

Examining the Community Press in the Present and Future

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What is the role of community newspapers in small, geographic communities? The role of the newspaper, while obvious to some, has not received much academic investigation. The role of the community newspaper goes beyond carrying the week's news to the local citizens. The community newspaper promotes and encourages local economies and is a major tool for municipal governments, school boards and health regions to communicate with their citizens. Community newspapers also play a role in promoting and maintaining quality of life in small communities. These rolls arise because the community press is often the only media source that provides exclusive local content. But the community press is undergoing changes and must be aware of how people access information in order to stay relevant and prosperous.

Introduction

Nearly every community, town and city from Vancouver Island to Newfoundland to Nunuvut has a local community newspaper. Some of these newspapers have published for more than 100 years while others have published for not even 20. Despite differences in age, community newspapers all serve the same purpose: To keep the citizens of that community informed of the events, decisions, discussions and debates occurring in their own community.

However, according to Ellie Rennie, author of the book *Community Media, A global introduction*, the community media has not been the subject of much academic research. Rennie observes this when she writes, "Community media has received surprisingly little scholarly attention, even within the field of media studies itself."¹ (Rennie, p.16) Community media is an area worth exploring for this very reason.

There have been some dramatic changes in the newspaper business in recent years. The proliferation of the Internet has required newspapers to establish an online presence. Rising costs and falling revenues were exacerbated by the recent global recession. The United States saw some prominent newspapers close and there are no shortage of columnists, bloggers, and prognosticators who proclaim that the traditional print newspaper is a dying entity; however, while large newspapers may be fighting to remain profitable, community newspapers are not faced with as dire a challenge to their existence. This unique situation is due to factors that include geography and a lack of immediate competition.

If one were to ask a member of a smaller community, isolated either by language and culture or by geographic distance, about the importance of a community newspaper he might tell you how he cannot imagine being without such a newspaper. Amidst the doom and gloom of a changing media

industry, community newspapers are facing the same challenges as major metro publications but not to the same extent. There is evidence that suggests the community press is doing relatively well and will continue to do well.

A community newspaper and a metro newspaper appear to fulfill identical purposes in different sized environments: Keep the citizens of the community (whether it is Tofino or Toronto) informed and abreast of the news and provide a medium for dialogue and civic engagement. A closer examination of several small community newspapers in this paper reveals that their purpose is far more complex. They do not merely carry the week's news and advertisements. Entire sectors of these communities depend on the presence of a community newspaper to be able to perform their civic jobs effectively and efficiently.

Community newspapers are a unique form of media that have about as little in common with their metro-sized cousins as they do with television and radio. Community newspapers are a vital form of media in a small town. The presence of a newspaper is a key component of maintaining quality of life in an isolated city, town, or village by promoting and increasing civic engagement in the community in addition to presenting readers with information on decisions affecting their community.

American author and journalist Jock Lauterer has written on the community press in two of his books, *Community Journalism: Relentlessly Local* and *Community Journalism, the personal approach*. He is a journalism lecturer and is the director of the Carolina Community Media Project in Chapel Hill, N.C. and observes that there is a difference between the community press and the metro press:

Most community newspapers orient themselves ethically toward their communities in a fundamentally different way than their big-city cousins...While the community paper, like the large metro paper, serves in the vital role of public watchdog of governmental affairs...the similarities end there. (Lauterer, p.259)

This research project examines just how community newspapers are different than the metro press and what the role of the community newspaper is in the small community. The four research questions that provided the foundation of the paper include:

- Q1: What is the role of the community newspaper in the community?
- Q2: How does the community newspaper affect the quality of life in the small community?
- Q3: Is the journalism practiced at a community newspaper different from the journalism practiced in small-city and metro newspapers?
- Q4: What are some of the issues and challenges facing the community press?

Overview of the newspaper industry in Canada

According to the Canadian Newspaper Association (CNA), there are currently 98 daily newspapers in Canada (a daily newspaper is defined by the CNA as printing at least five issues a week or more) which collectively total an average daily circulation of 4.3 million copies (28 million for the entire week)ⁱⁱ. The CNA's sister organization, the Canadian Community Newspaper Association (CCNA) reports there are more than 700 community newspapers in Canada (publishing between once and three times a week) that have an average circulation of 12 millionⁱⁱⁱ per week. This means that for every daily newspaper published in Canada, there are seven community newspapers published. The 2006 Census reported that there were 13,325^{iv} people in Canada who defined their employment as a 'journalist,' while 25,020 people identified themselves as 'writers' and 16,210 people identified their employment as editors. While the percentage of those writers who work for newspapers, potentially on a freelance basis, may be small, these statistics reveal that close to 30,000 people in Canada are employed in the field of journalism. Clearly, community newspapers play a large role in Canadian journalism.

The five community newspapers, the *Rocky Mountaineer*, the *Ponoka News*, *The Olds Albertan*, the *Stettler Independent* and the *Lacombe Globe*, were chosen based on their geographic location to Red Deer,

Alta. (where the research was conducted) and ability to conduct personal interviews. As this is an undergraduate research report (with a finite amount of resources) these five community newspapers were chosen so interviews could be conducted in person as much as possible. Each of the five community newspapers serves geographic communities. There is evidence of an emerging trend in the community press within large urban centers that represent ethnic communities, religious communities or geographic neighbourhoods. Should this trend be sustained, such publications will be an interesting source for future research.

For this paper I consulted sources in the community press along with community members in each of the five communities.

Throughout this report reference will be made to the terms “community press,” and “community journalism.” Both of these terms are considered to be interchangeable with the term “community newspapers.”

Background Information

This project closely examined five weekly community newspapers in central Alberta in addition to several other sources of community media. The five newspapers were chosen for their comparability in terms of population size, location and diversity of ownership. Each newspaper is the main newspaper in its respective community. Table 1-1 lists the town, population (according to 2006 census data), newspaper name, publisher, and date of sample issue studied. It must be noted that each newspaper serves the outlying rural county as its town. For the purposes of this study, the population listed is limited to that of the town itself.

Town	Population	Newspaper	Publisher	Date of Issue Sample
Rocky Mountain House	6874	<i>The Mountaineer</i>	Family-owned	Tuesday, May 5, 2009
Lacombe	10472	<i>The Lacombe Globe</i>	Bowes Publishing Ltd. (Sun Media)	Tuesday, May 5, 2009
Stettler	5418	<i>The Stettler Independent</i>	Black Press	Tuesday, April 28, 2009
Olds	7248	<i>The Olds Alberta</i>	Mountainview Publishing	Wednesday, April 29, 2009
Ponoka	6576	<i>The Ponoka News</i>	Black Press	Wednesday, April 29, 2009

Table 1-1

The number of editorial staff at each newspaper changes slightly from newspaper to newspaper, as does the cost to purchase an individual copy. Table 1-2 presents this information.

Newspaper	Number of editorial staff	Cost per issue	Cost of annual subscription	Delivery method
<i>The Mountaineer</i>	4	\$1.25	\$36.75	Canada Post
<i>The Lacombe Globe</i>	3	\$1.00	\$48.62	Home delivery
<i>The Stettler Independent</i>	4	\$1.05	\$50.00	Canada Post
<i>The Olds Albertan</i>	3	Free	Free	Home delivery
<i>The Ponoka News</i>	2	Free	Free	Home delivery

Table 1-2

While both *The Mountaineer* and *The Stettler Independent* use Canada Post as a delivery method, the other three newspapers utilize carriers for door-to-door delivery. Since *The Lacombe Globe* is a subscription-based newspaper carriers deliver only to households holding a current subscription. *The Olds Albertan* and *The Ponoka News* are delivered to every address in the immediate town and copies are made available in drop boxes and places like gas stations in the surrounding rural area free of charge as well.

Defining a newspaper

We cannot begin to examine community newspapers until we establish a working knowledge of what a newspaper is in a general context. Most people are familiar with a daily newspaper, whether in a small or medium city to a major metro publication. A newspaper reports on the issues of the community it represents from municipal governments to school board decisions to public health announcements and infrastructure development. Newspapers also provide birth and death notifications and provide information on what has *happened* at the community, provincial, national and international level in addition to what *is happening*.

As Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel note in their seminal work *The Elements of Journalism*, “The primary purpose of journalism is to provide citizens with the information they need to be free and self-governing.” (Kovach and Rosenstiel, p. 12)

Newspapers make an important element of dialogue possible in a community. Columnists provide commentary and opinions on current affairs and the editor provides opinion on the stories carried in the pages and issues of concern. Newspapers also provide readers with an opportunity to become part of the dialogue by publishing letters to the editor. These sections, as we will examine later, are an important base for democratic participation and quality of life in a community.

Defining the community press

What defines a community newspaper is its strict focus on local news as compared to most daily newspapers, which focus on local content in addition to national and international stories. The community newspaper reports on anniversaries, Cub Scout jamborees, dances, high school awards, sports teams and Legion fundraisers. It recognizes money raised and donated, church bake sales and

local scandal. It is where people write letters about their crops and cattle and talk about the implications of new provincial or federal laws at the local level.

Content analysis of five community newspapers

To meaningfully compare the sample publications to each other, numerical, statistical and quantitative measurements of each community newspaper were conducted.

For the purposes of this project content shall be understood to include news stories, editorials, opinion pieces, photographs, and headlines. In short, any material produced by the reporting staff. Advertisements include civic announcements from a municipal office, school board announcements, and all forms of paid advertisements including classified ads.

Table 1-3 is a comparison between the column-inches¹ of editorial content (first column) compared to the total column-inches of the advertising (second column).

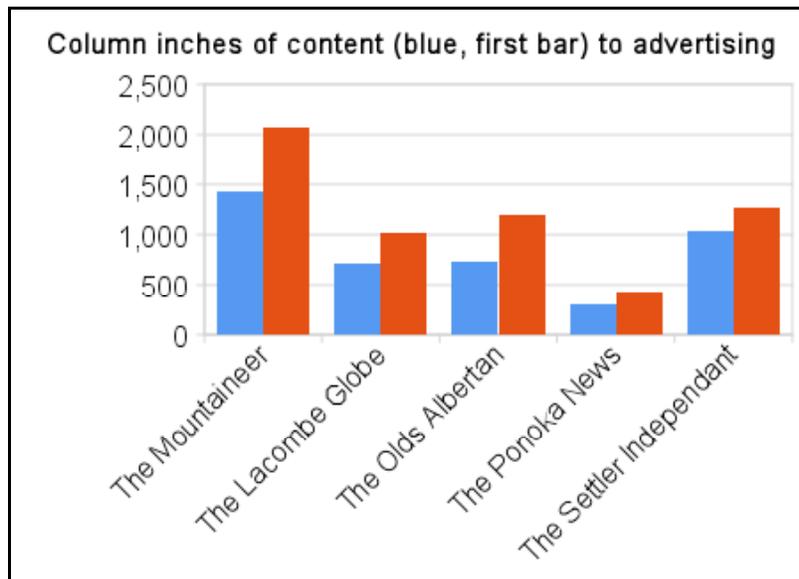


Table 1-3

As we can observe, each publication demonstrates a content-to-ad ratio of roughly 60 per cent. This does not include flyers or other independent paper advertisements and is an examination of just the newspaper itself. This ratio is grounded in historical context. For a newspaper to qualify for a discounted rate with Canada Post under the Publications Mail Agreement, it must conform to the following regulations:

A Publications Mail item, including all enclosures (inserts and outserts), must be produced with less than 70% space devoted to advertising in more than 50% of the issues in any 12-month period (advertising and editorial content must be distinguishable from one another). For

¹ This report will make reference to a calculation known as “column-inches.” This measurement is derived from measuring the physical length of a given column of text on a newspaper page. A story that is four inches long (including headlines) that runs across three columns is said to measure 12 column-inches. A photograph that measures five inches long that runs the span of three columns would measure 15 column-inches. The same rules apply to measuring advertisements.

example, 7 out of 12 monthly issues must each contain more than 30% editorial content, including enclosures. (Canada Post)

Each newspaper exceeds 30-per-cent editorial content in the selected issues and would qualify for the Publications Mail rate. Only two of the five newspapers make regular use of Canada Post to reach subscribers on a regular basis; however, each newspaper can apply for the reduced rate for out-of-town subscriptions.

While each newspaper had almost identical content-to-ad ratios, the following table reveals a difference between the five community newspapers in terms of quantity of content. An important distinction must be made between broadsheet publications and tabloid. Broadsheets are typically much larger and feature much more space on a single page than a tabloid-style newspaper. Because of this it is important to compare the two broadsheet newspapers to each other independent of the three tabloid newspapers.

Table 1-4 measures the number of pages in the sample issue to the number of stories (or bylines) in that issue in the three tabloid newspapers.

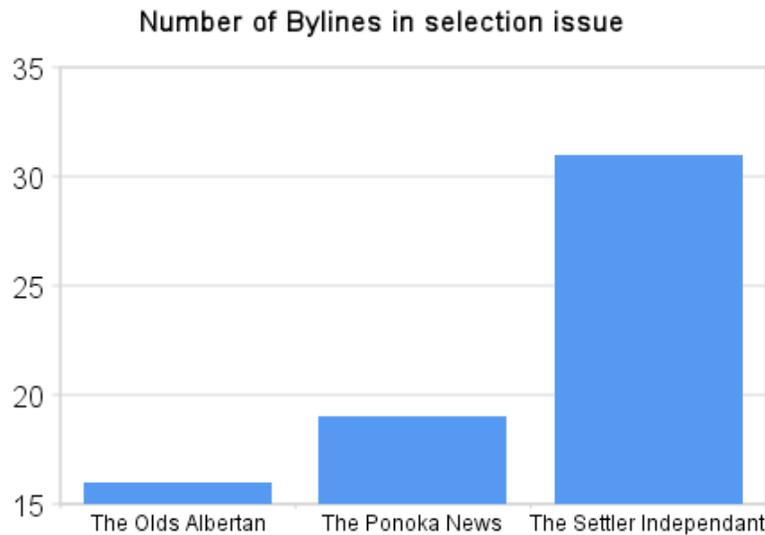


Table 1-4

Table 1-5 compares the number of bylines in the selected issue in the two broadsheet-style newspapers.

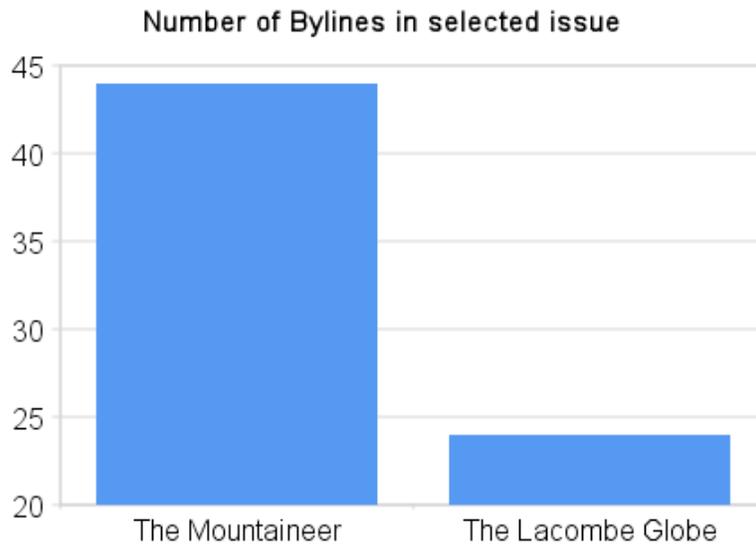


Table 1-5

Both tables 1-4 and 1-5 reveal a striking difference in the number of stories published. This evidence may mean several different things. Firstly, it is possible that the towns with smaller newspapers had less news to report on. This is unlikely a reasonable solution. Secondly, it possibly highlights the natural discrepancy between publications. No two newspapers are identical and some newspapers run more content than others.

Table 1-6 takes the number of citizens in each community (according to the 2006 census) and divides that number by the number of editorial staff at the newspaper (including editors but not including publishers). This measurement provides us with an understanding of the average number of citizens per reporter at each newspaper. There are no hard and fast rules about how many reporters should be employed at a given newspaper based on population. As Table 1-6 shows, there appears to be little to no correlation among the five newspapers.

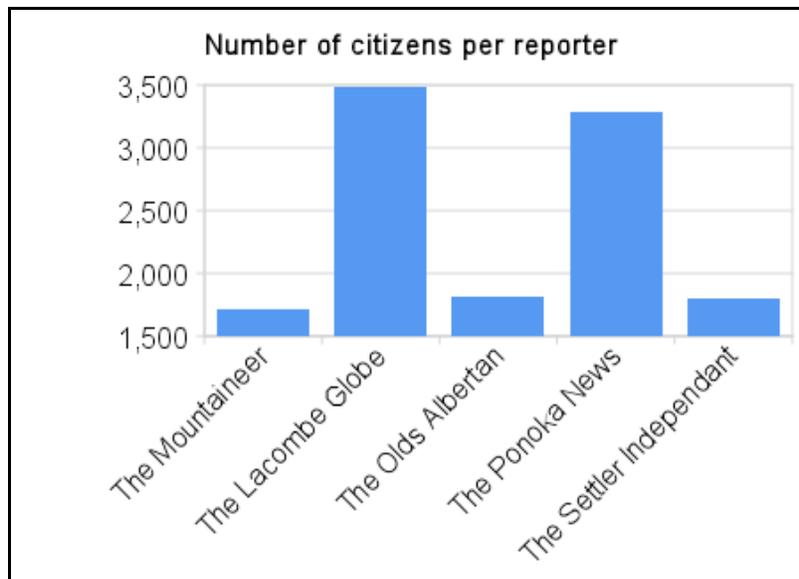


Table 1-6

By combining the data from editorial staff and distance there is evidence in this case of a correlation between geographic isolation and newspaper size. One possible reason for this correlation can be attributed to the competition between publications in close proximity. Judy Gordon, Mayor of the town of Lacombe said, “Very often we are relying on the *Red Deer Advocate* to print our message,” and explained how, because Lacombe was so close to Red Deer and many people commuted to the city to work, many people read the *Red Deer Advocate* instead of *The Lacombe Globe*. The municipal government of Lacombe felt it was able to reach the citizens of Lacombe more efficiently by advertising in the *Red Deer Advocate* than in the *Lacombe Globe*. Civic employees in the town of Rocky Mountain House would certainly not rely on a newspaper in a city nearly 100 kilometers away to try to reach their local audience.

There are many possible reasons for this discrepancy including population distribution and distance to urban centres or cities. As Table 1-7 reveals, the distance of each community to the nearest urban centre is quite different. The nearest major city to all five of the communities studied is the city of Red Deer (pop. 82,000); however, the town of Lacombe is significantly closer (30km) to the city than the town of Stettler (82 km).

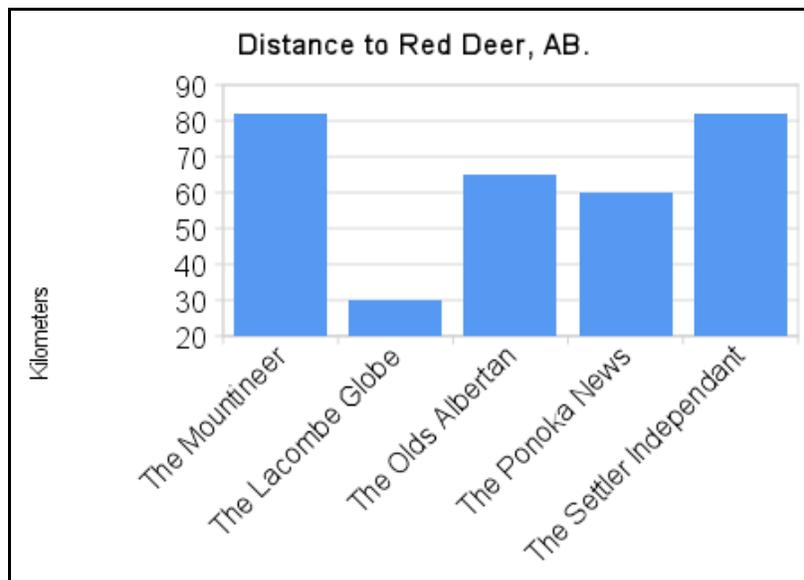


Table 1-7

Factors that affect the amount of content produced on a weekly basis and the ability of the newspaper to support more reporting staff can be attributed to several key factors: First, newspapers that charge a fee to purchase a copy in this examination support more journalists than those that give away their newspaper (and thus rely solely on advertising revenue). Secondly, in this sample group, the more geographically remote newspapers supported a greater number of journalists and content per issue than those newspapers in closer proximity to larger cities. A possible reason for this is because as communities are closer together, people who commute from one to another may rely on the larger local newspaper for the majority of their news requirements. Another potential explanation is the difference in economic bases between the five towns. Just as no two newspapers are identical, no two communities are identical either. While the five communities share similar geography and relative location, it is possible that the economic situation in each community is very unique. The amount of editorial content in a newspaper is often tied directly to the advertising base of the community. Theoretically, with more advertising comes more money and with more money comes the ability to

print more pages and hire more reporters. This topic is just one of many aspects that would benefit from further research.

Q1: What is the role of the community newspaper in the community?

Eileen Barak, the government relations representative with the Canadian Community Newspaper Association (CCNA), says that, not only is a community newspaper often one of the oldest businesses in a community, but it is also an integral part of that community:

Often times the community newspaper is one of the backbones of the community and is part of the fabric that weaves the community together. Often times the community newspaper is the only place to find local information and local events. And it's often, if not the oldest, than one of the oldest institutions in the community. We've seen when a community newspaper closes shop or becomes a more regionalized entity that part of that community spirit disappears.

Jim Hunter, Mayor of the town of Stettler says that *The Stettler Independent* is an important tool to the local municipality.

"It's a bit of a tool for us as councilors to see that feedback comes back in and to see what is going on in some areas of the community. The [Calgary] *Herald* and the [Edmonton] *Journal* deal with information regarding the country and the world. If I want to know how certain things reflect on my community and the values and the ideas of my community, it's my community paper I go to. You don't get that out of Edmonton or Calgary," he said.

As Hunter observes, the community newspaper is tremendously important not only to him as a citizen of the town of Stettler, but it is important for the functioning of institutions like the municipal government.

A distinction must be made between the functions of a newspaper at the metro level versus the community level. In urban areas of moderate to large population, citizens are served by a variety of media sources (be it radio, television, newspapers, or even news websites) and often multiple choices of those varieties; however, the markets in small cities and towns generally support only a fraction of the media diversity seen in the larger urban areas. This places the responsibility of civic scrutiny and dialogue squarely on the shoulders of the existing media, which in the small community is often a community newspaper. As Richard Bryant observes,

For local residents, the main value of a community newspaper is the very fact that the paper is local and produces news and comments which would not appear in a printed form elsewhere. The best community papers attempt to document the social histories of their area and, in a small but significant way, they record many public events and experiences, which would otherwise only be, preserved in private correspondence and oral history. (Bryant)

After preliminary research, it is hypothesized that there are three general duties that a community newspaper attempts to fulfill. Firstly, the community newspaper is responsible to the citizens of that community to keep them informed and aware of current events. Secondly, the newspaper supports and encourages local businesses as it also a local business that thrives economically when the community thrives. Finally, the community newspaper performs as a vital communications tool for the services of the community. Each of these hypotheses will be examined individually.

The community newspaper must keep the citizens informed

The *Mason Valley News* in Yerington, Nev. is a community newspaper with a weekly circulation of approximately 3,700. The newspaper's motto is "The only newspaper in the world that gives a damn about Yerington." While this humorous motto certainly speaks of the newspaper's passion for its

community it also presents the undeniable truth that no other newspaper in the world consistently cares about Yerington.

This motto establishes the foundation upon which the idea of a community newspaper is built: local content. Local content matters to the local readers and no one else. Save for a major emergency or other rare occasion when a news story attracts provincial or national interest, the majority of the content produced at the community press is completely local.

There was ample evidence of this claim in the five newspapers studied. Every single story published in all issues from the study group were produced by the reporting staff and focused on the local area. Some provincial issues were debated on editorial pages but the issue was always discussed in terms of how it affects the people of each respective community.

Regardless of differences in subject, specialization, setting, or circulation, all community publications share a common denominator. Their perspective, focus, balance and news judgment are driven by local interests first. (Lauterer, p.40)

In the small community there are typically no other sources for local news than the local media. From council decisions to school registration to public debate all that local content is the responsibility of the local press.

As Karen Paquette, a librarian in Rocky Mountain House says, the community press cannot merely provide the content without listening to the readers:

A community newspaper needs to be responsive to the needs of the community and to include articles and columns and different things from community groups so that it's not just necessarily news stories.

"It's very healthy for a community to have ongoing debate over issues that affect only that community," said Rick O'Connor, president of Black Press.

The community press allows the citizens of that community to present their concerns and debate local issues. Editorials and letters to the editor are two conduits of dialogue at the community level. The Internet is presenting new opportunities for people to become engaged in debate on local websites; however, an inherent weakness of the web is that it allows anonymity in posting material and the quality of commentary is a reflection of that weakness.

Community newspapers must support and encourage local business

The community newspaper is a local business. As such it must bring in revenue (mostly from advertisements) in order to function. It is important to remember this fact as we examine the second principle of the community press. All newspapers currently depend on advertisements from other businesses for revenue. When economic activity drops sharply (as has been witnessed since December of 2008 with the global recession) budgets for advertisements are cut and subsequently newspapers have been forced to cut their own costs. Thus, the intimate relationship between the community press and other community businesses is firmly established. When the local economy does well and local businesses can afford advertising, the community newspaper reaps the benefits. Thus, it is important for the community newspaper to be aware of its close relationship with other businesses so as to foster as much mutual benefit as possible. This may raise some challenges when it comes to editorial work, which will be discussed later on.

As Jock Lauterer writes,

A community newspaper must be vital to the reader as a source for business information, sales, product reinforcement, business identity—in other words, advertising. (Lauterer, p.289)

George Brown, president of the Alberta Weekly Newspaper Association and publisher of *The Ponoka News* says the connection the community press has to other businesses in the community grows

from the mutual prosperity they want to encourage. As local businesses are financially stable they have the ability to advertise more which, in turn, supports the newspaper.

“We’re probably working more hand in hand to make those businesses successful [than in a metro center]. We’re working with [local businesses] as fellow members of the Chamber of Commerce; we’re promoting things jointly in the community,” Brown said.

Cindy Petersen, the Executive Director of the Chamber of Commerce in Rocky Mountain House, Alta. said that *The Mountaineer* is an important part of both the Chamber of Commerce and the town.

“That’s the place [local businesses] advertise and make the community aware of what they have in the area. *The Mountaineer* is our main advertising venue for most of our members,” she said.

The community press is an important tool in making people aware of how they can spend their money locally. Whether it is specials at the grocery store to automotive dealership prices, the advertising of local businesses promotes the retention of money inside the community. When the local businesses do well, there exists more money for advertising, which the community newspaper then benefits from. Brad Watson, the Chief Administrative Officer for the town of Ponoka says that the municipal government advertises a variety of important messages and has no other viable options for reaching the community. The closure of a local newspaper would have a devastating impact upon the town’s infrastructure.

“[The closure of *The Ponoka News*] would be most serious [to] the commercial and industrial community. It would be a major setback for the merchants who advertise weekly in it. There would be more bleeding of purchasing that would leave the community that would go to the larger centers. I sit in economic development meetings and that is a critical discussion that comes up regularly. How do we stop the bleeding of people going outside the community to shop?” he said.

Watson touches on the idea of shopping locally as an important fact to promote and keep revenue inside the community. This aspect will be examined in more detail in the section on the community press and quality of life.

Local business is not the only area of the community that the community press supports. The municipal governments and social institutions of small communities rely heavily on the presence of the newspaper as well.

The community newspaper is an important tool for local service groups and government

Judy Dahl, Mayor of the town of Olds, says the community newspaper is a vital tool the municipal government uses to reach the township.

“For a community our size of 10,000 and less we don’t have many tools to reach our citizens and our newspaper is one of those tools. This paper is very vital to our sustainability in being able to provide information within Olds and our region,” she said.

Bobby-Jo Douglas, media relation’s officer with the Wildrose Public School District in Rocky Mountain House explains the important of the community newspaper to schools.

We as a school district rely quite heavily on our local community newspapers to disseminate information to our citizens. Our school district does a lot of advertising. Whether it’s from what our registration date to celebrations in our school division, we have on-going activities in our schools. It is important that the public understands what’s going on in public education.

We are a rural community so a large portion of our population doesn’t have access to high-speed Internet. While we have a local radio station and could get information out that way, we would be losing a large portion of our audience. The communication would change and there would be a whole lot more having to go out to every family in every school for some of that

information to be shared with the people who need to be in the know. That doesn't allow us to share our celebrations and highlights with the community at large.

Municipal governments face the same need to communicate with the community. Most community newspapers feature a prominent civic announcement page from the municipal government.

The multiple messages that the town council relies on the newspaper to carry reveal just how important the community press is as a communications tool for municipal governments. One might think the Internet provides the same ability to disseminate information; however, Internet connectivity in towns and rural environments is a fraction of what it is in cities. As long as this disparity exists, municipal institutions will continue to rely on civic announcements in the local newspaper.

"We incorporate several messages in [the civic page]: Swimming pool lessons, watering issues in relation to hot weather, bylaw changes, road closures, elections, bylaw changes. Anything we think should be put before the public."

Watson said that if such a medium did not exist, the costs and challenges incurred by a municipal government or town council would increase dramatically.

"Now you would have to place [these same announcements] in bulletin boards in the community or send them out to all of the property owners. There's an additional expense that is incurred and thus on the taxpayers. It would be somewhat less effective because though lots of people don't necessarily scan the newspaper or the read the newspaper they're less likely to go to the bulletin board. It [would] have a significant impact on us. Particularly on the legislative advertising we must do," Watson said.

The effects of losing a community newspaper affects extend far beyond the logistical operations of community institutions. The community newspaper is a major component in supporting quality of life and civic engagement in the community.

Q2: How does the community newspaper affect the quality of life in the small community?

The Centre for Health Promotion at the University of Toronto defines quality of life as: "The degree to which a person enjoys the important possibilities of his or her life."^v This definition provides a workable example to examine the importance that community newspapers play in quality of life. The two are indelibly linked. A high (or at least a growing) quality of life is only possible with the information and advocacy that a community newspaper creates. Linda Gilmore, former Assistant Director of the Huck Boyd National Center for Community Media at the A. Q. Miller School of Journalism and Mass Communication at Kansas State University writes in the online article "Community Journalism Defined," that,

In the small towns and cities of America, the local newspaper is one of the links that connects people to each other. It is one of the ways that the community is maintained. It is part of the local discussion on issues that concern a community. (Gilmore)

Gilmore's words are as applicable to any Canadian community. An examination of the five newspapers reveals stories about individuals and families. Such stories promote a sense of identity and community by the friends, relatives, and acquaintances who read about them.

The Small Cities Community-University Research Alliance at Thompson Rivers University In Kamloops, B.C. is researching how to document best practices in determining quality of life in small cities and communities. The research presented in this paper has potential benefit for this research group as community newspapers have a close relationship with their own community.

Jim Hunter says that keeping people informed of local issues is important in creating a sense of community.

It's a contributing factor to the sense of community not only in the town but also in our country and our district. There is that sense of community that this is a paper that is dedicated to the issues that are here, that are important, the issues that affect us all on a daily basis. You read stories about Afghanistan or the election in Iran, they are very important events and should mean something to us as Canadians but on a day-to-day basis we deal here with taxes and with annexation and with water issues and all those type of things. The paper is a conduit of that. You'd lose part of the sense of community that's here if it went away.

However, rather than trying to determine *how* a community newspaper increases or maintains quality of life, it is easier to analyze this situation in reverse by asking the question "How would one's quality of life be affected with the closure of the newspaper?" A recent report from Princeton University reveals some significant figures following the closure of the *Cincinnati Post*.

Two newspapers, the *Post* and the *Cincinnati Enquirer*, had traditionally served Cincinnati; however, the *Post* closed on Dec. 31, 2007. A study conducted by Sam Shulhofer-Wohl and Miguel Garrido of Princeton University discovered that, following the closure fewer candidates ran for municipal election and voter turnout fell dramatically. (Shulhofer-Wohl and Garrido) Such data is currently being corroborated in other cities that have faced prominent newspapers closures such as Denver, Col. with the recent demise of the *Rocky Mountain News* and Seattle, Wash. with the loss of the *Post-Intelligencer*. If Shulhofer-Wohl and Garrido's research is correct, then it reveals that the civic engagement of a community can be directly attributed to the presence of a newspaper.

This connection between the presence of a publication and civic engagement is an important factor in the quality of life examination. If people cannot enjoy the important possibilities in their own life, their quality of life is diminished. As Jeffrey Scheuer writes

Anything that enables people to learn, communicate, or act politically, enriches democratic culture. (Scheuer, p. 23)

An important aspect of the quality of life in a community is engagement. Leslie Winfield, a librarian in Olds, says that community news is important for any organization that relies on the community for support.

If community-based news is not reported in the paper how do we get support from the community? If you want your community to be involved then they have to be engaged in an organization through different news media contacts. If nobody ever knows anything about the agricultural society then when something comes up or they need help or they're looking for people it's really hard for them to find that support in the community.

To assess and meaningfully measure the quality of life of a community several measurements can be made of the media in that community. A higher rate of readership typically points to a higher quality of life because it means that more people are likely to be engaged within their own community. It is hypothesized that towns and small cities with a healthy level of readership of community media will typically exhibit higher degrees of community engagement within municipal politics (including voter turnout), greater support for artistic communities and local businesses and such a hypothesis is a suitable topic for future research.

Q3: Is the journalism practised at a community newspaper different from the journalism practised in small-city and metro newspapers?

Differences in the style and quality of journalism in the community and metro newsrooms

The community press has long been viewed by the journalism community as the place where new and young journalists cut their teeth before moving to a big city. It has often been regarded as being a “proving ground” for reporters to start before they gain enough experience to move to bigger newspapers. This reputation is changing, as newspapers, both large and small, have to change the type of journalism practised to keep readers.

As Lisa Joy, editor of *The Lacombe Globe*, explains, what has supported community newspapers for so long (and the main difference between them and the metro press) is the exclusive focus on local content.

We run submitted articles. We run 4H reports. We take pictures of the strawberry tea. The little things that just wouldn't make it in the dailies. It keeps [citizens] informed of what's happening in their community, it gives them a sense of community too. [...] We're celebrating the community and bringing issues to light.

Murray Elliott, publisher of *The Olds Albertan*, agrees with Joy's observations:

We cover what an outsider might consider the fairly mundane. We cover our community and that means the tractor pull, the cheque presentation, things that a big town paper won't cover. And our readers are actually sophisticated enough to know the difference and are looking for that kind of coverage in our local paper.

If the metro press attempted to report on every local activity (like each bake sale, car wash fundraiser, cheque presentation and social event) imagine how large one issue of a newspaper like the *Calgary Herald* would be. Even a small-city paper like the *Red Deer Advocate* appears to mimic its big-city counterparts by running a host of wire stories² from around the world interspersed with local content. In an issue of the *Red Deer Advocate* from July 6, 2009, 21 stories by local reporters were published alongside 20 wire stories from around the world. Considering that not a single wire story was published in any of the sample issues from the community press this highlights the critical difference across the medium. A newspaper like the *Calgary Herald* or the *Edmonton Journal* typically carries a large amount of national and international content from the wire services. Carrying wire content in the 21st century make be a dying practise as stories that appear even one day later in a newspaper are out of date.

There are different pressures on both the community press and the daily press. It is not likely that the residents of a small community don't want to know about national and international affairs, but it has more to do both with the cost of running wire stories and the timeliness of information. If a community newspaper hits the stands on a Tuesday, then the cut-off for story submission would most likely happen on a Monday. Considering that that newspaper will be on the stands until the following Tuesday means that a hard-news story that develops and changes on a daily if not hourly basis will be very out of date by the following issue. This effect of seeing “yesterday's news” on the stands is

² Wire stories are produced by organizations like the Canadian Press, the Associated Press, and Agence-France Press. News organizations pay a subscription and can publish content produced by the wire service. The term ‘wire service’ comes from when newsrooms had wire machines that would print off news stories from around the world.

increasingly affecting daily newspapers as well. Community newspapers deal with this issue by publishing local content that is unavailable anywhere else.

The local content, as Murray Elliott points out, the “fairly mundane” tractor pulls and cheque presentations, is what defines the local press. This content is unavailable anywhere else and, as we will examine in the next section, its importance cannot be understated. As Jock Lauterer sums up,

I see a very bright for community newspapers and we know that’s true because we see the big guys copying us. They’re going local. We’re seeing a real switch from content in the major metros.

As John Hinds says, “There’s amazing writing in both [community newspapers and metro newspapers] and there’s some bad writing in both. The reality is that people read their community press and they read their urban press. There’s good and bad [writing] in both.”

“Content is king. If you’ve got interesting dynamic content or even the mundane in a good visual way it attracts readers. You have to really do a sell job to subscribers,” said Glen Mazza of *The Mountaineer*.

Rick O’Connor with Black Press says that just because a community may be served by a local newspaper, the newspaper must be aware of the quality of its product: “Community papers are subject to the vagaries of every other business. If you don’t put out a good quality product people will not buy advertising or read it,” he said.

The community newsroom and staff are also often physically much closer to the community than the metro newsroom. Of the five community newspapers studied, all had newsrooms that were close to the centre of town. This meant that the reporting staff was not only close to the economic heart of each community, but that the newspaper was also a very visible and approachable business for citizens to enter. Metro newsrooms are often quite different and located high in office buildings or behind secretaries and security. A person could not expect to walk into a metro newsroom and be talking with a reporter with the same ease at which he could do so in a community newspaper. This is an important factor in the differences between community journalism and metro journalism. The community journalist is far more aware of his effect and proximity to his readers because he knows that should he offend, he is more likely to find himself face-to-face with whomever he has offended than the metro journalist. Is this because there are far fewer people to write about in the small community or is it that people take a much more vested interest in what’s being written in the community press? While there may be no definitive answer, it is certainly possible that it is a little bit of both.

As John Hinds observes,

In the smaller paper [subjects] are your friends, neighbours and customers. It’s a much more complex relationship than in a major urban daily. If you are a columnist in the *Toronto Star* or the *Globe and Mail* you’re not going to run into the person you wrote the article about in your corner store or Canadian tire. There are different issues

The importance of maintaining editorial independence as Kovach and Rosenstiel observe presents an interesting quandary for the community newsroom. How does one maintain independence from his subjects when they are neighbours, friends, chamber of commerce colleagues and acquaintances? Members of the community press face this challenge regularly as they attempt to publish stories while maintaining their editorial independence from those people mentioned above. Community journalists must realize that what may be in the best interests of the community may not be in the best interests of the newspaper.

“You work so tight with all these people in the small town most publishers sit on so many committees and so many boards that it’s tough [to remain independent],” said Murray Elliott, publisher of *The Olds Albertan*.

Elliott says that, when deciding whether to publish a story that has potential ramifications in the community, he makes his decision to publish it or not based on whether the story is news.

“If I thought that the story was written in a manner that would hurt somebody I would [pull it]. If it was newsworthy I wouldn’t,” he said.

Frank McTighe, owner and publisher of the Ft. MacLeod *Gazette* believes that the differences in journalism between the metro press and the community press are minimal.

I would say my expertise as a reporter and an editor is every bit as strong as anyone working at a daily. Just because the setting in which we do it might be smaller doesn’t mean the work we do is smaller. On a regular basis I write the same kind of stories that people working at the daily newspapers do. In a lot of ways the stories that I write will be of more importance to the people of our community than some of the ones that people at the dailies will do. We’re smaller community and it’s a more intimate setting. The news of that report is directly important to people of that community.

McTighe says that it is the responsibility of the journalist in any newsroom to remain independent from those he covers.

We don’t become too close to people in those positions. I personally keep as great a distance as I can from the people I’m reporting on to maintain some objectivity and so that that will not affect my opinion writing and reporting generally. Even at a big daily they might get more influence to impact their opinion writing, the influence of the police, the mayor, the politics that go on in a city. I think there is as much influence being put on at a daily newspaper as there could be on a small-town paper. The way that I try to deal with it is to keep some distance between myself and the decision makers in the community. It’s not always easy because sometimes we end up working shoulder to shoulder on a project for the good of the community. I’m always aware that I have to keep some distance and the community has to be confident that I have some distance from the people on whom I’m reporting.

Of all the content examined in the community newspapers one trend was established quite clearly. Every single article and editorial present in each community publication was produced locally. In other words, there were no wire stories or wire copy published. With the proliferation of the Internet and more and more people being connected all the time, publishing provincial, national, or international content can be out-of-date by the time it reaches readers. If a weekly newspaper were to carry such stories there would be very little reason to purchase a copy more than a day after publication. According to John Hinds, readers aren’t turning to their community newspapers for international stories.

People don’t want really to see [wire stories] in their community newspapers. If people want to find out about Hurricane Bill they will find it at other sources and will probably find more and better news faster. But the reality is that people read the community newspaper to find out what’s going on in their community. Those stories cost money and they’re not locally generated. People want to read their local community newspaper to find locally generated stories and content. If you’re producing once a week, you put in a wire story a week ago it’s old news.

As Frank McTighe observes, there is little reason to publish wire stories in the community press. Not only is there a cost associated with it, but the likelihood that wire stories directly affect his readers are slim.

People can get stories that would come off the wire from the radio, TV, the Internet way quicker than they can from our newspaper. What we do well, and the reason why we have a

niche here is we concentrate solely on Ft. MacLeod so we're generating the news for the community. There isn't much opportunity to pick stuff up off the wire that's really relevant to Ft. MacLeod anyways.

McTighe goes on to say that the community press possesses an inherent strength.

Community papers continue to perform well and we will as long as we focus on our strength that is coverage of the local community. For many of us who are outside major urban centers we are the source of local news. As long as we do a good job of reporting that and covering our community there will be a place for the kind of work we do. With that there will be a market to sell ads to complement the news. The key is really sticking to our strength and that is coverage of the local news. Local coverage is our strength. As long as we do that we will be the source of news in our community and people will continue to count on us whether it's a printed copy or an online version.

McTighe's reference to the "community first" ideology is the basis of strength for the community press and his thoughts are echoed across the journalism world from town Mayors to academics.

Jock Lauterer states that local content is tremendously important because of its direct effects. "People care about themselves first. Then they care about their families. Then they care about what affects them and that's local churches, schools and government," Lauterer said.

"As that circle expands you're level of caring gets less intense. Consequently the old expression that a dogfight on Main Street is more important than a revolution in Bulgaria is true. It sounds a little jaded and xenophobic. But as far as human nature goes, it's true. Local is all about how news affects you. And local has always been community. It's the only game in town because it's the one thing the major metros really can't do," he said.

While there have been many reports stating that newspaper readership is down, community-based readership remains strong.

Readership tends to be higher in smaller communities than in larger centres [...] It may be that smaller markets have more stable communities and tend not to be overwhelmed by the breadth of media choices in larger communities. (Canadian Newspaper Association)

The newspaper possesses advantages over other forms of community media

Of the five communities studied, the communities of Lacombe, Olds, and Rocky Mountain House had community radio stations that competed with the community press for advertising revenue in the direct local market. This is significant because in the latter two communities there exists less competition for ad revenue. Moreover, there is a certain degree of crossover in markets when it comes to radio and television as well. In the town of Rocky Mountain House one can receive several radio stations that are broadcast from as far away as Red Deer. This means that the community radio station is now competing with outside media sources for listeners. While this may seem obvious at first, it reveals the inherent advantage of the community press: an almost monopoly of locality. It is true that one has the ability to purchase provincial and national newspapers in the town of Rocky Mountain House (just as one can listen to national radio) but the likelihood of finding local content in either publication is slim.

Dennis Merrell is the executive director of the Alberta Weekly Newspaper Association and says that the newspaper possesses advantages over all other media.

"We have the ability to go deeper into the story so that people really have a better understanding what the issues are that you can glean from a 90 second clip on the radio station. That is the

overwhelming difference than the newspaper. There's a lot of credibility that comes from publishing the newspaper," he said.

While the community press must compete with other forms of media for ad revenue, the product produced by the community press remains very unique in the market. A local radio station that carries the top 40 hits shares many similarities with a radio station from the nearest city that also carries the top 40 hits. While a listener would hope to hear local news on the local station, it remains competitive within other stations in the broadcast area.

However, the inherent weakness in the community press is in timeliness, or the lack thereof. Radio stations and television stations can broadcast news almost instantaneously while such news might make the front page several days later significantly after the event. Some editors see this weakness as strength as they believe that reporting on such events days after it has occurred allows for reflection in reporting and more in-depth coverage.

"We offer information with reflection. The timeline on that is to our advantage. We can wait until we have the whole story or provide additional information to the details of the event on how it's affected the community at large. That has a much bigger impact than just the facts," Aubrey Brown said.

For other editors, the Internet is providing them the ability to compete with radio and television for breaking news.

"We've got breaking news online," said Lisa Joy, editor at the Lacombe *Globe*.

Maintaining an up-to-date web presence is one possible way that community newspapers can fight the stigma of carrying "last week's news."

John Hinds, president of the Canadian Community Newspaper Association says that the advantage of the community press lies in it being the "medium of record."

"Community radio is fairly limited. You don't see it as the medium of record for the community whereas the community newspaper is definitely where the community sees itself. The difference is the community newspaper is much more intertwined with the life of the community in the sense of both the business life of the community in terms of the advertising and the business side as well as the life of the community as being the medium of record," he said.

Funding and footing the bill: The close relationship with advertisers

A newspaper without available funds to operate would cease publishing very quickly. Newspapers are currently operated as business enterprises that must provide enough remuneration to pay employees, expenses and shareholders (if applicable). As we observed in the first section of this report, a community newspaper has a close relationship with the businesses of the community as it depends on their prosperity to maintain ad revenue. There is potential for this close relationship to affect the editorial content. Take this hypothetical situation as an example: A major news story occurs in a community surrounding unhygienic food handling practices at a local business that is also a major advertiser in the community paper. The editor must then weigh the risks and benefits to publishing the story. Will he risk offending the business so that it no longer is a client of the newspaper? Does the public's right to know outweigh his potential loss?

Newspapers depend on advertising revenue to pay the costs associated with publishing. Today individuals can advertise with online classified websites like Craigslist or Kijiji for free across the country. This means that the remaining advertising in the newspaper is extremely valuable to the publisher. According to the online magazine Information Week, since the launch of Craigslist in the mid-1990s, it has cost newspapers in the San Francisco Bay area between \$50 million and \$65 million in classified ad revenue.^{vi}

While in the metro environment there may be a plurality of possible clients for advertising, in the smaller community the client base is much leaner.

The Alberta Press Council is an independent organization dedicated to mediating concerns between newspapers and readers who file grievances. If a reader feels that a community newspaper has committed an error, the reader can contact the Alberta Press Council to raise the issue. Aubrey Brown at *The Ponoka News* says that working with the Alberta Press Council means that his readers know that they can take the newspaper to task if it violates standard journalism ethics.

“We have an independent editorial staff and in co-operation with the [Alberta Weekly Newspaper Association] and with the Press Council of Alberta. Our readers are represented through that,” he said.

Readership differences between metro and community publications

Does readership and penetration differ between the metro newspaper and the community newspaper? Aubrey Brown, publisher of *The Stettler Independent*, says that readership of the community newspaper is high.

“In our community we’re reaching 75 per cent of the residents. You’d never find that statistic at a daily,” he said.

Glen Mazza at *The Mountaineer* says that 83 per cent of adults in Rocky Mountain House read each issue of the newspaper and *The Ponoka News* even sees its circulation spike in the winter months as people place subscription orders to Florida where they spend the winter just so they can stay on top of local news.

The choice of media sources in urban centers is somewhat saturated (many metro centers in Canada still publish multiple newspapers in addition to a growing number of free tabloid-sized dailies) and include multiple radio stations and television stations all competing for advertising revenue and consumers. In Calgary for example, there are two daily newspapers, nearly a dozen radio stations, several free commuter dailies (*24 Hours*, *Metro*) and four major television channels. These media sources all fight for readers, listeners and viewers.

A factor that may contribute to preserving readership at the community level is a communities’ inability to support multiple media sources. In the town of Ponoka, for example, *The Ponoka News* is the only community media available. All the radio stations and television stations that are received are broadcast from cities like Edmonton and Red Deer. There is little to no content produced by stations from those two cities that concern day-to-day life in Ponoka. This small market provides an inherent advantage to the community newspaper, as it does not compete with other media sources for local content.

Another key factor of readership at the community level is free distribution. Both the *Olds Albertan* and *The Ponoka News* utilize door-to-door delivery free of charge. Every home address in each respective town receives a copy of the newspaper each week and copies are made available through drop-boxes in the country. This serves the newspaper in two ways: Firstly, readership is much higher when it is free and each household is receiving a copy and secondly, because readership is much higher the rates for advertising are higher.

This highlights another importance difference between the community and metro press. A metro newspaper could never begin to fathom distributing a newspaper to every home in a city of a million people, as the cost of such a distribution would be prohibitive. It may be a wonderful daydream for the publisher or editor, but a metro newspaper could not give away a newspaper to each and every home in a metro area.

The impact of the Internet on community newspapers

There is a difference of opinion when it comes to how the Internet has affected readership of the community press. One camp believes that the Internet has affected community newspaper readership and that community newspapers need to work at developing an online presence. The second camp believes that the Internet has made community newspapers more accessible and has encouraged a growth in readership. John Hinds says that the Internet has not adversely affected readership of community newspapers.

The Internet for the most part has not impacted community newspaper readership. The community newspaper is the Internet site of record for the community. I think it's actually increased community newspaper readership. In terms of what they cover it's very hard to get a local site that covers the same stuff as the local paper.

This report will examine such a website. Yet Internet connectivity in the smaller community (and rural area also served by a community newspaper) is much lower than in a metro centre, which is a possible reason for why community newspaper readership hasn't been greatly affected by the proliferation of the Internet.

The term "local" has even been replaced by the term "hyper-local" by some media scholars. Donna Shaw, a contributing writer for the website *American Journalism Review* wrote in an article titled "*Really Local*" that,

Generally a hyper-local news site (also known as local-local or micro site) is devoted to the stories and minutiae of a particular neighborhood, ZIP code or interest group within a certain geographic area. [...] The approach can help journalists build stronger relationships with readers, who contribute ideas and expertise. (Shaw)

Statistics Canada reports that a direct relationship exists between Internet connectivity and population density or geographic area. As the following data illustrates in Table 1-8, Internet usage and household connectivity drops sharply in smaller communities and rural settings.

Individuals (18 years and older) using the Internet for personal and non-business reasons from any location by community size, 2005

(McKeown, Larry, Noce, and Czerny)

Community size	Per cent
1 million persons or more	73
250,000 to 1 million	71
100,000 to 249,999	68
10,000 to 99,999	65
Rural and small towns	57

Table 1-8

Internet usage declines in small communities and remote areas. This could be due to the cost and availability of high-speed broadband Internet as one moves to progressively remote areas.

Frank McTighe of the Ft. MacLeod *Gazette* says that his readers haven't been pressuring him to produce online content.

The McLeod *Gazette* does not have people knocking on the door demanding that we put our entire paper online and that we offer it up free on our website the way some other daily

newspapers have done. The only people who seem to want more information on websites is people from out of town. The tradition of the print product being delivered to homes is still well supported by small towns. People like to get the newspaper in printed form.

Local ownership vs. chain ownership

Throughout the course of research, the question was asked whether the ownership structure of the newspaper mattered to the community and to businesses that work with the community press. Initial assumptions presumed that a family-owned newspaper would be regarded as more valuable to a community than a newspaper owned by a larger corporate entity like Sun Media or Black Press. The overwhelming response was actually that ownership of the newspaper hardly mattered at all. What did matter more in the eyes of community members were whether or not the editorial staff were involved in the community.

Murray Elliott, publisher of *The Olds Albertan* says that when a newspaper is part of a publicly held company, shareholders are expecting a certain return of profit on their investment.

“Dailies are answering to shareholders. I think a lot of them are still profitable but not enough to satisfy shareholders,” he said.

“Quebecor, owner of Sun Media, just like CanWest Global, are in particular situations that have resulted in them having to trim a lot of expenditures. There have been layoffs that may or may not bear direct relevance to what’s happening in that local marketplace. These companies are making decisions across the board in Montreal that affects the *Crows Nest Pass Promoter*. There is a reduction in staff that might not have a direct correlation to what’s going on in the local market place,” said Dennis Merrill of the Alberta Weekly Newspaper Association.

Of the five newspapers studied in this group, only one is independently owned. The Mazza family has owned *The Mountaineer* for years. While *The Mountaineer* does not have to produce the same kind of profits that a publicly traded company would expect to see, there are other challenges unique to the family operation. As Glen Mazza explains,

A small family-owned paper typically doesn’t have a printing press so your printing costs are higher whereas Sun Media has printing plants where they will print 15 other products as well. It’s a disadvantage.

[However] family-owned papers have a closer more in-touch commitment with the community because you don’t have people being transferred in and out as much. They know they have a long-term commitment to the community and know the community well.

Such a close relationship with other community members may prove advantageous. John Hinds says that it doesn’t matter who owns the newspaper, it is the content that matters.

“Whether the content is produced as part of a chain or produced by individuals the connection is still with readers on local content.”

Frank McTighe of the Fort MacLeod *Gazette* agrees and says that what really matters isn’t who owns the paper but how it’s operated.

There are some very good corporately owned newspapers who serve their community well and the newspapers are well respected and loved in their communities. There are some independent newspapers that don’t work very hard and don’t do a good job at covering and serving the community and they are not loved and respected in their town.

It’s the staff of the newspaper that makes a great difference in how the newspaper performs in the community. If you’re doing a good job I don’t think people are aware of who owns you. They are more concerned with the product that they receive once a week or twice a week.

If it's a good strong newspaper doing a good job of covering the community providing some opinions and some leadership and covering all the stories and providing some features and doing a good job serving the businesses in terms of advertising sales that's the important thing. It doesn't matter who owns the newspaper.

As Dennis Merrell observes,

The corporate players in our province have problems of their own that affect decision-making. [Family-run newspapers are] not governed by a corporate wide stance of cut costs and lay people off which down the road affects your ability to be a flourishing paper that capitalizes when the economy rebounds. But looking at it the other way you don't, as an independent, have that corporate presence to allow you to get through the tough times to have a succession of money losing years but you're able to carry on business.

Word of mouth in the small community

In a small community where nearly everyone knows everyone else and words travel fast, is a community newspaper still an integral part of that community? If a newspaper ceased to publish would word of mouth be sufficient to circulate the important information? Anyone who has ever played the game "Telephone" where you pass along a message from someone else and then compare the final message with the original is familiar with how information can mutate and become distorted through sequential permutations. While word of mouth may be a sufficient medium for sharing certain types of news, it is not a reliable or accurate process. As John Hinds with the CCNA observes,

It's about context. One of the things about a newspaper in its form is the curatorial or editorial aspect of a newspaper. Pooled ignorance of the crowd is very different one would hope from a researched article with real facts. It's the difference between what you can find out on the Internet and actually in a newspaper. There's a lot of information out there but the strength of the newspaper and its benefit to the community is the idea that someone has curated and thought about and present and provided some context to facts. It's the difference between gossip and news.

The presence of an editorial "filter" to ensure quality accurate reporting is an important function of the community press. Word of mouth not only fails to ensure the regulated dissemination of information but it can suffer from mutations completely changing the message that was sent.

As Frank McTighe of the Ft. MacLeod *Gazette* observes, even though words may travel quickly in a smaller community, there is no guarantee that the correct information will reach everybody who needs to know.

Word-of-mouth would be incomplete in that not everyone knows everyone. You might have a piece of information out of town council and you might share that with some acquaintances and friends but there's no guarantee it's going to make it around the community in its entirety. With the newspaper we add to that whole communication system within the community and we publish a certain number of copies that go to a vast number of homes. We strive to get the information factual so the story we present is the accurate one. The distribution of information through individuals is not always the case. People will put their own particular spin on a story. They'll add facts; delete facts as it suited them. You can't be sure the real story is the one that everyone is hearing.

Q4: What are some of the issues and challenges facing the community press?

Community newspapers may face challenges in the future of maintaining their position as primary sources of local news. Community-based news websites across Canada have appeared that seek to provide a similar, albeit modified, role as a communications tool in the community while making revenue off of online advertising. If community newspapers are to prosper and maintain their status moving forward, they will have to look to develop their own electronic presence in a competitive fashion. If print advertising revenue cannot be recouped, or if the online newspaper does not provide the financial foundation to operate a newspaper then a sustainable online product must be invented. This challenge will define the future of news and fortunes will be built upon it. Whether people will pay for online content is a contentious issue and worthy of research itself. The website, www.castanet.net, is, according to the sales manager, a profitable online news website that is worth examining.

The community news website as a model of sustainability

The small city of Kelowna, B.C. is served by a daily newspaper, a thrice-weekly newspaper, several radio stations and an independent community website. In 2000, the website www.castanet.net was launched as a news portal. Nine years later, it is an independent company having separated from its parent company in 2007 and is a potential model for the future of community news at the online level. It is living proof that a dedicated community-based website with local advertisements can be profitable. It isn't the only news website that serves the Okanagan valley. A website called kelowna.com has also started up.

Castanet.net, or just simply Castanet, currently employs 15 regular staff and all of its operating revenue comes from the sale of online display advertising and classifieds. This is an important model to examine because it dispels all previous notions of how a community news website should operate and function. Community newspaper websites are often no more up to date than the current copy of the newspaper. Since this project aims to suggest answers to how the community press can operate into the future it is important to establish what competition community newspapers may face in the future and how they can establish a successful and profitable online presence.

Chris Kearney, the sales manager of Castanet, says that they do not have difficulties in making a profit.

“We’re wildly profitable. We lost a lot of money the first couple of years but now it’s a very viable business,” he said.

“[Community websites are] a different business model. Fundamentally the sales reps at a newspaper are trained to sell newspaper advertisements. They get more for them because of the tradition and history and a lot of their clients are used to paying rates for print advertising. The overhead in the print business is huge compared to online. They need to charge those rates to keep the presses going. It’s just a different business model,” he said.

Castanet runs frequent updates on news stories throughout the day. As Kearney explains,

People want their news brief and to the point. In print journalism they write and write and write and the editor cuts stories. Our advantage is the timeliness of it. We have 11 stories already posted since 5 a.m. and it’s only 9:50 a.m. People want quick information. They want

quick updates on things. If they want longer editorial pieces there are other sites that do that. Our readers are interested in timeliness and getting information.

Another advantage that Castanet possesses is the prolific use of video, audio, photos and text to tell stories. New technology like web-based video has also been regarded with little warmth in the newsroom. But, as Kearney explains, the advantages of having multiple media to tell a story are another way to entice and capture readers.

That is one thing that has made us popular is just how local we are. People look to CNN for their international news or the CBC for their national news but as far as covering local stories with video, audio, text, photo galleries, there's no one else doing it as far as the numbers we're doing.

The advantage to advertisers is that Castanet can provide clients with information on the exact number of independent visits their ad receives online. Such information is extremely valuable to advertisers and provides them with a tangible number.

[We provide] cost-effective results and tangible results as far as providing statistics on how many times their ads were seen, [and] how many people clicked on their ads to view their website or display pages. There are some tangible results there. We can break it down there for a cost per impression while the newspaper's rates are a little willy-nilly. There's no follow-through with a response to the campaign. That's our unique selling propositions.

Castanet also welcomes read contributed photos and video. This is no different than any other media. The advantage to Castanet is that with virtually unlimited space on the web they can include much more reader-submitted content than a newspaper. As Kearney explains, having a product that brings in content from community members firmly establishes Castanet's reputation as the source for local content.

It's become a user-driven medium. A huge number of people provide free content through our columnists and written articles. It's just free content. The same is with pictures or videos. We just credit them to whomever took them. You don't always need a professional photographer to take a great picture. It also just shows we're a community-minded media as well. Using pieces from the community and people can feel confident sending us stuff and it being used and them being proud of being a part of the community providing information to everyone.

The lessons that the community press can learn from studying such a successful model are legion. For the community press to successfully create an online identity, it must seek to mimic the business model put forward by community web portals like Castanet. There is a very real possibility that if the community press does not embrace the web progressively, entrepreneurs will fill that void in the small community and present the community newspaper with a new challenge to its viability. If the community press continues to allow itself to play catch-up with news online then it may find, as the case is with Castanet, that it has to compete with online news sites that are already well-established brands in the community.

The future of the metro press must be to become more like community newspapers

The metro press has viewed the community press for many years as a source of soft community-based news that came out once a week. In today's technological world, even daily newspapers are dated by the time they hit the stands the next day. To take a story, lay it out on a page, send it to the press, and deliver it to a home or grocery store means that that same story could be anywhere between 12 and 24 hours old already. In an era of instantaneous communication such a time lapse for the dissemination of information is a very possible reason for the decline in metro readership over the last decade. After all, who wants to buy yesterday's news when one can find out today's news for free online? The irony now is that the journalism practised at community newspapers is the style of journalism the metro press is now beginning to imitate.

This is the most important lesson for the metro press and even the small-city newspapers. By providing coverage of the same stories that are available through multiple media sources (online news websites, radio, television) means that the material is more likely to have been read or seen already. To view it from an economics standpoint we can apply a supply and demand paradigm: The supply of national and international news has increased dramatically and the demand hasn't been able to keep up.

The metro press can learn a few important lessons from the community press. The most important lesson is the notion of locality. When the *Calgary Herald* reprints international stories it is competing with the variety of news sources mentioned above. A citizen of Calgary has another daily newspaper, several weekly publications, nearly a dozen radio stations, several television stations and the Internet that all offers the same content. How can a newspaper expect to compete with this, especially considering the printed copy will be at least 12 hours old by the time it hits a doorstep or grocery store? Such a newspaper must change its focus in order to survive. That focus is on local content.

While there are many opportunities to consume national and international stories, there are fewer opportunities for a Calgarian to read local content. Both the metro newspapers cover local stories but they mix them with the national and international stories as well. Who wants to pay for yesterday's news?

The metro press could restructure itself to produce local content that is unavailable anywhere else. If the community press can publish a weekly newspaper with nearly 50 pages of stories produced in a rural area then it should be easy for a metro publication to do the same every day of the week with 50 times the population. The supply of local news is available and there is a demand.

The end of the two-newspaper town

Throughout the course of this research project, many of the people consulted spoke about recent closures of community newspapers in western Canada. Two of the most prominent closures were the *Jasper Booster* in Jasper, Alta. and of the *Town and Country Examiner* that served the communities of Morinville and Redwater, Alta. However, the major detail that was ignored in the stories written by editors and bloggers decrying the end of journalism is that these two communities were each served by two newspapers respectively. To this day Jasper is still served by *The Fitzhugh* and Morinville still has *The Morinville Mirror*.

"Given where the print medium is going it is less and less likely that we will have print competitors," said Glen Garnett, the Vice President of Editorial at Sun Media.

"I do fear we are going to see a lot less two-newspaper towns. It's a real concern for us but it's also a concern for the communities that are enjoying multiple voices," he said.

A small economy may no longer be able to sustain two independent community publications but there is no evidence to suggest at the moment that a community lacks the ability to support at least one.

Glen Mazza, publisher of *The Mountaineer* agrees with that sentiment.

“Smaller communities aren’t able to support two newspapers. Advertisers are downsizing or cutting budgets because of the recession. Newsprint prices have gone up. You want to give your employees cost of living increases. The cost is a bit of a challenge. Revenue isn’t growing at the rate costs are,” he said.

Costs for supplies such as print, ink, and distribution have grown significantly in the past decades. Communities with multiple newspapers are now almost entirely metro centres (Vancouver, Calgary, Edmonton, Toronto etc.) though communities are beginning to be served not by multiple newspapers but by community-based news portals like www.castanet.net in Kelowna that ascribe to the same mandates as the community press and are capable of running profitable online news websites.

The future of print news

No research conducted on newspapers in today’s world would be complete without at least a passing examination of the question, “What is the future of print news?” It is a question in the back of the minds of journalists, publishers, and readers alike. The sheer cost in terms of labour and resources to produce a printed product appears less and less enticing as more people get their information from the Internet. Print now suffers from some major disadvantages. Firstly, the turn-around time to get news from the newsroom onto a page, printed and delivered. As people are more connected to the Internet they are less likely to want to purchase news that was current 12 hours ago. Secondly, younger readers who are used to having free information from the Internet face a different decision making process when they decided whether on not to purchase a newspaper. As Lauterer points out, the readers “of a certain age” are more likely to want that printed product because that is what they are used to and want to read from. As long as the print product is profitable then it will most likely remain a viable option for news delivery; however, in the next 25 years, the baby-boomer generation will be passing away and there is the distinct possibility that print, as a news medium will pass away with them. This doesn’t mean that community or metro journalism is in trouble per se, but it does mean that newspapers must look at how their product can remain viable to their market. The community newspaper-style of journalism is a potential model to imitate. Community newspapers are used to offering more feature news and reflection on what is going on in the community. As Aubrey Brown of *The Ponoka News* points out,

We don’t take on the responsibility of providing live news. We offer information with reflection. The timeline on that is to our advantage. We can wait until we have the whole story or provide additional information to the details of the event on how it’s affected the community at large. That has a much bigger impact than just the facts.

Conclusion

While this research report was conducted during a difficult time in the history of newspapers, there is a sense of optimism for the future. Of all the individuals interviewed from librarians, mayors, and civic workers, to editors, publishers and readers, all were unanimous in their core belief that a community newspaper is a vital establishment in their community.

Even as we email our friends around the world, we are aware of our next-door neighbour whom we see mowing the lawn, whose dog is barking, and from whom we may need to borrow a cup of sugar now and then. The new century is not likely to change that. (Copeland, p. 152)

What remains to be seen is how the community press will evolve in the 21st Century to remain relevant. But, as Jock Lauterer writes, the community is indelibly linked to their community newspaper.

The papers own birth, history, development, welfare and future are inextricably bound up with the history and future of its community. (Lauterer, p. 261)

What matters less is how that content is delivered as readers evolve and go online. What will not change are a community's needs for local content and the reader's ability to engage his neighbour, local businesses and his local government. How he is able to do this may change in some communities and may remain the same in others. What will never change is the importance of this ability to be engaged and the need of a community press to provide that engagement.

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Janice Baron
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Brad Watson
Chief Administrative Officer, Ponoka

Lisa Joy,
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Christina Petrisor
Head librarian, Mary C. Moore Public Library, Lacombe

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John Hinds
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