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THE HOMETOWN PAPER
VIABILITY OF NEWS IN THE COMMUNITY PRESS

BY ROBERT DYKSTRA

**THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF JOURNALISM**

**in the
School of Journalism and Communication
Carleton University**

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Carleton University
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**The undersigned recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies
and Research acceptance of the thesis**

**THE HOMETOWN PAPER
VIABILITY OF NEWS IN THE COMMUNITY PRESS
submitted by Robert Dykstra, B.A.
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for
the degree of Master of Journalism**

Thesis Supervisor

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February 16, 1999*

ABSTRACT

Community newspapers, or weeklies, are low in profile yet they are ubiquitous in both urban and rural settings. They are influential in setting the agenda of public discussion.

This thesis argues that community news is shaped and frequently constrained by factors inherent to the small community. Editors and publishers believe their role is to foster harmony, not create conflict. Community newspapers act as boosters for the local community, sometimes at the expense of analysis or criticism. Advertisers influence news content more than they do in larger media because the small paper is financially more dependent on a limited advertising base. Community publishers and editors are often part of the business elite. Lack of professionalism precludes in-depth reporting. New technology has shifted production work to journalists, impinging on the news-gathering process. While community newspapers are not uniformly bad -- some display an enterprising journalism and many are slick in appearance -- they often paint a picture that does not reflect reality.

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"...the fact is that most small dailies and weeklies are the backyard of the trade, repositories for any piece of journalistic junk tossed over the fence, run as often by print-shop proprietors as by editors. Mostly they serve as useful bulletin boards for births, deaths, and marriages (providing that this news comes in by its own initiative); only in exceptional cases do they raise and resolve important local issues."

**-- Ben H. Bagdikian, "Behold the Grass-roots Press,"
Harper's Magazine, December, 1964**

"See, in small towns people don't find things out from reading the newspaper. Especially not a weekly. Gossip takes care of most of the local news long before the paper comes out, and certain topics never make it into print at all. Anything that would upset a respected local family, for example, doesn't get published. Weeklies are about garden club meetings and birthday parties--not about rapes and suicides. They're like a time capsule, but it's sundial time; they count no hours but unclouded ones."

-- Sharyn McCrumb, *She Walks These Hills*, 1994

THE HOMETOWN PAPER VIABILITY OF NEWS IN THE COMMUNITY PRESS

by Robert Dykstra

INTRODUCTION

Community newspapers are frequently described as purveyors of the parochial, characterized by uncritical reporting and monotonous accounts of local goings-on. They have been described as mirrors, bulletin boards and almanacs, or, in their more pro-active role, as institutions that build the community and foster its social and financial well-being. The community paper's news content is frequently seen as inconsequential, rather than enterprising or agenda-setting, with only superficial coverage of "events," sometimes well after they happen.

News in the community press is unabashedly local. Rural community papers are filled with council and school board meetings, reports from service clubs or business groups, gardening feats, local sports, and columns detailing who is in hospital and who is in town visiting whom. Metropolitan community papers reflect an urban readership, but their focus is the same: local events and goings-on, political battles with adjacent suburbs, or the nearby city, and occasionally stories on trends and issues affecting the community. If the community papers are devotedly parochial, that -- from the local perspective -- is their strength. As Morris Janowitz notes, local news can only be meaningful to someone who has some personal acquaintance with the

community itself.¹ They foster local identity and pride, and provide a direct ideological influence on members of the community.² The essential character of localness makes them, in theory, inherently more democratic than the larger mass media. They are closer to their constituents, and presumably more accessible to them.

Much academic research focuses on the mass media, primarily daily newspapers and television networks. Even the two royal commissions that examined the ownership, quality and cultural significance of the Canadian media paid little attention to the community press. The Davey Report in 1970 devoted a short chapter, out of a total of seven volumes of text. Eleven years later, the Kent Commission Report contained a meagre nine paragraphs on the community press, out of 255 pages of text. During the last two decades, some cities have seen their daily newspapers merge or close outright, and the remaining ones attempt to claw their way out of circulation and advertising doldrums.³ Media giants have been buying profitable suburban weeklies that have been stealing advertising revenue from their dailies. If you can't beat 'em, buy 'em. Torstar Corp., owners of the *Toronto Star*, had the foresight more than 20 years ago to buy some 26 community papers in Southern Ontario through its company Metroland. Southam Inc. later bought 20 in the same region, and through Lower Mainland Publishing, another 13 in the Vancouver area. It also owns the two dailies, *The Vancouver Sun* and *The Province*. David Black, a former *Toronto Star* circulation executive, started with one small paper in British Columbia 20 years ago. He now owns 52 papers in B.C. and Washington State, including a dozen papers in the Vancouver area recently purchased from a British company. Bowes Publishers Ltd. Has been buying small papers in Alberta, Saskatchewan and Ontario, owning a total of 34. In Newfoundland, Robinson-Blackmore Printing and Publishing owns 15 community

papers.⁴ Family ownership of the community paper in Canada is almost a thing of the past; most are now owned by a corporate chain or a smaller area publisher who also usually owns a the centralized printing plant.

Some argue that no distinction should be made between the community papers and the dailies, except that community newspapers are smaller and publish less frequently, usually once or twice a week. In a sense this is true. Both operate in a free market, and aim to provide owners or shareholders with a profit, largely through advertising. Both exist to inform, and to various degrees, entertain. More important to society, both engage in the production of "news," information that, ostensibly, is of interest to readers who are citizens of a given "community." But it is here I pose the central question of this work: Does the community newspaper operate under a distinct journalistic ethos, an ethos producing news that is not always representative of "truth" or reality, and thus not always viable as a tool in the democratic process?

It is not my aim to compare, per se, the journalistic product in daily and community newspapers. Neither do I propose to prove that community newspapers are uniformly bad. Many, in fact, display an enterprising journalism and a high quality of writing, as well as presentation. I will suggest, however, that the process of "journalism" as typically practised in the community press has specific environmental conditions that influence the production of news in a more distinct manner than that of the dailies. I suggest that the nature of community news is not merely that it is local, but that it is shaped, and frequently constrained by factors inherent to the small community. I will focus on what I believe are seven such significant factors, namely (1) the traditional role of the community newspaper, as perceived by those involved in its production, (2) a history which has established a commercial ethos, (3) a lack of professionalism, (4)

advertising pressures, (5) agenda-setting by business and political elites, (6) community boosterism, and (7) new technology.

Throughout, I will examine the nature of community news in the context of expectations of "truth," and the relevance of this news as a means of empowering community members. This constitutes my meaning of "viability." I will focus on community newspapers in Canada, both rural and urban, but will draw on theory and case studies and other relevant material pertaining to the community press in Britain and the United States.

End notes

1. See Morris Janowitz, *The Community Press in an Urban Setting: The Social Elements of Urbanism*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1967, p. 2.
2. As discussed by Janowitz, op. cit., and Franklin and Murphy in *What News? The Market, Politics and the Local Press*, London, Routledge, 1991.
3. Four new dailies have been successfully launched in the last two decades: the four *Sun* papers in Toronto, Winnipeg, Edmonton and Calgary, and, most recently, the *National Post*.
4. Figures are from Canadian Community Newspapers Association, Group Publisher Report, Oct. 7, 1998.

CHAPTER ONE

Journalism, democracy, and the community

The role of the news media and journalism in a free society has been exhaustively described. I want to re-affirm some of these basic concepts in order to lay the groundwork for my discussion of journalism in the community press. Similarly, I will delineate the concept of community. Finally, I will outline recent ideas about "community communications" in order to assess the effectiveness of the community paper as a tool for participatory democracy.

Despite differing views regarding the virtues and vices of journalism, most will agree its role is profound, "arguably the most important form of public knowledge in contemporary society."¹ One writer describes journalism as "the intelligent collection and organization of public information, and the translation of that information into effective words and images for the lay audience."² Another sees journalism as "a free society engaging in conversation with itself."³ Yet another states journalism is "that realm of social life where the exchange of information and views on questions of common concern can take place so that public opinion can be formed."⁴ News in terms of Western traditions can also be defined as the impartial recording of facts with societal value, as opposed to partisan political rhetoric, or the adoption of the role of public relations vehicle for a specific cause.⁵

In theory, the role of journalism in society has evolved into one that is inherently anti-institutional, in essence "to afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted."⁶ This concept springs from Anglo-American traditions of media acting as "watchdog" on governments, providing the ordinary person with a critical eye, and information necessary for him or her to function in everyday life. Liberal-democratic countries adhere to the notion of a free press, and many embed it in their constitutions as a fundamental freedom. This system, or slight variations thereof, has been described as based on libertarian, liberal pluralist, or social responsibility theories of the news media.⁷ In essence, every citizen, within the confines of libel or anti-hate legislation, has the constitutional right to speak (and publish) his or her opinions. Such a system, espoused by John Milton and later John Stuart Mill, is necessary in creating a "marketplace of ideas" from which truth will eventually emerge.⁸

A vast body of research and opinion, emanating mainly from the social sciences, has challenged or discounted some of the basic concepts and practices regarding journalism. If we accept the notion that "news plays an important role in the ongoing enterprise of a democratic society"⁹ critics justifiably will ask: Whose news? Researchers have questioned influences and pressures which make news biased: the journalist's personal values to select or advocate certain positions; professional or newsroom routines; the philosophical imperatives as determined by media ownership, especially corporate; and the agendas of other powerful groups or institutions. Critical theorists see influences on news gathering and dissemination

. . . not as the work of competing groups, but as part of a network that operates toward a single end. That end in a capitalist society must involve a profit motive and be conservative in nature, to best serve the dominant ideology. This approach suggests news gatherers operate in an atmosphere of constraint dictated by economics and the unspoken ideological "policies" of the news organization that supports a larger societal ideology.¹⁰

Others stand between the liberal-pluralists and the critical theorists. Seminal work by Gaye Tuchman suggests that reporters and editors are "professionals" who work by "knowing how to get a story that meets organizational needs and standards."¹¹ Lars Engwall describes the newspaper business as a "hybrid" which provides a public service as well as producing a product for profit. The two imperatives can be in conflict as when a primary advertiser becomes the "target" of the public's "right to know,"¹² or more subtly when advertisers are able to influence the news agenda through marketing or public relations.

In the free market context, Schiller has described news as a commodity, but that's not to say that readers (or viewers) are simply news consumers. As Jay Rosen argues, a distinction must be made between readers as consumers and readers as citizens.¹³ "The first seeks to understand people as users of a product, customers of a business, which is one thing they are when they read or watch the news. The second sees them as members of a community, inescapably connected to other members."¹⁴

The production of news is thus tempered by societal notions of both freedom and constraint, sometimes in a paradoxical manner, but ostensibly designed to enhance democratic discourse. In the end, the public's trust is based on the assumption that news reflects reality, or at least approaches "truth."

In this examination of community news and its relevance in terms of democracy -- that is, its viability -- it is helpful to borrow some concepts from an area of communications research known as "community communication."¹⁵ Although these concepts are applied primarily to the study of communications and media in developing countries, they contribute to a theoretical

framework for my examination of the community press in Canada. Frances Berrigan, a researcher in this field, defines community media in this way:

They are media to which members of the community have access, to information, for information, education, entertainment, when they want access. They are media in which the community participates, as planners, producers, performers. They are the means of expression *of* the community, rather than *for* the community. Community communications describe an exchange of views and news, not a transmission from one source to another.¹⁶

Berrigan stresses the importance of the "horizontal" communication process as opposed to "top-down" which she sees as perpetuating an elitist or authoritarian relationship. The present-day system of representative democracy (as opposed to the archetypal model of participatory democracy developed by the Athenians) makes people far removed from the process. They feel powerless and passive. Berrigan concedes that a direct system of democracy on a large scale is not practical. She thus sees access to, and participation in media as providing the tools for the democratic process.

Communication is inherent in the definition of community (the words come from the same Latin root word meaning "common") because it is the conduit of the knowledge and ideas which maintain a commonality. "Community" implies a common set of interests and a world view which differentiates it from the wider social world around it.¹⁷ Individuals in a community are thought to share a "commonality," either in a cultural sense which would include the metaphysical aspects of history, myths, beliefs, as well as language, or in common, daily patterns such as their recreation or shopping habits.

But communities are not totally harmonious. In any group there are divergent or conflicting interests, as well as different perceptions of common interests. We can reason, then,

that the role of the community newspaper is to facilitate divergent or conflicting views -- a marketplace of ideas. Berrigan notes that media professionals (and governments) often resist true democratization. Traditional media are organized hierarchically, which means that specialists make judgments on content, and time or space allotments. In doing so, these professionals act as "gatekeepers" and wield considerable influence in defining the agenda of public discussion. Media organizations are generally large and powerful, and few of them welcome interference from outside.

In this sense, the community press, while appearing to be "grass roots," and operating under the myth of a journalistic adversarialism is similarly an institution of elites which promotes consensus, and avoids conflict; which perpetuates the status quo, rather than challenges it.

The community press: The Western paradigm

In many Western countries, the community press -- usually a weekly press -- complements the larger, daily newspapers whose circulation is mostly in metropolitan areas. The obvious difference between the community paper and the daily is that the former is almost exclusively local in content, with only a small percentage of editorial material dealing with events or issues outside the boundaries of the community. Outside matters are mostly dealt with in opinion columns or editorials (for example, a local view on a federal issue), or sometimes a national or international story may be "localized" if it contains a local angle. For example, *The Bridgewater (Nova Scotia) Bulletin* carried a front-page story on the space shuttle Discovery because one of the astronauts on board was Bjarni Tryggvason who grew up in nearby

Lunenburg.¹⁸ Alternatively, daily newspapers carry community stories only if they are of interest to a mass, urban readership. Time sensitivity is also more important for dailies; weekly community papers are less concerned with immediacy. News material can be bumped back to the next week's edition if this week's is already full, or if a last-minute advertisement displaces news.

In Canada, there are about 950 community newspapers, publishing once or twice, and occasionally three times a week. Their combined circulation is about 13 million on a weekly basis.¹⁹ (The country's 106 daily papers have a combined circulation of about 5 million on a daily basis.) Surveys show that between 65 per cent and 69 per cent of Canadian adults read community papers.²⁰ In rural areas, the weeklies are usually distributed by subscription via Canada Post. In urban areas, the papers are often given away free to all, or selected households, under the system known as controlled circulation or free distribution. This method has in the last two decades given urban community papers an enormous advantage over dailies in capturing advertising. While dailies struggle to achieve an average of 20 to 40 per cent penetration throughout a metropolitan area, a community paper delivered to all households will claim 100-per-cent penetration in an area whose demographic particulars can be more easily analyzed by the advertiser. The suburban merchant advertising in the local paper is able to target potential customers in his community, as opposed to paying a much higher rate to expose his wares to the daily's widespread readership, many of whom might not travel to another suburb to shop. New computer technology and contract offset printing have also drastically reduced the start-up costs for small newspapers. Free circulation and cheap technology have facilitated the proliferation of the so-called "freebie" or "shopper" newspaper, heavy in advertising and full of "journalistic junk," to borrow Bagdikian's phrase. This phenomenon will be discussed in later chapters.

In a free market environment, certain economic conditions – that is, an advertising base from which to draw revenues – is the primary determinant for a new commercial newspaper. Morris Janowitz, in his work on the community press in an urban environment, suggests that the impetus for people in a particular community to communicate with each other, and strengthen their commonality in the face of the mass forces of the larger community, occurs despite the absence of an economic rationale:

The analysis of the community press as a communication system . . . reveals that despite the growth of mass communications and large-scale organization, most individuals are not living in a "mass society" in which they are directly linked to the major agencies of concentrated social and political power. Rather, the growth of large-scale organization has been accompanied by a proliferation of intermediate haphazard-like social arrangements and communication patterns.²¹

While this describes the social impetus for the creation of new newspapers, the Western paradigm is based predominantly on the economic imperative. There are a only handful of community or neighbourhood newspapers which can be considered non-commercial, produced by volunteers under the auspices of community associations. For the most part, they still depend on advertising income to pay for production and printing.²²

The growth and increased profitability of the community papers has attracted the attention of media chains. In Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver, chains which own one or more of the dailies also own, or have an interest in, the urban or suburban community papers. For example, in 1990 Southam Inc., which already owned the broadsheet *Sun* and the tabloid *Province* in Vancouver, purchased 13 community papers in the lucrative Lower Mainland area, as well as a real estate publication, three flyer distribution services, and two printing businesses.²³ Southam Inc., which owns 17 dailies across Canada, also owns 41 community papers through

various holding companies. In 1981 Southam owned no community papers. Southam's parent company, Hollinger International, owns 19 community papers, some operating under its subsidiaries, Sterling Newspapers or UniMedia. Quebecor Inc. has 41 community papers, compared to 28 in 1981. Thomson Newspaper Corp. owns nine community papers, compared to 30 in the early 90s and 15 in 1981. The other daily chains with an interest in community papers are the *Toronto Sun* with 24 and Torstar Corporation, which owns the largest circulation daily in the country, *The Toronto Star*, with 26 community papers, most operating under the subsidiary known as Metroland.²⁴

As well, there are chains which publish community papers in specific provinces, or regionally. In British Columbia, David Black, a former *Toronto Star* circulation executive, is the principal shareholder of 52 community papers which operate under three holding companies, namely Island Press Ltd., Cariboo Press Ltd., and Metro Valley Newspapers, purchased in the spring of 1998 from the British newspaper firm, Trinity International. Other large holdings include Bowes Publishers with 34 papers in Alberta, Saskatchewan and Ontario, and Robinson-Blackmore with 15 papers in Newfoundland. Canadian Community Newspaper Association figures show that out of 668 English-language newspapers which are members of the CCNA, 391 belong to 133 media chains. Thus 58 per cent of the country's community newspapers are owned by chains, up from 50 per cent in 1981.

Along with the move to corporate ownership, the community newspaper has, in the last two decades, undergone significant changes. As noted by Lea Guenther, the small, family-owned operation had loyal advertisers and faithful subscribers.²⁵ It was usually the only newspaper in town, so it had a stable circulation and little or no competition. After the paper was put to bed

each week, extra income was earned from job printing or an adjacent stationery store. Editors were also owners, publishers, printers, and frequently sold the ads. Today, corporate managers with advertising or accounting backgrounds oversee the newspaper as an enterprise, and as we shall see, sometimes determine the editorial tone of the newspaper. Typical are the smaller chains, or group publishers, which own a centralized printing plant, and produce a number of other "sister" community papers, usually in a given region, as well as advertising material (for example, flyers) which can be stuffed inside the papers at several cents per copy, or distributed on their own using the newspaper's distribution system. Reporters and editors tend to be graduates of journalism schools, often on their first job, arguably better trained than their predecessors, but often not native to the community and therefore not intimately acquainted with its nuances and vicissitudes.

Community papers have a cleaner, more professional look compared to the letterpress or early offset products of 20 or 30 years ago. Then, community papers looked not much different from their predecessors even 100 years earlier: grey, print-oriented, and reflecting the limitations of the day's more cumbersome letterpress technology, or the idiosyncrasies of the printer or editor. Today, computer technology, million-dollar centralized printing plants, and design consultants with propensities for colour, screens, boxes and "factoid" sidebars allow even the smallest rural paper to look like *USA Today*.

Whatever its look -- slick or hick -- and whatever its ownership -- corporate or mom-and-pop -- the community newspaper tends to be highly influential in defining news for its readers. As noted by Franklin and Murphy, the potential for such a paper to set the agenda of public discussion on local matters cannot be overstated.²⁶ The pressures, influences and constraints that

bear on this community agenda will be discussed in the following chapters.

End notes

1. Robert Hackett and Yuehzhi Zhao, *Sustaining Democracy: Journalism and the Politics of Objectivity*, Toronto, Garamond Press, 1998, p. 1.
2. Ben H. Bagdikian, "Let's get rid of bad journalism teaching," *ASNE Bulletin*, December/January 1984, reprinted in *Planning For Curricular Change, Project on the Future of Journalism and Mass Communication Education*, School of Journalism, the University of Oregon, November, 1987.
3. As noted by Stuart Adam, in *Notes Towards a Definition of Journalism-Understanding an old craft as an art form*, The Poynter Papers: No. 2, The Poynter Institute of Media Studies, 1993, p. 6.
4. Peter Dahlgren, *Television and the Public Sphere, Citizenship, Democracy and the Media*, London, Sage, 1995, p. 7, as referenced by Hackett and Zhao. op. cit., p. 1.
5. Franklin and Murphy, op. cit. p. 56.
6. Attributed to H.L. Mencken
7. See Fred L. Siebert, Theodore Peterson and Wilbur Schramm, *Four Theories of the Press*, Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1963.
8. See John Milton's *Areopagitica* and John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty*, two classic essays on freedom of expression.
9. Roger Bird, *The End of News*, Irwin Publishing, Toronto, 1997, page 2.
10. As described by Sarah Russel Hankins, "Freedom and Constraint in Objective Local News Coverage," *Newspaper Research Journal*, Vol. 9, No. 4, Summer 1988, p. 86.

11. Gaye Tuchman, *Making News*, New York, Free Press, 1978, p. 5.
12. Lars Engwall, *Newspapers as Organizations*, Westmead Farnborough, Hants, England, Teakfield Ltd., 1978, p. 96-7.
13. In "Public Journalism: Theory and Practice," by Jay Rosen and Davis Merrit, Jr., Kettering Foundation, Project on Public Life and the Press, Dept. of Journalism, New York University, 1994.
14. Ibid, p. 16.
15. For a discussion of community communication, see Frances J. Berrigan, "Community Communications: The Role of Community Media in Development," No. 90, reports and papers on mass communication, UNESCO, Paris, 1979.
16. Berrigan, op. cit., p. 8.
17. Franklin and Murphy, op. cit., p. 58.
18. "'Our astronaut' aboard shuttle," *The Bulletin*, Bridgewater, N.S., Aug. 13, 1997, p. 1.
19. Statistics are from *Europa World Yearbook*, 1998, and the Canadian Community Newspapers Association. It should be noted that community newspaper circulation figures include those distributed free to all households.
20. A 1994 Angus Reid survey indicates 65 per cent of Canadian adults read community papers. Numbers from the Canadian Community Newspaper Association based on a 1998 survey shows 69 per cent of Canadian adults reported reading a community newspaper within a seven-day period.
21. Janowitz, op. cit., p. 200.
22. Ottawa is the only Canadian city to have several such newspapers. For example, *The Glebe Report*, produced by the Glebe Community Association, or *OSCAR*, produced by the Ottawa South Community Association are funded by their respective associations, as well as by a modest advertising income. Their overhead is low; they are largely staffed by volunteers.
23. The complex series of transactions was announced by Southam Inc. in May, 1990. In November 1990, the federal government under the Competition Act (1986) filed an application to contest the takeover, claiming that the merger limited competition for newspaper retail advertising services in Vancouver. The Competition Tribunal subsequently ruled there was no competition between the two dailies and the community papers in the Greater Vancouver area because the newspaper products were different. The tribunal did rule that Southam's ownership of the *Real Estate*

Weekly, and the suburban *North Shore News*, resulted in the elimination of competition on the North Shore. For more details, see Daniel Shaw and Terrence J. Thomas, *Newspapers and Concentration*, Background Paper prepared for the research branch of the Library of Parliament, January, 1994.

24. Figures based on information provided by the Canadian Newspaper Association and the Canadian Community Newspapers Association.

25. Lea Guenther, "Four Categories of Change at the Weekly Newspaper," in *Journalism Quarterly*, Vol. 64, No. 4, Winter 1987, p. 863.

26. Franklin and Murphy, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

CHAPTER TWO

The community press: The good news papers

For years, the *Vancouver Courier*, a free-circulation paper serving the city's upper-middle class west-side, presented as its logo: "Your Good News Paper!" The paper reflected the gracious prosperity that is the self-image of this affluent community. The image was seldom challenged by the reporting. The paper took on journalistic vitality only when defending the local status quo, as, for example, in the early 1990s when west-side residents objected to the city's plan to use abandoned railway tracks for light-rapid transit to the suburbs. Although "good news" philosophies are not usually declared on front pages, community newspapers inherently are purveyors of news that is positive, news that reinforces a community status quo rather than challenging it. In the words of one editor: "I try to emphasize the positive aspects of the community. I like [to use material] that puts a smile of people's faces."¹ The editor explained that his biggest problem as a community editor, in fact, was to find enough good news. Finding bad news was seldom a problem. This approach defines the newspaper as the bearer of news that instils within the citizen a positive attitude toward the community. In turn, this perception of role shapes the definition of what is news and establishes, or at least influences, the agenda of public discussion. The notion of the local newspaper as "friend" to the community is then a self-

fulfilling prophesy: it provides news that is neither negative, nor threatening to the community.

Whether it is the 70,000 free-circulation *North York* (Ontario) *Mirror*, or the 500 paid-circulation *Rivers* (Manitoba) *Banner*, community papers have been variously described as mirrors, notebooks, forums or almanacs. Their chief characteristic, as noted before, is that they carry almost exclusively news of events and issues that occur in the community. Such a paper also serves local businesses with a platform for local advertising which, in turn, provides revenues to maintain the newspaper operation.

Stakeholders in the community press -- owners, publishers, editors -- boast about their papers being leaders, educators and builders of the community. The owner-editor of a community paper in Tennessee writes that her paper's role is to keep readers posted on "what's news" and to be the citizenry's "steadfast, concerned friend."² It is worth quoting this editor at length because the statement represents not merely a recipe for editorial content but a fundamental definition of the community press, reflecting an ideology that is conservative, patriotic, and based on 19th-century notions of progress.

It [the local newspaper] announces and rejoices in the community's births, describes the delightful details of weddings, mourns and eulogizes the deceased, and prints pictures of the star athletes, distinguished students, debutantes and military personnel. Supporting and promoting all the community's worthy causes, the newspaper leads the way in raising funds for the United Way, for a faltering library or for historical restorations. It extols the efforts of the Chamber of Commerce and helps to sell memberships.³

This vision stipulates that the community newspaper is much more than merely the bearer of (positive) local news. The writer goes on to state that:

It is our modest opinion that in the pages of God-guided, conscientious,

independent small-town newspapers lies much of our nation's hope for a favorable future. Theirs is an exciting soul-searching obligation and stewardship, and their contribution to the public good cannot be overestimated.⁴

While Canada's Special Senate Committee's Report on Mass Media⁵ chastised the country's daily newspapers for their increasing corporate blandness, it singled out community papers for providing independent, vigorous, diversified voices, even if they tended to be somewhat conservative in their outlook and editorial philosophies. A background brief for Senate committee members suggested that community papers were similar to dailies in that they provided information to the public, a market service, exhortation, instruction and entertainment. But the brief notes also notes some differences. One owner is quoted as saying: "Weekly newspapers become an integral part of the community and establish a closeness to people which daily papers, radio and television cannot accomplish."⁶ The author of the brief, Paul Champagne, suggests somewhat naively that these assessments suggest "a heavy degree of objectivity and conscientiousness on the part of the editor or publisher."⁷ Journalistic "objectivity," as we understand it today, is impossible. Is this so-called objectivity, or conscientiousness merely another way of describing the conformist role the community paper must assume in order to be a functional member of a given community?

In keeping with the positive role, local papers are frequently described as the "glue" that holds the community together. The Davey Commission agreed with this assessment, suggesting that the local paper performs the functions of parish priest, political patriarch, and broker of progress all in one, a heavy burden. The commissioners wrote: "by reporting those local events of mutual interest, they served as a binding force in their areas by contributing to the sense of welfare and togetherness in the community and working for the betterment of their fellow man

who shared common problems and joys."⁸

By way of their editorials, editors see their role as not just interpreting local events, but "to provoke," "to lead," "to arouse," and to provide the reader with "political criticism."⁹ This suggests that the newspaper in effect becomes the community's conscience, based on an editor's or publisher's biases, tempered by community standards and ideology. Bruce Kennedy, a former weekly newspaper editor and author of *Community Journalism -- A Way of Life*, described the role of his paper this way:

Black type can be a constant driving force in a community. When you believe in its essential good and respect its power, a newspaper becomes an awesome force, a continual influence that regenerates itself each week. My newspaper existed as a community partner for two generations before I came along, and it will be going for a long, long time after my time is past.¹⁰

Kennedy goes on to describe what he believes to be the essential nature of the community paper:

We should be interested in everything. How old is that bridge? Is it marble time? Did the ice on the river go out earlier than usual? Are the post office flowers blooming yet? Are the fish biting? What will make the town grow faster? What were the laughs this week?

We should especially be interested in people. We should make them aware of who lives across the street. Involve them with each other: How is Sam since he got out of the hospital? Is John home yet from overseas? Can we help you with that special project? Have the Heywoods started their garden? Congratulations on being a grandfather!

There's much of this "neighbouring" in small-town newspapering. The whole town is the family next door. Our papers help to bring us together even more.¹¹

The social significance of the community paper is complex. It is expected to fulfil certain

journalistic expectations, as discussed earlier. But it must also fulfil what might at times be contradictory expectations of perpetuating all that is good in the community and ignoring the bad. Reporting takes place within the frame of this perceived role as community booster, and the news would be biased accordingly. Such news may paint a picture of a community's life that is less than accurate, a series of myths and illusions that may not be in the best interest of all citizens.

Even in editorial or opinions columns, where editors exhort, arouse, lead, provoke, or otherwise engage in diatribes involving community issues or personalities, the criticism tends to be tame. An opinion writer for an Alberta weekly said she could express opinions as long as the paper's general manager agreed with them.¹² Traditionally, editorials are unsigned and considered to be the institutional voice of the newspaper. They can be written by the editor, the publisher, or a reporter (sometimes the same person on small papers). Some community papers, out of policy, do not run editorials. The editor of a rural Ontario paper stated that: "Editorials are out in a very small community like this. There is no time for facilities for research and the editor will make an ass of himself."¹³

Some free-circulation suburban papers do not publish unsigned editorials, only bylined columns. By doing so, they reduce the risk of creating controversy or offending an advertiser. An editorial stand may be disagreeable to political or business elites of the community, jeopardizing either the status of the editor or publisher, or the newspaper's advertising income. When editorials are signed by the writer, or are in the form of a bylined opinion column, this labels any opinion therein as that of the writer and not of the newspaper.

For many community papers, segregating news and opinion may be somewhat of a moot

point. Community newspapers reveal opinion or bias in "news" stories much more blatant than the subtle influences inherent to the production of news mentioned briefly in the introduction. Frequently, stories are biased or contain opinion, instead of fact, simply because the writer happens to be involved in the story, or is a member of the organization or group from which the report emanates. For example, in *The Bulletin and Progress Enterprise*, a combined paper serving Bridgewater and Lunenburg (Nova Scotia) the story "Queens to lead street parade" notes that 33 former "Queens of the Sea" will lead an upcoming parade to kick off Lunenburg's annual fair.¹⁴ The story contains several quotes attributed to parade chairman Susan Corkum-Greek. Susan Corkum-Greek is listed as editor of *The Bulletin* and has a number of bylined stories throughout the paper.

Clubs or organizations seek to share their news, or promote their activities. In a small-town paper such groups can, be they weight-watcher groups such as TOPS (Take off Pounds Sensibly), Kinsmen, Kiwanis and Rotary, or the Chamber of Commerce. Because of a small editorial staff, community papers have always relied on submissions from group members. Mostly these reports find their way into the newspaper unedited, or only lightly edited, the editor happy that another community event has been "covered" with little effort or time. Other reports containing opinion or bias include those from rural correspondents who are often closely acquainted with their sources, or sports teams whose coaches, or parents submit reports of triumphs on field or ice even though their teams lose the actual game.

Press releases, or reports from police and fire departments, the courts, or local government are riddled with opinion reflecting the interests of the source. Here is one newspaper's report on the search for a missing youth:

Search Society participates in Ft. Saskatchewan search

**David Finn, President
Little Divide Search & Rescue**

The Little Divide Search & Rescue participated in the search for Wayne Hoffman of Sherwood Park on July 9 and again on July 12.

Under the supervision of search master Vonnie Woods of the Fort Saskatchewan RCMP, the Lac La Biche team joined other volunteer search teams from Strathcona County, Bonnyville, Edmonton, and the Canadian military. Unfortunately, the search ended with tragic news for the Hoffman family with the discovery of the 17 year olds [sic] body on July 12.

This was the first search for the local Search & Rescue Society and provided valuable experience for the members involved. The mechanics to a missing person search are similar to forest fire fighting in terms of the emergent nature of the situation and the deployment of large numbers of people and resources. There is a prescribed format that a search master follows in conducting a search. This formula is then tailored to address the specifics of the search such as the age and health of the missing person, the season, and the terrain.

The response to the Hoffman search was very good, highlighting the humanitarian aspect of search and rescue (SAR) where the most important element is that someone is lost and needs help, not who he is, or where he is from.

The Little Divide Search and Rescue Society is holding a general meeting open to all on July 28 at 7:00 p.m. in the Lac La Biche Provincial Building. The Society will also be participating in the Pow Wow Days weekend.¹⁵

Editors cite lack of staff to cover all events and lack of time to edit the submitted reports as reasons for publishing such news. Some will argue that the role of the community paper is to allow such direct access to citizens. This would be valid if the paper was a true product of the

community or the neighbourhood, without profit motive, written and edited by locals. But the commercial community press, for the most part, assumes operation according to the concepts of professional journalistic standards. This means reportage free from bias or vested interests. The aforementioned example, and countless others in community papers surveyed for this work, indicates that this is not the case. Even the most obvious biases are accepted by editor and reader alike as the norm of community journalism.

The concept of "good" news, of course, is defined by the paper's editor or sometimes the publisher. Acting as gatekeepers, they determine what events or issues will be covered, or published. Controversial matters, or those contrary to the newspaper's commercial interests, can be downplayed or ignored. In the early 1990s, the owner-publisher of a Vancouver suburban paper declared in a front-page editorial that he would no longer run letters to the editor concerning a controversial housing development proposed for a large tract of farmland. Public sentiment was decidedly against the development. The paper's publisher was a prominent member of a local business group and saw the development as progress, favourable to the local economy.¹⁶

Similarly, community newspapers stay away from "investigative" reporting. Aside from the obvious time and money restrictions, the papers do not uncover injustices, or challenge community icons for fear of rocking the boat. (Specific reasons why will be discussed in later sections.) Many papers define their role according to such a philosophy. The editor-publisher of the *Edson (Alberta) Leader* asserted:

Investigative reporting does not seem to fit into the rural scheme of things nor the urban scheme either. There are not enough things to be investigated to the bottom of the dung heap as the majority of the population is trying to make the community a better place in which to live.

It goes without saying that this type of reporting usually has no use for religion or no time for professional careers and the only political views worth mentioning are those of the reporter. Disparaging remarks about local activities, facilities and the efforts of small town residents, affront many. Committing to print acid remarks and personal attacks suggests a lack of talent and training in depreciating the efforts of others. This suggests that the reporter is not so much a journalistic ace as a journalistic ass.¹⁷

Wetherell and Kmet note that life in a small community means conformity. Those who do not conform are frequently labelled as "misfits" and ostracized. Despite the idealistic declarations that the newspaper should "provoke," "lead" or "arouse," the reality is that as an institution it is limited by the social, political, and economic circumstances of its environment. Editors and publishers see their roles as promoting community harmony, not causing disharmony, controversy or dissent. Editors who do not hold such views, or who are too much of a thorn in the side of local decision-makers, or business leaders, may be excluded from inner circles or lose advertising business. This pressure forces the newspaper to produce a less aggressive or more "positive" journalism.

End notes

1. As stated by Dan MacPherson, editor of the *Edson* (Alberta) *Leader*, in an interview, July 28, 1998.
2. Arne Jones, co-owner of the *Greeneville, Tennessee Sun*, writing in *Presstime*, October 1991, p. 28.
3. Arne Jones, *ibid*.
4. Arne Jones, *ibid*.
5. Report of the Special Senate Committee on Mass Media, Vol. 1, *The Uncertain Mirror*, "The Community Press," 1970.
6. Champagne quoting Gerald C. Craven, then president of the Canadian Weekly Newspapers' Association (now the Canadian Community Newspapers' Association), p. 18.
7. Champagne, *op. cit.* p. 18.
8. "The Role of the Canadian Community Newspaper Industry," Paul M. Champagne, September, 1969, prepared for the Special Senate Committee on Mass media, p. 1.
9. Champagne, *op. cit.* p. 19.
10. Bruce M. Kennedy, *Community Journalism: A Way of Life*, Ames, Iowa State University Press, 1974, p. 244.
11. Kennedy, *op. cit.*, p. 246.
12. This was stated in a personal conversation with Carolyne Aarsen, columnist with the *Barrhead* (Alberta) *Leader*, July, 1998.
13. Champagne, *op. cit.* page 20.
14. "Queens to lead street parade," *The Bulletin* and *The Progress Enterprise*, Bridgewater and Lunenburg, Nova Scotia, Aug. 13, 1997, p. 9.
15. See "Search society participates in Ft. Saskatchewan search," in *Lac La Biche Post*, Tuesday, July 22, 1997, p. 6.
16. The editorial appeared in the *Delta Optimist*, in 1992, signed by then-publisher Ernie Bexley. Exact date unknown.

17. Editorial in the *Edson Leader*, Oct. 22, 1979.

CHAPTER THREE

The local press: historical underpinnings

The *Halifax Gazette*, first published March 23, 1752 is said to be Canada's first newspaper.¹ But that is less relevant to this work than the fact that it was a weekly and that it was launched by a printer, John Bushnell. This is where the daily and community press share their common roots. Colonial papers, some of which went on to become dailies, were always weeklies. Most were started by printers who were "craftsmen" first, but who assumed the role of editor, publisher and entrepreneur. As both Janowitz and Sim note, even though these small newspapers are historically seen as organs of political or social enlightenment, their existence was firmly rooted in business.² These early papers were financially dependent on government advertising -- and often acted as government "gazettes" -- and later on partisan groups, or financiers who turned them into organs with a religious or political purpose. Socially, the country's press, after Confederation and into the early 20th century, developed into a "prime mythmaker" and "very much a bourgeois domain."³ The daily press became departmentalized along the lines of the crafts or professional specialities -- press operators, compositors, reporters and editors, advertising sales staff, publishers, and the like. But for the small newspapers the job functions were far less discrete. This tradition persists in the community press.

Early colonial newspapers were small, rarely more than four pages and "editorially feeble."⁴ Their "news" content consisted of scientific and literary material, government proclamations, shipping news, and foreign news clipped from American or European papers well after the fact. Local news had usually circulated by word of mouth long before it appeared in print. Typically, small advertisements offering services, cattle or land, appeared on the front page. The financial plum for these newspapers was to capture a government printing contract, or better, be appointed the King's Printer, assuring a steady income for the enterprise, and the newspaper's homage to its source of funds.

Early flatbed wooden presses were relatively small and portable, allowing printers mobility, should local conditions lose their appeal. Once a page was printed, the forme was dismantled and the same type set by hand for the next sheet. These weeklies were mostly "produced by one person, with or without an apprentice, who collected and wrote the news, set it in type, printed it, sold subscriptions and advertisements, and sometimes even distributed the newspaper."⁵ The early journalists needed no special skills, other than to be able to read and write. Fetherling writes that "The dream of many an apprentice was to become a journeyman and then a master and to publish his own newspaper, of which he would be both editor and printer."⁶ He notes that when steam presses began appearing in the larger cities in the 1840s, acquisition costs and labor dashed those dreams. Rutherford reminds us that this printer-journalist connection lingered until the end of the 19th century –and in rural areas, much later than that.⁷

As the colonies' population grew, so did the number of readers. People became wealthier and more literate. Newspapers became more partisan, mouthpieces for those who saw themselves as social and political reformers, sometimes backed by sympathetic financiers. So while direct

dependence on government revenues gradually diminished, the partisan papers were, instead, beholden to the special-interest groups which supported them. More significantly, newspapers also began deriving more of their revenues from advertising and subscriptions, which Desbarats suggests created a climate of greater freedom for the press. In one way it did, but it also set the stage for the mass-commercial press which predominates today.

The advent of the "penny press" in the U.S., which combined reporting that purported to champion the ordinary working person, along with entertainment such as humor, poetry and serial novels, was echoed in Canada.⁸ Publishers discovered how to please the greatest number of people, and offend the least. More readers meant more advertisers trying to reach those readers, and higher advertising rates. These self-described "people's journals" were, according to Rutherford, "business enterprises, which their proprietors expected would produce a large advertising revenue."⁹ At about the same time, revolutionary changes in the printing press contributed to massness. Steam-driven presses, and a few years later the rotary press, made printing faster and more efficient. Ironically, this new equipment required to produce these newspapers aimed at ordinary people, could no longer be financed by ordinary people. In Fetherling's words, printing moved from being a craft to being an industry.

The mass-circulation approach and reporting said to be "factual" or "objective" shifted away from "copy that brimmed with a kind a luxurious Victorian vitality."¹⁰ It was eclipsed by the sparse "inverted pyramid" structure which made it easier for compositors to cut news stories from the bottom up, should extra space be needed at the last minute. As well, after the mid-1840s the structure accommodated the necessarily brief reports sent via telegraph. The stylistic move to "factual" reporting separated "views" from "news," as described by Hackett and Zhao, who argue

that this mass-reader orientation doomed any sense of radicalism found, for example, in a fledgling labor press.

At the same time as the popular dailies claimed to bring information to the people as a whole, they excluded ordinary people from participating in generating information and campaigning for their own causes. To be sure, the press claimed to provide the facts, and occasionally it crusaded *on behalf* of the people. However, it was not the people themselves, but a privileged group, namely, the major media and their sources that came to define the terms of public discourse.¹¹

This so-called "objective" approach served to foster a "mass" media whose formula was to please the most number of readers and offend the least. The financial success depended on advertising, and advertising was tied to circulation. Rutherford characterizes the latter half of the 19th century, and the first 20 years of the 20th as the "golden age" of newspapers in Canada. The bourgeois press helped shape the national myths -- the dogma of modernity and progress, the ideal of peace, order and good government, the gospel of social harmony, and Canada as an island of sanity in a world gone mad.¹² In small towns, weekly newspaper publishers equated their community's growth and progress with their own financial success. They became self-appointed spokesmen for economic growth and progress, and the well-being of their communities.¹³ It is not mere whimsy that produced names such as *The Jasper Booster*, *The Lunenburg Progress-Enterprise*, or *The Chilliwack Progress*.

With growth and westward expansion of settlement, the number of newspapers, including the smaller, community papers, grew steadily. In 1864 there were 226 weeklies, plus 43 newspapers that published either twice or three times a week, compared to only 23 dailies. By 1900 the number of weeklies jumped to 804, compared to 121 dailies. The semiweeklies and triweeklies had all but disappeared.¹⁴ Desbarats notes that shortly after the turn of the century the

distinction between dailies and weeklies was institutionalized.¹⁵ In 1908 weekly publishers created their own section within the Canadian Press Association; 11 years later they formed the Canadian Weekly Newspapers Association. In 1971 the name changed to the Canadian Community Newspapers Association to accommodate papers which published more than once a week, and at the same time suggest a collective sense of harmony and identity, as denoted by "community."

The weekly papers prospered most often as part of an enterprise whose main income came from job printing and the sales of stationery. Daily journalism evolved into a specialty defined roughly as reporting and editing, and packaging information as "news"; it encouraged technical and ethical professionalism. In the weeklies, the functions of printer, publisher, editor, reporter — and, by necessity, that of entrepreneur — frequently remained combined. As I will discuss in other sections, this created conflicts of interest, as the journalistic imperative was frequently not identical to that of the publisher.

If the weekly hoped to settle into the community and prosper, it had to fit into community consensus, appease the business community and assist in its definition of community progress. This made the newspaper first and foremost an economic enterprise. That is not to say that any journalistic imperative was absent, or that the information published was not of interest, or of some value to the readers. But any journalism which challenged consensus or the status quo would be viewed as hostile. The local paper was one that provided "information to the public, the provision of a market service, exhortation, instruction and entertainment"¹⁶ but only in the context of being "a friend to the community" and a contributor to its progress, which in the spirit of the day meant economic progress.

And that is how the early weeklies presented themselves. In the first issue of the *Cobourg* (Ontario) *Star*, which appeared Jan. 11, 1831, publisher R. D. Chatterton wrote: "In the conduct of this paper, neither expense nor exertion will be spared to make it a source of usefulness and prosperity to the district and entitle it to be an esteemed friend and welcome friend at every fireside."¹⁷ The *Huntsville* (Ontario) *Forester*, after its founding in 1874, "supported the handful of hopeful incoming residents, painfully conscious of the community's urgent demands. They found in the *Forester* a never-failing and always helpful agent. Much of the agitation for the opening of roads, the extension of the railway to the community and the provision of the countless needs of the intrepid settlers found an ever-active advocate in the *Forester*."¹⁸

From the beginning, owners or editors of newspapers were frequently involved in politics (William Lyon Mackenzie, Joseph Howe, George Brown, among the better known). In community life, newspaper publishers and editors joined in local politics or organizations whose purpose was growth, progress, and the social and financial well-being of the community. Johnston writes, "It is true that weekly publishers, as much as and perhaps more than any other group, are invited to take part in local endeavours. One publisher proclaimed that "Many a town . . . owes its very existence and prosperity to the weekly newspapermen who stand behind every project."¹⁹

Johnston offers fulsome praise for those publishers or editors who were involved in activities designed to make the town grow and prosper. For example, W.E. Smallfield was editor and publisher of the *Renfrew* (Ontario) *Mercury*, as well as being mayor. Johnston asserts that "The local editor was almost sure to know what was going on and what was planned and whether or not it might be an unreasonable raid on the pockets of the taxpayers."²⁰ The local editor, says

Johnston, was always welcome at the municipal council table, where he sat with the elected officials and was consulted about proposals. He often knew municipal life better than the councillors because he had been involved in municipal affairs for so long. William J. Kennedy, editor of the *Durham (Ontario) Chronicle* during the 1950s and 1960s was singled out for his "remarkable" involvement in community activities. The editor was apparently engaged in "the District Board of Education, Children's Aid Society, Canadian Cancer Society, Jaycees, Kinsmen, Governor of Durham Memorial Hospital, Chairman of the volunteer ambulance service, Durham Housing Survey Committee, Durham Businessmen's Association, Fire Department Volunteer Driver, Public Relations Officer Grey and Simcoe Foresters, Boy Scouts of Canada P.R., Credit Union Advisory committee, Centennial Committee, Minor Hockey Association."²¹ So as publishers and editors became participants, or leaders, in community institutions, their newspapers tended to foster economic growth, largely by cooperating with community institutions which served those ends, rather than challenging them. The first half of this century saw massive population shifts from the country to the city, which had a significant impact on the community press. The number of rural newspapers declined, to be offset by the urban community press, which Janowitz asserts arose from commercial requirements connected with the decentralization of the central business district. The growth of cities resulted in the development of suburbs, with their own retail centres in the form of shopping malls. Entrepreneurs saw new money-making opportunities in the malls, to be facilitated by ever-cheaper and easier-to-use printing technologies. What emerged was a new kind of local publication, known as the shopping guide or "shopper." While these publications were never considered to be bona fide newspapers, their existence had a major influence on the journalistic

content of those publications that were.

Shoppers are characterized by lack of editorial or news content, but usually with the look and feel of a newspaper. Most shoppers carry between 90- and 100-per-cent advertising. They are distributed free within boundaries often determined by a shopping or retail area. Publishers see them as a service to advertisers, bringing buyers and sellers together. The shopper offers no journalism other than a scattering of service-type articles, or announcements derived from press releases from community groups, usually excluding commercial interests who are expected to pay. Brandsberg notes that some publishers argue the shopper should contain no editorial material because it would dilute the advertising content.

As shoppers offered free distribution, and claimed 100-per-cent household penetration in designated areas, suburban advertisers became convinced their advertising dollars were more effectively spent there. The existing paid-circulation community papers operating in the same trading area (or new newspapers) found they had to match the distribution numbers of the shopper. This produced several results. Production and circulation costs increased because more papers had to be printed and distributed. Subscriptions -- traditionally 15 per cent of the paper's income -- were virtually eliminated. In theory, increased advertising income would offset these losses as advertisers were lured away from more expensive dailies. But the community papers found they still had to compete with the shoppers which had lower overhead because they had little or no journalistic staff. In turn, their advertising rates could be lower. This competition in the suburbs produced a new breed of community newspapers: the free-distribution newspaper with a targeted readership. In journalistic terms, it also influenced content.

While the advertising-to-editorial ratio varies greatly from paper to paper, Brandsberg

found an average of 71.4 per cent advertising in the free circulation papers he surveyed in the United States. This is higher than the 60 per cent advertising which paid-circulation publishers say they need to make a profit.²² Paid-circulation newspapers, at least in theory and based on tradition, are more journalistic products than just vehicles for advertising. The presumption is that readers pay for them because they are getting something of value. If the reader feels cheated out of journalistic expectations, he or she can cancel the subscription. This method of circulation makes the newspaper primarily responsible to *readers*, not to advertisers. Free newspapers do not operate on that assumption. Communities -- neighborhoods, suburbs, or towns -- become geographic or demographic targets and the area is blanketed with free copies on every doorstep, or in every mailbox. Advertisers or potential advertisers may be impressed with the numbers of "households," and by extrapolation, the number of "readers" exposed to the paper. The truth is, even with extensive readership surveys, no one is really sure how many people read the free papers each week. Publishers tend to be secretive about estimates of actual readers. But whatever their numbers, the fact is that free distribution has changed the paper's responsibility from readers to advertisers.

How has this mode of distribution affected journalism? Franklin and Murphy assert that because of their dependent relationship to advertisers the free newspapers do not constitute an independent voice.²³ The free shopper, as characterized earlier, is totally dependent on, and thus beholden to advertisers and speaks unabashedly on their behalf, having little or no pretensions to a journalistic mandate. Many such publications attempt to resemble a newspaper, believing that readers would view the content more favorably. Brandsberg quotes one shopper publisher as saying he included some editorial material to enhance the publication's image. He felt a

publication carrying some local news would be better accepted than one carrying only advertising, and that advertisers would consider it to have more "prestige," or legitimacy.²⁴

This could be the beginning of a process by which a shopper develops into a publication that approaches a serious newspaper, although development could follow two different journalistic paths.²⁵ Some shoppers have developed into what we would define as a newspaper, with about 60 per cent advertising and 40 per cent local editorial content. More likely the shopper will contain "advertorials" written from promotional material supplied by the advertiser, or other cheap copy from press syndicates, public relations firms, private and public organizations, or local governments.²⁶ The latter evolution is more likely because it's more profitable. This is apparent in many free-distribution community papers, as evidenced by "stories" which are often nothing more than community announcements or self-serving press releases.

The *Edson* (Alberta) *Anchor* ("Your free community newspaper") has two pages devoted to "World of Wheels."²⁷ Stripped around the ads for car dealerships and repair shops are seven non-bylined stories ostensibly offering advice on car maintenance, complete with urgings to "consult a specialist." The *North Shore News* (North Vancouver, B.C.) informs readers in a headline that "Island retreat offers off-season deal." The story begins: "From September 16th, visitors to the Gulf Islands can experience the luxurious rooms and cuisine offered by Mayne Island's Oceanwood Country Inn at a special off-season package rate."²⁸ The rest of the story is in the same promotional tone.

Should a publisher or an editor consciously decide to produce a more journalistic product, a way of doing so must be found within the economic rules. Brandsberg notes that between 1965

and 1968 in the U.S. the advent of shoppers forced a trend to free distribution. Weak papers ceased publication or withdrew from the circulation area of the free paper. Stronger ones bought out the free paper or launched their own to compete. The result was that many paid papers were forced to go to free circulation in order to compete.

The economic logic is simple. Shoppers did not have to hire journalists to report on the news. Brandsberg estimates that shoppers were 50-per-cent cheaper on a cost-per-thousand basis because of their lower overhead. Advertising rates were approximately 50-per-cent lower than paid newspapers. This placed pressure on any bona fide newspaper in the area to bring down rates as well, reducing its income and forcing editorial cut-backs. New newspapers used free distribution to create instant circulation without having to experience the slow process of building up readership based on the journalistic quality of the publication. A new breed of free community newspapers was thus established, a hybrid of free shoppers and traditional paid newspapers. Except for distribution, they looked like traditional paid-circulation papers in every way, except that responsibility to readers was now overshadowed by responsibility to advertisers. Janowitz found that some free newspapers reflected an editorial independence, but that the tendency was to be aligned with the business establishment, its sole source of income. Franklin and Murphy similarly note that in Britain the free papers, instead of winning readers based on strong editorial content, opted for maximum distribution numbers, low production costs, cheap delivery networks using an "army of low-paid schoolchildren."²⁹ They cite one free newspaper opening without any journalists.

With the primary allegiance switched from reader to advertiser, the free circulation paper has great latitude to practise any type of journalism it wants, as long as it doesn't offend, and as

long as it pleases the advertiser: a new commercial journalism with a happy face. If it doesn't please some readers because it is irrelevant, those readers will rebel by simply tossing it aside; the advertiser may never know. While many free-circulation newspapers are polished and professional in their presentation of this "news," Franklin and Murphy argue that they changed the ideological nature of the press. In one sense they provided a pluralism in content and authorship which professional manufacture of news makes impossible, but they placed the agenda of public discussion into the hands of the authorities and commerce.³⁰

End notes

1. The *Picton (Ont.) Gazette* claims to be Canada's oldest community newspaper, publishing since 1830.
2. Janowitz, op.cit., and Sim, John Cameron, in *Grass Roots Press: America's Community Newspapers*, Ames, Iowa, Iowa University Press, 1969.
3. Paul Rutherford, *A Victorian Authority: The Daily Press in Late Nineteenth Century Canada*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1982, p. 156.
4. Peter Desbarats, *Guide to Canadian News Media*, Toronto, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1990, p. 4.
5. Desbarats, op. cit., p. 5.
6. Doug Fetherling, *The Rise of the Canadian Newspaper*, Toronto, Oxford University Press, 1990, p. 29.
7. Paul Rutherford, *A Victorian Authority*, op. cit., p. 57.
8. Fetherling writes that Benjamin Day started the *New York Sun* in 1833 by eschewing political speeches and other dense matter to concentrate on police news and neighbourhood reporting. The cost of the paper was one cent, compared to six cents for other dailies. The *Saint John News* is the first successful penny paper

- in Canada, first publishing in 1838. See Fetherling, op. cit., p. 27.
9. Rutherford, *ibid.*
10. Desbarats, op. cit., p. 8.
11. Hackett and Zhao, op. cit., p. 35
12. Rutherford, op. cit., p. 156. See also discussion on this matter by Desbarats in *Guide to Canadian News Media*, p. 15.
13. See Minko Sotiron, *From Politics to Profit: The Commercialization of Canadian Daily Newspapers, 1890-1920*, Kingston, McGill-Queen's University Press, 1997, p. 65.
14. Kesterton, op. cit. p. 39.
15. Desbarats, op. cit., p. 16.
16. Champagne, op. cit., p. 1.
17. J. George Johnston, *The Weeklies: Biggest Circulation in Town*, Bolton, Ont., The Bolton Enterprise, 1972, p. 1.
18. Statements made in an editorial by H.E. Rice, publisher of the *Huntsville (Ont.) Forester* to mark his retirement in 1966. As quoted by Johnston, op. cit., p. 4.
19. Johnston, op. cit., p. 2. The publisher quoted is J. Herbert Cranston of the *Midland (Ont.) Free Press-Herald*.
20. Johnston, op. cit., p.3.
21. Johnston, op. cit., p. 5.
22. The standard advertising-to-editorial ratio is 60-40 which allows the newspaper to cover expenses and operate at a profit. This figure will vary from paper to paper, of course, depending on operating costs, advertising rates, efficiency of operation, and what management deems to be a necessary rate of return on investment. The paradox inherent in the ad-to-editorial ratio is when the figure favours advertising the paper is healthier economically, but often poorer journalistically, at least quantitatively. Conversely, if the ratio favours editorial, this indicates the paper may be doing a good job journalistically but suffering financially, assuming the paper receives no subsidies. A shopping guide with 95 per cent advertising then may be viable in an economic sense, but certainly is not in a journalistic sense.
23. Franklin and Murphy, op. cit., p. 76.

24. See George Brandsberg, *The Free Papers: A comprehensive Study of America's Shopping Guide and Free Circulation Newspaper Industry*, Ames, Iowa, Wordsmith Books, 1969.
25. A small community newspaper in Sechelt, British Columbia, started in the early 1970s as the free-circulation *Sechelt Shopper*, competing with an existing paid-circulation newspaper. In the course of a decade, the shopper carried more and more news, changed its name to *Sechelt Shopper-Press* and then to *Sechelt Press*. The existing paper, the *Peninsula Times*, was forced out of business.
26. Franklin and Murphy also discuss the tendency to efficiently produce "news" on the part of the free circulation papers. Much of this free material is generated by public relation officials hired by municipal governments in an effort to build up their image, and communicate to constituents through a compliant local newspaper, or a municipal newsletter.
27. *The Anchor*, Edson, Alta., July 27, 1998, pp. 26-27.
28. "Island retreat offers off-season deal," *North Shore News*, Aug. 24, 1997, p. 40.
29. Franklin and Murphy, p. 23.
30. Franklin and Murphy made this assessment based on their study of the British local press. The evolution of the free newspaper is similar in North America.

CHAPTER FOUR

Professionalism in the community

Journalists are loosely bound by professional or ethical standards. The emphasis is on loosely, not bound. When Canadian journalists have over the years engaged in fitful discussions about whether journalism should be a profession, with a governing body, education requirements, and codes of conduct, they have backed away from the idea. They don't want to be like doctors and lawyers whose professional bodies are often seen as being closed and self-serving. They argue that any such restrictions contradict the very nature of journalism and its inherent freedoms, philosophical and constitutional. Community newspaper journalists are even less enthusiastic about establishing professional standards through a national governing body. Not because their standards are necessarily lower, but because the community newspaper frequently attracts -- and depends on -- submissions from people who are not journalists by trade, but simply citizens interested in public discourse, or who want to convey a message, or share information.

The Canadian Newspaper Association provides in its Statement of Principles guidelines on professional and ethical conduct but they are applied on a voluntary and haphazard basis. Provincial press councils -- which have only a few community papers as members -- act as self-

policing bodies for the industry, but without mandatory membership. They have no jurisdiction over individual papers or journalists. Many in the community press see press councils as a challenge to editors and publishers who believe they have the right to publish whatever they want.¹ Perhaps for that reason, the Canadian Community Newspaper Association, or any of the provincial counterparts, does not provide codes of conduct or professional guidelines for community journalists.

For my purpose, professionalism means a certain quality of writing and editing, competency in gathering news, evidence of some research and interviewing skills, as well as fairness, accuracy, disinterest, and a lack of opinion or overt biases. A close scrutiny of community newspapers from across the country indicates much poor journalism. There is crippled story structure, bad grammar and awkward sentence structures, spelling or typographical errors, one sidedness, conflict-of-interest, misleading, vague, or downright wrong information. The free-distribution *Edson* (Alberta) *Anchor* reported that local bargain hunters were pleased with the Canada Day auction. The auction had been cancelled. Commenting on this error later, the reporter shrugged it off , saying the paper couldn't cover everything.²

Sometimes the local news is not local, or the news is stale. The Davey commission heard complaints about the "lack of editing of correspondents' reports" and the "tendency to use fillers and press releases as received rather than rewriting them so that they apply to the local situation."³

This is sometimes true for locally generated news stories. A paper will fail to localize an important regional or national story, repeating in a headline and lead sentence information that has already appeared on radio, television, or the daily press. For residents of Saltspring Island

(British Columbia) to read in their local paper that "Canada unequivocally voted 'no' Monday"⁴ a full two days after the defeat of the Charlottetown Accord would make them wonder about this story's timeliness or local relevance. A local approach would have quite simply led with something like: "Saltspring Islanders overwhelmingly rejected the Charlottetown Accord last Monday," which correctly provides readers with information that is both relevant to their community, and most likely new. Similarly with a pre-election story in the *Whistler* (British Columbia) *Question* headlined "Poll shows NDP has lead over Liberals."⁵ The top-of-page story related the results of a poll carried out the previous weekend (the story ran on a Thursday) by the nationally distributed *Globe and Mail* and a major Vancouver television station just prior to a provincial election. Considering that the larger media outlets had already carried the story in the early part of the week, and that both are readily available to Whistler residents, running it again in the local paper -- without a local angle -- indicates either laziness, or a news judgment not attuned to the local community. This approach, or "angle," serves to reduce relevance to the local citizen. Where community papers compete with daily newspapers, both the market and community information needs dictate that the two media complement each other, not compete.⁶

Many community journalists recognize the lack of standards but say they're fighting an uphill battle with management in trying to improve them. A reporter-photographer who has worked 13 years for suburban papers in Southern Ontario and the Vancouver area states: "Most of those years have been spent trying to maintain some sort of journalistic standard in companies that, for the most part, couldn't really give a damn about what they put around the ads, or about the people who produce the copy and photos that go around those ads."⁷

In an ethical context, perhaps the most crucial element of community journalism is the reporter's and editor's relationship with other members of the community. Bruce Kennedy in *Community Journalism* tells reporters: "It is difficult to be the brazen hard-nosed reporter in a town full of people you know, but it is possible to be persistent."⁸ Under a heading "Getting along with your public," Kennedy writes: "People will become very cross with you. And you with them. It's inescapable in business, big town or little. Small-town feuding is complicated further because if you're a Hatfield you're constantly running into a McCoy -- in the post office, during Rotary Club, at the basketball game."⁹

Champagne states that "the personal element [in small communities] is not as pronounced in the large urban areas and therefore the urban editor rarely faces the problem of having to alter the news."¹⁰ Champagne relates details of a conversation with an editor, part of which is reproduced below:

We were discussing the personal nature of the business of being a newspaper editor in a small town -- how the townspeople drop into the newspaper office to chat, how almost all dealings are on a first-name basis, and so on . . . The editor was asked if this might not have a detrimental effect on his reporting of the news . . . he gave the example of a local boy getting into trouble with the police, and how he purposely left out the boy's name in the story. Yes, the personal element, vis a vis the community, affected his reporting, but no, it was not to the detriment of his readers for "They all knew about it anyway. Why should I freeze the boy's name in print so that it will be a recorded mark against him for all time?"¹¹

The federal Young Offenders Act would in this day preclude publishing names of youths involved in crimes, but the point here is that editors will alter news when they judge it pertinent to do so. The editor thus bestows upon himself -- and the newspaper -- a significant role in the local system of social control. A suppression of facts on the grounds that they could cause embarrassment or controversy may serve to maintain community harmony, or the status quo, but

represent "a whimsical and erratic form of censorship."¹²

Country columns, social reports, endless accolades on community do-gooders and successful fund-raisers frequently display grievous transgressions in the areas of research, writing quality, conflict-of-interest, and so on. One might argue that here professionalism may well be secondary to the fact that the information is being published at all, and that it fulfils its communicative and social role within the community. (In truth, most editors run them as submitted because they say they are too busy to edit them. Some editors will argue that there is merit in retaining their flavor and character.)¹³

The rural community papers, especially, have a long history of running dispatches from surrounding regions or from neighbouring communities too small to sustain their own newspaper. Even editors call these dispatches "bush notes" or "back-yard" social columns. The so-called stringers who produce this material are mostly people who have an aspiration to write, and certainly must have keen interest in the activities of their neighbours. For example, *The Weekly Press*, "serving East Hants (Nova Scotia) and its surrounding communities since 1986," has a small boxed advertisement on its editorial page inviting readers to become community correspondents on condition they "love to write" and "know what's happening in your community."¹⁴ The columns, under titles such as "Around Town," "Hello neighbours," "Local and Social," "Report from . . .," contain anything the writer believes is worth sharing, from bridge games to decisions by local council; from horticultural feats to reports of visiting friends and relatives. The reward is sometimes financial, but more likely, a free subscription to the newspaper, a byline and a semblance of local celebrity status in being "the community reporter."

The quest for more professionalism is now rendering such correspondents extinct. With

more writers trained at journalism schools, unionization at many of the larger community papers, the "little old ladies in tennis shoes"¹⁵ are being replaced by paid correspondents who may be more familiar with the inverted pyramid, less interesting but more factual. Many editors believe these amateur correspondents are anachronisms and not worth the newsprint space. A community paper in Nova Scotia made the "daring" move to eliminate 16 country correspondents because the paper's managing editor felt they were no longer being read, and that the unsubstantiated gossip was an invasion of privacy.¹⁶ Instead, the paper's reporters "are working a little harder" and making forays into outlying communities to write stories based on tips from the fired correspondents. After eliminating the bush notes, according to the editor, the paper's circulation increased although there were some complaints from out-of-town readers who regarded them as letters from home.

This professional production of community news may well improve the paper from a strictly journalistic point of view, but what is lost is participation and direct access by ordinary citizens. I noted in Chapter One Berrigan's concerns that media professionals acting as gatekeepers wield considerable influence in defining the agenda of public discussion. Eliminating correspondents also eliminates a channel of communication that could be described as "horizontal" or "bottom-sideways," to use Berrigan's terms. A small but meaningful opportunity for participation in the affairs of the community is lost.

Besides, it may be legitimate to argue that this informal reporting provides the paper with the whimsy and folksiness characteristic of the small town itself. One observer put it this way: "Sometimes you have to compromise quality to ensure that you get a local feel for your paper."¹⁷

The eternal lament by paid editorial staff is that they are overworked and underpaid.¹⁸ The

newsroom or printshop is sometimes Dickensian with reporters and editors working long hours, cheek-by-jowl in cramped spaces, and if they are lucky, surrounded by temporary dividers or high stacks of newspaper returns, to separate their work from that of the business or advertising departments. Community papers rarely have morgue files. Background research, when done, means rummaging through back issues which may or may not be bound. As well as carrying journalism – attending meetings, making phone calls, sifting through press releases, writing stories, taking photographs, processing film, editing, laying out pages – reporters and editors must also write advertising copy, answer telephones, and attend to customers who may want complain about last week's editorial, place a classified, pay for their subscription, offer an opinion on the sewerage bylaw, comment on the weather, or all of the above. All this for a salary as low as \$16,000 to \$20,000 a year. One community journalist comments: "During my stint in Metroland, I became fairly involved in the Southern Ontario Newspaper Guild as we thought to yank our working conditions from backwoods sweatshop to the urban reality in which we lived our lives and plied our trade."¹⁹

Lower salaries tend to be in the smaller, rural papers; higher salaries – between \$25,000 and \$40,000 – usually are paid by suburban papers, which are often unionized. At non-union shops, reporters and editors who complain about overwork, or performing duties outside the job description are told, in effect, that here you do everything, and if you don't like it, there's the door. Management calls such employees whiners and tries to hire employees who will "just do it."²⁰

Community papers act as training grounds for young journalists who understand the necessity of "paying your dues" before heading to the better-paying dailies, public relations, or

broadcasting. Some discover they like the small-town life and stay, maybe advancing to higher positions. Stagnation is always a worry though, with young reporters having to cover the same stories over and over or their editors perhaps not having the skills or time to help them improve.²¹

Many community papers now require experience or a diploma or degree in journalism. Post-secondary schools largely have taken over the apprenticeship role from an industry which prefers to have workers productive from day one. The higher education and better training ensure, in most cases, that the level of professionalism increases, but that also has a detrimental side. Well-educated journalists often have their sights set firmly on the big daily. Training and sophistication makes them less patient with press releases, obituaries, anniversaries, or bureaucratic minutia from local officialdom. Their idealism gives them strong inclinations to "change the world," work on issue-oriented stories, for which most community papers have little money or inclination. One university graduate stated: "When I took my first job out of Carleton University, a part-time weekend photographer's position at Metroland's *Burlington Post*, I figured I'd pay my dues for a year, maybe two, then move on to bigger and better things at a regional daily."²²

For those reasons, some editors or publishers don't want people with degrees, or even students who graduated at the top of the reporting class. They cause trouble and they leave. Reporters who display too much zeal are considered a poor fit in a small town where "outsiders" are looked upon with distrust, a position substantiated when they antagonize political and business leaders.²³

Low wages and long hours characteristic of the community press also contributes to a steady turnover. Rural papers are notorious for long hours; a small staff means everyone helps

with everything until the paper's put to bed. The newly appointed editor of the 1,400-circulation *Houston* (British Columbia) *Today* commented on his work load: "At one point this summer, when I was with the *Interior News* in Smithers [B.C.], I was quite pleased with myself because I had written 14 stories in one week. Little did I know I would look back on those lazy days of summer, when I turned in a trifling 14 stories."²⁴ When a reporter complains, he or she can expect to be lectured by editor or publisher that this work is done for love, not money which, of course, is not entirely untrue.

David Cadogan, a former president of the CCNA, and owner of several community papers in New Brunswick and Nova Scotia, suggested that reporters as good citizens would be involved in community affairs anyway, so they might as well be there reporting on the matter. He told a CBC radio interviewer that "I don't feel too bad about some reporters working more than 40 hours a week. Personally, I always have. Being part of a community newspaper has, for me at least, always been not only my job but my hobby, to quite an extent my politics and to quite an extent my religion . . . And to be paid to be there too, and to get a good seat, that is a privilege."²⁵

The high turnover of staff affects news content. Reporters frequently don't know the background of a story, or the personalities involved. When they do, it's time to leave. This sets up the potential for the news agenda to be more heavily influenced by local officials. Without background knowledge, a new reporter or editor will be less confident about challenging the views of an official who has lived in the community for many years. And professional standards face pressure from the top as well as the bottom. The editor who writes political commentary will sooner or later be pressured by citizens to jump into the fray. Either that editor's judgments are sincerely valued or he is goaded into public office so that his political mettle can be put to the

test. Most likely, though, the editor is a member of the establishment, and thinks a civic duty could not be shunned. As noted in Chapter Three, community newspaper editors have along history of public involvement. The debate about whether journalists should participate in community politics has gone on for some time. Lines are usually drawn between those who believe journalists are compromised by belonging to organizations they may also have to write about, and those who believe journalists must exercise their rights and duties as citizens.²⁶ In larger community papers, with a clearer delineation between the newspaper as a business and as journalistic enterprise, the problem is usually less acute. The owner, publisher, or advertising manager freely engages in politics, the chamber of commerce, service clubs and so on. Editors and reporters tend to keep their distance because they fear conflict. Despite this, there are many examples of community journalists who are involved in groups or organizations, political or otherwise. In smaller communities, the tendency to take on other roles in the community, and thereby be a "responsible" member of it, is even greater.

Bob Verdun, former editor and co-owner of the *Elmira* (Ontario) *Independent*, believes an editor should not belong to any community organization:

If I am going to do a good job of serving this community, I have to avoid becoming too closely involved with *any* special-interest groups. I have to try to put principles ahead of friendship, and truth ahead of selfish business concerns. I know that I cannot *always* live up to those requirements, but to *try* if I am going to be the editor of a newspaper that is of long-term value to the community it is supposed to serve.²⁷

Verdun had been fired in 1974 as editor of the now-defunct *Elmira Signet* for his criticism of local politicians. He was told by a local merchant that his "kind of journalism simply would not work in a small community."²⁸ It was okay to criticize politicians if you lived in Kitchener or

Toronto but not in Elmira, even if it was deserved. That's when he started *The Independent*.

Verdun believes negative reaction to critical reporting occurs because local politicians assume they are your friends, and that in the small-town way of doing things those politicians expect cooperation and loyalty.

A U.S. survey which asked daily and weekly newspaper editors how they assessed the quality of their news content indicated some significant differences between the two groups.²⁹ Staff enterprise was rated lower as the size of the paper decreased. Nearly all daily editors rated editorial independence as essential compared to only two-thirds of the weekly editors. Three-quarters of the daily editors valued staff professionalism, compared to only one-quarter of the weekly editors. Community leadership was rated as more important to weekly editors, increasing in importance as the size of the papers decreased.

The survey also shows some marked differences in content standards. While editors generally disparaged sensationalism and valued strong local news coverage, visual appeal, accuracy and good writing, weekly editors considered news interpretation, a strong editorial page and comprehensive coverage less essential. Predictably, weekly editors rated community consensus as more essential.

The personal nature of life in the small community means the reporter will avoid writing stories that may result in personal conflict with a neighbor. Reporters at dailies have more anonymous relationships with the subjects of their stories and unless covering a regular beat, chances of face-to-face contact after the story is in print are slim. Janowitz argues that newspapers in small communities avoid conflict, not create it, and reporters generally must conform to that view. So, reporters might omit specific material from stories, tone down their

criticisms in an opinion column, or even forgo stories in the first place. As noted by the reporter quoted earlier, working in a small town "means that you will meet someone who has read your column. People see your picture in the paper every week and they have an axe to grind, and, no, they won't write it in a letter to the editor, and if they do, they won't sign it. It also means that if you write something critical of the council you will be looking them in the face Tuesday after next."³⁰ Ironically, community reporters who are aggressive in pursuit of information (a trait of value in daily newsrooms), or those who consistently write "negative" stories, may find they have worked their way out of a job.

In one such instance, a reporter who worked for a radio station in a large city took a job with a small community paper and embarked upon a mission to expose the amateurs and slackers who ran the town. It wasn't long before the paper's editor started receiving complaints. Town officials closed ranks and refused requests for information or interviews. The reporter lasted only a few months before heading back to the city.³¹

End notes

1. See "Whose Free Press?" Dave de Jong, *The Publisher*, August/September, 1993, p. 4.

2. This was related to me by Judy Corser who had spoken with the paper's reporter, June 16, 1998.

3. Champagne, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

4. See "Islanders say 'no' to accord," Gulf Islands Driftwood, October 28, 1991, p. 1.
5. "Poll shows NDP has lead over Liberals," Whistler Question, May 16, 1996, page 1.
6. A study conducted in suburban Denver and Detroit concluded that the weekly suburban papers and the dailies did not have equivalent content and thus did not compete for readers. While the various suburban papers examined covered the specifics of their respective communities, the dailies covered all the suburbs on a wider, regional basis. See Stephen Lacy, Ardyth B. Son, and Lowndes F. Stephens, "Suburban News Coverage: A Content Analysis of Suburban Papers in Denver and Detroit," Newspaper Research Journal, Vol. 10, No. 3, Spring 1989, pp. 39-50.
7. Comment made to me by Mario Bartel, staff photographer for the *Tri City News*, Port Coquitlam, B.C., via e-mail, Sept. 3, 1997.
8. Kennedy, op. cit. p. 23.
9. Kennedy, op. cit. p. 19.
10. Champagne, op. cit., p.27. The emphasis is mine.
11. Champagne, ibid.
12. For further discussion on this see Franklin and Murphy, op. cit., p. 57. They attribute this quote to James Aitchison in his book *Writing for the Press*, London, Hutchinson, 1988.
13. Although there are many, perhaps the best-known of such correspondents is Edith Josie, an Inuit women who for years wrote a column from the tiny northern community of Old Crow for the *Whitehorse Star*. Her dispatches, entitled "Here are the News" were sometimes published in the *Edmonton Journal* and read on CBC Radio's *Morningside* program. The weekly column was a compilation of social goings-on and Josie's observations and comments on them.
14. *The Weekly Press*, September 10, 1997, p. 4.
15. Paul Reynolds, managing editor of the *Bangor (Maine) Daily news*, was quoted as saying "God bless the little old ladies in tennis shoes," as he referred to the stringers who he said had helped build his newspaper's circulation. See "Stringers -- backyard-fence social columns inched out by more traditional journalism," *Presstime*, May, 1986, pp. 16-18.
16. "Banning the bush notes was a daring move," *CCNA Publisher*, November, 1985, page 10, by Jay Underwood, managing editor, *Springhill & Parrsboro Record*.

17. Ken Johnston, editor of *Rainy River (Ontario) Record*, quoting an unnamed judge in the CCNA's annual Better Newspaper Competition. The item appeared as a letter to the editor under the headline "BNC judge's comments can help paper improve," in CCNA Publisher, August-September, 1993.
18. This is based on numerous informal conversations, and interviews with community reporters and editors, as well as from personal experience. The writer has worked as reporter and editor for three community papers.
19. Mario Bartel, op. cit.
20. This represents a prevailing attitude among many publishers and some editors. My description here is based on the views of a Vancouver Island, B.C. publisher, addressing a journalism class at Langara College, Vancouver, in the winter of 1998. I have heard this position stated frequently by community newspaper management.
21. An observation based on my numerous conversations with reporters at community newspapers.
22. Mario Bartel, op. cit.
23. This observation is based on the author's own experience as a journalism instructor. Some publishers or editors simply do not want to hire graduates who see themselves as "investigative" reporters because there is little time or money in a small newspaper for such journalism, and because overly aggressive reporting could offend some members of the community, especially advertisers.
24. Barrie Abbott, editor of *Houston Today*, in a letter to me, dated Sept. 5, 1991.
25. "Low wages will kill newspapers: caller," CCNA *The Publisher*, August/September, 1988, page 21. The published transcript was part of a CBC Radio Noon program on which David Cadogan was interviewed.
26. "Should newspaper people run for office?" CCNA *The Publisher*, December, 1985.
27. "To be effective, a community journalist must rise above friendship, and club or party ties," Bob Verdun in a speech to Elmira, Ont. Kiwanis club, published in *Elmira Independent*, March 21, 1987.
28. Ibid.

29. See George A. Gladney, "Newspaper Excellence: How Editors and small and Large Papers Judge Quality," *Newspaper Research Journal*, Spring 1990, pp. 59-72. The survey involved 257 editors of dailies categorized as large (140,000 plus circulation), mid-size (30,000-139,999), and small (under 30,000), as well as editors of weekly newspapers (average circulation 6,500).

30. Barrie Abbott, op. cit.

31. This anecdote is based on the author's own experience as editor of the weekly Sunshine Coast News in Gibson's, B.C. The reporter in question worked for a competing paper in nearby Sechelt.

CHAPTER FIVE

The influence of advertising

The newspaper business is a "hybrid" organization. The goals of running a business may conflict with the foundation of journalism: the people's "right to know."¹ Community newspapers are dependent on a smaller advertising base than larger urban media, so the degree of dependence on individual advertisers is greater. As well, the small community's social system means people and institutions work together toward social harmony and economic prosperity. Finally, the new corporate ethos in a largely chain-owned community press tends to view journalism as a distant second to the economic imperative. These conditions, I suggest, blur the distinction between the role of advertising and news departments -- whose separation is usually sacrosanct in daily newspapers -- and make the small newspaper more vulnerable to advertising pressures. So the community's news agenda is frequently, and sometimes significantly, shaped by the newspaper's economic imperative.

When a shooting took place in the town of Athabasca, Alberta in the Fall of 1992, the reporting of it in *The Athabaskan*, one of the town's two papers, cost the paper a double-page spread in advertising. The owner of a local grocery store, who was the brother of the man involved in the shooting incident, disapproved of the coverage and said: "If the paper was going

to . . . make us look bad, then maybe they didn't need our business."² The competing *Advocate* had a story ready to run but management forced the editor to kill it. Its advertising was not affected.

A U.S. study in the early 1990s focused on advertising pressures at small and large dailies, not the weeklies, but the results are telling.³ About 90 per cent of 147 editors surveyed reported pressure by advertisers because of stories. But small-circulation newspapers tended to capitulate more easily to this pressure than larger-circulation papers. Secondly, smaller newspapers reported more in-house pressures from advertising managers or publishers to write or tailor news stories that would please advertisers. The survey concluded that: "Media with narrow advertising bases seem to be more susceptible to advertising pressures because advertising withdrawals by individual advertisers hurt the bottom line more."⁴ One editor commented that the problem was more insidious:

The real problem is much more subtle and, I suspect, far more widespread . . . In 13 years, at three newspapers, I have never had a publisher who wasn't a member of the Chamber of Commerce, never had an editor who didn't at least attend Rotary if he wasn't actually a member, have never seen a newspaper official who wasn't in some way tied into the local power structure.

The danger is not an overt threat. I haven't seen a publisher come back from a chamber meeting and say, "Hey, Al at the [auto] dealer said we have to have a story about xxx." But there is a similar world view, a similar feeling about what is important and what isn't, a likeness of mind about what the newspaper should be covering. They don't need to be told by an advertiser that something is important or that a news story should focus in a particular direction. Editors and publishers probably usually don't think about advertisers when they make those decisions. They don't need to. They already share the same attitudes, convictions and world view.⁵

A national survey of Canadian community newspapers conducted in 1994 by Angus Reid

Group revealed that many editors are "more favourably inclined" to cover the activities of organizations that advertise in their papers.⁶ Out of 150 editors surveyed, 48 per cent said they drew a "strict line" between news and advertising interests; 40 per cent said they would be more receptive; 12 per cent refused to answer. The editor of a small British Columbia weekly stated: "It makes me sound like a bit of a prostitute, but I think the truth of it is that if somebody were to come along with a big ad program, you'd be inclined to throw a few puff pieces their way."⁷ The editor of a mid-sized Saskatchewan weekly said: "We try to draw a strict line [between advertising interests and the editorial side] but everybody is human."⁸

In 1988 *The Province* in Vancouver published a consumer story warning readers that they may end up paying more than the sticker price when buying a car.⁹ The story noted that dealerships were charging for paperwork and other "handling" matters which, in some cases, jacked up the price significantly. Several large car dealerships withheld their advertising from the newspaper. In commenting on this situation, the "general manager"¹⁰ of a suburban community newspaper, which circulated in three Vancouver suburbs home to many car dealerships, declared that his paper would never publish such a story. He would not jeopardize thousands of dollars worth of advertising.¹¹ This comment tells us that anything that limits advertising revenues is not news.

It also reveals what I would suggest is a general attitude among the new breed of community newspaper managers, who have entrepreneurial or financial backgrounds, rather than journalistic. Such managers, mostly in the corporate-owned urban community press, are measured by their abilities to improve profit. Any reporting that causes controversy, or jeopardizes advertising revenues would not serve that end. The process, of course, can also work

the other way. Advertising can grease the wheels for positive coverage. For example, when a fiction writer suggested that a community paper do a story on her upcoming book signing at a local drugstore, a reporter told her it likely wouldn't make it into the next issue. But if the drugstore bought an ad, he said, they might be able to get the story in.¹²

The community newspaper is parasitic. It depends almost entirely on the welfare of other merchants. (Merchants need the paper to advertise but their viability does not necessarily depend on newspaper advertising.) It is thus in the best interest of the newspaper not to generate stories that might harm local commerce, even if such stories might be in the community's best interest. Janowitz suggests that "Since publishers are sensitive about their business status and independence, one response is to seek to minimize business news in their columns without fundamentally alienating any one advertiser."¹³ This might explain the paucity of business news in the community press, and why, when it does appear, it is often an enthusiastic announcement of some new business, or in an "advertorial" adjacent to an ad.¹⁴ The free publicity, it is hoped, will in turn generate more advertising from the same merchant or other merchants. This free publicity is known as "editorial support," and is frequently used by advertising sales staff as an incentive to sell an ad. Some newspapers provide such "support" free of charge; others will add a surcharge to the cost of the ad, perhaps 10 or 20 per cent. Some newspapers will identify such material as an "advertising feature," in the form of a small headline or logo, and perhaps set the story in a type style that is different from the paper's regular body text and headline style. Other papers will not even bother to distinguish this material from news, believing that it is genuine business coverage. This is especially true if the advertiser is a new business, or an existing business undergoing expansion or renovation.

For example, "stories" such as "Look to South Coast for casual clothing,"¹⁵ or Ladner's Blue Line Sports can make you look like an athlete,"¹⁶ are "Business Section" stories announcing the opening of these stores in a blatantly promotional style. ("With Christmas fast approaching, Blue Line has a lengthy list of stocking stuffers such as basketball key chains, coffee mugs and more – all with your favourite sports team's logo.") From its treatment on the page, the story (and photo) appear as news material. Nowhere are they identified as advertising. In addition, promotional articles disguised as news frequently find their way into news sections. A story entitled "Fully balanced kids' meals," it turns out, promotes a new instant meal for children, Total Kids Cuisine.¹⁷ Another story, entitled "Doggone breath," asks readers: "Does a good morning kiss from good ol' Rover render you unconscious?"¹⁸ The story continues for a dozen column inches on the causes of "hound halitosis," making periodic reference to Nabisco's new "Minty Bones" dog biscuits. This material is cleverly written in a news style, generated by marketing departments or public relations agencies, and containing just enough useful or interesting information to turn it into "news" for the overworked community editor. It's the "journalistic junk" referred to by Bagdikian.¹⁹

This type of coverage impacts the news agenda in several ways. First, the definition and purpose of "news" is blurred. Especially if such material is not identified as such, the uncritical reader cannot distinguish it as advertising. If it is treated as "news," the reader will tend more to place it in the realm of "truth," which, of course, is the objective in the first place. If it were identified as advertising, some journalistic integrity would be retained, but from the advertiser's (and advertising department's) point of view, it would be less effective because the reader would view the content as less credible.

Secondly, this material could supplant actual news. If the editorial support does not itself produce revenues, it would likely be counted as part of the editorial content -- an expense to the newspaper enterprise -- as opposed to advertising, which constitutes revenue. Given that most newspapers require roughly a 60-40 ad-to-news ratio to make a profit, advertising posing as news would make up part of the 40 per cent allocated to the "news hole." Any additional editorial material, that is, real news, would be discarded (or held over until the following issue) because the number of pages is determined by advertising space sold, seldom by quantity of news.

A third way such advertising material supplants news involves the reporter's or editor's time. Because of their writing and photographic skills, editorial staff are often called upon to produce the editorial support. Many consider this form of journalistic prostitution part of the job. One editor said he liked writing such material because it gave him more freedom stylistically and because he could get the advertiser to check the final copy -- anathema to many journalists.²⁰ The significant point here is that time spent writing advertising features means less time spent on news. Given that community newspaper staff complain of not enough time to practise a more significant, in-depth journalism, maybe this is one reason why.

Many small newspapers, as understaffed in the advertising department as they are in editorial, lack a long-range advertising strategy.²¹ This means knocking on doors to sell advertising space. These frequent encounters might make it easier for an advertiser to suggest a positive story or make suggestions -- a form of subtle blackmail -- to tone down or change an editorial stand. If the merchant and the publisher are acquainted with each other, they are more likely to "help each other out."

As well, some advertisers feel they have a right to dictate policy because they realize the

publisher is so dependent on them. Here's an example. A paper in a mid-sized Alberta community published a letter-to-editor complaining about the proliferation of the hot-pink billboards advertising one of the community's private liquor stores. The editor took out the reference to the billboards' color fearing it would identify this particular liquor store, a regular advertiser. Even so, after the letter was published, the owner of the liquor store walked into the newspaper office and told the publisher he would cut back on advertising, starting with his newspaper.²²

If advertisers are concentrated or organized they can put even more pressure on a publisher. They can choose to move their money to a competitor, if there is one, with a more favorable editorial policy, or even provide the backing for another paper. In a society that lives and dies with Adam Smith, competition seems a good idea. It results in more newspapers, more jobs, a more competitive environment and, for our arguments, better journalism. But often, it does not, especially when the agenda is driven by the advertisers.

In Chilliwack, B.C. local businesses, mainly realtors, didn't like the monopoly of only one newspaper, *The Progress*. Realtors would sometimes complain to the paper when stories were not upbeat enough concerning the local property market. The realtors became the mid-wives for a new community newspaper, managed by an entrepreneur with no newspaper background. Initially, the new paper carried only a small amount of material generated by its staff reporter. Much of it was gleaned from press releases or community announcements. This soft editorial stance found favour with the community's business establishment. The paper thrived. With two papers now operating where one did before, is the community journalistically better served? It is obvious the new paper appeased its advertisers, economically and

journalistically. Its economic success is based on a certain cosiness with other community enterprises, and to maintain advertiser loyalty it was required to practise a less critical type of journalism. *The Progress*, in order to recapture its advertisers, was thus pressured take a similar approach, at least toward the lucrative real estate sector.²³

Advertising pressures force publishers to exclude crusades or controversies. Janowitz refers to the publisher as "an entrepreneur of advertising space and a spokesman on behalf of the community" and quotes one publisher as saying his "papers exist on account of advertisers . . . we have to conform or we are out of business."²⁴

A number of researchers have focused on this conundrum. Donohue's findings show that editors of weekly newspapers were more concerned about advertising than they were about news and editorial, the opposite of what daily editors said.²⁵ He notes that the small-town editor has a restricted number of advertisers whereas the urban daily editor could lose one and still survive. As well, a big-city merchant may have a greater need to advertise. Donohue further notes that staff at small newspapers often wear several hats -- reporting, editing, advertising, administration and distribution. These roles could be, at times, in conflict. Any resolution would likely favor the business side of the operation, as opposed to the journalistic. In the words of one editor, "I can refuse a story on Friday afternoon . . . but if I refuse an ad I am refusing my paycheque."²⁶

At dailies, advertising and editorial staff are in separate departments, often on different floors of a building. The small staff and close quarters in most weekly papers mean the reporters and editors are familiar with advertising sales staff. This familiarity increases the chances of advertising requesting or suggesting a favorable story, in the form of "editorial support," as discussed earlier.

One way that publishers can be less dependent on local advertising is by obtaining more national advertising. Since this is not an easy quest for local newspapers operating perhaps thousands of miles away from the advertising source, community papers attempt to do so through the Canadian Community Newspapers Association based in Toronto. The CCNA lobbies national advertisers and advertising agencies on behalf of its 700-member newspapers. It tries to counteract the image of parochialism and irrelevance, as well as accusations that circulation tracking is unreliable. National advertising is coveted not only for the revenue itself but because its impersonal nature lessens local pressures. The publisher would thus be freer to publish material he wanted without destroying the distinction of the community paper as a medium devoted to local coverage.²⁷

Special supplements are designed to provide advertisers with a platform linked to a theme such as local holiday celebrations, or the opening of a recreation centre complete with congratulatory stories surrounded by advertisements from businesses with a hand in its creation. A community paper in Alberta built a special section around the theme of drinking and driving, complete with generic editorial copy and merchants who could advertise their wares. The paper's enticement to advertisers was: "Let's get these drunk drivers off the road."²⁸

The supplements presumably provide extra revenues but at the expense of editorial integrity. Editorial material is required to provide "news" or feature material to keep the ads from bumping together. The problem from a journalistic perspective is that this pap masquerades as news. If the paper's reporters and editors don't have to produce it, then expenses are low and profits greater. When such copy is generated in-house, it is often based on material provided by the advertiser. Most reporters and editors take the position that it is easier to dash off the stories

than to fight the ad manager or publisher.

In the fall of 1997, the Southam-owned *Delta Optimist* carried a six-page "Special Supplement" which was promoted on the paper's front page. The supplement was billed as the "'98 Auto Preview" and urged readers to "check these pages for the latest in automotive technology and styles." Here's one of the stories:

This year Suzuki introduces the all-new Esteem Wagon to Canada (though we can't technically say "introducing" as it's already a hit in Europe and Japan). It's got all the Japanese quality and features you'll find in our Esteem sedan, with one difference -- more cargo space.

The Esteem wagon promises to be one of the most practical, stylish and sporty looking vehicles on the road. With a 16 valve 1.6 litre four cylinder engine, electronic multi-point fuel injection and safety features including dual air bags, side impact beams and child safety rear door locks as well as comfort features like 14 inch wheels and tires, front-rear mud flaps, roof rails, intermittent front windshield wipers (and a wiper washer in the rear) and an AM/VM 4 speaker cassette stereo system, Esteem wagon leaves the competition in the dust.²⁹

The story reads as if it is straight from the company brochure (which it likely is) and confuses the reader in its use of "we." The use of "we" is traditionally reserved for opinions in editorials, as the voice of the paper. Its usage in what appears to be news columns might trick some readers into assuming the same here. Is it "we" at the newspaper promoting this particular vehicle?

The six pages carried a total of about 253 column inches of advertising, and about 76 column inches of so-called editorial material, counting headlines and publicity photos, extolling the virtues of the new vehicles. Stories and headlines were set in the same type style as the paper's regular news, and the design was also similar. Nowhere was there a disclaimer informing the reader that the material was, in fact, provided by the companies interested in selling their

products.

In the end, any argument concerning the distinction between advertising and editorial content may be for naught. A small story in *The Publisher*, the CCNA's industry newspaper, proclaims that: "Ads are News!"³⁰ The story refers to a poll conducted by the *North Shore News*, a free-circulation newspaper in North and West Vancouver, B.C., which shows a large majority of residents liked to get their advertising flyers via their community newspaper, rather than by mail. *The Publisher* quotes the *North Shore News* as stating: "That's hardly surprising because advertising flyers themselves ARE news -- often the best news in the paper -- which is good news for advertisers too!"

End notes

1. As discussed, for example, by Lars Engwall, in *Newspapers as Organizations*, Westmead Farnborough, Hants, England, Teakfield Ltd., 1978, pp. 96-7; Dennis McQuail, *Mass Communication Theory*, Beverly Hills, California, Sage, 1983, pp. 45-6, 60-1; and Gaye Tuchman, *Making News*, New York, The Free Press, 1978, p. 5.
2. "Ties That Bind," Chad Skelton, *Ryerson Journalism Review*, Summer, 1998.
3. L.C. Soley and R.L. Craig, "Advertising Pressures on Newspapers: A Survey," *Journal of Advertising*, 21 (4) December, 1992, pp. 1-9.
4. Soley and Craig, *ibid.*, p. 7.
5. *Ibid*, p. 8.

6. "The Canadian Media Review 1994, Community Newspapers and Shaping Public Opinion, A National Survey of Community Newspaper Editors, Journalists and Their Readers," Angus Reid Group, p. 74.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. See "Buying a car is series of bumps," *The Province*, Oct. 21, 1988, pp. 38,39.
10. "General manager" is not a traditional job title at newspapers. This position combines the jobs of publisher and managing editor, two roles which in daily newspapers are usually kept distinct because their interests sometimes conflict. This title has become more common with the advent of corporate ownership of the weeklies.
11. The comment made by Bob Graham, general manager of the *Tri City News*, a free community newspaper distributed in Burnaby, Coquitlam, and Port Coquitlam.
12. This story was related to me by Judy Corser. Her conversation took place July 16, 1998 with a reporter for the *Edson* (Alta.) *Anchor*, a free newspaper.
13. Janowitz, op. cit., p. 157.
14. It is common practice for many community newspapers to provide positive editorial copy for merchants who buy regular, or one-time "splash" advertising in the paper. Such "stories," sometimes labelled as "advertorials", but often not, are written on the feeblest news angle. The unsuspecting reader cannot tell that this story was paid for by the merchant, and produced as an inducement or a form of kickback.
15. *Delta Optimist*, Delta, B.C., July 5, 1995, p. 10.
16. *Delta Optimist*, Nov. 15, 1995, p. 9.
17. "Fully balanced kids' meals," *Delta Optimist*, Dec. 20, 1988, p. 7.
18. "Doggone breath," *Delta Optimist*, Dec. 20, 1988, p. 11.
19. Ben H. Bagdikian, "Behold the Grass-roots Press," *Harper's Magazine*, Dec., 1964, pp. 102-110.
20. Interview with Dan Macpherson, editor of the *Edson* (Alta.) *Leader*, July 28, 1998.

21. See Janowitz, op. cit., p. 164.
22. This story was told to me by Dan Macpherson, editor of the *Edson (Alta.) Leader*, in an interview July 28, 1998.
23. This development occurred in the early 1980s when I was employed by *The Chilliwack Progress*. While the real estate sector complained of high advertising rates, there was also unhappiness with some of the real estate stories. For example, realtors believed stories on low sales volumes or stagnant markets should be played in a "positive" way, so as to highlight the "buyers' market."
24. Janowitz, op. cit., p. 215.
25. G. A. Donohue, C.N. Olien and P.J. Tichenor, "Structure and Constraints on Community Newspaper Gatekeepers," *Journalism Quarterly*, Vol. 66 No. 4, (Winter 1989) pp. 807-812, 845.
26. Dan Macpherson, op. cit.
27. Janowitz, op. cit. p. 165.
28. Sales approach used in 1998 by the *Edson (Alta.) Anchor*.
29. "1998 Suzuki Esteem Wagon," *Delta Optimist*, November 26, 1997, p. 23. The story is reproduced as published in the newspaper, with typographical and punctuation errors.
30. "Ads are news!," *The Publisher*, September, 1985.

CHAPTER SIX

Newspapers as community boosters

In August 1997, when Canadian astronaut Bjarni Tryggvason was part of the 11-day Discovery space mission, the Bridgewater (Nova Scotia) Bulletin carried the following story on the bottom of its front page, under the headline "Our astronaut aboard shuttle":

It was the only complication in an otherwise perfect lift-off.

Moments after the space shuttle Discovery rose from her Cape Canaveral launch pad en route to an 11-day mission in space, two countries began bickering over who could call astronaut Bjarni Tryggvason their own.

Icelandic president Olafur Ragnar Grimmson, on hand for the August 7 launch, declared the 51-year-old payload specialist his country's first space voyager, saying he was "the direct heir to Leif Ericson's history of discovery of this continent" and calling it "a continuation of a great Viking tradition."

Meanwhile, Mac Evans, head of the Canadian Space Agency, insisted Mr. Tryggvason was a Canadian.

Here on the South Shore, we know the real truth. While Mr. Tryggvason was born in Reykjavik, he grew up in Lunenburg and that makes him our astronaut.

The six-member shuttle crew is conducting experiments aimed at a better understanding of the earth's atmosphere. They'll return to earth this weekend.¹

Boosterism emphasizes cohesiveness and positive thinking and bears directly on the

community's self-worth.² As described by Wetherell and Kmet, the booster ethos draws heavily on capitalist social and economic theory; it means growth and progress are a central measure of success. "While such boosterism affected the economic and political life of a community, it also had an obvious impact on the social and intellectual life of a town, especially in the sort of public discourse that was tolerated."³ Sotiron argues that when local newspaper publishers became involved with boosting civic growth, the commercialization of news columns increased. "Since growth and progress, usually synonymous in their minds, figured so largely in their financial success, the publishers were understandably open to becoming self-appointed spokesmen for and boosters of the economic growth, progress, and well-being of their communities."⁴ Increased prosperity in the community meant increased prosperity for the newspaper. Johnston writes:

It can hardly be denied that to a degree the community interest of publishers is also self-interest. A "booster issue" of a local paper means advertising dollars. It also means a great deal of work and, if a measure of confidence is generated in the town or district, community benefits, while not so tangible as those of the advertisers and the publisher, may be just as great.⁵

Johnston refers to one weekly which ran a front-page, seven-column spread boasting that it gave more than \$1,500 in space to promote the community, based on advertising costs of the day.⁶ In fact, the Canadian Weekly Newspapers Association (now the Canadian Community Newspapers Association) included a "community service competition" in its annual award which the CCNA carries on to this day. In the CCNA's 1997 competition, community service awards were made to newspapers for encouraging governments to fund a long-term care facility, initiating a youth award program, funding a drive to refurbish chairs in a local theatre, and promoting Christmas charities.⁷

Stories designed to make citizens feel pride in their community, or motivate them to work for the betterment of the community, appear positive, or in the least harmless. The most overused headline word in the community press is "success," as in "Natal Days brims with success," "Cancer campaign 1998 a success," or "Fun Run a success," all in the same issue of *The Spectator*, in Annapolis Royal, Nova Scotia.⁸ Kennedy states that as editor "I represent my town to the rest of the world, I become one of its spokesmen, too, fighting for trade area business, for community prestige, for high school athletic recognition."⁹ An editor told the Davey Commission, "I believe most daily papers are selling news. We are selling our communities."¹⁰ Boosterism may serve the paper's economic ends, but often skews news judgment. Community newspapers display numerous examples of such stories, besides the astronaut story quoted earlier. *The Picton (Ontario) Gazette* boasted on its front page: "Our Ian Carswell runs for Canada."¹¹ The same paper, under the headline, "Chaos in the classroom," informs readers that "Changes in staffing and curriculum wrought by government policy may have created 'chaos' in the educational system, but PECI principal Dave Mackay is determined that his school will rise to the challenge and provide its approximately 1,000 students with the best education possible."¹² Three stories and a photo caption on the front page of *The Merritt (British Columbia) News* (whose motto is "putting our communities first") took such an approach. The lead story announcing that CrimeStoppers has come to Merritt quotes the local RCMP sergeant in the third paragraph: "It makes sense logistically and economically to tie in with a larger organization. I believe it will serve our community very well."¹³ A second story, also primarily sourced from police, notes that the annual Insurance Corporation of British Columbia "Speed Campaign kicks off this Friday, June 26, and runs for ten days until Sunday, July 5."¹⁴ High up in the story, in

paragraphs four and five, the writer (listed as the paper's "news editor," "editor," and "publisher") praises the local road safety group. 'The Merritt area Speed Watch group, formed just last October, has already drawn praise from Ted Ockenden, ICBC's Regional Manager of Public Affairs and Road Safety. 'Given the newness of the Merritt Speed Watch group,' said Ockenden, 'it's proven to be an organization that's shown really positive results. I've been impressed with the group and the hours they put in.'"¹⁵

The third story's headline reads, "Canada Day fun ready:" "Summer's officially here and what better way is there to greet the new season than to celebrate the 131st birthday of the country? Canada Day is, as always, July 1, and just as always, Merritt is getting ready to throw a big birthday party, an all-day affair that starts at the Civic Centre and rolls right through to dusk at Central Park."¹⁶ The front-page photo shows four men in fire-fighting gear cutting the roof off a wrecked car, and a woman apparently trapped inside. The caption reads:

Maybe the Merritt Fire and Rescue Department could make a few extra bucks this way – the five-minute convertible job seemed pretty popular last Saturday. Actually, this was part of an extraction demonstration carried out as part of the J.S. Crawford-sponsored Road Sense Awareness Day held at the Railyard Mall; the woman being treated is a firefighter's wife (who says they don't risk their lives just as much as the guys?), and the car was a demonstration vehicle hauled out for the day. Using the Jaws of Life, the boys yanked the doors off, then snipped the roof within about five minutes, impressing the crowd and any number of passers-by.¹⁷

Boosterism has other harmful effects on news and community life than non-news posing as news. Boosterism implies competition with another community. This is a form of parochialism which the newspaper feeds on at the expense of the community with which it is in competition. Rivalry between two communities, as played out in the local newspapers, can turn vicious and xenophobic. Historically, developing communities competed for railway lines and

service facilities. Today, neighbouring communities vie for regional hospitals or Canadian Tire outlets. This bias is detrimental to the home community itself. Such coverage might ignore the community's weaknesses, or downplay or ignore any issues which may place that community in a bad light. The promise of a new pulp mill in an economically depressed town would likely produce much positive copy; those speaking out against the accompanying pollution and smell would be given short shrift.

In cities, boosterism pits one suburb against another, or a suburb or neighbourhood against the larger metropolis. Janowitz believes that the central and underlying concern of community journalism is the rights and the privileges of the local community with respect to the surrounding metropolis. He found in his survey of urban community papers that most stories (95 per cent) are non-controversial, except when the topic is the local community against the urban metropolis.¹⁸

In being a booster, a community reporter may unwittingly -- and unprofessionally -- miss the more pressing issue. Take the following example:

Shhh! It's supposed to be hush, hush, but the *Optimist* is about to blow it wide open.

Eaters of the Dead, one of the largest Disney movies ever shot, will be filming at the Ferry Road boat ramp in Ladner for the next four weeks. First, they have to build the set -- a Baltic seaport village and wharf. That should take about two weeks and another two weeks for filming. The scene will involve loading Viking ships with goods and supplies.

"Considering the magnitude of the film it should be quite interesting," said Dave Gibbons of Delta's park and recreation department who negotiated the deal for the municipality.

"We got into some fairly heavy negotiations. They wanted it because it was the most ideal site," said Gibbon.

The deal negotiated is a straight rental although they tried to get the film company to rebuild the dock. Gibbon hopes they'll be able to use the rental fees to upgrade the rickety wharf that is used heavily by pleasure boaters and fishers.

The dock will be returned to its original form, once filming is done.¹⁹

The lead of this story is self-serving to the paper and has very little to do with the matter at hand. Self-congratulations are strongly implied on behalf of the community. Readers are told that this is "one of the largest Disney movies ever shot" and "one of the biggest movies ever shot in British Columbia." Therefore, the implication goes, residents should be proud. There is no factual information regarding how large, or in what terms -- cost, number of actors, and so on. This overtone of boosterism obliterates what should be an important element in the story. The boat ramp happens to be the only public ramp in the community and it is heavily used. How will local residents in what is essentially a water-oriented community put their boats in the water? What do boaters think about this public facility being closed to them for a month? What alternatives are available? None of these concerns are in the story.

The subsequent issue of the twice-a-week *Optimist* carries a follow-up story headlined: "Village needs to welcome film industry."²⁰ This story, too, fails to address any of the above questions. The paper quotes both the local business association president and the executive director of the chamber of commerce, who chastise residents for being unfriendly to the film industry. The antipathy, according to the business association official, is based on "word on the street." The entire story thus assumes information which has not been properly established, at least not in the newspaper's coverage. There is no evidence from citizens who find the film crews an inconvenience, or from merchants complaining about street closures. This is poor journalism. If antipathy to the film crews exists, the paper ignores it.

In the following U.S. example, it becomes apparent that an editor who doesn't play the boosterism game is blamed for the community's problems, simply for daring to bring them into the open. Patrick Huber, owner, publisher, and editor of *The Herald*, a 1,473-circulation newspaper in Postville, Iowa, was accused by merchants and local politicians of hurting the town's image through his "negative reporting."²¹ Huber ran stories on the town's impending hospital closure, drug use in rural Iowa, and questionable practices by the local bank. "Maybe the small-town paper does not have to be about who ate dinner with whom, who died last week, and who won the local ball game. I thought Postville could be trained to appreciate the value of quality journalism."²² Huber was wrong. Community leaders invited another newspaper into town and supported it with their advertising dollars. Huber was forced to sell the 98-year-old paper to the new competitor. Its first editor was a public relations specialist who declared in an editorial that, "We aren't interested in uncovering or creating scandals."²³ The paper's general manager said his paper was willing to work with the community, not against it: "We're real service-oriented and are conscious of the people's wishes."²⁴

Boosterism means minimizing controversy, particularly if issues place the community in a negative light. An editor can simply deny crime, unemployment or strife by downplaying it or not reporting it at all. Many editors refuse to report court news. They cite reasons such as negativity, embarrassment to family or friends of those named, or a crime-ridden image for the outside world. Reporting local crimes requires "both wisdom and courage."²⁵ The editor of *The Meaford (Ontario) Press* wrote in an editorial that parents sometimes begged him not to publish names of offenders. "Why should we add to the sorrow and humiliation that follow in the wake of wrong-doing?"²⁶

Whetherell and Kmet note in their work on small-town life in Alberta that during the course of a decade so many community papers reprinted an article from the *Christian Science Monitor* (most often as an editorial and without credit) that "it clearly touched small town sensibilities and represented a core set of beliefs about town life."²⁷

The editorial asserted that turning from a city paper to a town one was like "stepping from the slums full of vile odors into an old fashioned garden with honeysuckle and the scent of perennial flowers. While reports of murder, infidelity and selfishness in city papers were depressing, reports in town papers renewed faith in life. Here are set forth only that which uplifts the community -- the activities of the businessmen, the church news, the civic good accomplished by the women, school gatherings and the like. They were the simple annals of the great common people who are really the broad foundation of this great country of ours."²⁸

Janowitz noted that all editorial matter -- public affairs, columns, letters to the editor, as well as editorials proper --lacked controversy. "A portion of the so-called editorials are merely traditional appeals to community sentiment. In addition, by making use of selected letters to the editor, the paper can further relieve itself in the dilemma involved in expressing opinions."²⁹ A lengthy editorial in *The Merritt News* falls into the category of "traditional appeals to community sentiment." The editorial criticizes the vandalism done to an elderly woman's flowerbeds, asking rhetorically why anyone would do such a thing. The writer assumes the vandalism was done by "kids" or "youths" -- "the fact is widely known that it's kids doing the deed,"³⁰ even though proof is never provided. The only indication is that the victim had chased some teen-age girls out of her garden several days before. The editorial states that vandalization of the community's greenery "happens all the time" although no details are provided, and there is no indication of the severity of the problem. The editorial's last paragraph invites the "folks who were involved in the incident" to write a letter to the paper stating reasons for their actions, or to offer an apology.

The editorial takes the approach of cooperation, not conflict. The goal is harmony. But the real facts — and any real issue — are ignored. The editorial merely appeals to what must be an obvious community sentiment. The community's law-abiding citizens will agree this act of vandalism is deplorable, and lament the state of youth today. In assuming what the paper knows will be a safe and agreeable position, it taints all youths in the community. They are the easy target.

Community editors sometimes go the great lengths to censor material that may jeopardize the equilibrium of the community, or challenge its welfare. This is especially true if such negative images are generated outside the community, either by a nearby "rival" community, or by the large urban media.

In this case, a community editor didn't merely act as gatekeeper of his own paper, he managed to subvert publication of a national story involving his town, scheduled to be published in a daily newspaper. The issue centred on the bomb blast that killed nine men during a bitter strike at the Giant gold mine in Yellowknife. *The Edmonton Journal* assigned two reporters to investigate the circumstances of the Sept. 18, 1993 bombing with the story scheduled to run on the anniversary a year later. The report recalled details of the event and implicated two local men in the blast. It was scheduled to run in the *Journal*, as well as in a number of other Southam dailies.

A draft of the story found its way to Bruce Valpy, editor of *The Yellowknifer*, a 6,000-circulation twice-a-week community paper. Valpy believed its publication would exacerbate an already tense atmosphere in the community, and possibly incite violence. Contrary to ethical and professional practice, Valpy faxed the *Journal's* draft story to civic officials, the RCMP, the

miners' union, mine management, and the territorial government. As Valpy later told a reporter, he believed that although the story made sense journalistically, it was damaging for Yellowknife. "We live here and what we were seeing just before the anniversary was not pleasant. So we weighed the consequences of passing the Journal story around and the only negative consequence was that we would look bad in the journalistic establishment in the south."³¹ A subsequent inquiry into the bombing brought about murder charges. The two people named by the *Journal* were also charged but with lesser offenses. Valpy's actions sabotaged the work of other journalists, and squelched information that was in the public interest. The pertinent point here is the widely divergent judgments made by the community-based *Yellowknifer* and the daily *Edmonton Journal*.

Mike Hayes, the editor of the *Smith Falls* (Ontario) *Record News* said Valpy made the decision he did because as a prominent member of the community he was concerned about its welfare. "In jobs like mine, we often have to take off our journalistic hat and put on the community hat."³² The former chair of the Ryerson School of Journalism says small-town papers sometimes ignore certain stories because their reporters don't have the level of expertise, or the time. But he also believes they ignore stories because they are advocates for their community and prefer to accentuate the positive. "Most people are proud of their communities and their local paper is a major player in the promotion of that pride."³³

Newspapers are used as instruments of self-identity and self-assertion, promotion of the community as a social, political and economic unit. Janowitz noted that the local community paper tended to integrate individuals into their community; that people who were regular readers of local papers were more active participants in the community; and that papers helped orient the

individual to community by building and maintaining local traditions and identifications. These can be seen as positive values, providing the basis for boosterism, just as pride in, and identification with, one's country are fundamentals of nationalism. While such sentiments are not necessarily sinful in themselves, they do warp the presentation of community news.

End notes

1. "'Our astronaut' aboard shuttle," *The Bulletin*, Bridgewater, Nova Scotia, August 13, 1997, p. 1.
2. See Wetherell and Kmet, op. cit., p. 21-26.
3. Wetherell and Kmet, op. cit., p. 23.
4. Minko Sotiron, *From Politics to Profit: The Commercialization of Canadian Daily Newspapers, 1890-1920*, Montreal and Kingston, McGill-Queens University Press, 1997.
5. Johnston, op. cit. p. 8.
6. Ibid.
7. See Canadian Community Newspaper Association's 1997 Better Newspapers Competition Results Book, pp. 29, 30.
8. All three headlines are found in *The Spectator*, Annapolis Royal, N.S, Aug. 11, 1998, pp. 1, 4 and 8 respectively.
9. Kennedy, op. cit. p. 6.
10. Champagne, op. cit., p. 22.
11. *The Picton Gazette*, Sept. 2, 1998, p. 1.
12. "Chaos in the classroom, PEI principal takes on Government policy," *The Picton Gazette*, Sept. 2, 1998, p. 2.

13. "Who you gonna call? CrimeStoppers 1-800-222-TIPS," *Merritt News*, June 24, 1998, p. 1.
14. "Speed Watch, speeding blitz set for Saturday," *ibid.*
15. *ibid.*
16. "Canada Day fun ready," *Merritt News*, June 24, p. 1.
17. "Convertible--the easy way," *Merritt News*, *op. cit.*, p. 1.
18. See Janowitz, *op. cit.*, p. 77.
19. Maureen Gulyas, "Disney Shooting in Ladner," *The Delta Optimist*, Sept. 27, 1997, page 5.
20. Trudi Beutel, "Village needs to welcome film industry," *Delta Optimist*, October 1, 1997, p. 9.
21. See Kim Nauer and Steve Rhodes, "Postville's 'better' paper," *Columbia Journalism Review*, March/April 1992, pp. 12,13.
22. Nauer and Rhodes, *op. cit.*, p. 12
23. Nauer and Rhodes, *ibid.*
24. Tom Johnston, general manager of the *Postville Herald-Leader* as quoted by Nauer and Rhodes, *op. cit.*, p. 13.
25. Johnston, *op. cit.*, p. 26.
26. As quoted by Johnston, *op. cit.*, p. 27.
27. Wetherell and Kmet, *op. cit.*, p. 28.
28. Wetherell and Kmet, *op. cit.*, p. 28.
29. Janowitz, *op. cit.*, p. 77.
30. "Floral Follies," *Merritt News*, June 24, 1998, p. 6.
31. See "To publish or perish: At small-town newspapers protecting the community can be more important than a good story," by Chris Cobb, *Ottawa Citizen*, February 19, 1994.
32. Cobb, *ibid*
33. Cobb, *ibid.*

CHAPTER SEVEN

Beholden to business and other community institutions

Discussions in Chapter Five centred on the direct influence of advertising on the news agenda. In this chapter I will discuss how business and other community institutions -- often political -- influence, or attempt to influence, news coverage.

The commercial imperative of the community newspaper necessitates a close relationship with the local business establishment, and other community institutions. Janowitz notes that publishers view their newspapers more as business enterprises than journalistic ones. "As a member of the local business fraternity, he [the publisher] is constantly soliciting its advertising and working hand in hand with its members in major business promotions . . . the fact that so many of his business relationships are anchored in the context of a business *fraternity*, prevents him from personally ignoring an even small-to-moderate advertising account."¹

A publisher in Eudora, Kansas exclaimed that "we are living in the golden age of journalism."² Clearly, he meant this in commercial terms, not journalistic. Having started his paper in 1989, this publisher expressed excitement by the fact that a new supermarket and a new industrial plant would locate in his community, providing him with additional business opportunities. On Vancouver Island, a publisher who oversees a small daily and several

community newspapers insists his reporters should "be prepared to do a puff piece favourable to the local Ford dealer and not talk about journalistic principles."³ Publishers and editors view their papers as agents of (usually commercial) progress, along with other community businesses and organizations (of which they are often members) which serve that goal. Publishers -- and by extension, their newspapers -- are entwined with business and political and social organizations which form the community elite.

Desire for respectability and prestige, and pressure to help keep the community itself viable, draw the publisher into community activities and organizations. The publisher is often looked upon as a promoter with the power to lead public opinion. It is unlikely that any organization in which the publisher is involved is going to suffer from negative publicity. The publisher feels a sense of importance as an adjudicator of publicity. The paper's sponsorship of community-conscious programs is good for business. Janowitz writes:

The personal contacts the newspaper publisher has with businessmen, aldermen, and community leaders create the milieu in which the publisher operates and condition the content that appears in his paper. These personal contacts help to develop an institutionalized aversion on the part of the community newspaper publishers toward incurring the bad will of any section of their clientele and also to account for their inhibitions in their pursuit of a vigorous editorial policy.⁴

Publishers and editors frequently tell of instances where they are asked to keep certain information out of the paper, even if that information is known in the community from other sources. A publisher often prides himself on keeping a controversial or negative story out of the paper even if a competing newspaper, a nearby daily, or a radio station carries it. The publisher then looks down on the other media as morally inferior.⁵ When the *Stouffville (Ontario) Tribune* reported that the town's chief administrative officer had been charged with impaired driving,

town officials took umbrage.⁶ They punished the paper by refusing to return phone calls or to provide information. They were willing to talk to the competing paper, *The Stouffville Sun*, which had not run the story. The favoured paper took a much friendlier approach: it reported minor criminal charges involving politicians, not bureaucrats.

Janowitz found that there was only a slight tendency for chain-owned newspapers or large independents to carry more items involving controversy and change. "It appears that the temperament of the publisher is just as crucial as economic control and stability in this regard."⁷ The Southam-owned, free-circulation *Vancouver Courier* discovered this the hard way in the Fall of 1998. Management told one of the paper's columnists to cease writing about Israel and the Palestinians, after local Jewish leaders made it known they disapproved. There was talk of reader and advertiser boycotts. Commenting on this case, *Vancouver Sun* columnist Paula Brook suggested that while columnists are within their rights to express opinions, readers are within their rights to find opinions offensive -- and to say so to circulation or advertising departments. "And if the owner [of the paper] responds by saying, you're right -- reprehensible speech is no longer free around here -- then decisions are taken and life carries on, and as long as the government stays out of it we do not call this censorship. We call it business."⁸

The corporate mentality has resulted in what Bagdikian has called the "neutralization" of news, and in the hiring of managers who fit the corporate mould. "It is a rare corporation," Bagdikian argues, "that appoints a leader unsympathetic to the desires of the corporation."⁹ He further suggests that the unseen hand of the corporation -- for example, the recruitment and promotion of personnel sympathetic to the corporate culture -- produces an "enormous increase in material of superficial content and minimal interest to readers but of maximum interest to

advertisers."¹⁰ My scrutiny of community newspapers reveals a striking lack of business coverage, which was also noted by Janowitz in his study.¹¹ A minority of papers devote a page or so to local business developments, often surrounded by "business directory" advertising, but coverage is generally positive, ranging from profiles of "successful" businesses,¹² to stories masquerading as advertising copy. Stories such as "New business class introduced by Cathay",¹³ are numerous. "Surrey's own West Coast Impressions," tells of a local t-shirt design business which "offers diversity to their clients with graphic design and quality printing topping the list."¹⁴ "Local family starts new challenge," is a half-page story extolling the virtues of "ultimate challenge paintball," which encourages readers to "try the ultimate challenge."¹⁵ The story is on top of a half-page ad for the same business. Sim reminds us that the community press is particularly vulnerable to commercialization because the staff is small, overworked, and unprofessional, so they fail to distinguish, or don't care to distinguish, the difference between news and PR dressed up as news.

A newspaper's business orientation does not merely "neutralize" journalistic coverage of the commercial sector. Others have noted the intricate web that exists in small communities, connecting individuals and organizations to the community's institutions, and producing a consensual view of both the community and the outside world.¹⁶ This view encourages reliance on institutional sources which share the world view of the business community and the publisher.

Editorial content in the community press indicates a strong reliance on the traditional institutional sources--municipal or regional governments, school boards, police and fire departments, and courts.¹⁷ As well, there are numerous items dealing with volunteer groups, business-oriented organizations, service clubs and provincial or federal politicians who are given

space for self-serving "columns."¹⁸ *Cochrane (Alberta) This Week* gives regular column space to the town's mayor ("Mayor's Report"). One such column was entitled: "Let's work together as Cochrane continues to grow."¹⁹

We find news of business or factory closures in the community based largely on explanations by management, and often based on press releases from them. The *Edson (Alberta) Leader* ran a front-page story "Luscar eyeing \$550 million merger" concerning the merger of two large coal-mining companies.²⁰ The story was written from a press release issued by one of the companies. Officials were quoted as assuring area residents that the merger would not affect the local economy. Later, the story quoted a local mayor -- but from a story in the *Edmonton Sun* (Edson is 200 kilometres west of Edmonton). The mayor expressed concerns that job losses resulting from a merger would be a blow to the community. Similarly, we see reports straight from the local police office -- "Report from RCMP, "Police Blotter", "Court Report" -- but few in-depth stories detailing reasons, or a larger context for crime.

If coverage of a political body or organization does not fit the perceived role of the newspaper, or if it is non-existent, friction between the newspaper and members of the community can occur. Bruce Kennedy touches on this matter:

Public officials are a perpetual source of news. They are also a source of frustration. Invariably they think they know more about the news business than you do; inevitably they are impressed with their own importance, particularly if newly elected, and they divide all news into two categories: that which they want publicity on and that which they don't.²¹

When coverage does not fit with perceived role of the newspaper -- perceptions created symbiotically by editor-publisher and readers -- friction can occur. This is illustrated in the

following letter to the editor, written by a member of a local service club in Kitimat, British Columbia (*italic emphasis mine*):

The Kiwanis Club of Kitimat has been a major contributor to the community of Kitimat for many years. In particular, the club has sponsored the Hallowe'en hot dogs and drinks for children and their parents . . . The Kiwanis Club is most concerned by the *lack of coverage of local events* and in particular the Hallowe'en celebrations by the community newspaper.

For the past two years, the club has been promised coverage of the Hallowe'en events; both before, *to notify the public of the time and place of the event*; and after, *to acknowledge the event's success*. This year *the club provided a draft article* as requested by one of the newspaper staff. Unfortunately, neither occurred.

Last year, a *letter to the editor thanking the Kiwanis* sponsoring the event had been submitted to the paper immediately after the event. Your paper did not even have the courtesy to publish it.

As you are aware, each year for the past many years, *the Kiwanis Club has paid large sums of advertising* in your newspaper for the Annual Kiwanis Auction. It would appear that when a community service club contributes, even in a small way to your well-being and prosperity, it would only be fitting if the newspaper responded in kind.

The Kiwanis Club believes that everyone in Kitimat, including your readers, would be better served by you if the local newspaper at least covered local events shortly after they happen and *appeared to take pride in what happens in Kitimat*. The Kiwanis Club, unfortunately, is not the only community service club that feels the way we do . . .

If your policy is not to give a greater emphasis to coverage to local Kitimat events, then we believe all of Kitimat is entitled to know the stance of our local newspaper. Our club would of course then have to *reassess our relationship with the newspaper*.

—Bob Ivison
Kiwanis Club of Kitimat

Note that the letter writer's original criticism is based on the lack of coverage of a particular

event, but the implication -- a serious one -- is that the paper has a policy of not covering local events. While coverage of the events organized by the Kiwanis Club may, indeed, constitute community "news," the assumption is that the Kiwanis Club has a right in dictating that it be published regardless of other circumstances. Lack of reporting staff, lack of space, and deadlines often serve to keep certain information out of the newspaper. Stories that don't make it in the paper this week may be eclipsed by more important or more recent material the next. Faced with late news, or too much news, an editor would find it necessary to forgo self-serving material in lieu of something more crucial. Contrary to the letter writer's implication, such judgments are seldom part of a conspiracy to keep such items from appearing in print.

Here, values and judgments based on an editor's journalistic standards clash with expectations of the community, or dominant community groups -- the two are often one and the same. Non-compliance can mean the loss of "large sums of advertising," and a "reassessment of our relationship with the newspaper." In effect, the newspaper is being blackmailed. Announcements of upcoming events, stories on the "success" of those events, and thank-you letters congratulating organizers are mainstays of community news, not because they necessarily contain an inherent journalistic value, but because they reinforce the community's sense of its ideal self.

There are other examples of officials pressuring the local paper. The editor of the *Kanata* (Ontario) *Kourier* criticized city hall in his column, so the mayor declared he would refuse to do interviews with the paper's reporters.²² The mayor was offered opportunities to address any factual errors in the original column, either through a letter or a column. The mayor refused. The paper stood its ground. According to publisher Alex Munter: "It's become a point of principle --

of free speech, of freedom of the press, and a question of who gets to decide what shows up in print, and it certainly won't be the mayor."²³

In Ottawa, a city councillor quit writing a column for one of the city's community papers because the paper was practising "mainstream investigative" reporting²⁴ on crime, election campaign expenses for municipal politicians, and, as it turned out, the same councillor's wedding gift from a community association. In a letter to the publisher of *The News*, a 21,300 free-distribution weekly covering the city's Alta Vista and Canterbury neighbourhoods, councillor Peter Hume wrote: "The role of a community newspaper is to provide information and news to residents that they would not normally receive via the mainstream media."²⁵ The paper published the letter -- it was marked "not for publication" -- because publisher Michael Wollock believed it was a matter of community interest. Hume then switched his column to a smaller paper described as "more a community bulletin board."²⁶

The British Columbia Teachers' Federation pulled advertising from the *Oliver* (British Columbia) *Chronicle* because the publisher had written a column criticizing teachers for going skiing on their professional-development days. The ad campaign that was to run in every other newspaper in the province was cancelled by local union officials who said the *Chronicle* would only get the ads if it published "balanced" articles on education.²⁷ The paper's editor said teachers wanted coverage that was "fluff."

In the Vancouver suburb of Delta, a local councillor chastised *South Delta Today* publisher Tom Siba for being critical of a municipal newsletter distributed via the paper. The councillor believed that since the publisher received revenue for distributing the newsletter, it was poor business practice to criticize it. In response, Siba wrote:

I personally don't believe having integrity is poor business practice. From time to time we have people attempt to threaten or cajole us to alter our editorial stance or tilt our news coverage. We don't. No doubt we have lost some advertising revenue as a result, but we have gained far more than we have lost by putting out honest, credible newspapers.²⁸

That publishers and editors stand up to such pressures is a tribute to them. Even so, attempts to tailor the news continue, often at a high level. An official representing the agriculture industry urged community newspaper editors and publishers at their 1993 national convention to work more closely with his industry. "I think you are going to find that farm leaders are going to rely heavily on you to help us in our efforts to ensure that farmers know what is happening in their communities, nationally and internationally," said Ken Edie, chairman of Prairie Pools Inc. "You are also going to be called upon to help get the farming message out to the general public."²⁹ Edie then informed the newspaper people that farm marketing boards do not keep the country's food prices artificially high, and said "community newspapers can play a strong role in relaying the facts."³⁰

Whether Edie is right wrong about marketing boards is not the issue. His choice of words is significant. The paper's role is to "relay" the "facts." What he means, of course, is that the newspapers should present the world as seen by Prairie Pools Inc. For community newspapers in the farm belt, the suggestion is appealing indeed. The fact that Prairie Pools Inc. was a sponsor of the 1993 CCNA convention, and advertises in the community papers could also provide an incentive.

Up until the 1950s, owners of small newspapers and their families were given free passes on Canadian National Railway to travel to Canadian Weekly Newspaper Association³¹

conventions, staged annually in different parts of the country. Newspaper proprietors were held up as the thread that helped to hold this patchwork quilt of a country together, much like the railroad itself. The federal government, which also provided generous postal subsidies to small-town publishers, patronized the papers with advertising and a belief that uniform views of nationhood tended to minimize social or political unrest. Today, the government largesse is gone but the yearly conventions of the Canadian Community Newspaper Association are strongly supported by corporations which may sponsor a breakfast or a happy hour, sometimes in return for the opportunity to preach their points of view.

At the 1994 CCNA convention in Charlottetown, P.E.I., a representative from Canadian National Railways was afforded the opportunity of telling editors and publishers at a lunch (paid for by CN) why the disposal of short-haul rail lines was good for the railway, and good for the country. The sale or closure of these apparently unprofitable rail lines was a major issue, especially in rural areas which felt they were being abandoned. The official urged editors and publishers to look favorably upon CN's actions when writing about the issue.

Sometimes papers have their own way of dealing with officials who suggest or insist that reporting follow their agenda. The following story appeared on the front page of the *Shuswap Sun*, a 16,000 free-circulation paper in Salmon Arm (British Columbia):

It was a real wet fair . . . but a good one.

According to Carey Dennis, fair association president, the rainy weather didn't affect turnout too much this past weekend. He declined to provide gate numbers, however, and, when pressed, said plans are already underway for the 100th annual fair next September. He declined to give any specifics.

Dennis also refused to provide any results of the fair's prize winners. For

information on all those winners, the *Sun* suggests you call Dennis at home, 832-3838, or at work, 832-2124.³²

Note that the story typically begins with the "success" angle found in so many small-town paper stories. The source, the fair's president, insists the event was a success despite the rainy weather. As the item indicates, he refused to provide numbers which implies that attendance was not as good as the official would like the community to believe. The fair was held, everyone had a good time, community spirit is intact -- why ruin the event with facts? The reporter's handling of this story is unusual. The newspaper risks alienating this official or others who don't share the joke.

In the end, the practise of meaningful journalism in a small community can lead to the paper's demise. When *The Spectator* in 100-Mile House, B.C., published a story on home-based marijuana-growing operations (the story quoted a source as saying that "every second house was growing something"), the paper was shut down twice.³³ The first came after somebody threw a fire bomb through the paper's front window, destroying the building and its contents. The paper resumed operations out of temporary quarters. The second -- and permanent closure -- came after 70 per cent of the merchants boycotted the paper for making the town look bad. The story had gone national and they blamed the paper for blackening the town's image. The owner of a local stereo store said: "Yes, the merchants of 100 [Mile House] have pulled their advertising -- but not because we wanted to silence *The Spectator* -- but because we wanted them to print the truth. We were registering a protest. Thank goodness we live in a free society which gives us this right."³⁴ According to Don Robertson, a local freelance writer who wrote a column for *The Spectator*, "You don't rock the boat in small towns."³⁵

End notes

1. Janowitz, op. cit. p. 164.
2. Bert Hull, publisher of *The Eudora News*, quoted by Jerry Bellune, in "Extra! Read all about it. Non-dailies bust out of economic doldrums with new products, services," *The Quill*, Jan.-Feb. 1992, pp. 16-21.
3. Nigel Hannaford, publisher of the *Alberni Valley Times* (Port Alberni, B.C.) speaking to journalism students at Langara College, Vancouver, Spring, 1998.
4. Janowitz, op. cit., p. 171.
5. The example involving *The Vancouver Province* and its story on car dealerships -- which a local community paper refused to run - illustrates this point. See Chapter 5, *The Influence of Advertising*.
6. See Chad Skelton, "Ties that Bind," *Ryerson Review of Journalism*, Summer, 1998, p. 16,17.
7. Janowitz, op. cit., p. 94.
8. Paula Brook, "Business rights versus speech freedom," *Vancouver Sun*, Dec. 9, 1998, p. A-17.
9. Bagdikian, op. cit., p. 197.
10. Bagdikian, op. cit., p. 202.
11. Janowitz writes: "Since publishers are sensitive about their business status and independence, one response is to seek to minimize business news in their columns without fundamentally alienating any advertiser.", op. cit., p. 165.
12. For example, "Colemans wheeling big freight into 50th year," tells the story of a local family trucking business in *The Carillon*, Steinbach, Manitoba, June 15, 1998, p. 20-B.
13. *The Richmond News* (Richmond, B.C.), Nov. 30, 1988, p. 23.

14. "Surrey's own West Coast impressions," *Surrey/North Delta News Leader*, July 3, 1996, p. A-23.
15. "Local family starts new challenge," *The Barrhead Leader*, July 13, 1998, p. 19b.
16. Janowitz, Wetherell and Kmet, Johnston, and Kennedy discuss this matter in their respective works.
17. This observation is primarily based on my perusal of about 150 community newspapers representing different parts of the country. The papers span a period from 1994 to 1998. Most papers are members of the CCNA and were obtained through the organization's "Mixed Bag Exchange."
18. Most of these columns, in fact, are written by party hacks or public relations experts. Generic versions can be adapted to the local scene. They are sent out under the local politician's byline with headlines such as "Report from Ottawa," or "Report from your MP," and found frequently on the editorial pages of community newspapers.
19. "Let's work together as Cochrane continues to grow," *Cochrane This Week*, June 30, 1997, p. 7-A.
20. "Luscar eyeing \$550 million merger," *Edson Leader*, July 27, 1998, p. 1. Reporter Dan Macpherson stated in an interview with the writer that information from the mining companies involved in the merger came from a press release.
21. Kennedy, op. cit., p.10.
22. See "Kanata Kourier locked in battle with mayor over columnist," *CCNA Publisher*, March, 1989, p. 8.
23. *CCNA Publisher*, ibid.
24. City councillor Peter Hume, as quoted by Ron Eade, "Weekly's muckraking miffs councillor," *Ottawa Citizen*, November, 1993.
25. Eade, Ibid.
26. Eade, ibid.
27. "Teachers pull newspaper ads after skiing retreat criticized," *Vancouver Sun*, March 11, 1996, p. B-2.
28. Tom Siba, "Just because you're paranoid doesn't mean people aren't talking about you," *South Delta Today*, February 22, 1992, p. 6. Note that Siba later became publisher of *The Delta Optimist* after Southam bought both papers. *South Delta Today* ceased publication.

29. See "Ag industry appreciates weeklies, spokesman says," Dave de Jong, *CCNA Publisher*, August/September, 1993, p. 13.

30. Dave de Jong, *ibid.*

31. Now known as the Canadian Community Newspaper Association.

32. James Eke, "Work's already started on Centennial Fair," *Shuswap Sun*, September 4, 1997, p. 1.

33. "The little paper that defied arsonists," Bill Seymour, *CAJ Bulletin*, Summer, 1992, pp. 10,11.

34. "Marijuana controversy shuts down paper again," *Vancouver Sun*, Nov. 12, 1992, p. B-5

35. *Ibid.*

CHAPTER EIGHT

New technology and the community press

The first wave (of computer technology) has run its course. The second wave is happening now and it involves technology being used to eliminate jobs, or radically change the division of labor to the point where the net result is a reduction in jobs.

--John Bryant, Canadian director, Newspaper Guild¹

Discussions of the "new technology" in recent years have often centred on how technology shapes society and history. Technology can be seen as doing things *for* us, but it also does things *to* us. Turkle stresses that computers can be used simply as a "tool," or can define us as individuals, or as a society.² Technology can liberate humankind, but at the same time represent a constraint. For instance, choosing to drive a car between point A and point B might be faster than walking cross-country, but by the very act of choosing the car we are limiting ourselves to the road. Winston argues that as a society we have been preoccupied by "technological achievement," at the expense of content. Technological developments in television, he argues, have been tremendous since its advent in the 1950s, but content has not improved much.

Desktop technology has spawned a proliferation of free newspapers or newsletters which

can be cheaply and easily produced, but contain little or no journalistic content.³ Because it is easy and relatively cheap to start a small newspaper, desktop technology creates conditions for new competition that heightens this commercial climate. Anyone, whether a journalist, or what Franklin and Murphy term, a "buccaneer entrepreneur"⁴ can start up a newspaper, or go into the printing business and draw away some of the job printing from small newspapers which still rely on their printing operation to pay some of the bills. As these new newspapers establish themselves, existing newspapers are forced to adopt similar efficiencies in order to survive. Mike Phillips, publisher of a small paper in Washington State, ponders the question: "Who will have the best and freshest ideas as new technologies make Everyman a potential publisher?"⁵ He hopes this process will involve journalists. In the same vein, Michael Abrams, associate professor of journalism at Florida A & M University, was quoted as saying: "If I were an entrepreneur fresh out of school, an idealistic young person who wanted to change the world, I'd buy myself a Macintosh and a laser writer and go to town. I wouldn't even have to spend as much as I would spend on a new car."⁶ But perhaps the "entrepreneur fresh out of school" wouldn't feel a need to change the world, but merely a need to make some money.

Potential publishers know that for \$15,000 to \$20,000 a small company can purchase all the pre-press equipment necessary to produce a newspaper: a stand-alone computer, a laser printer, and page make-up software. Twenty years ago, the average cost of a an editorial front-end system and a phototypesetter was between \$50,000 and \$100,000, and that was only the initial outlay. Costly photosensitive paper and chemicals were an ongoing expense.

This means desktop computer technology is a useful response to commercial pressures, not necessarily a tool for an improved newspaper. The automobile industry is often used as an

example of how automation can serve to make production more efficient, reduce unit costs, and, if not necessarily produce a better quality automobile, at least provide automobiles which are of a consistent quality. If I may make the leap from automobiles to newspapers, I would suggest, that page templates provided with page make-up software make it easier for those with limited design or layout skills to construct pages. The result is an evenness of quality that is efficient but often monotonous. More to the point, though, the pre-press process can now be carried by non-specialized production staff (that is, editorial staff) which translates into a cheaper paper.

It is interesting to note the priorities of some small newspaper publishers. They lament that graduates from journalism schools not only lack the usual writing and editing skills, but even worse, they lack the electronic publishing skills required to make them productive from day one on the job. Robert McClain, quoted the publisher of a small newspaper in the Southern U.S. as saying: "Kids come in here saying they were taught computers in college. But I ask them a few questions about the MacIntosh or QuarkXPress or FreeHand and I get blank stares from most of them . . . what are these people being taught?"⁷ McClain notes that many schools don't have the commitment, budget or trained instructors to teach the electronic publishing skills "students will need in the working world."

Computer technology has changed newspaper production, blending what a few years ago were several specialized craft functions into a one-person job. The last two decades have seen production move from the "back shop", where type was set and pages "composed" or "pasted up" manually by specialists, to the composition of electronic pages in a computer manipulated by editorial staff. "Desktop publishing," or "pagination," as it is commonly known in the industry, is clean, efficient, relatively cheap, and easy to learn. Much of the esoteric knowledge inherent to

typography and composition have been built in to the program. The computer continues to save labor and costs for newspaper management. Community newspapers and other small publications have wasted little time in utilizing computer technology, because of the small amount of capital required, and general lack of job-defining labor contracts. This has created a preoccupation with production "efficiencies" which discount the work of the editorial staff.

The move to desktop technology has seen the back-shop jobs of typesetting and composition virtually eliminated. In some instances these craftspeople have been retrained to work in advertising make-up, as glorified typists responsible for typesetting the remnants of hard copy that still come into the paper (obits and the like). Some have become computer troubleshooters. Most of their work has been taken over by the journalists. A typical help-wanted ad for reporters not only includes traditional requirements such as a camera, car, and ability to work hard and meet deadlines, but also experience in pagination.⁸

Thirty years ago computers were not part of the journalist's lexicon, and neither was the esoteric knowledge that was the domain of printers and compositors. The function of the journalist was to report and edit. For the most part, computers have facilitated that process. Catherine McKercher in her study of computer use at two Canadian daily newspapers, notes that most reporters see computers as enhancing the news-gathering process by, for example, providing quick access to electronic clipping files, communication, access to on-line databases, and data analysis.⁹ In terms of computerized editing and page make-up, the journalist has assumed an important role in the production process. In performing the functions that were once the domain of specialized crafts, the journalist, in effect, has become part "production worker," especially at smaller newspapers. Does this mean the journalist's primary function of news

gathering and writing is being eroded? And, if so, is this affecting the quality or quantity of news?

Community newspapers have embraced pagination for several reasons: (a) it's cheap and profitable; (b) non-unionization and lack of formal job descriptions mean job flexibility; (c) personal computers and cheap software can be easily adapted to any small newsroom, especially compared to more expensive mainframe systems initially used by daily newspapers.

The computer was first introduced to newspaper newsrooms in the late 1960s and early 1970s. It took about 20 years for journalists to replace typesetters (by writing their stories directly into a computer, then printing out to a typesetting machine). It has taken about five years for journalists to take on pagination -- placing the story and graphic elements, as well as advertisements, on an electronic "page" which is then transferred to a laser printer or typesetting machine for printout.¹⁰ In effect, editorial staff have now largely taken over paste-up, a job previously done by a skilled compositor, traditionally a member of an exclusive guild. The speed of the change has provided little time for assessment of just how these expanded functions have affected the editorial staff's capability to gather, write, and edit the news.

One community newspaper publisher, the incoming president of the CCNA, was likely speaking for many in the community press when she stated in the early 1990s:

We set a goal last year to be fully paginated by the end of 1993 and we are on course. But is that the course to follow? What changes are around the next river bend? Does anyone have all the answers? I doubt it very much.¹¹

McClain writes that copy editors are expected to do much more now than previously. "I cringe as more and more newspapers eliminate jobs in the composing room and then load those duties on

the already overworked copy desk. And, in most cases, management gives copy editors those additional duties without providing them sufficient training to perform them efficiently and effectively."¹² Roger Bird in *The End of News* quotes an editor as saying that pagination makes the newspaper look cleaner and more visually appealing, but Bird suggests a price is being paid in content:

This writer's experience includes a shift from a news job that was mostly copy editing with a substantial amount of interconnection with other editors and with reporters either on hand in the newsroom or across the country or around the world. What mattered in that job was overwhelmingly the *content* of the stories. Like any news organization we made our mistakes in judgment, fact, wording, balance and fairness. But the mistakes came in the teeth of unrelenting attention to content.¹³

Bird notes also that managing editors at dailies tend to hire the copy editor who is the "computer techno-whiz" as opposed to one who is a traditional news junkie, but with limited computer experience. With the traditional foundation of the news culture being eroded by technological change, "news faces an uncertain future."¹⁴

Few community papers even have a position designated as "copy editor." Actual copy editing, if done at all, is done by the editor or a reporter. If everyone else is too busy, the writer (who could also be the editor) will edit his or her own copy. Pagination -- which implies knowledge of hardware, software, as well as design and typography -- is thrust upon the journalist largely because there is no one else to do it. So, some news gathering and writing is being displaced. This emphasis has also affected the training of young journalists. One journalism student complained that students were spending too much time learning three pagination software programs at the expense of learning how to gather and write news.¹⁵

According to the student, the school's response was that students were required to know the three programs because these programs were being used by newspapers; knowing all three would increase her employment chances. Journalism schools with skills-oriented curricula generally try to be sensitive to industry trends and needs, especially those of the community press which provides many entry-level jobs.¹⁶

But at what point does this devotion to technology become a burden on journalism? A young journalist on her first job with a chain-owned urban community newspaper became frustrated at spending what she felt was too much time in front of a computer monitor instead of reporting. Her editor told her that the paper's twice-weekly schedule, and the large number of pages, meant reporters had to produce pages. When this situation didn't change, she left the paper to look for another job where she could devote more time to actual reporting.¹⁷

The use of computer technology in the newsroom, then, has created a blurring of the traditional role of the reporter as news gatherer and writer with the other role of design and production. At dailies, reporters were seldom involved in that process. Reporters at community papers have always performed production functions, but currently the *extent* of their duties is greater than in the past. Reporters must now know production, design, typography, layout, software, and the computer system's idiosyncrasies. The blurring of job functions occurs in subtle ways. Everett Dennis reminds us that in the 1970s when American (and Canadian) newspapers were losing circulation and market penetration, the industry engaged in large-scale self-evaluation.¹⁸ Focusing on a new television generation, newspaper managers recast their products in brighter colors, using more graphics, shorter stories, and a redefinition of news to include more stories with the "human angle." Senior editors started talking about the "look" and "feel" of

the newspaper; its "reader-friendly" quotient, a term which, significantly, is only a variation of the "user-friendly" rating as applied to computer technology. Consequently, the newspaper's appeal to readers would be determined by the new lords of the newsroom: designers and marketing experts. Content was never forgotten; it was merely relegated to second place. Editorial workers, with the aid of new computer technology, and new software, were thus given the responsibility of not only providing a good read, as it were, but to dress the product up so that it would look appealing on any supermarket shelf.

A 1994 survey of 695 community newspapers across Canada indicated that, despite this extra work, papers were not generally hiring more journalists to accommodate it, and that, indeed, the re-assignment of this work was seen as an efficiency.¹⁹ Editors and publishers responding to the survey indicated most had used some form of "desktop publishing" for four or five years. Much of the production work was being taken over by editorial employees. Twenty-six respondents said their newspapers employed fewer production workers than they did five years previously. Editorial positions remained about the same with 16 papers indicating an increase, and 15 indicating a decrease. The change in almost all editorial positions involved one position. (Advertising positions increased noticeably with 19 papers indicating an increase in advertising employees, and nine a decrease.)²⁰ The fact that journalists were taking on new work but showed no corresponding gains in staff numbers indicates that efficiencies in the form of higher productivity and lower labour costs are inherent to new technology.

The survey revealed that a few editors spent no time on electronic page make-up, 25 (44 per cent) said they spent some time, but less than 30 per cent of their work hours on make-up. There were 12 who said they spent between 31 and 60 per cent of their time on this task; and

another 12 were doing make-up between 61 and 100 per cent of the time. What is also clear is that reporters are involved in electronic page make-up. Out of 63 respondents, 23 estimated that reporters spent no time working on page make-up software; 21 stated 30 per cent or less; 10 stated 31 to 60 per cent; and four stated between 61 and 100 per cent.

The editors were aware of the extra work and responsibilities placed on the editorial department. Nineteen respondents noted that the roles of editor and reporter had undergone some degree of change with pagination. One editor put it this way: "It's kind of like socialism in which the editorial department now controls the means of production. There is less time to do news, but the problems of switched headlines and cutlines no longer plague us." Other comments conveyed a similar message: "Much of editor's time spent doing layout, rather than more traditional duties of editor"; "Cuts into editing time, as well as planning stories and talking with the community"; "Editor has to do much more -- design the page and make it up at the same time. Saves overall time in the end, but leaves less of the editor's time for other duties."

While changes in editorial responsibilities were noted, some interpreted this positively, not only as increased efficiency, but as personal development for employees. For example: "[Desktop] allowed staff to expand responsibilities and knowledge giving everyone a better feel for what it takes to make a newspaper." Another comment reflected what may be a preoccupation with the technical aspects of pagination. "The more you learn about the program and hardware capabilities, plus the always-improving technology, the more you want to do with it. This sometimes causes frustrations for the staff, and sometimes slows down overall production."

The publisher-editor of one paper (circulation 6,000) commented that the reporter's position at his paper has become "a more technical job" and that his role as editor has changed

"because [the editor is] more involved with page layout since designing is done on the computer, and some staff [are] not computer literate enough to handle the new systems."

As noted earlier, newspaper owners and publishers favour the new technology more because of its contribution toward efficiency than toward improving journalistic content. Comments in the survey tended to back that argument. The most common response to the question asking publishers and editors to list the advantages of this technology can be typified by the following two responses: "Saves time and money." and "Efficiency and therefore profit."

While efficiency and profit are legitimate motives, the question is: at what expense? If reporters and editors in the chronically understaffed community press are taking on these added functions, is this at the expense of the more traditional tasks of news gathering, planning, writing, and editing, or, as noted by one survey respondent, getting out and meeting members of the community. That computer technology has made newspaper production more efficient is beyond question; but that it has created a better newspaper from a content point of view is not. If editors and reporters find they have less time to spend on their traditional, and hitherto primary functions, content cannot help but be harmed.

Maybe such concerns are already too late. The *Wainwright* (Alberta) *Star-Chronicle* boasted in 1993 that its advanced technology had replaced its staff reporters, first from three to one, and then to zero.²¹ Technological efficiency indeed.

End notes

1. Stated in a telephone interview with the writer, March 18, 1994.
2. See Sherry Turkle, "Computers and the Human Spirit," a paper presented at a conference on technology sponsored by the Gannett Center for Media Studies, Nov. 10, 1986.
3. The daily four-page newsletter *News in a Minute*, July 28, 1998, distributed in Edson, Alta., is a typical example. The newsletter contains local advertising, classifieds and non-local news and sports briefs rewritten from a nearby daily. Local news is non-existent other than two brief "Community Calendar" announcements. Similar newsletters exist in other communities.
4. See Franklin and Murphy, op. cit., p. 22 for their discussion of how new technology has encouraged the development of cheaply produced free-circulation newspapers.
5. Mike Phillips, *The Bremerton (Washington) Sun*, "Prototypes for the Future: How Readers Look at Newspapers," American Society of Newspaper Editors, Future of Newspapers Report, April, 1990, p. 51.
6. Abrams as quoted by Margaret Genovese, "Desktop Publishing Spurs Weeklies," *Presstime*, January, 1987, p. 20.
7. As quoted by Robert McClain in "Journalism education should include more computer training", in *Newspapers and Technology*, January, 1994, p. 20.
8. For example, a classified advertisement in the "help wanted" columns of the *Edson (Alberta) Leader* of July 20, 1998, asks for: "Experienced reporter for independent weekly located half and hour from Edmonton. Must have camera, car and ability to meet deadlines, paginate. Fax resume to 403-987-3488.
9. Catherine McKercher, "Computers and Reporters, Newsroom Practices at Two Canadian Daily Newspapers, *The Ottawa Citizen* and *The Gazette (Montreal)*" in *Canadian Journal of Communication*,

Vol. 20 (2), Spring 1995, pp. 213-229.

10. At larger newspapers, journalists generally have specific job functions. Reporters write stories, editors edit copy, and design editors lay out pages. At smaller newspapers, those jobs are often done by one person. The Poynter Institute promotes an integrated process called "WED" (Writing, Editing, Design) which aims to create a unified knowledge involving those three specialties.

11. "Ride the Wild River of Technological Change," Joyce Carlson, *CCNA Publisher*, June, 1993, p. 7

12. Robert McClain, "Copy editors--the unsung heroes", in *Newspapers and Technology*, February, 1994, p. 9.

13. Roger Bird, *The End of News*, Toronto, Irwin Publishing, 1997, p. 124.

14. Bird, op. cit., p. 126.

15. The Kwantlen College (Richmond, B.C.) journalism student mentioned the complaint to this writer in a telephone conversation in the early 1990s.

16. My conversations in recent years with editors and publishers in the community press indicate they prefer to hire journalists who not only have pagination skills but a working knowledge of specific software and hardware used by that particular newspaper.

17. This information was related to me by reporter Anne McLaughlin when she was employed by the *Vancouver Courier*.

18. Everett E. Dennis, "Technological Convergence and Communication Education," Gannett Center for Media Studies, p. 3. This is a copy of a speech delivered at the Conference on Leadership in Communication, San Diego State University, Nov. 15, 1989.

19. The survey was conducted by the writer as a research project. Editors and publishers at 695 community newspapers across Canada were asked about their use of newsroom technology.

20. We cannot not assume that all job changes are because of new technology. Other factors such as economics or reorganization obviously play some part.

21. See "A technological breakthrough?" *CCNA Publisher*, June 1993, p. 4.

CONCLUSION

I have defined news viability in terms of how it reflects reality or approximates truth. Is news in the community press, then, viable?

In theory, small-scale newspapers operating in small communities can facilitate communication and contribute to a local "marketplace of ideas." Their closeness to members of the community provides conditions for access and participation, that is, two-way communication. But ironically, this closeness also establishes the conditions that shape the news. Franklin and Murphy have noted that community newspapers are highly influential in defining news and setting the agenda of local discussions -- in turn shaping its ideology, politics, self-image, and ideas of progress. News is the product of the journalistic process, and, as such, shaped by influences, such as newsroom routines, journalists' personal biases, commercial imperatives, and political and corporate agendas. Community news production will be similarly influenced, but, in addition, is subject to pressures particular to its environment. If these pressures also exist for daily newspapers, or other mass media, I have argued that they affect community news to a greater extent.

Editors, publishers and owners involved in the community press typically describe their

role in terms of a mission. This mission rarely involves challenging the status quo, and most always to act as the "mirror" of the community. The mirror concept is wishful thinking. Not everything can be reflected and it denies the hands of the gatekeepers and the various influences on news as discussed in this work.

Historically, I have shown that community newspapers, like the dailies, are firmly rooted in commercialism. The community press developed less from the journalistic imperative than it did from providing a service, along with other businesses, in the way of printing, advertising space, and information ("news") designed to provide the catalyst for "progress," primarily economic progress. Sustained by advertising revenues from local merchants, the newspaper developed a financial dependence on local business, with newspaper publishers measuring their own success in the community by business standards, not journalistic.

The more recent development of the free shopper "newspaper" has had a major impact on distribution methods. If, as Sotiron maintains, the commercialization of Canadian newspapers started at the turn-of-the-century (with publishers attempting to expand readership in order to capture more advertising) the process was completed in 1960s and 1970s when urban community newspapers opted for free or controlled distribution. With all householders receiving the paper free, whether they wanted it or not, the burden was lifted from the publisher (and editor) to ensure that *content* would attract readers. Franklin and Murphy argue that this has resulted in an ideological shift whereby the newspaper is primarily oriented to the advertiser instead of the reader. They also argue the orientation to advertisers deprives free circulation newspapers of an independent voice. Furthermore, free circulation newspapers dilute journalistic activity because it is a costly liability, and in any competitive situation, that part of the newspaper is often the first

target of cost-cutting. Cheap or free material from press syndicates and public relations firms, as well as from local governments, means a newspaper can operate with only a small news-gathering staff. Any competing paper is forced to adopt the same process in order to stay competitive, and the news agenda is further handed to those with vested political and commercial interests.

I have also suggested that community newspapers lack the professional standards associated with the better daily newspapers. A scrutiny of community newspapers shows the quality of writing and editing, or depth of news coverage is generally of lower quality. Among journalists, community papers are seen as training grounds for dailies, the "bush league" of the industry.¹ Problems of low pay, long hours, lack of on-the-job training opportunities are frequent complaints voiced by journalists who toil in the community press. Many seek advancement to the larger papers which precludes continuity of news coverage and background knowledge of local events and issues. While the "grass roots" nature of community news, particularly as displayed by volunteer writers or country columnists, may be viewed as an integral (and charming) part of its nature, the reality is that such material cannot be a substitute for news. It is fraught with subjectivity, vested interests, and outright opinion.

Small profit margins and low editorial budgets means stories are seldom done in-depth. Press releases are often published verbatim because there is no time to check sources, or to rewrite them to expunge biases or vested interests. Staff are relieved that this material helps fill the pages. Even if we accept that reporters and editors still have some professional control over content, social, commercial, and institutional pressures force them to conform to community norms. Sim notes that in a long-settled community the idealistic editor wages a lonely battle.

The late Jim MacNeill, when he was owner and publisher of the (Montague, P.E.I.) *Eastern Graphic*, was known for his crusading style even if it targeted officials in his own community. He stated: "I think you have to accept that you haven't got close friends in the community."²

Crusading journalism is not unheard of, but uncommon in the community press. Professional standards, and the psychology of professionalism, must be improved. The impetus must come from community journalists themselves. A liberal arts education, an appreciation of the value of journalism in society, and a display of quality journalistic skills are all necessary. What is also needed is the encouragement and backing of professional groups such as the Canadian Association of Journalists. Because of the problems particular to community newspaper journalists, an association of community newspaper journalists would be in order. As well, the Canadian Community Newspaper Association should cease its preoccupation with the business side of newspapers and encourage training and support, including a statement of editorial principles, for its thousands of journalists.

Advertising has long been accused of influencing journalism in all media operating in the capitalistic marketplace, but community newspapers are particularly susceptible because of their limited advertising base, and their proximity to their sources of revenue -- advertisers. My assessment (and examples) indicate a range of content influenced by advertising or the business sector. In some cases, stories are presented as news, or business news, but are blatantly promotional in nature. In other cases, news agendas may be entirely advertiser-driven. I have referred to Soley and Craig's survey indicating a relationship between small newspapers and capitulation to advertising pressures. Community newspapers are less likely to jeopardize income from their limited advertising base, and their parasitic nature, as I have described it, makes them

more sensitive to community business cycles. As a result, they tend to avoid or downplay news that may destabilize the local economy. Community newspapers tend not to provide any thorough coverage of the local business scene, and when they do, it is often in the form of positive "news", provided as a psychological boost to the business sector, or in the form of free publicity, and often as an incentive or a kickback to the advertiser -- known in the business as "editorial support."

Such accusations of advertiser influence and dependency leads to the question: If newspapers are not to be funded through advertising, then how? I am not so unrealistic as to suggest that newspapers should charge sufficiently high subscription rates so as not to require advertising revenues. Nor would I suggest that newspapers be funded by governments or wealthy benefactors. If newspapers are to continue functioning in the economic marketplace, and it's logical to think they will, the principles of the marketplace must not be allowed overwhelm the principles of journalism, as it applies to a well-functioning democracy. What is needed is an assertion of journalistic principles over economic ones. The reader must be provided with the "truth," and treated first and foremost as a citizen, not as a consumer. That means advertisers should hold no sway with the news agenda.

In Chapters Six and Seven, I argued that boosterism and the propensity of publishers to fit the newspaper into the local business and political structures. In the history of small-town Canada, boosterism was inextricably bound to growth and progress as a central measure of success. Boosterism determined what sort of public discourse was tolerated. When local newspaper publishers became involved with boosting civic growth in their communities the commercialization of news columns increased. Thus publishers became unabashed spokesmen

for the economic growth, progress, and social well-being of their communities. Publishers see themselves as an integral part of the community's business and political establishment. As this is their fraternity, they are unwittingly beholden to it. Few are the small-town publishers who are not members of a community service or business group, and some are actively involved in local politics.

Finally, in Chapter Eight I noted that computerization of the community newspaper newsroom has forced reporting and editing staff to take on new job functions, and suggested, with some evidence from a national survey, that this has come at the expense of the news-gathering process. The new technology benefits the newspaper enterprise because it increases efficiency and reduces labour costs. There is no evidence that technology produces a better newspaper journalistically. In fact, I suggest the opposite may be true.

The question of news viability cannot be answered in simple terms of black or white. The picture that comes to mind is grey. Journalism as practised in the community press makes a contribution to the marketplace of ideas, but it adheres to its own paradigm. It is not dictated by the highest social values. Community news is shaped, and sometimes overwhelmed by commercial or political influences; it is often self-serving to the community, and it is frequently wanting in its professional standards. Like Alice's looking glass, the community's "mirror" frequently does not reflect reality.

As a final note, I need to state the obvious: That this is not an exhaustive work on the community press. I noted in my introduction that comparatively little work had been done on community newspapers, especially in Canada. Large corporations have taken notice of the small

newspapers, but many others haven't. More research needs to be done, for example, on the effects of corporate ownership of the community press, the specific impact of new technology on editorial content, and the function of the non-commercial community paper,³ to name only a few.

Endnotes

1. See Chad Skelton, "Ties that Bind," *Ryerson Review of Journalism*, Summer, 1998, p. 22.

2. As quoted by Chad Skelton, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

3. For example, *The Glebe Report*, in Ottawa's Glebe district, is a neighborhood newspaper staffed partly by volunteers and funded through the Glebe Community Association, as well as by a small amount of advertising.

APPENDIX

Use of computer pagination in community newspaper newsrooms

Survey methodology and results

METHODOLOGY

The survey, conducted in February and March of 1994, was sent to 695 community newspapers, all members of the Canadian Community Newspapers' Association. This served as the survey's sampling universe. The CCNA-member newspaper constitute about 62 per cent of the total number of about 1,100 newspapers in Canada. The CCNA agreed to include the survey in one of its regular monthly mailings to members. A cover letter written by the author of this paper on Carleton University letterhead briefly explained that the survey was a research project and that its primary goal was an attempt to determine how desktop computer pagination systems have changed the traditional job functions in the newsroom. The cover letter was addressed to the publisher or editor, although the CCNA mailings were addressed to the publisher, or owner of the newspaper. Frequently, and especially so in smaller newspapers with circulations of under 5,000, the publisher and the editor are the same individual, and in some cases that person is also the reporter. There was no certain indication that the questionnaire was answered by a publisher or editor, except in cases where the respondent specified his or her position. For the sake of this survey, the exact status of the respondent is not significant, although it could be argued that a

publisher would tend more to extol the efficiency and money-saving virtues of pagination, whereas a front-line editor might note its effect on editorial production.

The questionnaire contained 25 questions, most of them with forced-choice answers. Some questions asked for brief explanations to answers provided. Respondents were also invited to provide additional comments on the topic, which some did. Size of CCNA member papers range from about 1,000 circulation with an average of 12-16 pages per issue to more than 50,000 per issue. Publication frequency is from once a week to three times a week.

SURVEY RESULTS

Of the 695 questionnaires that were mailed, 72 were returned, producing a 10.4-per-cent response rate. Wimmer and Dominick report that the average mail survey achieves a response rate of 10-25 per cent which they state casts some doubt on the validity of the findings.¹ Respondents were asked in the initial question if they used desktop publishing in any form. All questionnaires returned indicated "yes" to this question. It is not known how many newspapers do not use any form of desktop publishing process, although some allowance must be made for those who do not and therefore did not bother to return the survey.

Respondents were asked to check one of five circulation categories in which their paper fit. Out of the 72 respondents, 13 (18 per cent) were 2,000 or under, 36 (50 per cent) were between 2,000 and 5,000, 18 (25 per cent) were between 5,000 and 15,000, two (2.7 per cent) between 15,000 and 25,000, and three (4.2 per cent) more than 25,000. The average number of pages numbered 24, with a low average of 10 pages, and a high average of 48. Most newspapers have used desktop equipment for four to five years for some part of the process. Thirty-four

papers used a scanner regularly, although there was wide variation on use, with some using it only for line graphics and others for text and halftones -- in two cases colour.

Regarding staff numbers, 26 respondents said their newspapers employed fewer production staff than they did five years ago. Most indicated a reduction of one position, although a fair number (eight) indicated reductions between two and four employees. One larger-circulation paper (more than 25,000) indicated a reduction of 10 production employees. Seven papers actually reported adding production staff, in most cases by a half-time or a full-time position. Advertising positions increased noticeably with 19 papers indicating an increase in advertising employees, and nine a decrease. Editorial positions remained about the same with 16 papers indicating an increase, and 15 indicating a decrease. The change in almost all editorial positions involved one position. An anomaly was the above-mentioned paper which not only reduced its production staff by 10, but its editorial employees by the same number. This paper's advertising positions, on the other hand, increased by seven. It should be noted that while not all job changes can be attributed to changes in technology (other factors such as economics, reorganization, etc. obviously play some part), these changes do support the assumption that computer pagination significantly lessens, or eliminates, production staff, namely the typesetter/compositor positions. Much of the production work, or pagination in its various forms, has been taken over by editorial, but the fact that editorial departments have not made corresponding gains in staff numbers must reflect the understanding on the part of management that "efficiency" in the form of higher productivity and lower labour costs are inherent to the use of new technology.

Complete pagination--involving computer make-up and output of a camera-ready page or

to negative or plate, complete with halftones and ads--is being done by only seven of the newspapers surveyed. Thirty-six of the respondents indicated they used computer programs for various stages of make-up, with most falling into the category of creating pages (flats) and pasting up halftones, graphics, and ads separately. Others in this category produced "story packages" (stories typeset in desired type and number of columns, plus headlines) ready for paste-up on to flats. Halftones and ads would also be pasted up separately. Seventeen respondents indicated their papers still produce galleys of type for cutting and pasting on to flats, with headlines set separately.

If the job of the production worker (typesetter, compositor) is diminishing, then who is taking over production, now largely in electronic form? Respondents were asked to estimate the amount of time compositors, editors, reporters spent working on a page make-up program. Follow-up questions in this section asked whether the switch to desktop facilities changed this person's basic job functions, and, if so, how it changed. While most papers indicated they had reduced the number of compositors within the last five years, most also indicated someone (or several persons) on staff still fit that job description, although many made note of the fact that the compositor's job had changed from manual paste-up to work involving a computer. Fourteen papers indicated they had no such position; some specifying that the work had been subsumed into other positions, that is, editorial, advertising, or in two cases, into a new position known as "advertising assistant." Those newspapers with "compositors" estimate such employees spend a variety of time doing some sort of computer work, either inputting advertising or editorial copy, or doing layout. Answering the question of time spent on page make-up programs, 19 out of 64 respondents (30 per cent) answered that compositors either spent 0 per cent of their total work at

that task or indicated they had no such position. Fifteen (23 per cent) estimated 30 per cent; six (nine per cent) estimated between 31 and 60 per cent; and 24 (38 per cent) estimated between 61 and 100 per cent. It was clear from the elaborations regarding this question that the majority of compositors involved the setting of advertising copy, or making up of entire ads using a desktop program. As noted previously, two respondents stated that such employees were not considered to be "compositors", but "advertising assistants" who were paid according to piece work, or commission, as opposed to an hourly wage. The situation might be typified by the comment from one respondent who, in answer to the question regarding the number of staff in production, stated: "Editorial and advertising staff do it."

The survey results, in fact, back up that statement. Many respondents indicated that staff in the editorial department are responsible for setting and layout out editorial material, and, in most cases, would appear to be responsible for completing the final page, with ads and art work either added electronically, or in paste-up. Out of 57 who completed this question, eight respondents (14 per cent) stated that editors spent 0 per cent of their time on electronic page make-up; 25 (44 per cent) said they spent some time, but under 30 per cent; 12 (21 per cent) estimated between 31 and 60 per cent; and 12 (21 per cent) between 61 and 100 per cent.

What is also clear is that reporters are involved in the task of the electronic page make-up. Out of 63 respondents, 23 (37 per cent) estimated that reporters spent no time working on page make-up software; 21 (33 per cent) stated 30 per cent or less; 10 (16 per cent) stated 31 to 60 per cent; and four (six per cent) stated between 61 and 100 per cent. (The latter figures include one reporter typesetting stories and headlines on a word processing program, in specified column numbers, ready for paste-up; and a reporter who is also the editor and the compositor, thus

explaining the 100 per cent figure.)

Various comments concerning a change in basic job functions (or, in some cases, the last question asking respondents to list the chief drawbacks of using desktop) indicates there is some cognizance of the extra work and responsibilities placed on the editorial department, most of on the editor. Nineteen respondents, in fact, noted that the role of the editor and that of the reporter had undergone some degree of change with the advent of pagination, or some form thereof. One editor put it this way: "It's kind of like socialism in which the editorial department now controls the means of production. There is less time to do news, but the problems of switched headlines and cutlines no longer plagues us." Notwithstanding the respondents's sense of humour, it is interesting to note that the editor equates staff in his department to downtrodden workers. More significantly, though, we need to underscore the reference to news. Other comments conveyed a similar message:

"Much of editor's time spent doing layout, rather than more traditional duties of editor."

"Editorial staff are responsible for layout of each addition, i.e. ad placement, page count, etc. Advertising people do assist in layout."

"Too much of editor's time spent in front of computer screen."

"Cuts into editing time, as well as planning stories and talking with the community."

"[Desktop] is changing the roles of staff, i.e. less and less manual paste-up, therefore reporter does less page make-up."

"Editor has to do much more--design the page and make it up at the same time. Saves overall time in the end, but leaves less of the editor's time for other duties."

Commenting on how desktop has changed the editor's role, one stated: "From strictly a

writing position with some typing to flowing pages."

Another wrote: "The roles of editors are expanding to designing, taking time away from their first role as editors and writers."

Another: "In addition to the regular functions of an editor, i.e. editing, administration, scheduling and writing--the editor also assumes the role of compositor."

Yet others: "The editor acts as page compositor, doing news layout every Monday, all day."

"Much more hands-on page design."

One respondent elaborated that two editorial staff and one advertising person are in production one full day each week. Yet another specified that editorial staff works 1.5 days in production; advertising one day. Yet another stated that the use of computer production required the use of a "systems manager", although it was not specified whether this position is full-time, or part-time, and if so, what other functions this person performs. Interestingly, this publisher noted a 50 per cent reduction in production staff in the last five years, from eight to four.

While the change in editorial responsibilities was noted, some interpreted it in a positive light, not only because of increased efficiency, but as personal development for employees. For example: "[Desktop] allowed staff to expand responsibilities and knowledge giving everyone a better feel for what it takes to make a newspaper."

One comment reflected what may be a preoccupation with the technical aspects of pagination. "The more you learn about the program and hardware capabilities, plus the always-improving technology, the more you want to do with it. This sometimes causes frustrations for the staff, and sometimes slows down overall production."

The publisher-editor of one paper (circulation 6,000) commented that the reporter's position at his paper has become "a more technical job" and that his role as editor has changed "Because [the editor is] more involved with page layout since designing is done on the computer, and some staff [are] not computer literate enough to handle the new systems."

Small newspapers with limited staff are more restricted in consolidating job functions with desktop. The editor of one small (under 2,000) circulation paper stated: "Past experience says it's too time consuming for one person."

On the other side, some larger papers find the burden on their editorial staff too high. For example, a publisher who oversees three newspapers produced in a central plant wrote: "Full page pagination is not a viable alternative for us. We produce 60-80 pages in one-two days including ads and layout.

We find it takes twice the time to finish an ad on the computer compared to manually....Desktop has certainly made our job easier but you have to pick and choose which applications will enhance your operations. Another publisher wrote that "...unless one is very adept at pagination the process to set the editorial copy can take longer."

This tells us that unless reporters are thoroughly trained and are proficient on the software, the process can actually be slower. Publishers would like to collapse the production job into that of the editor or reporter, but only if the individuals are proficient.

As noted earlier, newspaper manager see technology primarily as contributing toward the efficiency of the enterprise, as opposed to improving journalistic content. Comments in the survey tended to back that argument. The most common response to the question asking publishers to list the advantages of desktop can be typified by the following two responses:

"Saves time and money." and "Efficiency and therefore profit."

A few publishers answering the survey were sceptical that pagination is, in fact, a panacea for the small newspaper. "Desktop' for our purposes means that reporters set their own type and eventually output it via a laser printer in galleys of formatted type. Likewise, the ad people and then the whole thing is pasted up manually. I've examined carefully the pros and cons of pagination and have determined that we cannot afford the time to dedicate an editorial person (or indeed create a discrete position) for electronic layout. In conversation with other publishers, it seems that they've undertaken the challenge of pagination as just that: a 'challenge', and freely admit that it takes some time."

Another publisher stated that "Rapid improvements in hardware and software make it difficult to keep up in light of the fact that desktop has been applied to the weeklies in such a haphazard way. The proper foundation in correct typography is being rapidly lost because of such a mish-mash of training programs aimed at getting you to drive the car, but not learning the rules of the road."

Several publishers commented, in fact, that desktop allowed them more flexibility to the extent that they were contracting out certain parts of the operation. One publisher did not answer any survey questions related to editorial matter, stating simply that all editorial work was being contracted out. Others said that desktop allowed them to move advertising employees into piece work, and away from salaries. One publisher wrote: "Desktop is used in advertising. People who run it are on straight commission so their paycheques are in proportion to revenue. This system has eliminated high-priced compositors who were paid on an hourly basis."

Another commented: "We have a plan to create ad assistant positions in which

compositors work with sales people on a wage and commission basis to prepare spec ads as well as regular ad work."

Difficulty on obtaining employees trained or experienced in pagination is listed as one of the major drawbacks of the new technology. "We don't have time to train; we are always busy with the paper" or "We are a small weekly; we tend to train and people move on" were typical comments. When asked to rate the importance of training or previous experience in desktop, nearly all of the 66 respondents who answered that question said it was either mandatory or an asset. For editors, 20 (30 per cent) considered it mandatory, while 44 (66 per cent) considered it an asset. Two (three per cent) felt it was not important. The same question pertaining to reporters brought similar responses. Ten (15 per cent) rated it as mandatory; 48 (72 per cent) felt it to be an asset; eight (12 per cent) said it was not important. Those offering explanations why they felt it important for reporters to know desktop fell into two categories: one, because reporters were required to produce pages on a regular basis; or two, because reporters would be required to fill in for the editor on occasion. For compositors, 36 (54 per cent) of respondents felt it was mandatory to know desktop; 29 (44 per cent) thought it an asset; and one person (1.5 per cent) rated it as not important.

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