra at *The Bugle* said those personal experiences also influence how she approaches her job. “Basically you have to understand you’re going to live in the community you’re covering and they are going to stop you in the bank, drug store for the good and the bad. There’s no anonymity. When you work for a community newspaper, everyone knows you. And just because you close the door and go home, you’re still a newspaper employee,” she said.

James at *The Times* also said his close connection to sources and personal experiences with are imperative for him to do his job as a journalist in a small town. “The rapport I have with the (sport) coaches is a little different because I live here. It’s a big deal to live in the town we work in. Groceries, the doctor, church, everything is here and I try to do it all here. But that tells people I’m going to be here. I’m not just coming and going, and I think there is a little more trust there,” he said.

*Prominent, but not exclusive, identity: Role-based*

The findings also reveal that role-based identities influence how small-town weekly newspaper journalists perform their jobs. The observations and interviews with news workers indicate that the role of being a professional journalists helps guide their news decision-making, including writing and reporting of news stories. “If you want people to trust you, then you have to be fair. I try to be objective, but personal experiences will always

come about,” said Dan at *The Times*.

The news workers do consider themselves professional journalists, although not all of them have been formally trained as journalists. Most of them received their training through socialization with other staff members at the newspaper and reading news stories in their newspaper and in other media. This role-based identity as professional journalist helps them know what is news through accepted journalistic news values such as timeliness and proximity. The identity also informs their understanding of how a news story is constructed, what to ask in interviews with sources, and how newspapers should appear aesthetically. “I read a lot. I subscribe to two dailies, and I read the sports sections for multiple weeklies. My first story was covering eight-man football playoffs. I knew I had to watch the game and get the stats,” said James at *The Times*.

For Elizabeth at *The Herald*, her role as a professional journalist guides her understanding of the purpose of journalism. “You don’t sensationalize. It’s a game. But you got to remember you have a lot of influence, and with that comes a lot of responsibility,” she said. But she added there is a difference to newspapering in small communities than journalism in bigger cities. “I think we cover weddings and obits with more care than larger dailies. Weeklies are doing well because of news about church fairs, honor rolls, the sports. Everyone on the bench gets covered,” she said.

The role-based identity of family member is also significant for small-town news workers. James at *The Times* said being allowed to have flexible hours and include family in work-related activities are perks of being employed by a weekly newspaper. “Doing what I do is not about the money. It makes me feel wanted. I had always heard working for a family paper was a good deal and came with perks. There’s no time clock. If you need to

take your car to get fixed, you can go. If you're willing to sacrifice socially, this is a pretty good deal. I have kids. If we need to stay home, we stay home," he said.

But role-based identities can also have drawbacks for small-town news workers. For instance, in addition to being the publisher, Kristen at *The Herald* is also a mother and a wife – both role-based identities. These identities influence how she does her job, which includes overseeing the production of the weekly newspaper, handling payroll, selling advertisements, attending government meetings and writing the stories, creating page budgets for the newspaper, planning for special sections, and attending sporting events for photos. Especially in recent years, she has established boundaries around how much energy she devotes to her job as publisher:

As a woman, I'm still expected to be a mother and housewife. I felt like I had to be some kind of superhero. My husband had to cover the duties of raising our children and doing all the housework. Do you know how hard it is to walk into your own kitchen and it not feel like it's your own kitchen? I had to set some boundaries. I told myself I'm only going to be doing this much work. I've cut back (on workload) so that I am only away from home for two nights a week. I'm only doing this much work, and I'm not doing work at home as much.

The role-based identity as a business owner is also significant for the publishers of small-town weeklies because economics are important, even when the news worker considers himself or herself a part of the community. "You can't give your product away. We have resisted that business model," said the publisher at *The Times*. The publisher at *The Herald* said the role of being a business owner has taken its toll on her physically, mentally, and emotionally. She revealed that she and her co-owner, Elizabeth, were planning to try to sell the newspaper and she was ready to return to her family farming business.

She said as the owner of the newspaper, she has had to sacrifice other roles in her life, including being a wife and a mother. She said the stress has affected her sleeping,

eating, and ability to work well since she took over ownership of both newspapers in the mid 2000s. The publisher of *The Herald* said she considered walking out of the business a few years ago and now regretted she did not. “I wish I hadn’t stayed. It took a lot out me,” she said.

The publisher said she thought the paper would sell, and she hoped it would sell to someone locally or at least someone familiar with small-town newspapers. She said she would miss what she does. “I’ll miss being known as the newspaper lady, but it’s time for another chapter,” she said. “My brain is in overload with all the information I know about the people in this community,” she said.

*Prominent, but not exclusive, identity: Group-based*

Based on the findings, group-based identities commonly guide the behavior of journalists in small towns. The most significant group-based identities for small-town weekly newspaper workers include being members of their communities and being members of local organizations. “Here, I’m part of the community,” said Sandra at *The Bugle*. “I live here. It’s not that I drive in and drive home. I’m part of the community. I work with people on a professional level, but I shop at their stores and get their services. I have that connection because I have lived in (the county) more than half my life. You get that connection because of longevity. If people are here only a short time, I don’t know if you get that because they are impartial or if they aren’t involved.”

Molly at *The Times* said getting involved and being a part of the community is expected of everyone, including the news workers. This news worker is heavily involved with historical preservation in the community, she also used to be a member of a local Lions organization, remains an active member in a local church, and owns the land for the local

community garden. “You must know the community. You get involved and you can’t just walk away,” she said. “You get really involved in a small community, and that’s a big deal. People really appreciate it, and it feels good to be appreciated.”

For the publisher of *The Herald*, belonging to local organizations such as the local Community Club and Rotary Club and Athletic Booster is vital to her role as a journalist and publisher. It also is important for knowing what is happening in the community. “It shows we’re supportive and that this isn’t just our jobs. By being part of clubs, it gives us insight into the community. It’s important to be actively engaged. You make contacts, make better friendships. They tell you more stuff because you’re a part of the community. They don’t think you’re just going to run with a story,” she said.

The group editor who helps manage the media group that oversees *The Bugle* also said it is important for a small-town news editor to be engaged with the community through organizations because it contributes to understanding of the community, which ultimately helps make better journalists. “That’s where we pick up a lot of stuff. You’re a community member and always a newspaper man. You can’t separate the two,” he said.

#### *In-groups/out-groups – social identities*

Social identity, which is detailed in the contextual framework above, posits that people identify with certain groups. The findings in this study reveal that social identities are socially constructed by personal, role-based, and group-based identities. The social identity of community journalist is created by the combination of personal identities, role-based identities, and group-based identities held by small-town news workers.

The findings suggest that small-town news workers often do consider themselves as members of an “in group” while journalists who do not work for newspapers in small towns

are considered members of an “out group” or are considered “others” and often referred to as “they.” For example, Sandra at *The Bugle*, which is under a corporate ownership structure, talked about her managers who travel from a larger metropolitan area as people who do not understand how community journalism in her small town works. “Their understanding of (county name) is driving down the interstate to (town name),” she said. She added, “It takes a special mind set to be a community journalist in a small town. You can’t come into a community and have an ‘us’ vs. ‘them’ attitude. The newspaper is part of (town name) and you need to be willing to understand the people.”

Another example from the findings provides evidence of how weekly newspaper journalists compare themselves with other types of journalists. “You have to have some roots. Being a part of the community has allowed me to come and do what I do. I can walk into one of the elementary schools and they know who I am. When larger newspapers come in, no one has an idea who they are,” Jane at *The Times* said.

Elizabeth at *The Herald* also made distinctions between small-town newspaper journalists and other types of journalists. “At weeklies you have to be a jack of all trades. It can be easier doing journalism at a daily, but you also don’t get to do other things,” she said. Even within the in-group of community journalists, there are “others.” For example, a local competitor, another weekly, is always referred to as “they” in conversations among the news workers at *The Herald*.

Each week, the news workers at *The Herald* faithfully read the competitor’s newspaper to make comparison between the current week’s editions. The researcher observed Randel reading a copy of the competitor’s print product and overheard Elizabeth say to him, “If this paper wasn’t printing the past, it wouldn’t have any pages.” “The other”

is so often thought about by the news workers at *The Herald* that the newspaper does not run any advance promotions of upcoming news stories or special sections because they said the competitor would start selling ads for the same type of section or story.

For small-town news workers, the identity as a news worker in a small town does often conflict with their maintenance of other identities such as community member, mom/dad, church member, civic organization member, etc., because they are so well known in the community. For example, James at *The Times* said it is often hard for him to get the community to understand he is not just a news worker. “People always expect me to shoot video or take pictures wherever I go, but I have my limits,” said James. “I intentionally do not take the camera to my daughter’s events at school. At some point I have to be able to be there and enjoy the event. Not as a reporter, but as a dad.” Jane at *The Times* said for her, there is no separation between being a reporter and being a community member in a small town. “You can’t separate the personal and professional life,” she said. However, she said when she is in the mood to not be a news worker in a small town, she stays home, which is located out in the country, and unplugs her phone. Even then, she added, the emergency response scanner remains turned on. “You don’t shut (the scanner) off,” she said.

## **Discussion**

This chapter has explored how the identities held by small-town newspapers news workers impact their roles as journalists. Specifically, the researcher wanted to know:

RQ14: How do the self-perceived identities of small-town weekly newspaper journalists affect their news production practices, strategies, and norms?

In answering the above research question, it is important to recognize that the identities of small-town newspaper news workers are complex. The findings do support the identity theories presented in Chapter 2. The news workers hold multiple, and sometimes

competing, identities. These identities are important to recognize because they provide meaning and purpose to the news workers' lives and to their jobs. Their identities – including journalist, community member, parent, spouse, neighbor, and club member – affect how they approach journalism in their communities. The small-town news worker is not detached from the community she or he works in. In fact, news workers in this study repeatedly told the researcher that in order to do journalism in a small community, they must constantly and simultaneously engage with and participate in the community on a personal and professional level.

The professional identity of small-town news workers is entwined with their other identities. For these news workers, being aware of those other identities motivates them to be journalists in the small town. These connections as spouse, as church member, as Rotary Club member, as parent, and as sports booster lead them to be journalists in the first place and affect how they enact that role as journalist. The multiple roles help them understand what news is in small towns and how news is or is not presented.

Role Strain Theory (Goode, 1960) suggests people have difficulty fulfilling their role obligations. This research shows that small-town news workers do face role strain, meaning they do, at times, have difficulty fulfilling their different role obligations, including being a publisher while at the same time holding the identity of mother and/or community member. Future research on community journalists should consider trying to understand these news workers through a RST interpretation, which would provide further insight into how these journalists manage their roles.

Terry (2011) has contended that community journalism is not a theory; it is an attitude. This study reveals that small-town news workers are emotionally, physically, and

mentally attached to their communities and believe that attachment is vital to do their jobs well. In his book, Ryfe (2012) argued that in order for journalism to survive in an emergent media era journalists need to make personal connections with their audiences. That is in fact what community journalists at small-town weeklies have been doing ever since such newspapers began. This study suggests that this ability to accept the need for personal connections enables weekly newspapers in small towns to survive.

So far, this study has investigated the content published in weekly newspapers and the people who produce the news in small, rural communities. The final step is to investigate what the local weekly newspaper means to its readers. Through interviews with official and non-official community members in each of the three field sites, the next chapter explores how local people perceive the place of the weekly newspaper in the community.

## **Chapter 7: What does the community think of its newspaper?**

This chapter explores what the selected community sources, official and non-official, think of their local newspaper and its role within their communities. Through an analysis of interviews with selected community members in the three small, rural communities in eastern Iowa as described in Chapter 4, this chapter aims to specifically answer the following research question:

RQ15: From the community's perspective, what is the role of the weekly newspaper in the community?

### **Methodology**

To help understand the community's perspective about the role of the weekly newspaper in the community, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with four community members, two officials and two non-officials, from each of the three field sites, which are described in Chapter 4. These 12 interviews included five primary open-ended questions; elaboration questions served as follow-ups.

The community members were selected based on directions from the researcher's university IRB. As per IRB rules, the researcher had the publishers of two of the weekly newspapers and the managing editor, who was in the local authoritative position, of one newspaper choose and contact the community members they wanted to participate in the study. Once the community members agreed to participate, the researcher contacted each one and set up convenient meeting times and locations for interviews.

The interviews, which lasted between 40 and 60 minutes, were digital-audio recorded and transcribed by the researcher. In addition to recording the interviews, the researcher took extensive hand-written notes during the interviews. The research data

involving the interviews with community members were stored in a locked drawer in the researcher's office on the UI campus. The researcher transcribed the digital audio recordings of the semi-structured interviews with community members once the fieldwork was completed. To protect the identities of the participants, the researcher gave each participant a pseudonym.

The researcher analyzed and interpreted the interview data with community members through textual analysis, which as described in previous chapters, is an inductive process of reading and re-reading and conducting line-by-line coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Thematic categories and patterns emerged from the data and have provided meaningful insight into community members' perceptions of the local weekly newspaper's role in its community.

## **Findings**

Based on the findings, community members in small-towns in rural Iowa consider their local newspapers vital to their communities. Every single participant began and ended his or her conversation sharing positive feelings about the importance of the local newspaper to people in the local community.

The primary role of the weekly newspaper is that of information source. The community members rely on the local newspaper for information about community events, social events, businesses, legal notices, recipes, letters to the editor, deaths, schools, government, their neighbors, crime, sports, and historical remembrances of the community's past. "(The newspaper) is to help you find out what is going on. It's how you keep up with the community," said Janice, an official source in Brownville. Tom, another official source in Brownville, said the newspaper is everything to the community. "It's the news. It's the

society news, news, church information, garage sales, just everything. It's a small-town newspaper," he said. Also, Tony, an official source in Nemaha, said the paper keeps the community informed. "The purpose of our paper is to let the local residents know what's happening with things like the police, schools, sports," he said. "People love the sports coverage in small towns. I read it for the board news, front-page news, and the editorial page." Bob, a non-official source in Brownville, said, "(The newspaper) provides information, especially social events and schools."

For Janice in Brownville, the information provided by the newspaper has real-life implications for how she handles her job. A middle school principal, she said the newspaper provides insight into her students' lives, which helps her know how to approach them. "The arrest log is really important to me. I know a lot of people read it for gossip, but I read it to see which parents have been arrested and for what. I want to be able to offer support and protect my students. There are real implications with this information. It's not just for gossip," she said.

The local newspapers also serve as advocates, or voices, for the community, said community members. Larger media in the area do not travel to their communities unless a major news event occurs, such as a murder or a natural disaster, so having the local voice is crucial. "The newspaper provides the exposure because (large newspaper) and (large newspaper) aren't going to do it," said Scott, a non-official source in Auburn. Bob, a non-official source in Brownville, described the newspaper as the "voice for the community." He added, "When we need something done or when we are fighting for something, the paper talks about it. Sometimes (publisher) and (reporter) will write a column supporting whatever is going on, or the organizations doing stuff." Scott, a non-official source in Auburn, said he

believed there was not another media that cared about his town. “(The local newspaper) is the only thing that gives a whoop about (the town),” he said. “The other media wouldn’t be here. You’d have the big stuff, but you wouldn’t have that local coverage like this paper gives the town.” Becky, an official source in Nemaha, held a similar belief. “Larger media don’t come here except when there is a larger story like getting the pool opened last year or the closing of a plant or the river flooding. They don’t come for the everyday stuff,” she said.

The findings also show the local newspaper serves as an information resource for people to connect to and remain involved with the community. Without the newspaper, “there would be less involvement in the town, I think, because it would be harder to let people know what’s going on,” said Bill, an official source in Auburn. Another official source in Auburn said the newspaper builds a sense of community. “It is important to do these things because rural Iowa is becoming more transient. Newspapers can help build that sense of community for these transients,” he said. Becky in Nemaha, a non-official source, said the paper allows her to know what the other people in the community are up to. “You can open the newspaper and know you’re going to know the people. And you can see someone the following week and know what they have been up to and you can say something to them. Little things like that make a difference,” she said.

Another major role of the weekly newspaper, revealed in the findings, is that the local newspaper helps construct and maintain a collective memory for the community. Collective memory, as defined by Barry Schwartz (1991), is “a metaphor that formulates society’s retention and loss of information about its past in the familiar terms of individual remembering and forgetting” (p. 302). The local weekly newspapers create a sense of

collective memory by helping their communities remember their pasts by regularly providing a historical column that may include photos of places, events, and people published in the newspaper 10, 25, 50, even 75 years prior. Community members said such material creates a positive sense of nostalgia. “I like to look at what happened 50 years ago. The memories flood back for me. The pictures are funny, and we can remember what it was like here when we were growing up,” said John, an official source in Auburn. For Scott, a non-official source of Auburn, that historical news stirs up a lot of memories. “I get a kick out of the past news because it’s old stuff. The community has really changed. Not as many businesses here. There were franchise auto dealers, a furniture store. It’s a ‘remember when’ kind of thing,” he said.

The study also reveals that the community newspaper is the constructor of community. This role reflects Anderson’s (2006) idea that newspapers help construct communities, specifically connections among community members, through the use of common language, common values and the act of knowing other people are reading about the same stuff. This role became evident when Chris of Nemaha, an official source, said, “I’m more now likely to read the newspaper because of my position as city administrator, but really it helps me stay informed. I want and need to know what the residents are reading.” Becky in Nemaha, a business owner, also indicated the newspaper creates a sense of community. “The older people, they come in, and that’s the first thing they go to. They know it’s here on Thursdays. And I hear people talking about what they read in the newspaper. They’ll mention ‘so and so’ and ask ‘did you see that so and so died?’ We all read it,” she said.

The researcher also asked the community members whether they thought their

newspapers and the news workers were fair on their coverage of events, places, and people. The findings revealed that, in general, the community members do think their newspaper is fair and its content accurate. “The paper is fair,” said Bob of Brownville, an official source. “(The publisher) is honest. He reports it the way it is. When I was mayor, the stories were written as they unfolded. (The publisher) doesn’t try to taint the stories in any way. He’s good people. We might have a difference of opinion, maybe.” Cheryl of Auburn, a non-official source, said the local town “used to have characters in it, and the paper covered all of it, all of them.” Bill of Auburn, an official source, also said, “I know the paper isn’t going to do anything to sensationalize the news. It’s not going to purposefully make you feel bad. And they call and ask questions for clarifications.”

Although community officials were more likely than non-officials to cite a time they thought the coverage was not always fair or accurate, the general tone of their comments still tended to be more positive than negative. For instance, Janice in Brownville, an official source, said,

I think it’s harder to do journalism in a small town than a bigger place. You’re going to face pressure from all kinds of groups. But the paper is fair. (Editor) is not going to misquote me on purpose. I trust him. We don’t always agree with how the newspaper story reads, and I don’t agree with how things come across sometimes, but he’s not deliberately misquoting me. There are times when, with things like grants that can be technical, that there are inaccuracies. But I’ve never had arguments with anyone over there. Most of the stories are accurate representations of our council meetings, which usually never draw anybody.

However, a bit of concern did surface in Nemaha, which is where the only paper in this study was not locally owned. Tony, of Nemaha, also an official source, said, “I’ve wondered if I’m at the same meetings (as the reporter) sometimes. There are a lot of times the story isn’t really accurate, but our subject matters are complex. But usually the

newspaper is fair in what they report.”

Community members also were asked what areas of news content their newspapers might improve. In general, community members seem fairly satisfied with the content produced and published by their local newspapers. “I wouldn’t change anything. I trust the paper,” Scott, of Auburn, a non-official source, said. Bob, of Brownville, another non-official source, said he thought the paper did a good job of covering different groups. “It’s not always just about sports, but it captures the whole community. I see a good round of people in there,” he said. Also, Cheryl, of Auburn, a non-official source, said, “You do see some names over and over again, but they do a good job of picking up stories from all over and getting in names.”

But some community members said they wished they did see coverage of a different assortment of topics and issues. “I wish there was more coverage of (middle school sports,” said Janice, of Brownville, an official source. Rachel, of Brownville, another official source, also wanted “more local news of our sports.” She added, “Sometimes I think they show the other towns more.” Bill, of Auburn, an official source, also said he would like to see the newspaper expand its coverage area. “It would be nice to have more county-wide news. But overall, they don’t neglect anyone or anything,” he said.

Community members also were asked whether they felt their newspapers were reflective of the entire community or a specific population within the community. A majority said they felt their newspapers were reflective of their communities. “I think the paper does a good job of being reflective of the area,” said Chris in Nemaha. “Of course, it’s tough not to have the same people in the paper all the time because the same people are always involved in small towns.” Tom, of Brownville, another official source, said he

thought the paper was representative of the entire community. “They report on just about everything in this town that happens,” he said. “(The publisher) is a hometown guy. He’s very well known, very well liked. He’s a community guy. He’s in touch with everything that goes on in this town.” Becky of Nemaha, a non-official source, said she also thought the newspaper was reflective of her community. “Especially the front-page because those are the stories that are closest to the community. Our paper isn’t the statewide news. It’s just local. Our paper is always the local,” she said.

The findings also showed that community members felt their communities would suffer if the local weekly newspapers closed. This question seemed to stump the participants the most. Many of them said they had never given the idea consideration and many had to pause and think before responding. “It would be a big loss for the community. People use it,” said Bob in Brownville, a non-official source. “It’s a big information source for us. Where would we get our local information? We’re not on the television station radar.” Janice, of Brownville, an official source, said losing the local paper would be awful. “It’s an important part of the community because it keeps us all connected. We all know what’s going on. It makes us a community. Like when it comes out, we talk to each other about it,” she said. Cheryl, of Auburn, a non-official source, said she would be sad if the paper closed. “I wouldn’t like it because where would we get our local information? You could get it online, I guess, but I think we’d lose out on some of that stuff. We couldn’t get the local wanted ads. There could be a blog page, I guess. But we’d have to trust the blogger, and it would all depend. It wouldn’t be objective, I don’t think,” she said. For John in Auburn, losing the paper would be like losing the grocery store. “We’d lose a piece of ourselves. Websites are fine and acceptable, but we need an independent source telling people what’s

going on because that creates more credibility. It really helps to have that independent source validating what's going on," he said. Janice, of Brownville, an official source, said, "I would be lost. I rely on the paper."

Despite the current media environment, most of the participants said they believed there would always be a newspaper in their communities. Bill in Auburn, an official source, said as long as there are jobs, there will be small towns, which meant to him there will always be a local newspaper. "As long as the community supports the paper, I think there will be a small-town newspaper," he said. For Paul in Nemaha, an official source, there will be a local newspaper in small rural communities for years because of lacking infrastructure. "In this town, at least not yet anyway, we don't have high-speed Internet," he said. "But the older people don't want to be online anyway. They don't read online. And small towns are full of older people. The paper might go digital, but I don't think it will happen for a very long time." Cheryl in Auburn, a non-official, said despite the community's demographics, tradition will keep the paper alive. "Young people might not read the newspaper now, but like us, they come around to it when they get older," she said.

## **Discussion**

This chapter aimed to find out what the community thought of its local weekly newspaper. Specifically, the following research question was raised:

RQ15: From the community's perspective, what is the role of the weekly newspaper in the community?

In answering the above research question, the findings suggest the small-town weekly newspaper plays an important role in its community. Also, the findings suggest, an institution that began in the frontier days remains vital in the Internet age. They serve as an

information source, a community advocate, a community builder, community engager, and a constructor of a sense of community and collective memory. Respondents in this study all said losing the local newspaper in a small community would be detrimental to its residents, its local officials, its local government, and its community identity. The findings suggest the newspaper is the glue that holds the community together, or as one community member described his local newspaper as, “the lifeline of our community.”

Community members said losing the local newspaper would be like watching a family member or a friend leave town, which became evident in common descriptors of the newspapers and their staffs. Consistently, the community members described the small-town news workers and newspapers as “our neighbors,” “our friends,” and “a part of us.” For example, John, an official source in Auburn, said, “We’re better off as a community with a newspaper. We’d lose a piece of ourselves if we loss the newspaper. It is not a zero sum game. We are all in this together.” “Like their ‘friends,’ audiences think their local weekly newspapers matter – enough to want to be outside the post office on publishing days every week to get their copies of the latest edition.

This study has explored how Iowa’s weekly newspapers are faring in the digital age; what are the key practices, strategies, and norms of news production employed by news workers at small-town weekly newspapers; what kind of content gets produced for local weekly newspapers; how external and internal constraints influence news production in small towns; how the identities of small-town journalists affect how they do their jobs; and the perceptions held by community members about their local weekly newspapers. In the final chapter, the researcher ties together the major concepts, theories, and analyses that have emerged from the previous chapters. Chapter 8 also addresses why it is important to

understand the industry and its current state and will conclude with the researcher's views about the future of the small-town weekly newspaper industry as it fits within the larger media landscape.

## **Chapter 8: Key findings and conclusion**

News produced in small, rural communities by weekly newspapers is a social phenomenon. The social structure of the weekly newspaper and the community it serves, as well as the way news workers see themselves fitting into those structures, influence not only how weekly newspaper news workers produce their communities' news but also the content that gets published each week.

To extend the scholarship on community journalism, which has largely been ignored by media scholars, this dissertation studied weekly news production in rural Iowa by primarily using the theoretical perspectives of sociology of news and identity. Through this study, the researcher sought to explore whether the small-town journalism approach was different than that of larger daily newspapers and whether the approach affected how small community newspapers are faring in a digital age that has been extremely challenging to larger papers. The routine practices of news gathering used by news workers, the identity formations of weekly newspaper journalists, and the journalists' and community members' perceptions of the newspaper's role in the community were examined in this multi-faceted study, contributing conceptual knowledge and long-term value to the overall understanding of community journalism.

Focusing on small-town weekly newspapers in small communities matters because news and news workers have the potential to impact, at the grassroots level, the everyday lives of their readers. They can influence public opinion and how people view the world around themselves. The researcher also believes this dissertation provides members of the news industry insight into a different approach to journalism – the small-town weekly newspaper approach.

This chapter will address four significant points: a short summary of major key

findings; the connections among findings related to specific research questions addressed throughout the study, facilitating exploration of the larger implications of the study; the strengths and weakness of the dissertation as well ideas for future research; and finally, a discussion of what the findings suggest for the future of weekly newspapers and the newspaper industry as a whole.

### **Summary of Key Findings**

This section is not intended to provide a complete summary of the dissertation. Instead, it details the key findings of the five primary focal points within this dissertation work – weekly newspaper publishers, weekly newspaper content, weekly newspaper news workers, journalists’ self-perceived identities, and the community’s perception of the weekly newspaper.

#### *Weekly newspaper publishers*

There are four key findings from the questionnaire regarding Iowa’s’ weekly newspapers and their publishers. The first is that small-town weekly newspaper publishers believe the weekly newspaper industry is surviving the current chaotic media environment, despite some of their newspapers experiencing circulation and advertising revenue declines over the past five years. The second key finding of the questionnaire is that weekly newspapers remain focused on their print products despite the emergent media environment that is driving the production of news for larger daily newspapers. However, most of the publishers reported they planned to improve their newspapers’ online presence in the coming year. The third key finding of the questionnaire, which will be addressed in more depth in the subsequent section of this chapter, is that the actions of small-town weekly newspaper publishers are heavily guided by the community’s needs, more so than financial

gains and professional journalistic norms. Finally, according to the findings of the questionnaire, weekly newspaper publishers believe there is no one-size-fits-all approach to journalism and the role of the small-town weekly newspaper is different than the larger daily newspaper.

#### *Weekly newspaper content*

The content analysis of the front pages of the three weekly newspapers analyzed in this study sought to understand what was in Iowa's weekly newspapers, specifically, the extent of a presumed focus on local community information. There are a couple of major findings that emerged from the content analysis. The first is the hyper-local nature of the weekly newspaper news. The researcher did not come across a single story or news brief printed on the front page of any of the 12 editions analyzed in this study that featured news about another community. Another key finding is that the weekly newspapers primarily placed event-related stories on their front pages – hard news stories related to improving daily life, guiding people's decisions, and providing information about on-going community debates. The front pages contained very little soft news, such as human-interest stories or personality profiles. And finally, the content analysis showed that the primary sources used by the weekly newspapers were official sources, including elected and unelected officials.

#### *Weekly newspaper news workers*

Under the sociology of news theoretical framework, the research, through ethnographic case studies, explored how external and internal influences affect how small-town news workers do their jobs. The key finding concerning the practices, strategies, and norms of news production for news workers in this study is that because there are internal and external constraints on news production and the news workers, news and news

production in small towns are heavily routinized and predictable. Some of the constraints placed on these news workers include: ownership structures; limited staffs; shrinking communities, which create a need for more advertising revenue and circulations; and a once-a-week deadline, which affects the news value of the stories published and forces reporters to hurry their writing for publication. Another key finding concerning the news workers is that they have been trained to be self-sufficient rather than micromanaged. They know what is expected of them, they know where they need to be at specific times, and they know how much time they need to accomplish their work for the week.

#### *Journalists' self-perceived identities*

The self-perceived identities of these weekly newspaper news workers – and the effect of those perceptions of news production practices, strategies, and norms –were explored through the interpretive lens of identity theory. A key finding was that the identities of the people working for small-town newspapers are complex, requiring negotiation among multiple roles from news worker to parent to community member to organization member to volunteer. Another key finding is that because of their identities, small-town news workers are not detached from their communities in which they work. In fact, the news workers in this study repeatedly said that doing journalism in a small community requires that they constantly, and simultaneously, engage with and participate in the community on personal and professional levels.

### *Community's perception of the weekly newspaper*

The case study also provided insights into the views of community sources, official and non-official, about their local newspaper and its role within their communities. Universally, the sources interviewed for this study said the small-town newspaper is important to the community it serves. The community members see the newspaper as not only a source of entertainment and information, but also as a community advocate, community builder, and community engager. They also indicated they saw the newspaper as a constructor of the community's collective memory.

### **Connecting the Ideas**

This section provides a thematic analysis of the findings of this study in order to paint a richer, more conceptual and theoretical, picture of small-town weekly newspapers. The four primary themes, which emerged from the study's four data sets, to be addressed in this section include: weekly newspaper content, levels of influence, identity/motivations, and the role of the small-town weekly newspaper.

#### *Weekly newspaper content*

Previous research has shown that community newspapers primarily serve two functions. The first is to provide advertising opportunities for local businesses, and the second is to provide local information to the community (Abbott & Niebauer, 2000; Emke, 2001). Therefore, one purpose of this study was to further understand how the content of weekly newspapers supports those functions.

Findings from the content analysis, the questionnaire of the weekly newspaper publishers, and interviews with news workers and community members show that the weekly newspapers in this study are information sources to their communities. The content

analysis specifically sought to understand what kind of information, specifically the information on the front pages, was delivered to the communities. Were the front pages devoted to local events, such as library story time and Little League baseball games, or was there a more extensive range of content, such as issue-related stories or unexpected event stories such as crime and natural disasters that would be important to the community?

What emerged from the content analysis was that event-related news stories were primarily published on the front pages. These are the hard news stories believed by journalists to improve daily life, guide people's decisions, and provide the community with information about on-going community debates. The front pages analyzed for this study contained very little soft news, such as human-interest stories or personality profiles.

These findings about the types of news stories produced by weekly newspaper journalists are important because the front pages, as indicated in interviews with the news workers in the case study, reflect what the journalists who produced them considered the most important, the most valuable, news stories for the community at the time of publication. In addition to confirming that the stories on the front page were those they believed to be most important to the community, the news workers also indicated that meeting stories have always gone on the front page, which is a journalistic norm followed by larger daily newspapers.

The findings in the content analysis are also important to recognize because they do not perfectly match up with the questionnaire findings concerning the publishers' perceptions of the content in their newspapers or the responses from the news workers concerning newspaper content. In the questionnaire, the publishers reported they believed their communities wanted information about community events, local people, school news,

government news, and sports. However, the content analysis revealed that mostly government news – issue-related news – graced the front pages of the weekly newspapers, again, another journalistic norm shared with larger daily newspapers. These findings concerning the content of weekly newspapers contradict the idea, which is held by some journalists who work for larger daily newspapers, that the only news covered by small-town weekly newspapers is the “fluff” news, a belief that leads some big-city news workers to not consider small-town news workers their equals.

Discussions about content with the news workers revealed inconsistencies with the results of the content analysis. The news workers consistently talked about the how their readers appreciated human-interest stories, including profiles of people and places, because those are the types of stories that inform readers about their neighbors. However, the interviews with the news workers also revealed that the human-interest stories tend to take a back seat to the issue-related news stories because of time constraints. They said the human-interest stories take more time to write because they tend to require more creativity and thought, yet most said these stories were the ones they most enjoyed doing.

As previously mentioned, the content analysis revealed the hyper-local nature of the weekly newspaper news. In fact, not one story on the front pages of the newspapers analyzed concerned an outside community. The hyper-local nature of the news is important to recognize because it helps illustrate the newspaper’s role within the community. Anderson (2006) has contended that newspapers create imagined communities. The weekly newspaper creates a shared understanding among community members – an imagined community – of what the important issues are to the community as a whole. The content that gets published in the newspaper is the news everyone in the community is talking about, as

indicated by the community members and news workers in this study. The news workers said they make a conscious effort to use only local information when they need to fill a news hole. One news worker said she even considers the local audience when deciding what recipe to use in her weekly column. She said she wants the information to be useful to her readers.

Another finding, revealed through triangulation among the content analysis, the publisher questionnaire, and newsroom observations, is related to types of sources used by weekly newspaper news workers. According to the questionnaire, the publishers believed that featuring local residents as sources in the paper was important to them. However, the content analysis showed that very few local residents who are not officials were used as sources in the front-page news stories. The primary sources used by the newspapers were official sources, including elected and unelected officials, which confirms a contention of previous literature that journalists tend to rely heavily on official sources in their news-making decisions and practices (Sigal, 1973; Schudson, 1989; Berkowitz & Beach, 1993; Tunstall, 1976; Ericson et al., 1987). Berkowitz (2009) has contended that it is important to recognize the relationship between sources and news workers because news is an ideologue – meaning it can shape public opinion. In fact, Schudson (1989) has argued that news is what sources say it is.

But the findings on news content and types of sources found in weekly newspapers also need to be placed in the context provided through the interviews and newsroom observations of this study. The news workers said that specific pages inside the newspaper tend to be devoted to certain types of news, such as social, school, crime, religion, and agriculture news. “Soft news” content such as human-interest stories about people and

places in the community commonly rely on non-official sources. So it would be misleading to conclude from examination of the front pages alone that news workers ignore certain types of news or types of sources, or deem them unworthy of coverage. On the contrary, weekly newspaper news workers indicated in their interviews they know their communities well enough to know that particular types of news are highly read – and that readers expect to find that kind of news on specific inside pages. In fact, they said that news is printed on the same pages every week, and because of that, advertisers deem those spaces to be very valuable.

The combination of content analysis and interview data also yielded insights into use of bylines, which are commonly used in journalism to tell the reader who wrote the news story. Bylines are not necessarily important to weekly newspaper news workers, in contrast to reporters at larger daily newspapers, whose success often is translated into how many bylines they have produced each year. For example, one weekly newspaper publisher indicated in an interview that he did not feel the need to attach a byline to his work because he felt the community already knew he wrote the story. Another news worker said he quit putting his byline on his stories years ago because he is the only one who writes those types of stories, so it made no sense to put his name on them. Therefore, when examining the content of weekly newspapers, bylines are a poor measurement of the local nature of the news because not all weekly newspaper news workers include them.

In addition to understanding the type of news produced by weekly newspaper news workers and the sources they used, the research also conducted a textual analysis to understand whether or not values, which are often found between the lines and require interpretation, were presented within the newspaper content. Driven by Gans' (1979)

theoretical perspective that news contains values based on journalists' assumptions about the world around them, the research revealed that the news produced in small towns does hold certain values. Although Gans' research was conducted more than 35 years ago and aimed to understand news production by national media organizations, the researcher deemed Gans' framework applicable to the study of small-town weekly newspapers because it provided insight into how the weekly newspaper journalists envision their communities.

The findings of this study revealed that news workers in small towns base their reporting and writing on their inherent assumptions of the world around them, specifically their own small communities. Not only did this become apparent in the textual analysis, but it also was supported by the interviews with news workers when they spoke about how much they cared for their small communities and how they wanted their communities to thrive. The data revealed that the values, which are detailed in Chapter 2, held consistently by the small-town news workers in this study are small-town pastoralism, ethnocentrism, altruistic democracy, responsible capitalism, and individualism. All three newspapers had stories on their front pages that revealed each of these values. For example, a couple of stories revealed the value of responsible capitalism, the idea that government regulation hinders economic growth. A story about the possibility of reducing window hours at a local post office cited government financial concerns. Another story about forced layoffs at a local manufacturing company highlighted the role of falling commodity prices as the reason for 21 employees losing their jobs. These stories suggest that the journalists who wrote them are blaming the government regulations and policies for the negative economic impact at the local level. Even though Gans' interpretive framework was generated in the late 1970s, the fact that several of the values emerged in this study shows that his perspective remains

relevant today and is applicable to the small-town press.

Understanding that these values are found in the newspaper content is important because as Gans suggested, these are the values that the journalists believe are held by their audiences. Journalists in small towns consider themselves a part of the community, and the community members in turn consider the news workers a part of the community. This study suggests these are not just perceived values the journalists hold but also are values actually held by the entire community.

### *Levels of influence*

Under the sociology of news theoretical framework, specifically drawing from Shoemaker and Reese's (2014) "Hierarchy of Influences" model, this research explored how external and internal influences – as outlined in Chapter 2 – shape the news and news production in small towns. This study has primarily examined how three levels of analysis – organization, routines, and individual – within Shoemaker and Reese's model influence the news. This section looks specifically at the influence of the organization and routine practices of journalists, while the subsequent section will take into account how the individual influences news and news production.

The findings of this study revealed that there are internal and external constraints on news and on how news workers do journalism in small towns. Because of these constraints, news and news production in small towns are heavily routinized and predictable, which parallels Tuchman's (1978; 1997) findings in her seminal study on news and journalists. The findings of this study reveal there is an obvious rhythm of weekly newspaper workweek, which helps allow the small-town news workers to get their work done.

The organization as a level of analysis, according to Shoemaker and Reese (2014) is

concerned with how the organizational and bureaucratic settings – the social environment (Schudson, 1989) – influence news. This level of analysis aims to understand the effects of ownership, economics, advertising, and organizational policies on news production.

Ownership of the weekly newspaper has an impact on weekly newspaper news production. The findings of this study reveal that most community newspapers in Iowa are locally owned, either by an individual or a family. And while the length of ownership of Iowa's weekly newspapers seems to vary, most publishers have owned their newspaper(s) for years. The data from the questionnaire revealed that six publishers had owned their newspaper(s) for 30 years or more. Longevity also was a hallmark in the case study, with one publisher owning his newspaper for nearly 40 years while another had owned her newspaper since the early 1990s. The third newspaper was owned by one of the largest media corporations in the United States. The differences in ownership provided some insight into how different ownership structures influences news production in small towns, specifically how the journalists felt about their jobs and the relationship between ownership and the community.

The fact that the findings of this study suggest Iowa's weekly newspapers are primarily under local ownership is significant because it means the owners live in the communities in which they work. The longevity in ownership provides the owners with institutional knowledge of the community that cannot be obtained by outside ownership, which was a sentiment shared by the news workers of the newspaper in the case study under corporate ownership.

The news workers at all three newspapers observed in the case study said local ownership means a healthier newspaper because they believed the local publisher is more

likely to respect the community, be fair to the community, and understand what the community wants and needs from the newspaper. The longevity of ownership might also explain why questionnaire respondents felt the relationship between their newspaper(s) and their communities was strong, with no publisher reporting even a moderately weak relationship between his or her newspaper and the community. The interviews with the news workers in the case study also revealed that they believed longevity allows the publishers to build relationships with their communities.

The differences in ownership and the relationship with the community became apparent in the observations of the publishers and interviews with the news workers. One particular observation of one of the publishers showed the closeness between publisher and community. As the publisher walked from the newspaper office to a nearby office to take a photo, he acknowledged the people he passed by their first name and asked how their families were. On the other hand, one of the news workers who worked at the newspaper under corporate ownership said she believed the only understanding the upper management has of the local community is what they see from the nearby interstate as they pass by.

These relationships are important to recognize because they offer insight into how well the publishers might believe they know what matters to the people in their communities. Findings from the questionnaire and interviews with publishers in the case study suggest publishers believe their communities want coverage of their own community, including news about events, people, school news, local government, and sports. These responses confirm a contention from previous literature that, again, community newspapers are a source of information for the residents (Abbott & Niebauer, 2000; Emke, 2001).

Moreover, the publishers' perceptions of what news topics were important to their

communities paralleled what they believe was actually published in the weekly newspaper. This finding was supported by both the questionnaire and the interviews with publishers in the case studies, during which they detailed the stories on their front pages during the weeks the researcher was observing the newsroom. This is significant because it suggests that they believe they know their communities and are in tune with their audiences' needs.

Other constraints explored within the organization as level of analysis are economics and advertising. For small towns, economics and advertising are linked to another constraint – community structure. Small, rural communities are shrinking. The findings of the questionnaire and the interviews with publishers and advertising representatives in the case study revealed that advertising revenue has declined for many of Iowa's weekly newspapers over the past five years. The ad reps said there are fewer and fewer businesses in their small communities, which creates a challenge for them to maintain their current list of advertising clients, let alone find new advertising revenue.

Advertising greatly impacts news production in small towns. The news workers in the case study openly discussed how the volume of advertising in any given week dictates the number of pages to be printed, which ultimately dictates how many stories the reporters need to write. It is also not uncommon for editorial news workers to sell advertisements to sources they know personally, which is a practice that is inconsistent with the long-standing norm of journalists avoiding potential conflicts of interest created by involvement in organizational economic needs (Wasserman, 2010). However, the researcher only observed this practice of news workers selling advertisement within the locally owned newspapers. One local publisher said whoever can get the ad sold, should get the ad sold because it makes good business sense.

Another key finding concerning organizational structure is that weekly newspaper news workers are not micromanaged by their editors and publishers. The interviews with the publishers and observations of news workers in the case study revealed that the news workers know what needs to be done each week in order to put out the current edition. All three managers of the newspapers in the case study acknowledged that they did not need to micromanage because their reporters had been on the job long enough to know what needed to be done and how to get it done. In fact, only two news workers in this study had been working at their newspapers for five or fewer years. Of the three newspapers, only one held regular editorial meetings with the news workers; the other two simply announced at page design time what content was available for the current week's edition. Some of the news workers and publishers said the hands-off approach to management created a family-like atmosphere within their newsrooms, which they deemed important to their job satisfaction.

As previously stated, small-town news workers have routines. The routines are necessary primarily because of resource limitations, including small staffs. The newspapers in the case study had three or fewer editorial news workers and six or fewer total staff members. The findings revealed that this constraint limits the time that news workers can spend on any one project. Not only are the news workers writing the stories but they also are the newspaper's photographers and page designers. On specific days, they do not have time to cover, report, or write the news. This constraint, the news workers said, ultimately impacts their abilities to be able to follow the journalistic norm of writing news that adheres to journalistic news values such as timeliness and impact (Lanson & Stephens, 2007).

In addition to small staffs, non-daily deadlines also are a constraint on the news routines of the news workers. The once-a-week deadline affects the news value of the stories

published, as well as the reporting and writing of community events and official government meetings, which tend to be held on weekends and on Monday evenings, respectively, in small towns. These deadlines force reporters to hurry their writing before page layout day, which does not allow them a lot of time to follow up or seek out community members' reactions to the news. Such practices are seen as desirable at larger daily newspapers, where the news workers are solely responsible for reporting and writing, and emphasized in traditional journalism textbooks (Lanson & Stephens, 2007).

### *Identity/motivations*

As previously stated, Shoemaker and Reese (2014) have argued that understanding news workers at the individual level is important. However, most of the already-established research on understanding news workers at the individual level has focused on professional rather than personal identity (Gans, 1979; Soloski, 1989; Schultz, 2011; Deuze, 2005; Donsbach, 2009). Therefore, this study aimed to extend that literature by understanding the community news workers beyond their professional identities.

The self-perceived identities of weekly newspaper news workers – and the effect of those perceptions on news production practices, strategies, and norms of small-town journalism – were explored in this study through the interpretive lens of identity theory, specifically Identity Theory (IT; Stryker, 1968, 1980) and Social Identity Theory (SIT; Tajfel, 1981; Tajfel & Turner, 1986), which are detailed in Chapter 2. Based on the literature, identities are important to understand because they provide meaning to a person's life (Owens et al., 2010) and they guide people's behavior (Oyserman et al., 2012).

This study has revealed that the identities of weekly newspaper news workers are complex. As the identity literature suggested, weekly newspaper news workers hold multiple

identities, including the four identity types outlined by Owens et al. (2010) – personal, role, category-based, and group-based. The findings reveal that the identities held by news workers often require negotiation among multiple identities, from news worker to parent to community member to organization member to volunteer. However, the observations of and interviews with news workers, as well as the open-ended responses given by publishers of the questionnaire, revealed that news workers have difficulty fulfilling their different identity obligations. What small-town news workers deal with is conceptually known as role strain (Goode, 1960). The identity theory literature emphasizes that identities provide meaning and purpose to people's lives and careers (Owens et al., 2010), so it is important to recognize these role strains and these potentially conflicting identities held by small-town news workers.

The identities indicated above, all of which came out in the interviews and in the open-ended responses shared by the publishers in the questionnaire, affect how these weekly newspaper news workers approach journalism in their communities. Because of their identities, the small-town news worker is not detached from the community in which she or he works. In fact, news workers in the case study repeatedly said, as did the publishers in their responses to the questionnaire, that doing journalism in a small community requires that they constantly, and simultaneously, engage with and participate in the community on personal and professional levels.

Their professional identities are constantly entwined with their other identities. Moreover, they felt that being aware of those other identities – parent, businessperson, and community member – motivates them to do their jobs as journalists in a small town and guides their behavior as news workers. The interviews with the news workers revealed that

the interconnections among their identities led them to be journalists in the first place. In fact, most of the news workers interviewed in the case study said they ended up working at their newspaper because of their connections within the community and other community members, while only two of them ended up in the community because of their job at the newspaper. This interconnectedness between identities affected how they enacted their professional roles, understood what news was important to their readers, and knew how to present that news in the newspaper.

It is largely because their professional identity is constantly entwined with their other identities that weekly newspaper journalists do and do not abide by long-standing traditional journalistic practices and norms that are heavily practiced by larger daily newspapers and taught in traditional journalism schools, such as being objective and fair (Ward, 2010), as well as being free of any conflict of interest related to sources or organizational financial needs (Wasserman, 2010). The consistency and inconsistency with following journalistic norms might also be attributed to the fact that most of the questionnaire respondents did not hold journalism degrees and had not participated in a formal journalism-training course. The same was true for the majority of the news workers of the case study who said they received most of their journalism training through socialization at their weekly newspapers. In fact, the publishers reported that journalistic norms were the least influential motivator of their behavior as publishers. Instead, they listed “perception of the community’s needs” and “role as a community member” as the top two motivators that guide their behavior as publisher. The findings thus suggest a belief by the publishers that their community’s needs are more important than their professional identity as a publisher, their business needs, or journalistic norms. These same sentiments also were revealed in the interviews with the publishers in the

case study. For example, the publisher of one of the newspapers said she would have sold the paper years ago but did not because she felt it would be a disservice to the community, despite the physical and emotional stress the job gave her.

Despite the strain of balancing identities – sometimes competing identities – news workers at small-town weekly newspapers seem to be satisfied with working at a small-town weekly newspaper. Many within the broader newspaper industry, as well as the academy, see small-town weekly newspapers as stepping-stones for jobs at larger daily newspapers. However, the publishers of weekly newspapers who responded to the questionnaire in this study and the news workers in the case study seem satisfied with working at a small-town weekly; most have been in the business for years. In fact, only three of the 34 respondents of the questionnaire had worked in community newspapers for five years or fewer, while 11 publishers said they had worked in community newspapers for 30 years. The news workers in the case studies indicated the weekly newspapers are not short-term jobs but rather have become life-long careers for them.

#### *Role of the small-town community newspaper*

In addition to news content and levels of analysis that influence news production, this study also provided insights into the role of the small-town community newspaper from the perspectives of the publishers, news workers, and community members. Universally, the participants for this study said the small-town newspaper is important to the community it serves. Their perceptions support the claim that the primary function of the community press is to be an information source (Abbott & Niebauer, 2000; Emke, 2001). Responses from the publishers, news workers, and community members also support other theoretical insights into community newspapers and their roles within their communities. For instance, the

participants consistently agreed that weekly newspapers serve as community advocates that maintain a sense of unity (Emke, 2001), as community builders that create a sense of social cohesion for local people (Janowitz, 1952), and as community engagers that help community members become actively engaged within the community (Stamm, 1985). The participants also indicated they saw the local weekly newspaper as a constructor of the community's collective memory by helping the community remember its past (Schwartz, 1991) through the regular use of historical news content of places, events, and people within the community.

Interviews with community members indicated that they strongly felt losing the local newspaper would be detrimental to the residents, to local officials and local government, and to the collective identity of the overall community. They indicated they felt strongly that their weekly newspaper creates what Anderson (2006) described as an imagined community, which extends beyond the physical location because it creates a shared understanding of what is valued within the community. For the local residents, the weekly newspaper is the glue that holds the community together. It is not just a newspaper in a building on the town square; it is a member of their families, and the local news workers are "friends" and "neighbors." The news workers, who described the readers as "family" and "friends," shared these sentiments. A prime example was the news worker who said in an interview that she cried when subscribers/readers passed away and was joyous when they celebrated the birth of a baby.

The weekly newspaper publishers, news workers, and community members in this study also thought weekly newspapers serve a different role within their communities than daily newspapers do in their communities. This finding is significant because it supports the

idea that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to journalism. It calls into question whether the journalistic norms and constitutive rules such as objectivity (Ward, 2010) and serving as a watchdog for the public (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2001), which are taught in journalism schools and traditionally followed by larger daily newspapers, are viable to the small-town weekly newspaper journalism approach.

The majority of the publishers of small-town weeklies who completed the questionnaire, along with most of the news workers interviews, said they believed their newspapers were different than larger dailies. This finding suggests a view that there are different acceptable practices, strategies, and norms to the small-town journalism approach. For example, most of the weekly newspaper publishers, as well as the news workers in the case study, did not feel it was important to discuss news from outside the community or to be an adversary of public officials or business by constantly expressing skepticism about their actions. This belief supports Abbott and Niebauer's (2001) claim that community newspapers tend to reflect rather than criticize their communities. On the other hand, some of the journalistic practices, strategies, and norms taught in traditional journalism schools also are held by weekly newspaper news workers, including providing analysis and interpretation of complex problems for the community, providing entertainment to community members, and investigating local government. The findings in this study support Donohue et al.'s (1995) claim that the community newspaper tends to avoid conflict, but will, when necessary, serve as a guard dog, for instance if public officials overstep their boundaries and disrupt the community.

This section has provided a holistic picture of how news in small, rural communities in Iowa gets produced by synthesizing some of the key findings within the four data sets of

this study. The section has shown that the news produced by weekly newspapers is hyper-local in nature; that the news content and its production are influenced by external and internal constraints such as limited staffs, the need for advertising revenue, time issues, ownership and community structures, community members, and the identities held by the news workers; and that the news workers and community members feel the weekly newspaper remains viable in, indeed vital to, the community.

### *Weekly newspapers and the Internet*

As shown above, there are differences between journalisms done by small-town weekly newspapers and larger daily newspapers. However, as this research aimed to understand weekly newspapers in the context of the digital era, there is one more notable difference to recognize between these two approaches: the use of the Internet. While larger daily newspapers are trying to figure out how to increase their online presence on the Internet and connect with their audiences, the responses collected from the questionnaire and the interviews with the news workers show that small-town weekly newspapers continue to remain print-first institutions.

The findings of this research revealed that most weekly newspapers do have an online presence. However, the interviews with the publishers in the case study revealed that they are still more concerned about their print products than with their online products. All three newspapers in the case study do have a website, which primarily consists of an uploaded PDF version of the most current edition, and two of the three newspapers use social media to promote the news. However, the news workers said the websites and the social media platforms are only updated when they have time or remember to make updates.

The publishers and news workers are not in denial that the Internet is changing the

media landscape. In fact, the publishers and news workers in the case study talked about the future of the newspaper industry and the fact that their newspapers, at some point in time, will more than likely be digital-first products. However, the push to go digital is not urgent for small-town weekly newspapers for several reasons. One, the news workers said the infrastructure is not 100% available to their audiences, who live in areas that may have poor wireless coverage. Two, their audiences have not yet demanded that more resources be put into their online products in large part because, the news workers said, their audiences are older and interact more with traditional media than digital media. Finally, there is no competition pushing them to get the news out to the public faster through the Internet, as no other media organizations cover their communities. In fact, many of the news workers talked about how their towns are not on the radar of larger media unless there is a natural disaster or some major crime such as murder.

In the digital era, competition for media, though, does not simply include other media. Most major non-media organizations now have their own direct lines of communication with their audiences, making the need for media attention less urgent. However, in small communities symbiotic relationships (Sigal, 1973) remain extremely strong between news workers and their sources, including the local government and community organizations. Community businesses and organizations still prefer to rely on the local media to get information about events, issues, and people to the public. In fact, interviews with the official and non-official community sources revealed that the local governments have yet to rely 100% on the Internet to disperse information to the public; the audience has not demanded it, and it is cheaper to advertise in the newspaper than to hire an employee to run a website.

If and when the small-town weekly newspapers decide to allocate more resources to their news websites and social media platforms, their transitions may be far less painful than those undergone by larger daily newspapers. Small-town weekly newspapers have already achieved the number one goal that larger newspapers are trying to attain online: engaging their readers and building a loyal following. The weekly newspapers have already established their connections with their audiences and have figured out their loyal following wants news from the local weekly newspaper that is about their neighbors, friends, and families – a collection of news not found anywhere else.

### **Strengths, Weaknesses, & Future Research**

The most prominent strength of this dissertation is that it provides theoretical and conceptual insight into community journalism. Prior to this study, little academic research had explored weekly newspapers through such a framework. But this research clearly shows through an examination of text, production, and reception how small-town news is a social phenomenon. It details how news produced in small communities in Iowa is influenced by internal and external constraints such as the identities of news workers, the community structure, the newspaper's ownership structure, and the routines held by the news workers.

In addition, this study provides empirical evidence that the weekly newspaper industry in Iowa is surviving in the current chaotic media environment in which larger daily newspapers are suffering, even eliminating products. Through the use of multiple research methods – qualitative and quantitative – the research here provides a holistic depiction of the weekly newspaper industry in Iowa. In doing so, it suggests implications for the future of the weekly newspaper industry and the profession of journalism as a whole.

This research shows that the journalistic approach in small, rural communities is

different. But the findings also suggest that the approach to news production by news workers in small towns has worked and continues to work well. The majority of the publishers and other news workers within this study have indicated their newspapers are surviving, despite the challenges they face, including small staffs, revenue declines, shrinking communities, and growing technology.

However, the study was narrowly focused on Iowa weekly newspapers and further limited by the fact that data from the content analysis and ethnographic case studies were obtained from just three papers. It therefore is difficult to generalize the ideas and arguments presented in this dissertation. That said, the purpose here was never to generalize to the entire weekly newspaper industry but rather to begin to theoretically and conceptually understand the production of news by weekly newspaper news workers. Community journalism in general is a significantly understudied topic, particularly through research that goes beyond mere description, and the insights provided through this study lay the groundwork for further exploration. The goal is enhanced by the researcher's transparency about the process, context, and assumptions underlying this study. The context, setting, and culture of community journalism are all important for researchers to expressly recognize and acknowledge, as has been done here.

The researcher believes this dissertation raises fascinating additional research topics and questions concerning weekly newspaper production. One particular area of interest for further study is the role of women in community journalism. The data collected in this study provide evidence that women play a significant role in the production of weekly news. While women journalists have been studied (Bulkeley, 2004; Smith, 2015), the researcher could not find any scholarly work seeking to understand the role of women journalists in the

weekly newspaper industry despite their evident contributions.

Evidence from this study also shows that weekly newspaper news workers struggle to balance their roles as news workers, community members, and family members. That role strain merits more extensive exploration than was possible here. Further research would aim to explore and understand how the news workers manage the difficult job of balancing their multiple roles within small communities.

Several of the methods used in this dissertation also could be used to further understand the weekly newspaper industry as a whole. The questionnaire and content analysis could be fruitfully applied nationwide to extend understanding of the production of news in small towns across the United States, as well as to provide insight into how well weekly newspapers are doing in the emergent media era. The evidence from nationwide application of both methods would yield understanding of whether weekly newspaper work, as well as the content produced through it, varies in different regional and cultural settings. The researcher believes it is crucial to expand the scope of this dissertation study because, as previously stated, news and news workers have the potential to impact, at the grassroots level, the everyday lives of their readers, influencing public opinion and the ways in which people view the world around them.

## **Conclusion**

Despite its limitations, this dissertation does open the door for a more extensive discussion about the premise that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to journalism. This study has shown that there are differences between journalisms in small, rural communities and journalisms done by larger daily newspapers, at least as perceived by those working at weekly newspapers as well as by their local readers and sources.

I am optimistic about the future of the weekly newspaper industry as a whole and the role of the weekly newspaper in small towns across America. News workers at these newspapers know who they are, they know their roles within their communities, and probably most importantly, they know their audiences because they consider themselves a part of the audience. The practices, strategies, and norms of weekly newspaper news workers as revealed in this dissertation are not innovative. In fact, these approaches date to the frontier press – the original community journalism. This dissertation simply brings the social phenomenon of the small-town press into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, adding as well a richer theoretical and conceptual context than the relatively scarce work previously done in this area has provided.

And finally, the dissertation suggests that there is hope for the journalism industry as a whole. Because there is no one-size-fits-all approach to journalism, I suggest that an understanding of the weekly newspaper approach, as provided through this study, is embedded with solutions for other media organizations. Those insights can be invaluable in helping them survive the chaotic media environment they have endured for more than two decades now and continue to face for the foreseeable future.

If larger daily newspapers are to survive, they will have to learn to embrace some of the practices, strategies, and norms of weekly newspapers. If I could make one suggestion, it would be for larger newspapers to drop the journalistic norm that newspapers and their news workers need to be fully detached from their communities. If there is anything to be learned from the longevity of the weekly newspaper – and its apparent ability to survive and even prosper in the emergent media era – it is that its news workers embrace the idea that the community newspaper is not only about the community, it is also a part of the community.

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## APPENDIX A

### Survey for Iowa's weekly newspaper publishers (Note: Questions also used in the short survey are noted with an \*)

PLEASE NOTE: If you own multiple newspapers, please provide a response to the survey questions that best fits your overall portfolio. Thank you!

\*Q1 In general, Iowa's weekly newspapers are faring well in the digital age.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neutral/Don't Know
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

\*Q2 My own newspaper is faring well in the digital age.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neutral/Don't Know
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

\*Q3 My newspaper has been financially successful over the past year.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neutral/Don't Know
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

\*Q4 My newspaper is financially better off than five years ago.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neutral/Don't Know
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

\*Q5 My newspaper currently has strong advertising revenue.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neutral/Don't Know
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

\*Q6 The advertising revenue for my newspaper compared with five years has ...

- Increased Significantly
- Increased Slightly
- Stayed About the Same
- Decreased Slightly
- Decreased Significantly

\*Q7 Approximately what percentage of your newspaper is devoted to advertising space each week?

\*Q8 The circulation of my newspaper compared with five years ago has ...

- Increased Significantly
- Increased Slightly
- Stayed About the Same
- Decreased Slightly
- Decreased Significantly

Q9 My newspaper has an active website.

- Yes
- No

Q10 Readers of our online product have to pay to access our content.

- Yes, for all content
- Yes, for some content
- No
- Not applicable

Q11 We plan to improve our online presence in the coming year.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neutral/Don't Know
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

Q12 My newspaper uses social media to promote news.

- Often (1)
- Sometimes (2)
- Rarely (3)
- Never (4)
- Don't Know (5)

Q13 My newspaper uses social media to obtain important news.

- Often
- Sometimes
- Rarely
- Never
- Don't know

Q14 The Internet has changed the way our newspaper(s) operate(s).

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neutral/Don't Know
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

\*Q15 Are you the sole owner of this newspaper?

- Yes
- No

\*Q16 How would you classify the ownership structure of your newspaper?

- Individually owned
- Family owned
- Corporately owned
- Group ownership
- Other (please elaborate) \_\_\_\_\_

\*Q17 How long have you owned this newspaper?

\*Q18 How many weekly newspapers do you own or have ownership in?

Q19 How often do you include the following topics in your newspaper:

	Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	Don't Know
Community events	<input type="radio"/>					
Local people	<input type="radio"/>					
Crime	<input type="radio"/>					
Business	<input type="radio"/>					
Education/schools	<input type="radio"/>					
Government	<input type="radio"/>					
Sports	<input type="radio"/>					
Human interest	<input type="radio"/>					
Advice	<input type="radio"/>					
Agriculture	<input type="radio"/>					
History	<input type="radio"/>					
Other topics you include in your newspaper:	<input type="radio"/>					

Q20 How important is it to report on the following topics:

	Very Important	Important	Unsure	Somewhat Important	Not Important
Community events	<input type="radio"/>				
Local people	<input type="radio"/>				
Crime	<input type="radio"/>				
Business	<input type="radio"/>				
Education/schools	<input type="radio"/>				
Government	<input type="radio"/>				
Sports	<input type="radio"/>				
Human interest	<input type="radio"/>				
Advice	<input type="radio"/>				
Agriculture	<input type="radio"/>				
History	<input type="radio"/>				
Other topics your newspaper reports on:	<input type="radio"/>				

Q21 How important is it to include the following types of information sources in your newspaper?

	Very Important	Important	Unsure	Somewhat Important	Not Important
Local politicians	<input type="radio"/>				
Advocacy groups	<input type="radio"/>				
Local businesses	<input type="radio"/>				
Private citizens	<input type="radio"/>				
Government press releases	<input type="radio"/>				
Economic development experts	<input type="radio"/>				
Local service groups	<input type="radio"/>				
Other information sources you see as important for local news?	<input type="radio"/>				

Q22 In your experience, what do your readers want most from your newspaper?

- Coverage of local news/sports
- Coverage of past and upcoming local events/happenings/people
- Other (please elaborate) \_\_\_\_\_

Q23 How would you describe the relationship between your newspaper and the community?

- Very Strong
- Moderately Strong
- Neutral/Don't Know
- Moderately Weak
- Weak

Q24 Please respond to the following statements about the role of a community newspaper:

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
The weekly newspaper plays an important role in a community's economic development.	<input type="radio"/>				
An important goal of the newspaper is to maintain journalistic integrity, even if the newspaper has to criticize the community and/or its members.	<input type="radio"/>				
Weekly newspapers consider possible consequences to the community when deciding whether or not to cover certain stories.	<input type="radio"/>				
Weekly newspapers serve a different role within their communities than larger daily newspapers do in their communities.	<input type="radio"/>				
The community would suffer if there was not a community newspaper.	<input type="radio"/>				
The newspaper plays a role in creating social cohesion in the community.	<input type="radio"/>				
The newspaper plays a role in integrating residents into the community.	<input type="radio"/>				

Q25 How important is it for your weekly newspaper to ...

	Very Important	Important	Unsure	Somewhat Important	Not Important
Get information to the public in a timely manner?	<input type="radio"/>				
Provide analysis and interpretation of complex problems?	<input type="radio"/>				
Provide entertainment and relaxation?	<input type="radio"/>				
Investigate local government?	<input type="radio"/>				
Stay away from stories where factual content cannot be verified?	<input type="radio"/>				
Concentrate on news which is of interest to the entire community?	<input type="radio"/>				
Discuss national policy?	<input type="radio"/>				
Develop intellectual and cultural interests of the community?	<input type="radio"/>				
Be an adversary of public officials by being constantly skeptical of their actions?	<input type="radio"/>				
Be an adversary of business by being constantly skeptical of their actions?	<input type="radio"/>				

\*Q26 To what extent is your behavior as a publisher guided by ...

	Heavily Guided	Moderately Guided	Neutral	Weakly Guided	Not Guided
Journalistic norms?	<input type="radio"/>				
Your sense of professional identity within the community?	<input type="radio"/>				
Your perception of the community's needs?	<input type="radio"/>				
Business needs?	<input type="radio"/>				
Your perception of the community's shared values?	<input type="radio"/>				
Your role as a community member?	<input type="radio"/>				

Q27 How do you balance your responsibilities as publisher with your position as a community member?

\*Q28 How important are each of the following to you in terms of why you work in community newspapers?

	Very Important	Important	Unsure	Somewhat Important	Not Important
The pay	<input type="radio"/>				
Freedom from supervision	<input type="radio"/>				
The chance to help people	<input type="radio"/>				
Editorial policies of the organization	<input type="radio"/>				
Job security	<input type="radio"/>				
The chance to develop as a journalist	<input type="radio"/>				
The amount of autonomy you have	<input type="radio"/>				

\*Q29 All things considered, how satisfied are you with being a publisher of a weekly newspaper?

- Very Satisfied
- Moderately Satisfied
- Unsure
- Moderately Dissatisfied
- Very Dissatisfied

\*Q30 How many years have you worked in community newspapers?

\*Q31 What is your highest educational level completed before working with weekly newspapers?

- High school diploma or GED
- Vocational, business, or technical school
- Associate of arts or sciences degree
- Bachelor's degree
- Graduate degree
- Other (please elaborate) \_\_\_\_\_

\*Q32 Have you taken classes in journalism at a college or university?

- Yes
- No

\*Q33 Have you taken classes in business or management at a college or university?

- Yes
- No

\*Q34 If you graduated from college or university, in what field was your degree?

- Journalism
- Another communications field
- Business
- A field other than journalism, communications or business
- Did not graduate from college or university

\*Q35 Is there anything else you would like to add about community journalism or your responses to this questionnaire?

**APPENDIX B**

**Code Sheet – NEWS STORIES IN WEEKLY NEWSPAPERS**

**Unit of analysis** = Full news articles that are longer than three paragraphs and are presented on the front page of the newspaper, as well as the stories’ jumps inside the newspaper. *Code each news story separately.*

Newspaper: \_\_\_\_\_

Story Slug: \_\_\_\_\_

Date (month/day): \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ Byline present

No    0                      Yes    1

\_\_\_\_\_ Type of byline: Enter one:

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| 1. Staff byline  | 3. AP – Associated Press (If other wire service or syndicate, write in as other) |
| 2. Local source – submitted by someone not a staff reporter (include extension agents, columnists, etc.) | 4. None – no byline  |
|  | 5. Other – type in exact affiliation/source: _____                               |

\_\_\_\_\_ Dateline of story: Enter one:

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| 1. Community – local, dateline is from within the town the newspaper is published | 4. National – dateline is within the United States |
| 2. County – dateline is from within the county but not in the same town           | 5. None – no dateline                              |
| 3. State – dateline is from within the same state                                 | 6. Other – type in exact dateline given: _____     |

\_\_\_\_\_ Type of story: Enter one:

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Issue – hard news stories related to improving daily life, guiding people’s decisions, providing information about on-going community debates</li><li>2. Unexpected event – stories about crime, accidents, disasters</li></ol> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>3. Entertainment – soft news stories, human interest stories, personality profiles</li><li>4. Editorial/opinion</li><li>5. Other – describe as best you can: _____<br/>_____</li></ol> |
|--|--|

\_\_\_\_\_ Topic of story focus: Enter one:

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Government/politics</li><li>2. Crime</li><li>3. Disaster/accident</li><li>4. Business/economy</li><li>5. Public moral problems</li><li>6. Health</li><li>7. Welfare</li><li>8. Education</li><li>9. Science</li></ol> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>10. Energy/environment/recreation</li><li>11. Religion</li><li>12. People/person</li><li>13. Sports (school-related)</li><li>14. Arts/Entertainment</li><li>15. Other – describe as best you can: _____<br/>_____</li></ol> |
|--|---|

\_\_\_\_\_ Proximity of news story/topic/focus to community

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Local – from within the town the newspaper is published</li><li>2. Regional – within the county but not in the same town the newspaper is published</li></ol> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>3. State – within the state in which newspaper is published</li><li>4. Outside the state</li><li>5. Unclear to reader</li></ol> |
|--|---|

\_\_\_\_\_ Conflict within story

No    0                      Yes    1

\_\_\_\_\_ Length of story (number of paragraphs)

## APPENDIX C

### Code Sheet – SOURCES IN WEEKLY NEWSPAPERS

**Unit of analysis** = Full news articles that are longer than three paragraphs and are presented on the front page of the newspaper, as well as the stories' jumps inside the newspaper. *Code each source within news story separately.*

**Source** = A person, publication, or other record or document that gives timely information related to the news story:

Newspaper: \_\_\_\_\_

Story Slug: \_\_\_\_\_

Date (month/day): \_\_\_\_\_

Source Name: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ Type of source: Enter one:

1. Government employee
2. Political official (elected)
3. Educator/School official
4. Private business person
5. Special interest group representative
6. Private individual
7. Online resource
8. Public record
9. Press release
10. Other – describe as best you can: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ Geographic location of source: Enter one:

1. Local – from within the town the newspaper is published
2. Regional – within the county but not in the same town the newspaper is published
3. State – within the state in which newspaper is published
4. Outside the state
5. Unclear to reader