From weekly newspapers to online dailies:
The transformation of Canada's community press

by

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Abstract

The speed, scope and scale by which information is transmitted have contributed to a monumental shift in the way community newsrooms operate. The Internet has given Canada's community newspapers the ability to publish online as quickly as their daily and broadcast counterparts, providing both opportunities and challenges. This study investigates how community newsrooms are adapting to a digital environment, examines media response to technological change, and assesses the long-term viability of community newspapers via an analysis of structural trends at a time when newspapers are forced to once again renegotiate their place within the evolving networked news ecology. This is, after all, not the first time newspapers have faced a so-called disruptive technology. Radio did not kill newspapers, nor will the Internet. Canada's community newspapers have a viable future, but only if there is a return to the core mandate of the weekly press, which requires meaningful investment in a multimedia newsroom.

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Glossary of Terms

Advertorial	An advertisement created to mimic the style of editorial content.
Boosterism	A story that enthusiastically promotes the subject of the piece or is highly supportive of a person, place or thing; improving public perception of the subject.
Breaking news	Immediate coverage of unexpected events or developing stories (ex. a fire).
Canned copy	Material supplied by press agents and commercial press release services (ex. generic story about how to paint a car)
Citizen journalist	Member of the general public who collects and disseminates news.
Contextualization	A story that provides context – often providing background information so readers can fully understand the story or showing how it relates to other matters.
Disruptive technology	New technology that displaces existing technologies and alters the structure of society/business.
Enterprise story	Stories a reporter proactively unearths under his/her own, without being prompted by a press releases or event.
Filler	Short generic stories or public service announcements used to fill small spaces in the printed edition where needed.
Hard news	Factual account of serious information, generally related to politics and crime (not related to entertainment or human interest stories).
Hyperlocal	Information specific to a small, well-defined geographic location, such as a specific town or neighbourhood.
Investigative story	A story on a topic of interest that is thoroughly researched, often requires a journalist to expend additional time to uncover information that is hidden, buried or obscured.
Methodless enthusiasm	A term used by Carleton University professor Dwayne Winseck to describe unordered or haphazard eagerness to utilize new technologies. The use of new technologies without thought to why or to what end the technology is being used (no strategy – using technology for the sake of technology).
Page layout	Placing editorial content on individual print pages and arranging that content in a visually appealing manner.

Penny press	Mass-produced inexpensive tabloid newspapers targeting the working class in the 1800s, sold for a penny.
Photo essay	A story told primarily through photographs with some text.
Refrigerator journalism	Intensely personal or relevant content from a newspaper that is worth clipping and hanging on a refrigerator (ex. sport team photo).
Reportage	The act or process of reporting the news; the technique of gathering information.
Scoop	An original story published by a media organization before others.
Second day lead	Advances the story by reporting new information or updates an old story by providing the reader with a new angle or most recent development.
Sensational news	Event or topic in an article is over-hyped or exaggerated.
Shovelware	Copying and pasting content from the printed edition to the website without making adjustments to reflect the capabilities of the digital medium.
Static page	A website that contains fixed content (ex. newspaper contact information).
Stenography	Writing down what sources say or repeating claims without providing (or challenging) facts or providing other context.
“Story fall through”	When a story a reporter is working on does not pan out.
Total market coverage	A freely distributed newspaper that reaches all households in the target market.
Watchdog	Journalists are often referred to as “watchdogs” because they hold public officials accountable by providing independent scrutiny of government.
Web analytics	Measurement of web data, including how many unique visitors there are to a site, how long readers stay on the site, what users are reading, etc. A means of analyzing behaviour on a website to optimize web traffic.
Wire service	A service that provides news to publications that subscribe for a fee (ex. Canadian Press).

Introduction

The past two decades have seen significant and rapid change within the media industry, particularly in the community press. The growth in the use of the Internet has given community newspapers the ability to publish as quickly as their daily and broadcast counterparts. No longer must the community journalist wait until the next print publication to disseminate information. Breaking news is now in the domain of the weekly press.

This change in publication cycle has levelled the playing field, to a point, and has changed how community journalists approach news. Breaking news, video storytelling, and real-time reporting are now available to Canada's smallest newspapers. The changes wrought by digital media have, arguably, had a more profound impact on operations at community newspapers. Once defined by their weekly publication cycle, community newspapers across the country are now daily, multimedia operations.

Regardless of this dramatic shift in the operation and function of the weekly press, the bulk of research seems to focus on daily newspapers. Yet there are hundreds of small newspapers scattered across the country, devoted to informing a large percentage of the population.

Newspapers Canada, the industry voice for the majority of newspapers in Canada, estimates there are 122 English and French daily newspapers in the country, but more than 1,000 community newspapers. Research suggests 73 per cent of Canadians read a printed daily newspaper each week while 74 per cent of Canadian adults read a

community newspaper (Newspapers Canada). Despite these figures, few scholars have examined the role and function of these smaller-scale community publications. That dearth of research has not gone unnoticed. Bill Reader noted in 2012,

Despite the contributions of several important and helpful studies over the past decades, the field of community journalism remains largely unexplored, and the depths uncharted. Scholars who are intensely interested in the role of journalism in communities should attempt to take up Riley's challenge, albeit 70-plus years after the fact, and against many entrenched institutional biases against the 'silly little papers' that dominate the journalism world (18).

The challenge he referred to came from John Winchell Riley Jr. of Rutgers University who, in 1938, wrote that "the country newspaper, consistent and detailed register though it may be, has been given very little consideration as a possible source for sociological research" (qtd. in Reader 17).

This study hopes to help fill that gap by examining the role of community newspapers in democratic social inquiry, where "community newspaper" is narrowly defined as small, locally-oriented publications serving a specific geographic region, with distribution of the print product at a frequency of no more than three times per week. This definition aims to match the concept of the "country newspaper," although community papers are not relegated to rural areas but can also be found in cities across the country. The term community paper and weekly press are used interchangeably throughout this study.

Given the number of community papers established in both urban and rural areas, much of the research contained herein uses generalizations by means of a small, representative sample. While individual newspapers face unique circumstances, the

challenges and opportunities outlined in the following chapters are generally applicable to the industry.

There has been a flurry of activity within the weekly press as newsrooms adapt and shift to a multimedia strategy, switching from a print model to a digital news operation. In an attempt to grow audience and remain relevant to a reader base that is consuming information on multiple platforms, community newspapers have dived headlong into the digital realm, establishing news websites that supply relevant information to a geographically-defined audience.

Ben Scott argued in 2002 that some of the most successful news sites provide only local news and cater to residents of particular communities or regions. Those sentiments were echoed by American media speaker and trainer Kevin Slimp in 2012, who wrote on his blog:

It probably wouldn't surprise too many people in the business to know that community papers seem to be doing better than larger papers. It also wouldn't surprise most industry professionals to hear that locally owned papers seem to be fairing [sic] better than newspapers owned by large groups.

He explained community newspaper staff members understand their communities better than anyone else, resulting in stronger sales and increased circulation. Yet community newsrooms continue to face pressures similar to those felt by their daily counterparts: budgets are being slashed, resources are diminishing, production is being centralized, and journalists are increasingly being required to multitask and provide content for multiple platforms.

Given the current trends in community newsrooms, this study proposes to (1) provide a broad understanding of the role and function of community newspapers from which to establish a baseline of analysis, (2) analyze reaction by the press to new technologies, (3) investigate how community newsrooms are adapting to a digital environment and (4) assess the long-term viability of community newspapers via an analysis of structural trends.

In general, this thesis will examine the role and function of the community press in Canada, with an emphasis on what that role looks like in a digital environment and what impact the Internet and social media has on the long-term viability of community journalism. That will include an examination of media response to technological change, historically and contemporary. Research will also identify and explore shifting community news operations in a digital environment and the impact of increased consolidation and convergence within the industry. Overall, the thesis aims to examine the technological discourse that seems to permeate journalism studies. It also seeks to determine what role community news has to play in democratic society and whether the community newspaper is a viable medium that can coexist with its online counterpart.

This study relies on both secondary and primary research sources. Secondary research consists of a literature review related to social responsibility theory, public journalism, media and technology, digital media trends, concentration of ownership, market

analyses, and an econometric analysis of a hybrid newspaper. Qualitative interviews with industry professionals form the basis of the primary research.

In some cases the author has drawn on knowledge of the weekly press from her experiences working in the industry. For over a decade the author has worked in the community newspaper industry, first as a reporter at a small town newspaper in Nova Scotia and more recently as the editor-in-chief of a group of community newspapers in Ontario. As such, the author has witnessed, first hand, many of the changes taking place at Canada's community newspapers, including newsroom restructuring and corporate acquisitions and consolidation. These events have, in part, spurred this study. It is acknowledged that one's personal experiences do not necessarily reflect the overarching trends within the industry, which is why other members of the weekly press were contacted for this project. The author took all necessary steps to avoid including participants she has worked with previously. Mention of past and current employers was unavoidable, given the nature of corporate ownership in Canada. The author has striven to provide a fair, balanced and truthful account of all available information, regardless of professional affiliation. To avoid any real or perceived conflicts of interest, the author has no previous or current relationship with the individuals or newspapers used in the case studies.

Because this project focuses on community newspapers it was a challenge to find literature and information related specifically to the field as most scholarship and studies deal with daily newspapers or alternative media. Community news does not fit

neatly into either of those categories. And what literature there is regarding the community press often includes alternative media and the ethnic press, given that the term “community” can be defined in a number of ways and, at times, quite broadly. Sometimes key data was simply unavailable. Primary research combined with the author’s personal experiences within the weekly press was used to help extract the relevant theories and analyses that applied to this study, which uses a more narrow definition of the community press.

This study starts with an examination of the role and function of community newspapers in contemporary society, including a brief historical overview of the emergence of the weekly press and how technology is intrinsic to the way media operate. Indeed, media seem to be predicated on technology, be it the press that prints the paper, the telephone used to interview sources, the truck that delivers the printed product to readers, or new technologies that have brought news to the Internet.

Community newspapers form a unique part of a reader’s larger news diet, which includes national news providers, local dailies and an assortment of media of various scales dedicated to niche markets. While community news shares similar values to other actors in the media network, namely those values associated with social responsibility, there are also differences in its role and function given its unique position within social inquiry.

At a very basic level, the weekly press focus on content relevant to a smaller number of readers connected by a shared geography, affirming a sense of community and shared

circumstance, and creating a space for discussion and thought leadership. The community press informs, educates, and entertains a geographically defined group.

Given their closeness to the community, journalists with the weekly press tend to work more closely with their readers, creating tensions not generally found in the metropolitan daily press. While community newspapers take on the responsibility of producing “a truthful, comprehensive and intelligent account of the day’s events in a context which gives them meaning” (Peterson 87), they also listen to their audience and reflect on what they hear, and respond (Mersey 126). It is this tension, borne in part from the intimate connection community journalism has with its readership, that has helped shape and define the role of community journalism within Western democratic social inquiry.

Any examination of the community press would be incomplete without exploring how technology has been used to help shape and define media and grow audience. Through a literature review, the second chapter examines the technological deterministic views that seem to pervade journalism discourse and demonstrates, through a historical account of technological change as it pertains to journalism, that the World Wide Web is evolutionary, not revolutionary, and there has been consistency throughout communication history. From the telegraph to the advent of radio to the digital medium, a common thread of speed, scope and convergence can be found.

Contemporary commentary and rhetoric regarding the news media’s reaction to the Internet suggests the industry ultimately perceives emerging technologies as a threat to

old media, specifically where advertising revenue is concerned. Yet a historical account of technological change as it pertains to journalism reveals that the impact of infant technologies is more nuanced, defined instead by contextual constraints instead of by the technology itself.

The emergence of the Internet is not the first time newspapers have faced a so-called disruptive technology. When radio entered the market, newspapers were quick to experiment with the new technology, but as it grew into an ad-supported medium, that love affair seemed to wane as the potential for radio to divert ad dollars from the printed medium slowly grew. Media reaction to the advent of the Internet mimics the story of how the industry renegotiated the power balance with the inclusion of broadcast. The emergence of radio offers lessons that are relevant to understanding the changes seen within the industry today, providing a means of determining the viability of community newspapers into the future.

While technologies themselves do not determine outcome alone, they most assuredly have an impact on the industry. The third chapter investigates the shifting function of the community journalist, starting with the switch from letterpress to offset in tandem with innovations in camera technology that allowed "reporter" to become "reporter/photographer" in the community press. It was, perhaps, the beginning of the erosion of labour specialization, where the focus on reportage has dwindled and reporters with the weekly press have seen their job descriptions fundamentally change so they are now reporters, photographers, compositors, videographers, virtual paper

carriers, and curators. Advances in technology have brought with it increased efficiencies that save time and allow journalists to do more, but community papers tend to employ fewer journalists, so many are being required to multi-task and take on additional burdens, threatening the core function of the community press.

Shifting labour patterns and use of new technologies need to be understood within the context of the media industry's structure. Canada's media landscape is constantly evolving, in part due to corporate consolidation and media concentration. The fourth chapter examines this structure, which has changed markedly in recent years as companies try to diversify in an attempt to increase profit. Acquisitions and mergers have led to increased corporate ownership across Canada's media sector, including smaller-scale community newspapers.

Part of the problem with convergence is that media companies take on high levels of debt to acquire other holdings (Edge 1267), weakening their economic foundation and increasing their vulnerability to market fluctuations. There is a caution here for community newspapers, which are increasingly under corporate ownership.

Shareholders might not be making decisions reflective of the individual markets in which these papers operate as they pursue growth and integration while increasing investments in non-print related activities. Assuming high levels of debt in an effort to diversify portfolios or making investments and redirecting resources to other business ventures might be diminishing the effectiveness of community newspapers' core product.

The final chapter tests earlier findings against two case studies. The first is an examination of operations at a successful independent community newspaper in Sudbury. *Sudbury Northern Life* not only holds to the core values that define the weekly press, it has also made an investment in itself, separating some of the specialization between print and web duties within the newsroom. What emerges is a vibrant and respected weekly with a promising future.

Meanwhile, in what appears to be a strategic retreat, Transcontinental Media's *West Island Chronicle* in Montreal's suburbs has been subjected to continued cutbacks. This tactic of slash and burn to gain (or maintain) profitability has had a detrimental impact not only on the core function of the paper, but also its viability. Burdened with numerous responsibilities and access to little or no resources, journalists at the *Chronicle* have been reduced to barely scraping together the shell of a community paper that fails to truly engage its audience in any medium.

The final chapter will bring the research together and form a conclusion based on the information and arguments presented throughout the study, suggesting the viability of community newspapers must be understood in the context of enhanced social interactions, continual shifting labour patterns, growth of media conglomerates and increasing concentration of the community press ownership in Canada. It also proposes other areas of further study related to community newspapers. In general, Canadian community newspapers have a strong future both online and offline, with some

cautions regarding structure, management and resource allocation as they renegotiate their place within the evolving networked news ecology.

Chapter 1

Role of the community press in Canada's news ecology

When examining the role of the press in contemporary society it is important to note that the press is not a single, homogenous entity. It is instead a network of information providers, each fulfilling a different role within social inquiry.

That complex network includes, but is not limited to, international and national news providers, local dailies, community newspapers, and an assortment of media of various scales dedicated to niche markets. Since communication is the cornerstone of social coordination, or as Herbert Schiller notes, it acts as societal glue (Peters 403), it is through these various formal channels of information that society functions effectively.

Within this media landscape, Canada's community press has carved for itself a specialized role, filling a need for local, relevant and engaging content.

Before any exploration of these niche papers can be undertaken, it is important to provide a working definition of what a newspaper is so as to differentiate it from other community-focused publications. In general, a newspaper informs, interprets and engages. A newspaper keeps readers informed by presenting facts and reporting on issues relevant to the community it covers. Through editorials, opinion columns and analysis, a newspaper interprets the news and provides context. The public, meanwhile, is given an opportunity to become part of the dialogue through such features as letters to the editor. Taken as a whole, these functions are an important indicator of what constitutes a newspaper (as will be examined in the case study of the *West Island Chronicle*).

To determine the role and function of the community press today, one must first review a brief history of weeklies to understand how they emerged as a distinct subset within Canada's news ecology. It is worth keeping in mind that it is an evolution predicated on technological change and innovation as well as the maturing political economy of media, where newspapering arguably shifted from being a craft to an industry. These themes have become more pronounced in recent decades and will be addressed in greater detail in later chapters.

As previously noted, there is a dearth of research specific to Canada's community papers. Most histories concentrate on the metropolitan press while their smaller cousins often receive passing mention at best, despite both daily and community newspapers sharing a common ancestry. The colonial papers that later became dailies were often started as weeklies by printers who assumed the role of editor, publisher and entrepreneur (Dykstra 1999). Community newspapers "have been and continue to be a cohesive, potent force in the small towns and cities throughout the nation" (Karolevitz 4). From colonial times, weeklies have "informed, entertained, educated and editorially led a non-metropolitan constituency with the printed word" (Karolevitz 4).

North America saw a flurry of newspaper activity in the 1700s, particularly in the American colonies where booksellers, postmasters and printers set up local gazettes that featured local news. Local reporting, however, was not refined and was "measured largely by ambition or laziness of the publisher" (Karolevitz 33). Other newspapers shipped by rail were often the source of much of the editorial content (information copied from other newspapers). It is likely this early lack of sophistication, which

survived much of the 19th century, would result in a belief that weeklies are inferior – a stereotype that persists to this day.

Newspapering in the early days was tough and many papers/printers went broke (Karolevitz 24). Sourcing materials also proved difficult, be it accessing paper or even ink. The transfer of type to paper was a slow and tedious process during those early days, when papers would often consist of just four pages crammed with text. Production and thus circulation were limited.

As colonial expansion continued, the “need to get more copies out in a greater hurry mothered technological inventions and improvements at an ever-increasing pace” (Karolevitz 35). The 1800s saw changes and modifications to the hand press that resulted in faster production of the paper; a method was discovered for making paper into a continuous sheet, paving the way to later produce paper in a roll or web; mechanical type casters were created and the commercial production of ink emerged (Karolevitz 1985). Inventions not directly related to the manufacturing of newspapers also had an impact on the evolution of the product. For example, the advent of the pencil reduced dependency on ink wells and quills, making it possible for early journalists to gather and take notes wherever news was breaking.

But it wasn’t until the mid-1800s that any meaningful strides were made with respect to the reporting and the transmission of news. The advent of the electric telegraph greatly increased the speed at which news could travel. Combined with the gradual perfection of power presses, this ability to produce newspapers faster and more efficiently set the stage for the emergence of the penny press. With its emphasis on immediacy and

scoops – in other words, fresh and exclusive news – heavy competition for readers blossomed and market divisions began. The divergence between big city dailies and the community press started to grow. It is ultimately these changes that paved the way for the community press to emerge as a distinct medium.

As daily newspapers evolved into multi-purpose publications, excelling in the dissemination of national and international news with a relatively small amount of space dedicated to local news (Cossé 4; Voisey xix), Canada's community newspapers instead maintained a focus on information of local significance. Lacking the costly news-gathering resources employed by dailies and access to wire services, it had to be the trade in local news that these smaller circulation papers pursued.

In many respects, it was "the emergence of the metropolitan daily [that] permitted the weeklies to evolve into a distinct genre" (Voisey xviii). By choosing to supply its readers with national and international news, the dailies gave up the opportunity to serve smaller communities except as a provider of more big-picture news, for much of the information contained in weeklies may be regarded as relatively unimportant in the larger scheme of world events, but is vital to those within a particular community (Cossé 4).

Community journalism focuses on news in a predominantly small, distinct geographic market, with an emphasis on information about a specific community and its residents (Reader 3). Given the difference in both scope and scale, the community press emerged not as a competitor to the nation's dailies, but instead as a supplementary, yet important part of a reader's overall news diet. This complementary role was so

entrenched in the design of the community press that some weekly and daily newspapers in the early 19th century formed a partnership and offered joint subscription rates, such as Alberta's *High River Times* (weekly) and *Calgary Herald* (daily) in the late 1920s (Voisey xx). In 2006, Transcontinental Media's Ottawa downtown weekly, *City Journal*, was distributed, in part, via Postmedia's *Ottawa Citizen*.

A 1960 study by the University of Alberta on behalf of the Canadian Weekly Newspapers Association and its Alberta division demonstrated empirically that community newspapers were just one part of readers' media consumption. Examining readership of Alberta's *Lacombe Globe*, the study noted that readers got their news from dailies and magazines as well as the *Lacombe Globe*, their local community paper.

The below chart shows the type of information a reader might look for in a daily newspaper compared with the type of information they would expect to find in their community paper. This is for demonstrative purposes only. A daily paper might cover an event or issue also covered by the local community paper if that information is seen as important or has some other broader appeal, while the community paper might cover an international event if the local community is somehow affected by it. For example, the *Annapolis Spectator* (Nova Scotia) included coverage of the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami that hit Thailand because one resident from the town successfully outran the tsunami while another was killed. In this case, the focus was on the two individuals, not the disaster itself.

INFORMATION	DAILY	WEEKLY
Hyper local news		✓
International news	✓	
Crime/court	✓	✓
Canada	✓	
Queen's Park	✓	
Local service groups		✓
Celebrity entertainment	✓	
Local theatre		✓
Professional sports	✓	
Local amateur sports		✓
Opinion	✓	✓
Travel	✓	

What set the weekly apart, though, was that it was read more thoroughly than the dailies and the newspaper was passed to other households so that its reach extended beyond its circulation (Voisey xxiii). Community newspapers are read more thoroughly due to infrequency of the printed publication, volume of stories and relevancy of content. The stories and photos contained in a community newspaper tend to impact the reader or his/her neighbours more directly than those found in other media, rendering it more personal, relevant and worth the time to read. Weekly papers generally carry less content per edition and are not replaced by a new edition each day, making it easier to hold onto the product longer and read all the articles.

Recent studies conducted on behalf of the Canadian Community Newspapers Association show similar findings. A 2015 report found that readership has remained steady, with 73 per cent of adults read a community newspaper, and two-thirds of those readers reading all or most of the publication ("Strength of Community Newspapers: Snapshot 2015" 2). Research also shows that 95 per cent of readers turn to community newspapers for information on local news and events ("Strength of Community

Newspapers: Snapshot 2015" 2). While most Canadians read community papers alongside other media, more than a third of non-urban Canadians read a community newspaper exclusively ("Strength of Community Newspapers: Snapshot 2015" 2). The bulk of those who read community newspapers exclusively can be found in Saskatchewan (42 per cent) and Northern Canada (66 per cent) where access to other media forms might be more limited ("Strength of Community Newspapers: Snapshot 2011" 2). This is related not just to the sizable rural area found in Saskatchewan, but also correlates with the number of dailies available in that province. Saskatchewan only has four dailies, compared with Alberta, which has nine dailies, commuter papers notwithstanding, thus a reader in Saskatchewan has fewer daily options to add to their news diet.

Both community newspapers and their cosmopolitan cousins share an inherent responsibility to gather and report on issues of vital interest to citizens (Steiner 21).

Canada's weekly papers are "charged with the responsibility of collecting and disseminating essential information in a tightly defined geography" (Kvarnstrom, 2013).

It is the size of the coverage area, in part, that creates for the community press its niche role, where "the weekly covers a world three (to) 30 miles wide instead of one 25,000 miles around" (Kennedy 9). While the community press shares similar values to other actors in the media network, there are also differences in its role and function given its unique position within social inquiry.

It would be erroneous to assume that the more than 1,000 community newspapers in Canada comprise a homogenous unit. Scattered across the country are rural, suburban

and urban weeklies, some independently owned and others part of small clusters under group ownership or larger corporate chains. Each offers a unique flavour, depending on its individual market and management style, and each functions within democratic social inquiry based on its individual circumstances. Yet at the core, each of these papers serves a localized area – and it is this “nearness to people” that provides a common theoretical anchor when examining the community press (Reader 3).

Social responsibility and civic engagement

On a theoretical level, community news assumes a dualistic role in society. The weekly press follows many of the tenets outlined in the U.S. by the Commission on Freedom of the Press, commonly referred to as the Hutchins Commission, in its report *A Free and Responsible Press* (Singer 5). The report examined what the proper function of media was within contemporary democracy and offered requirements for a press that wanted to remain free. The commission charged journalists with the responsibility of being truthful, comprehensive and fair (Singer 5), and open to dissenting opinions. In essence, the report leveraged the idea of news media as a public benefit over that of a self-interested business. Commonly used phrases in contemporary journalism, such as “the public’s right to know” and “the public responsibility of the press,” are rooted within the theory of social responsibility (Peterson 73).

Yet community newspapers’ closeness with its readers has necessitated a secondary role, more closely aligned with the civic journalism movement that found favour in the early 1990s, although weeklies employed these tenets long before the movement emerged. The 1990s saw increased dissatisfaction among the mainstream press with

regard to its role within democracy as it was framed by social responsibility. Under that model the press seems to act as gatekeepers and fails to directly engage its audience. Instead of a two-way dialogue with its public, the old theory led news media to “broadcast” information to a (mostly) purely receptive audience. As the old adage goes, while journalists were not telling people what to think, they were telling the public what to think about (Mersey 126). Not a full-fledged theory but instead a “journalism of conversation,” civic journalism is based on the simple but controversial premise that the purpose of the press is to promote and improve on the quality of public or civic life, not merely report on and complain about what is transpiring (Glasser and Lee 197). There is an inherent interactive dimension to public journalism where the emphasis is on maintaining a dialogue with ordinary members of the public.

Along with its smaller geographic focus, it is this secondary role that has helped set apart how community newspapers function vis-à-vis their national counterparts. That unique position was summed up by Jock Lauterer:

At their best, community newspapers satisfy a basic human craving that the big dailies can’t do, no matter how large their budgets – and that is the affirmation of the sense of community, a positive and intimate reflection of the sense of place, a stroke of our us-ness, our extended family-ness and our profound and interlocking connectedness (qtd. in Hume 76).

In other words, community newspapers leverage the role of the ordinary citizen.

“Community journalism is credited with representing, reinforcing, and even constructing community” (Steiner 21) because it speaks to, from, and about its public via its emphasis on community life and local news. This is, perhaps, why the weekly paper is often regarded as a local institution in its own right, much like “the Legion, library or fire hall”

(Kierstead, 2013). It is a space where the community comes together, connecting readers and providing them with a sense of place and perhaps even belonging, where readers see not only their neighbours, but themselves reflected on the pages of their local paper. Many community newspapers, particularly those with a main street brick-and-mortar presence, have an open door policy and readers are encouraged to share information and news that is important to them. Publishers, editors and reporters are far more accessible to readers and are generally not tucked away in an office tower behind security.

Many community newspapers include content that is suggested, requested or even submitted by people in the community, such as photos of individuals holding a cheque or stories by community columnists. The *Annapolis Spectator* featured numerous submitted columns, either written by volunteer correspondents from the outlying villages and hamlets, local service clubs, or local sports aficionados. While on a pragmatic level, the smaller staffing levels at community newspapers vis-à-vis daily newspapers often means such submissions are a potentially necessary supplement to staff-produced content (Reader 6), it also demonstrates a deference to what the community sees as newsworthy. Citizens can participate in the production of news, either directly or indirectly, which often gives them a feeling of ownership toward their community paper. (A Marxist analysis would suggest such use of free labour is a form of exploitation and not the benevolent partnership otherwise implied, but that type of critique is beyond the purview of this discussion.)

These partnerships demonstrate what Lauterer argues is the first law of community journalism, which is that there exists a fundamental and reciprocal relationship between the paper and its town.

A community newspaper cares about its community in a supportive, positive, nurturing way. The paper's own birth, history, development, welfare and future are inextricably bound up in the history and future of its community (261).

Lauterer also claims that community newspapers also act as adviser, booster, supporter, advocate and mirror to the community (261). It is incumbent upon the paper to be "accurate, unflinching yet benevolent" (Lauterer 261).

It is, perhaps, this emphasis on benevolence and nurturing that has historically seen community newspapers portrayed as the media industry's poor cousins. While Lauterer appears to be extolling the virtues of community news as a means of connecting society at a most basic level – via reinforcement of community identity – he also appears to be advocating a model where weeklies become promoters for their community, presenting social, political and economic material with a positive spin that provides a skewed narrative.

It is this very model others have found faulty. Kenneth R. Byerly, who is credited with coining the term "community journalism," wrote in 1961:

Community newspapers today are burgeoning in big city and suburban areas and have new strength in small cities and towns. They offer much in employment, satisfaction, income, service, and ownership. A reason for the success of these ... newspapers is their "friendly neighbor" relationship with readers. This affinity also creates problems for community newspapers which differ from those of metropolitan press (qtd. in Reader 5).

Critics of community journalism argue that it is this very idea of the friendly neighbour relationship that threatens the journalistic independence of community newspapers. It is argued that nearness to the community leads to “timidity and laziness” lest the journalist offend his or her neighbours with aggressive reporting of community conflicts (Reader 9). Labels such as “boosterism” (enthusiastic promotion of something) and “refrigerator journalism” (intensely personal content that affects only a few people, such as a team photo) often permeate discussions regarding community newspapers, where the community newspaper is described as a thinly veiled advertising medium with little news.

Bill Reader suggests the “persistent myth” that small-town journalism is substandard compared with larger papers is in part due to a scathing rebuke about the lazy country editor that media critic Ben Bagdikian wrote about in *Harper’s Magazine* in 1964 (Reader 9). Perhaps in response to Byerly’s assertion in 1961 that “weeklies are the last stronghold of personal journalism in America” (26), Bagdikian described weeklies (and most small dailies) as the “backyard of the trade, repositories for any piece of journalistic junk tossed over the fence” where canned copy and “commercial pluggery” are often found on the pages of smaller circulation papers (102). Even Lauterer, who is considered an advocate of community journalism, levied strong criticism against the community press when, in 2006, he wrote:

Many small-town papers seem to attract and harbor the washed-up derelicts of our business; community papers at their worst become sort of a stale backwater for the flotsam and jetsam of journalism. This results in poor management, terrible writing and uninspired photography: a community paper that resembles the journalistic version of a zombie. It just keeps coming at you, dead or not (44).

While journalists with sub-par performance can be found in community news, so, too, can they be found elsewhere in the industry, just as each profession or trade has its superstars and its “flotsam and jetsam.” This is not a characteristic unique to community newspapers. The difference, however, is in the size of the newsrooms. A poor performer can hide more easily in a large metropolitan newsroom. That same journalist working at a community newspaper will stick out because that one individual could comprise half or even the entire staff at a small paper.

Many journalists working for the community press do not shy away from controversy. A glance at the winners list at industry competitions demonstrates that reporters at weekly papers are investigating local matters to get to the truth and keep watch over abuses of power, challenging the status quo and promoting discussion about controversial societal issues. The thrice-weekly *Brampton Guardian* in Ontario, for example, won an Ontario Community Newspaper Award for uncovering spending irregularities by councillors and the mayor, using documents obtained through access to Access of Information. The series of stories not only angered the community and arguably led to the incumbent mayor losing the 2013 election, but also resulted in a series of integrity reports and a change in bureaucratic leadership at the city. Metroland Media’s flagship paper, *The Mississauga News* (Ontario), earned accolades from the Local Media Association (formerly the Suburban Newspapers of America) for a series in 2013 that explored the prevalence of racism in the community.

Canada's community newspapers tell difficult stories that are relevant to the communities they serve, focusing on issues that affect the geographic area they cover. These stories often have a tightly focused approach as they are tailored to the specific needs and circumstances of a particular area at a particular time. In these cases, concepts such as "the public's right to know," are the overriding concern. When working at a Victoria, British Columbia, weekly, reporter Rebecca Aldous received a tip that the government was funnelling interest from an account that funds victim services to its capital budget. While it wasn't a large sum, it was having an impact on victim services, which was struggling with cutbacks (Aldous, 2013). It took her almost a year to research and uncover the story via information requests between her other duties, but she persisted and eventually broke the story.

In 2013, The *Victoria News* in British Columbia opted to cover Pride Week with a story about lesbian seniors who have a fear of going into long-term care homes or facilities in the area because they are not what they consider queer friendly (Descoteau, 2013). The newspaper could have decided to simply run photographs from the various Pride Week events, but instead chose to feature an enterprise piece about perceived persecution that touches the lives of those in the community.

There are numerous other examples of weeklies tackling difficult stories. Investigative and hard hitting news is one of the cornerstones of good community journalism, as evidenced by the many awards handed out by various media associations each year at both the regional and national levels.

The Canadian Community Newspapers Association's 2015 winner's book highlights some of the important reporting that is taking place by community journalists. Winners included a four-part series on recidivism in Ontario, another four-part investigative series on marine health (or lack thereof) in British Columbia, a feature on drug addiction, a report on Ottawa's overcrowded jail, and a series on teen pregnancy. These are but some examples of journalists digging into issues that affect their communities and, as one judge said, "they were not relying on officialdom for their answers" (Canadian Community Newspaper Awards 2015).

Many journalists employed at community newspapers hold to the basic tenets of the craft, where providing readers with a truthful, comprehensive account of issues is a priority. That they work at a smaller paper is only relevant in terms of the resources they have available to do their job. The publication frequency of a newspaper is not the determining factor in how a journalist approaches news.

Some of the criticism regarding the weeklies comes, in part, because the community press has historically been viewed as the training ground for the nation's future journalists, a perception that has slowly changed. There are a number of journalists "being retained in the industry and a lot of skills being shared throughout the industry" (Hinds, 2013).

Weeklies are focused on items of significance within a specific geography, thus the content tends to be less sensational and less urgent. A community newspaper edition might not carry a heavy hitting news exposé or an investigative piece because there is no need for that in a particular area at that time (Kvarnstrom, 2013). While such work

happens in community newspapers, it happens less frequently or is interspersed with grassroots content.

Smaller community-centric stories carry important details that matter to those whose life is touched by them in some small measure. It not only informs readers about the goings on in their community, it also helps build a sense of connectedness. In 1996

David Rooney, then editor of Alberta's *Banff Crag & Canyon*, noted:

Not everyone who reads a paper is a politician or a high-powered businessman. Most people's concerns are very ordinary – what the kids are doing, the school plays, the rummage sales, though that's not the only kind of thing a good weekly covers (Sheppard).

Charged with keeping the community informed and its people connected, it is only natural that some content found in community newspapers favours that which has relevance to a very specific group – a group defined by geography or an even smaller group within that localized setting. Content concerned with rummage sales, youth sports or the local Lions Club is inherently informational. "It might not seem like a bake sale is a big deal, but on the other hand they're raising money to keep something open" (Killen, 2013).

This focus on local content makes it difficult for community papers to use canned copy to any great extent. The news carried in weeklies needs to be relevant to a very specific readership, which is challenging if not impossible to maintain with the use of generic copy. All of those who work within Canada's community newspaper industry who were contacted for this research project were emphatic that the news found in the community press is primarily locally generated. Communications companies have asked

the Ontario Community Newspapers Association why they cannot get community newspapers to publish their press releases (Lannan, 2013). The answer is that space is at a premium and “99 per cent of what they publish totally relates to their community” (Lannan, 2013).

There are, of course, exceptions to the use of generic material. Special sections and newspaper supplements, such as those devoted to gardening or weddings, will generally use generic canned copy (Lannan, 2013). There are also some chains that share content across papers that are under the corporate umbrella (Hinds). But for the most part editors say if it does not impact the community they do not have room for the content (Lannan, 2013).

Weeklies sometimes feature profiles of local businesses, which are often an important part of the social, political and economic fabric of a town. If a business celebrates its 30th anniversary, the *Eastern Graphic* in Prince Edward Island will build an advertising feature around that (MacNeill, 2013). “There are real stories there to be told about real individuals who’ve worked hard for 30 years. Everybody who sells a widget has an interesting story to tell” (MacNeill, 2013). Sharing stories of those in a community and reflecting the community back on itself is the basis of community journalism. The key, of course, is to differentiate between news and advertising and maintain a consistent practice. That 30th anniversary might be news, but if that same business were holding a sale it would be an ad.

It is curious that terms such as “boosterism” and “commercial pluggery” appear to be aimed at the community press in particular. Other media are not without their share of

such content. Many daily papers devote entire sections to food, entertainment, automotive and travel. What are those, if not thinly veiled advertising supplements? Indeed, dailies are not immune to blurring the lines between advertising and journalism. More recently there has been a proliferation of “native” advertising among the dailies, particularly online, including at the venerable *New York Times*. Native advertising is a type of marketing that is camouflaged as editorial content. While it generally carries an “advertisement” or “sponsored by” tag in small print, it has raised concerns about muddying the distinctions between editorial and advertising.

The weaknesses found at the community press are equally applicable to papers of all sizes, regardless of distribution cycle. Tensions between advertising and editorial have always been at play and the needs of one often test the limits of the other. How often a newspaper publishes a print edition does not, in and of itself, define editorial integrity, just as it is not a hallmark of editorial excellence. Daily or weekly, both face the same underlying challenges when it comes to maintaining editorial independence, just as both must balance the need to preserve a certain standard while also being mindful of the profit motivations that guide decision making when it comes to advertising and marketing.

Meanwhile, the term “refrigerator journalism” need not always be disparaging because “if people think enough of what you do to put it on a refrigerator, you’ve connected with them” (John Neibergall, qtd. in Sheppard). Through such stories, weeklies “speak to, from and about the community” they serve, bringing people together with a shared

frame of reference (Steiner 21). This means local stories with local appeal can take precedence over sensational or hard news.

A reporter at an independent community newspaper in Quebec who requested anonymity notes that the first year he ran the small town paper he used what he had learned from journalism school, namely if it bleeds, it leads. Crime and hard news ran on the front page for about four months straight. He said he noticed a reaction from the community. While readers wanted to see the crime reports and hard news specific to their locality, they did not necessarily want to see it “over written” or splashed across the front page week after week. Readers expected to also see features about their children, their neighbours, and positive stories coming out of their community. It was a revelation to the reporter, who discovered that for the weekly where he works, editorial content is ultimately about striking a balance between offering readers really good hard hitting exposés as well as photos from the local tyke soccer match.

Community watchdogs

Not only do community newspapers take on the responsibility of producing “a truthful, comprehensive and intelligent account of the day’s events in a context which gives them meaning” (Peterson 88) they also perform a watchdog function. Weeklies cover their local governments and boards, holding public officials accountable. Many of Quebec’s community newspapers put pressure on the provincial government regarding its controversial language Bill 14 (Tardif, 2013).

Lauterer argues that, at times, the newspaper must function as a “tough love counselor and report on matters the community may not want to hear but needs to be exposed

to” (260). To remain relevant, community newspapers must publish all the news, whether it is good or bad. After all, in smaller communities it will not take long for the audience to notice important omissions from their local community newspaper, which would ultimately lead to questions of what else is being intentionally left out.

“Community newspapers must be prepared to print all the news if they are to survive” (Pumarlo 10).

In many communities, particularly in Canada’s small towns and rural areas, community newspapers are the only media filling a watchdog function. Most small councils and school boards are all but ignored by larger media unless something sensational is happening. It is the community press that holds these public bodies to account. The *Eastern Graphic* in Prince Edward Island, for example, is the only paper that “gives a damn about King’s County. If you go to Whitewood, Saskatchewan, the *Whitewood Herald* is the only paper in the world that cares about Whitewood ... the *Powell River Peak* cares exclusively about Powell River [British Columbia]” (Kvarnstrom, 2013). *High River Times* associate editor Marco Vigliotti says he remembers covering three councils at the first community newspaper he worked for and if he was not there for all three, no one would know what happened because he was the only newspaper reporting on what was taking place. Sometimes, other community newspapers will be present if there is overlap in geographic coverage or the town can sustain more than one weekly, or the local radio station and perhaps even other media might cover a meeting if something titillating is on the agenda, but, with the exception of urban and suburban weeklies where a local daily or even national newspaper will cover local councils and boards, it is

generally one reporter from one community newspaper who consistently attends and holds accountable municipal councils and public boards. As Quebec Community Newspapers Association executive director Richard Tardif explains, “If you’re in Wakefield, Quebec, and you’re worried about your ... taxes going up a certain amount, who’s going to cover that aside from your local paper?” (2013).

Community-centric approach

Sometimes weeklies opt to approach difficult stories in a distinct way, using community as the focal point. A reporter in Quebec recalls a time when a child was murdered by a parent and the area was “swarming with” national media reporters, which angered some members of the community. Because the weekly paper was not publishing for a few days, it could take a step back from the media frenzy. The move gave those involved a chance to see that the local paper was being sensitive, so they shared their stories and spoke with the newspaper when the reporter returned to do the story. The paper offered readers a feature on mental health issues in the community, how to talk to children about what had happened and an examination of how youth and the local school were coping with the murder of a friend. “We just went bigger and more community-based on that story instead of just a quick hit, like murder, blood ... that’s obviously part of the story, but we focused on the community and how it actually impacted them,” the reporter recalls.

It is not unusual for some in the community press to approach sensational stories in such a manner. Such an approach is perhaps a result of their “friendly neighbour” relationship with the community; however, the publication cycle has historically

provided community journalists with the opportunity to file a different sort of story. The approach is also born from necessity. Sensational news is likely to draw the attention of other media, be it national dailies, local radio or broadcast, that has a faster distribution cycle (at least historically). Word-of-mouth is also another carrier of information (and misinformation), particularly in tight geographic locations. The printed edition of the local weekly might not be available for days or even a week after the initial event. To remain relevant and avoid printing stale news, weeklies must find a fresh angle, which often results in a community-based story that adds new information. Use of the World Wide Web, hailed as a great equalizer in that it gives weeklies the ability to distribute information in a timely manner, has resulted in some shift in the approach to news by the community press. Those changes and their potential impact on the role and function of community newspapers will be discussed in the following chapters.

A community-focused approach can be a great strength, but it can prove to be a restraint as well. Community reporters' nearness to people can result in journalists being less forthcoming about information that is embarrassing or harmful to individual community members (Reader 3). For some, it can be difficult to criticize a mayor or councillor or even a particular situation because those involved are neighbours or people the reporter has known all of his or her life and they are friends (Charles A. Clark qtd. in Voisey xxvii).

This is particularly problematic in smaller communities. Reporters will often interact outside work with the people they write about. Sources and officials become part of a journalist's social circle, potentially attending birthdays, weddings, seasonal house

parties or all manner of non-work related functions together. Their children might attend school together, play on the same team, or be best friends who visit one another's homes often. For community journalists, anonymity is rarely an option. Reporters learn to cope with people yelling at them during public meetings because there is always some expectation that a journalist will at some point in their career be called out by angry or disgruntled individuals while on the job. But suddenly being unwelcome at a neighbour's Christmas party can be more difficult to overcome. Journalists at community newspapers report being accosted while grocery shopping or while attending an event with their young children because of a story they wrote. It can be all too easy to allow the threat of being ostracized by one's social circle to affect one's professional news judgment. No one wants to be friendless and alone, thus it can have a chilling effect. Knowing a story will adversely affect one's personal life can lead to more timid reporting, which in turn leads to significant problems where bias and favouritism come into play. Unflattering stories might be glossed over or ignored entirely, resulting in a skewed presentation of what is happening, bringing the credibility of the paper (and the individual journalist) into question.

Not all journalists are able to cope with this closeness to their community. They will sometimes cloak their reticence under the guise of being more accountable to individuals within the community. When journalists allow the potential impact on their personal life to interfere with their independence, they are no longer effective at providing an objective and truthful account. They become compromised.

Many community journalists are acutely aware of the delicate balance between objectivity and their closeness to their community and have found ways to overcome the difficulties in some measure. Some mitigate the problem by choosing to live outside the community they cover (Killen, Tardif, Vigliotti), making a clear separation between their personal and professional selves. This is not an option for all reporters, though, particularly those covering remote communities or those working for papers that expect their staff to live in the community.

Staff at the *Lunenburg County Progress Bulletin*, meanwhile, have the option of handing off an assignment which they are not comfortable covering. This is possible because the independent paper employs five full-time reporters and an editor. The paper's publisher, Lynne Hennigar, explains staff sometimes exchange assignments because they are involved with a local organization.

I know some community newspapers just don't allow their staff to become as involved in their communities. We felt that we're an integral part of our communities and we need to be involved and we don't feel it's necessary to limit staff in terms of their involvement. It's meant some juggling but I think we manage it quite well (Hennigar, 2013).

Six editorial staff allows reporters to trade stories, but those who work for community papers with fewer staff often do not have the option of handing a story to a colleague. Their ability to fully participate as a citizen is thus constrained by their work responsibilities. Aldous, who works for a paper that employs two reporters and an editor, says there are a number of committees and organizations she would like to be involved with but she does not take part. "I'm aware there could be conflicts and I

wouldn't be able to write about certain things and because we have such a small newsroom there's really no one else to fill the gap. That's difficult" (Aldous, 2013). Reporting on the community in which she lives has not meant Aldous avoids difficult stories involving those who might be neighbours or friends. Aldous knows who will be upset by what she writes, but that does not stop her. It does, however, make her check the information more carefully. The stories "affect people's lives and you see that so you have to have your [information] dead on, otherwise it's in your face" (Aldous, 2013). Separating one's independence as a professional journalist with one's personal life is a difficult balance each community newspaper journalist must deal with to the best of their ability. It is not always easy to distance oneself from the community to which one belongs, and it takes a certain amount of self-awareness to manage, but it is possible. It is important to note this is also not an obstacle unique to community journalists. Beat reporters at daily papers often face similar conflicts as they develop sources over a long period of time and potentially even befriend those individuals. Political reporters, for example, start to socialize in certain circles, developing both professional and personal contacts. They, too, must also report, without hesitation, on the people they work with on a daily basis and socialize with outside working hours. Where community is defined by geography for weekly reporters, it is defined by specialization in the daily world, and both can carry with it the tension of trying to be a "friendly neighbour" while also undertaking the job of being a dispassionate journalist. Being close to the community does not change the news, but instead makes the job harder for individual editorial staff, for "in the earnest struggle to influence men's

minds, obtain their business and publish their news, you must alienate some” (Kennedy 7). One Quebec reporter says he has lost friends and has gained others during his years reporting at a community paper and “it’s just about having a thick skin and realizing that it’s your job.” The community press is not for the faint of heart, but journalism in general has never been a haven for the timid.

Not all criticism stems from the inclusion of grassroots news items or the paper’s closeness to its community. Some point to a lack of critical reflection as a shortcoming shared by many community newspapers. Linda Steiner argues that owners of weeklies, who are increasingly chain media organizations instead of independents, rarely spend money, and will rarely risk ad revenue to probe local tensions and deep seated problems (22).

For small publications, a threat by one business owner to pull their advertising can have a significant impact on the bottom line. Where dailies enjoy a healthy volume of advertisers and are not reliant on one expensive ad, the loss of a full page ad at a smaller paper can have a far greater impact on revenue. A threat by a local business to pull their ad because they are unhappy with the editorial coverage can cause considerable tensions between the newsroom and advertising and/or the publisher. Advertisers might have some measure of influence at some community newspapers, but they do not necessarily dictate content, as Tim Shoults, publisher of the *Squamish Chief* (B.C.), explains:

I’m as cautious about offending advertisers as I am of offending any reader. We are a community newspaper with a limited advertiser base, not a big-city daily, and it’s foolhardy to pretend that we can bite the hands that feed us with impunity.

On the other hand, our advertisers want us because of our readers, and our readers want us to report the news fairly – and in a small town, word travels fast if you start suppressing stories for your clients without good reason. That means that we have to maintain our integrity even at the cost of an advertiser – a cost which is generally temporary (qtd. in Moore).

A 2003 survey of community newspaper publishers and editors by Newspapers Canada suggests advertisers do not dictate content, although they might force newsrooms to defend against questions of whether the information is a matter of public interest. The threat (or potential threat) by advertisers leads some to tread carefully, particularly where business stories are concerned. “The public interest value of the story has to be carefully measured to avoid unfairly maligning a business,” says Tony Richards, publisher of British Columbia’s Gulf Islands *Driftwood* (Moore).

Community newspapers are, perhaps, more cautious when advertising considerations are affected by editorial content. Many community papers report responsibly on tough local issues. Many community newspapers both engage with their audience and fight for the public’s right to be informed. “For every pandering publisher, they say, there’s at least one principled one who is unmoved by local pressures” (Sheppard).

Conclusion

In 1952, Morris Janowitz found that community media was centred on social and personal news, local volunteer associations, municipal services and community involvement (Steiner 21). Those findings are still relevant. Evidence today suggests many small, locally-oriented publications also gather and report on issues of vital interest to citizens.

Just as government transparency and accountability are vital components to any working democracy, so, too, is a free, responsible and responsive press at all levels of society. The community press serves that function at the local level. Weeklies can be the primary source of local coverage for readers. They do not provide breaking news at the provincial, national or international level and “nor should they” (Lauterer 43), but they do serve as a watchdog for the small municipalities across Canada. They are a supporter of that which needs to be supported; these papers provide a voice of clarity and challenge the status quo.

Community papers can stimulate thinking, particularly on local problems and projects, report local news items that do not appear in other papers or report details of local news stories that are not included in stories run by other media (Byerly 5), all the while respecting the intimacy between the paper and the community (MacNeill, 2013).

Whether covering high school graduations, snapping photos of cheque presentations, analyzing health documents, filing Access to Information requests, or partnering with volunteer groups, community journalism plays an important role in democratic social inquiry. Its impact is lasting because a photo lacking mass appeal endures on someone’s refrigerator or because a city established proactive disclosure of politicians’ expense accounts and a lobby registry in response to a series of investigative articles. It is this balance as community advocate and community watchdog that has helped shape and define the role of community journalism in Canada.

Chapter 2

Media and new technology: Renegotiating the balance of power

Society has become increasingly interconnected through technological innovation, changing the communication landscape and bringing information to people faster in a world that is virtually closer. This change has created an increasingly interdependent public sphere. Perhaps at the nexus of this network is the press, where journalists are both senders and receivers of vast amounts of linked information at unprecedented speeds. This shift in the information economy brings both opportunities and challenges.

Contemporary commentary and rhetoric regarding the news media's reaction to the Internet suggests that, after initial enthusiasm, emerging technologies are perceived to be a threat to old media, leading to fragmentation and lost revenue. Yet a historical interrogation of how journalism has responded to technological change in the past demonstrates that the approach is more nuanced, with emerging technologies defined by contextual constraints instead of by the technology itself. New technology does not supplant traditional media, and it is non-technological factors that have a significant impact on revenue.

In his book *The Vanishing Newspaper*, Philip Meyer predicts that the last newspaper will be printed sometime in 2043. Although during a talk he gave at the 2011 Canadian Association of Journalists conference in Ottawa, he cautioned that such a prediction was not to be taken literally, his point was clear: the future of the printed newspaper is bleak.

This sentiment is echoed by those who control media organizations. “Newspapers across the world have been impacted in the last 10 years by the introduction of new technologies, changing dramatically the incumbents of printing products,” Quebecor’s then-chief executive officer Pierre Karl Peladeau said after the organization announced it was cutting 10 per cent of its workforce (LaSalle). After announcing its own layoffs earlier in 2012, in an internal memo to its staff Postmedia indicated it was aiming to reduce print-related costs and instead focus investments on digital platforms.

Those at the front lines of the industry – journalists themselves – also often point to technology as the cause of change (or even upset) within their industry. Anyone who has worked in a newsroom and witnessed first-hand restructuring efforts, or in the case of this author been forced to manage such change, can attest to the fact that such reorganization of editorial duties is often predicated on technological change, as exemplified by the above-noted quote by Quebecor’s CEO. Industry professionals invoke technology as a self-sufficient explanatory factor for the changes that are occurring (Örnebring 58).

It is not surprising that such beliefs permeate the industry since much of the discourse within journalism seems to have been preoccupied with this same line of technological determinism, a theory that presumes technology defines the structure. Using this viewpoint, many in the industry focus on the impact technology has on news media and the structural transformation of the public sphere. Often it is described as having a negative impact, where new media is seen as supplanting traditional forms of

journalism. The arguments frequently pit old and new against one another. Henrik Örnebring, professor of media and communication at Karlstad University in Sweden, notes that some theorists and commentators in journalism studies took a deterministic stance in the early days of the Internet, referring specifically to McNair, Negroponte, Welch and Pavlik (Örnebring). John Pavlik, for example, argues “journalism has always been shaped by technology” and the distribution of information “has been enabled, if not often driven, by technological advances” (Pavlik 229).

But other scholarship challenges notions that technological change has a revolutionary effect on the press. Brian Winston argues that change is less revolutionary and more evolutionary and that Western civilization has fundamentally displayed continuity despite enormous changes to detail over the past three centuries (374). On a fundamental level, the role of news media remain the same – to inform the public – but the way in which media undertake that function has changed as new distribution models and techniques become available. Technology is most assuredly a factor in how processes within news media have changed, but it is not an independent variable. The emergence of new technology must be understood within the social, political and economic context of the day, which can influence use, form and function.

The first misconception that must be addressed is that of sudden technological development. In actuality, innovation tends to be incremental, building on existing technologies. The electric telegraph was the next step in communication following the semaphore telegraph (using visual signals to convey information) that had been in place

since 1794, and only came about following “gradual experiments with electricity” (Blondheim 305). The telegraph was conceived of three decades before its debut, while a Frenchman hypothesized the telephone in 1854, 20 years before Bell (Winston 374).

The success of the electric telegraph, meanwhile, depended not only on it working as intended, but also in being a useful instrument as a means of communication with enough users to render it financially viable (Blondheim 305). In other words, it had to fit into the existing political, social and economic framework. Some of those first users of the telegraph were newspapers, whose industry relied on the speedy accumulation of information.

Having made use of pony expresses, carrier pigeons, steamers and even optical telegraphy, newspapers were trying to gain a competitive advantage over their counterparts before the electric telegraph emerged (Blondheim 305; Standage 228). Newspaper publishers weren’t just the first investors in the electric telegraph, they were the most generous, “providing the largest source of revenue, and establishing organizations such as the Associated Press ... to exploit the potentials of electronic communication” (Winseck 140). The advent of this newer technology was but a continuation of what the press was already doing: vying for faster ways to gather information as a means of competing against other newspapers.

Regardless of the nuances associated with the development and adoption of new technologies, the advent of the Internet has produced much speculation about whether print has a viable future. The Internet is often referred to as a disruptive technology,

that is, a new technology that disrupts the market and ultimately displaces earlier technologies. In the case of the Internet, it is described as disrupting the media industry and, some argue, displacing print media.

This is not the first time the industry has been preoccupied with the death of print, just as this is not the first time newspapers have faced a so-called disruptive technology. History suggests print media has proven to be remarkably resilient when faced with innovation that shows signs of being disruptive. News media response to emerging technologies is far more complex than technological determinism might suggest. Instead of “old media” being threatened by “new media,” there is a far more differentiated response.

An examination of the impact radio had on print, and the newspaper industry’s influence over the use of radio, demonstrates there are parallels to be found between the emergence of broadcast and the more recent proliferation of digital media. Information regarding the so-called Radio-Press War and the later adoption of Internet technologies occupies itself with dailies, yet community newspapers were not entirely immune to shifting media consumption patterns and the perceived threat of emerging technologies. Radio was also a nuisance to weeklies, as Karolevitz notes in his book documenting the history of America’s weekly press, and the Internet has become an integral part of community newsrooms across the country. The patterns outlined below are assumed to thus mimic, to some extent, the situation at community newspapers, which ultimately faced off against local, community radio and later embraced the

Internet. It is this history that can provide a means of determining the future of printed newspapers and the news media's relationship with new technology.

The emergence of radio

Radio's emergence and the subsequent so-called Press-Radio War of the 1930s highlights how market influences played a significant role not only in newspaper revenue, but also how an infant technology was utilized. The 1920s and 1930s was punctuated by intra-industry conflict, which perhaps better defined the role of media in the news ecology than the emergence of a new technology.

The decades that led to the maturation of news radio saw competition of different kinds at various levels ebb, flow and overlap (Allen 51). Just as the telegraph and press were intertwined through cross-ownership and functional interdependence based on the shared uses of technology (Winseck 140), newspapers and broadcast radio were also intertwined to varying degrees. Radio did not emerge fully autonomous from newspapers.

From the beginning, some newspapers were involved with broadcasting, forming an interdependent relationship with the new medium. The adoption of new technologies has always been part of the newspaper business. "Indeed, for over ninety years newspapers have had to deal with the steady incursion of new technologies," which can even stretch back another 60 or so years to deal with the rise of the telegraph in the early- to mid-19th century (Winseck 2).

Even before the electric telegraph gained dominance as a means of faster communication over great distances, newspaper owners experimented with and implemented new technologies, often to their advantage. Steamboats, stage coaches and turnpikes helped hasten the flow of news (Blondheim 305). Gutenberg's 15th-century press was modified and improved upon, which eventually led to the introduction of the steam press that could make more copies of the newspaper cheaply, leading to the proliferation of the American penny press in the 1830s (Stamm 256).

Newspapers, meanwhile, were the telegraph's first patron. The second telegraphic message sent from Washington to Baltimore after initial tests was, "Have you any news" (Blondheim 305; Standage 228). Technological change was less a threat to established media and more a means of gaining an advantage in a highly competitive environment that dealt with a perishable commodity, namely news. Competition was so fierce, in fact, there were instances where telegraph lines were cut to prevent rivals from sending news to their papers (Blondheim 305). The press was willing to put a lot of resources into controlling the flow of information, specifically foreign news. Penny press editor Horace Greeley best explained the rationale behind such fierce competition when he noted, "The public are apt to take the paper which has the first news" (Blondheim 23).

Thus it should not come as a surprise that some newspapers chose to take advantage of radio when it emerged. Radio, after all, presented a new opportunity because it opened up a separate mass distribution channel to the public (Stamm 256). Owners of the *Parkersburg Sentinel* and *Parkersburg News* (West Virginia) had been looking for ways to

expand their public service function even before radio came on the scene, sending men wearing advertisements to the field next to their plant with megaphones to announce such items as sports scores (Stamm 256). Broadcast, then, was but an extension of what the newspaper was already doing. It changed the scope and scale of news dissemination, but not the inherent function of those standing outside with megaphones passing information on to the gathered crowd who chose to “tune in.” The Parkersburg papers weren’t the only newspapers to adopt broadcasting in the early days. Newspapers were among the first American radio pioneers, owning more than 10 per cent of the total number of stations in 1923 (McChesney).

In Canada, many of the largest and most powerful newspapers took to the airwaves in the 1920s, including Montreal’s *La Press*, the *Toronto Daily Star*, *Globe*, *Mail and Empire*, *Telegram*, the *Vancouver Sun* and *Province*, among others, including some smaller papers (Allen 51).

Many newspapers used radio as a promotional tool for their printed product (not unlike the use of the Internet in its early years by news media). The *Regina Leader* (Saskatchewan) used a mixed-medium called radiographing to send radio reports to remote locations which were transcribed and then posted on bulletin boards. The purpose was to promote the newspaper, or as the *Leader* later put it, “The policy of this paper was to radiograph just enough to leave the people in suspense and make them buy papers” (Allen 52). Hearst’s *San Francisco Examiner* would print charts in the late 1920s that football fans could use as a visual accompaniment to the company’s radio

broadcasts, which proved to be a “great promotion stunt” (Stamm 11). In 1933, Canadian Press general manager J. F. B. Livesay wrote to his members reminding them of radio’s role vis-à-vis newspapers:

The general principle is the report broadcast be of a nature to whet the public appetite rather than satiate it. The broadcast should give a good general idea of the result of the election but the listener would have to fill in the story from the published print (Webb 367).

Ultimately, it seems radio was initially viewed as a means of promoting and leveraging the status of the incumbent media, much like the Internet when it was first used by newspapers. At the same time, some newspaper publishers were stepping into the realm of broadcasting, shifting from a newspaper business model to a news business model based on a multimedia approach (Stamm 256). This evolution in media convergence would come to play a role in the future structure of the news media industry, both in terms of the emergence of radio as well as the advent of television in the mid-20th century and the Internet later in the same century, as news businesses brought these various media under one network. Historian David Nasaw noted, “Decades before synergy became a corporate cliché, Hearst put the concept into practice” (qtd. in Stamm 256).

In the early 1920s, radio was “greeted as an exciting new toy” and newspapers were not hostile to the new medium that they actually helped promote (Karolevitz 134). Robert McChesney calls most of the 1920s a honeymoon period with the emerging broadcast industry (McChesney). During this time, the broadcast industry received encouragement and free publicity from newspapers via program listings, suggesting this first decade was

one of co-operation and ambivalence toward an infant technology whose potential had not yet come to be fully understood:

During the 1920's [sic], when radio was in its early developmental stages, broadcasting stations had either the active cooperation or the complete disregard of the newspaper industry. Few publishers were aware of radio's capacity to obtain advertising support and to rival the press in the distribution of news. Publishers owning radio stations usually operated them for the purpose of advertising the affiliated newspaper (Chester 253).

However, radio also had the potential to threaten the role of newspapers as the dominant provider of news, something that was not completely lost on these early adopters, who saw both opportunity and challenge in broadcast. In addition, not all newspapers responded eagerly and strategically (Stamm 256). This political tension helped influence the direction radio would take, at least in the short term.

Attempts to control this newest medium were most evident in the way the Associated Press and Canadian Press created policies in reaction to radio news. It is important to note that many of these tensions were not the product of a homogenous group of newspapers trying to rein in radio, but was instead a tension borne from a differentiated group of newspapers with varying degrees of interest and power in broadcast news, from those that owned stations, were affiliated with stations, or had no partnership with broadcast. "The most important line of conflict was not *between* press and radio. Instead it was competition among newspapers *over* the spoils offered by radio" (Stamm 256).

Between 1922 and 1931 CP adopted a series of ad hoc policies related to radio, creating a general policy that specified news already published in a CP member's paper could be

broadcast on stations owned or partnered with the newspaper, within time-based restrictions that matched those of the member newspapers (Allen 53). These time restrictions were, in fact, a continuation of an existing structure, where newspapers were designated as either a morning or afternoon paper. In effect, members of the press were attempting to place the new medium within the existing newspaper structure (arguably seen again with the emergence of the Internet).

These policies emerged from a belief, at least by some in the industry, that hearing free news broadcast before newspapers were distributed lowered the value of printed news (a common refrain when newspapers first started publishing online). The concern was that radio was scooping its print counterparts.

The situation south of the border was similar, although the rules imposed on radio were more restrictive and the structure more complex. In 1931, George B. Dolliver, publisher of the *Battle Creek Moon Journal* (Michigan) said that “radio ... has become a keen competitor to the daily newspapers and a genuine nuisance to the weeklies” (Karolevitz 135).

These concerns regarding radio’s impact on the hegemony of the printed word intensified at the same time broadcasting quickly grew into its “modern status as a network-dominated, advertising-supported medium” (McChesney). Radio saw a 90-percent increase in advertising revenues between 1929 and 1931 while newspaper ad sales dropped (McChesney). Newspapers’ advertising revenue dropped from \$800 million in 1929 to \$490 million in 1932 before rebounding to \$600 million in 1937, while radio

revenue climbed from \$40 million in 1929 to \$80 million in 1932 to \$145 million in 1937 (Stamm 256). A survey by the American Newspaper Publishers Association (ANPA) in 1931 showed that more than 90 per cent of its members, including some that owned broadcasting stations, blamed the emergence of radio for some of the loss in newspaper advertising revenue (McChesney).

Yet there are two key factors that might suggest radio was not necessarily the threat it seemed to be in this perceived zero-sum game for advertising dollars. The ANPA officially recorded no direct advertising on radio just five years prior to 1931 (McChesney). If, as McChesney asserts, radio had only recently grown into an advertising-supported medium in the late 1920s and early 1930s, it stands to reason any advertising-supported revenue increase would appear dramatic. Any gain in revenue received relative to itself would be substantial. Yet in absolute terms, the revenue broadcasting pulled in during this time was a fraction of what newspapers garnered, even factoring in the decline.

The second factor that requires consideration is the Depression. Emerging media technologies should not be examined outside the social, political and economic situation, for each of these affects how technology is received, utilized and perceived. Starting in 1929, the American economy took a significant hit with the infamous Wall Street crash. A general lack of confidence in the economy resulted in high unemployment and less spending, which would have eaten into newspaper profits independent of radio's existence. It is possible that radio exacerbated the situation to

some extent – impoverished people opting for “free” broadcasts, advertisers choosing to spend money with one medium instead of both – but if there was a negative impact on revenue at this time, it needs to be understood within the context of the economics of the time. The upswing in revenue newspapers generated in 1937 suggests the loss they experienced in the early part of the decade had more to do with the Depression than the emergence of advertising-supported radio.

While newspapers remained far ahead in absolute terms, many publishers found the trends troubling (Stamm 256). The period of the early- to mid-1930s has been described as the Press-Radio War. Continued attempts were made to place restrictions on both the kind and amount of information that could be broadcast. Some newspapers argued that radio news bulletins competed with the primary function of newspapers and took away circulation, while radio advertising cut into newspaper revenue and presented a threat to the “financial welfare of the press” (Chester 254).

By the mid-1930s, however, there seemed to be a subtle change in attitude toward radio. In 1937, a piece in *Editor & Publisher* noted there was a “perfect unity of purpose and operation between broadcasting station and a newspaper” (Stamm 256).

Meanwhile, newspaper publishers increasingly sought broadcast licenses. A 1938 report of the ANPA radio committee reads in part:

One of the most remarkable changes in recent years is the increasing number of radio stations under newspaper ownership, control, or affiliation. It is reported on apparently good authority that 211, or nearly one-third of the 728 stations in the U.S., are identified with newspaper interests (Chester 263).

Many of the struggles and conflicts that grew from the emergence of American broadcast were mirrored in Canada. Just as some U.S. newspapers felt threatened by the emergence of radio advertising, so too did Canadian publishers.

The 1936 Moose Mine disaster in Nova Scotia triggered some of the complaints, but a closer examination of what transpired suggests the event served to highlight historical rivalries within the media industry.

Canadian historian Jeff A. Webb offers a detailed account of how news media, particularly the CRBC (precursor to the CBC), approached the disaster. The day of the mine collapse in April 1936, several newspaper reporters arrived at the scene, fighting over access to a single telephone through which they could transmit their stories. The provincial minister of mines ordered the reporters to share the line, five minutes per hour. A week after the men became trapped and the story had garnered international attention, the CRBC arrived on scene, prepared to give live reports via the lone telephone. But reporters already on the scene tried to deny the CRBC access to the telephone. Tempers were so high, it is reported that a fight broke out between the CRBC's J. Frank Willis and Percy Cole of the *Toronto Telegram* (Webb 369). Willis was ultimately given five minutes each half hour, giving him the ability to report twice as often as his counterparts (Webb 370).

While the example of the Moose River disaster was used by Webb to highlight the competition between newspaper and radio, there are suggestions within the description of the interplay between reporters that the nature of the competition was more

nuanced. To set it up as a battle between newspaper and radio ignores the fact that newspaper reporters fought among their own over access to the only telephone on site. News media, regardless of the technologies employed, already had a long history of fighting to be the first purveyor of news. While the concepts of time and space in relation to media evolved with the advent of radio, the technology itself did not change the fundamental competitive advantages sought by those in the news business.

By the end of the 1930s, restrictions against radio by news services was further relaxed. And like American newspapers, an increasing number of Canadian newspapers bought radio stations so that by 1939 more than one-third of Canadian private broadcast stations were owned or affiliated with newspapers (Allen 66). It would seem constraints placed on radio slowed the rate of diffusion so the existing social fabric could absorb the new technology (Winston 374). The competitive environment, punctuated by internal dissension, found relative stability with its newest medium, and print continued to operate alongside this newest technology, supplying the bulk of information to the public.

Integrating new media technologies

The events that unfolded in both Canada and the U.S. during the emergence of radio as a new technological means of disseminating information demonstrate the complex interactions of existing news media when a new medium is introduced. These complex and often competitive relationships suggest technology is not an independent variable,

but is instead framed by the existing structure, where groups negotiate power and authority with available resources.

This is not to suggest that new technologies have no impact on journalism. Journalism, by its very nature, has always relied on technologies. “In fact, for most of the history of journalism, the most important technology to be skilled in has been the relatively simple technology of writing” (Örnebring 64), whether it be for print, online, or a broadcast script. It could be argued that the very basis of journalism – that of storytelling – is itself a technology. Whether the journalist uses the upside-down pyramid or hour-glass format, a hard news or narrative style, words, images or sound, that journalist is interacting with technology in a way that best suits their specific need at the time. At a very basic level, that’s what newspapers did when radio emerged.

Radio introduced a means to communicate information directly to listeners in a shorter amount of time than newspapers. While, unlike the telegraph, radio was able to bypass newspapers as the sole disseminators of news, broadcast was in many respects a continuation of what the telegraph did before, or steamboats and carrier pigeons did before that yet again. It enhanced communication structures that already existed in society. It provided a faster distribution model.

Journalism’s reaction to broadcast in the 1920s and 1930s suggests three general, overlapping phases: experimentation, increased competition and tension within and between media, and relative stability and increased convergence. These suggested phases are not dissimilar to those Carleton University professor Dwayne Winseck

identified in his analysis of the telegraph from 1840 to 1910, which he classified as: uncertain demand and methodless enthusiasm, ruinous competition, and strategic consolidation (Winseck 137).

These phases, or variations of them, are a useful means of both examining and understanding media's relationship with digital news.

It has been argued that the roots of online journalism can be traced back to the 1970s when newspapers experimented with videotext (Kawamoto 189), while the 1980s saw failed efforts to digitize text-based content (Scott 93). The emergence of online journalism as we know it today took place with the introduction of commercial web browsers in the 1990s.

Newspapers were enthusiastic adopters of digital technology, many diving into the digital realm head first. This is not surprising since newspapers have historically been at the vanguard of innovation, willing to experiment with any development that provides a means of reaching readers and growing audience. This willingness to utilize new technologies was reinforced in 1994 when Arthur Sulzberger Jr, then-publisher of the *New York Times*, told those gathered at a Columbia Grad school breakfast:

As long as our customers want it on newsprint, I'll do all I can to give it to them on newsprint. If they want it on CD-ROM, I'll try to meet that need. The Internet? That's fine. Hell, if somebody would be kind enough to invent a technology, I'll be pleased to beam it directly into your cortex. We'll have the city edition, the late city edition, and the mind-meld edition (qtd. in King 175)

The first decade of the Internet was punctuated by methodless enthusiasm, as newspapers experimented with this newest distribution tool. Canada's weeklies took to the Internet with such gusto they, like their daily counterparts, gave their content away for free, even the subscription-based weeklies such as the *Yarmouth Vanguard* (Nova Scotia) and *Eastern Graphic* (Prince Edward Island). Owner/publisher of the *Eastern Graphic* Paul MacNeill noted of the enthusiasm for web:

We went through a sort of Wild West with the Internet where everybody could sort of do anything ... and then we went to the period where we threw everything up thinking it was going to be the panacea that we could generate ads online (MacNeill, 2013).

Much like radio, Internet-based news did not emerge autonomous from legacy media.

Online news content was generally limited to what the industry terms "shovelware," or content that is basically copied from the print edition and posted to the website without any of the elements that make online news truly digital. This is because "new practices do not so much flow directly from technologies that inspire them as they are improvised out of old practices that no longer work in new settings" (Marvin 5). Newspapers utilized websites much as they did the print edition, a practice that continues in many newsrooms to this day.

For years, online journalism was viewed as a "supplement and a complement to the dominant print and broadcast news media" (Scott 93), much as radio was originally a means to promote newspapers. Newspaper websites were often used as a means to promote the print edition. Some newspapers, for example, would upload portions of a story to whet the appetite, encouraging readers to read the full story in the paid printed

edition. Indeed, the same worked in reverse, where newspapers would include a portion of a story in print and direct readers to web to read the full account in an attempt to grow online readership. It was a short-lived practice, though, given that it ultimately alienated readers of the product they chose to read.

The entry of low cost personal computers coupled with improvements to Internet connection speeds and available bandwidth resulted in greater diffusion of digital media, bringing the Internet into the homes of most Canadians. This easier and less expensive access for readers spurred an increase in online efforts. Newspapers were faced with new competitors entering the marketplace.

Having successfully found relative stability within a news ecology that included broadcast, newspapers had to face off against a myriad of other advertising-supported enterprises. Digital-only news providers such as *Huffington Post*, aggregators and search engines (Yahoo, Google), free classifieds sites (Kijiji, Craigslist) and social media (Facebook, Twitter) entered the media structure, all competing for ad dollars.

Once again newspapers saw declining revenue as these new competing enterprises entered the fray. Some of the decline was indeed a direct result of new media. Not all community newspapers have been equally hit by declining classified revenue, as there are a lot of smaller communities where classifieds are still doing well (Hinds, 2013), but for many community papers classifieds has been a “disaster” (Kvarnstrom, 2013). “It’s just a huge loss of revenue ... This industry was not ready for that and was not able to

transform their business model and strategy ... and since we didn't someone else did" (Kvarnstrom, 2013).

But not all revenue slips can be so easily attributed to the rise of ad-supported digital media. At the same time the Internet was emerging as a mass communications tool, the industry was hit with a recession in the 1990s. It took the better part of the decade for the economy to rebound. This mimics the rhythms seen with the introduction of advertising-supported radio, which evolved as the Depression hit.

The economy has seen other slowdowns since newspapers took to the web. Less severe than recessions, these slowdowns still have an adverse impact on newspaper revenues. In 2001, the economy experienced a slowdown in growth following the high tech boom of the late 1990s. Arguably, the market never truly recovered from the 2001 slowdown. More recent pressures, including the debt crisis in Europe and decreasing oil prices, have increased uncertainty in the market. Whether Canada has slipped back into a recession is a matter of some debate, but regardless, the economy has not been conducive to growth.

Newspapers are so intrinsically tied to the economy and commodity prices that they are often an indicator of downturns (Homayed, 2013). Newspaper "fortunes flow with the economy" (Kvarnstrom, 2013). It can be all too easy (and convenient) to blame the newest media rival for shrinking ad revenue. The Internet has indeed been the catalyst for at least a portion of those lost dollars, particularly when it comes to national advertisers, but it is not the sole reason for the overall decline.

Local advertising, for example, has remained relatively steady, although it too ebbs and flows with economic conditions. In 2013, Glacier Media was down a couple per cent in local advertising, but the economy was “sluggish” out west at the time, so that dip in revenue was a result of the economy and not the migration of ad dollars to other channels (Kvarnstrom, 2013).

Online journalism has become a significant platform for news but it is still not yet fully formed, with most community newsrooms relying on a print model to manage their digital platform. Thus, newspapers are still working through the overlapping phases. Experimentation continues to some extent, but the focus is predominantly on competition, with movement toward increased consolidation of Canada’s media (see Chapter 4). The media industry is in the midst of a market correction. The trouble is no one really knows what stability will ultimately look like.

Conclusion

Many of the concerns expressed during the early years of radio – competition for revenue and audience, death of print – have been resurrected. Yet, like radio, this is happening against a backdrop of specific economic, social and political pressures. To assume that digital journalism will lead to the death of traditional media, *prima facie*, is to ignore important contexts, just as framing the Press-Radio War as a cross-media struggle neglects the differentiated and nuanced tensions at play. As Mark Twain has been credited with saying, “History does not repeat itself, but it does rhyme.” Indeed, this seems to be the case with the arrival of digital media.

Neither the emergence of radio nor the addition of television led to the death of print. Print has proven to be remarkably resilient as a communications medium. Even in the midst of the Depression, when advertising revenues were shrinking, crops were failing and banks were collapsing, people still went to great lengths to receive their community newspaper despite the availability of relatively free news over the air. Publishers of weeklies revived the old barter system to keep their publications alive when business could not afford to advertise and readers could not pay subscription fees. “Produce replaced cash, and it was not unusual for circulation solicitors to have a chicken crate in the car trunk” (Karolevitz 135). Even when the necessities of life became critical for families, the demand for newspapers remained (Karolevitz 135).

The need for information is intrinsic to human nature and the fundamental need for news will not change. Information contained in community newspapers is laser focused and often not available elsewhere. This unique content is either in that newspaper, or on that newspaper’s website. Community newspapers, with their focus on smaller geographic areas, thus offer advertisers targeted audience that cannot easily be found elsewhere.

Radio and television were eventually absorbed into the growing networked media ecology and so too will digital media. Newspapers have historically renegotiated their place in the news ecology. The realignment continues with the addition of digital media. While there are pressures from digital competitors, the core function of community newspapers is unique, making it a niche product that remains relevant to readers.

Provided the business model can adapt and the core focus is not lost, the weekly press is well positioned to carve for itself a continued specialized role in the evolving communications structure. To that end, the following two chapters examine the changed workflow and focus within community newsrooms as well as the structure of the industry and the impacts that has on the continued viability of the weekly press.

Chapter 3

The changing role of community journalists

The speed, scope and scale by which information is transmitted has contributed to a monumental shift in the way community newsrooms operate. Where once they published on a weekly cycle they are now able to publish online as quickly as their daily and broadcast counterparts. It has provided a more level playing field but has also brought with it additional challenges that threaten to erode the core function of the journalist, which in turn adversely affects the quality of content.

Journalism has always been predicated on technology, as explained in the previous chapter. Recent innovations have again increased the speed by which reporters can impart information. The telegraph gave newspapers the ability to transmit information more quickly. Radio and later television, allowed media to disseminate that information to the public more rapidly. The World Wide Web and subsequent spinoffs (social media) act as both a collector and distributor of information that is faster and reaches a potentially much broader audience. The ability to share information faster has provided community journalists with new opportunities and challenges, altering how they both work and approach news.

This chapter will examine two main impacts innovation has had on weekly newsrooms, starting with an analysis of how the approach to news has shifted due to a faster publication cycle with the new digital edition (websites). The chapter will then delve into

technologically-driven expectations that have both enhanced and eroded work by journalists at Canada's weeklies.

While technology plays a role in the changes that have been or are being undertaken in community newsrooms across the country, technology itself is not the cause, although it is often the excuse, as explained in the preceding chapter. The use of technology is bound within the structural dynamic of the entire industry. The structure of Canada's weeklies will be more fully explored in the following chapter.

From weekly to daily deadlines

Of the various media, the weekly press has, arguably, seen the greatest shift in its news operations since the advent of the World Wide Web. Community newspapers were largely insulated from the methodless enthusiasm that followed on the heels of the introduction of radio and later television. Those innovations introduced distribution models most weekly newspapers could not afford to utilize. While the speed of news delivery increased, the community press continued to operate on a weekly schedule that matched its print distribution. Timeliness was not the same motivator it was for broadcast and daily newspapers because the product was still delivered only one to three times per week. Relevancy, instead, has been the cornerstone of Canada's non-dailies.

Distribution channels opened for the weekly press with the advent of the World Wide Web in the 1990s. As barriers to entry drastically decreased – arguably one needed only a computer and Internet connection to become a publisher, the cost of which was

negligible compared with starting a print newspaper or broadcast operation – Canada’s community newspapers found another, faster, means of disseminating information. The age-old quest for innovative solutions that would speed news delivery provided a technology the country’s smallest papers could capitalize on.

Not all community papers were early adopters. While some were at the vanguard, many held back for various reasons, be it due to lack of resources, knowledge, or a general perception that this newest communication tool was merely a fad. Indeed, the digital divide is striking when it comes to Canada’s weekly press. Even following the enthusiasm of the early to mid-2000s that saw many community papers establish websites, there remain a small but not insignificant number of newspapers that either continue to operate offline or only offer a bare-bones “splash page” as a website (Hinds, Lannan, Tardiff).

The digital divide is one of the challenges the industry faces as a whole. Access to high-speed Internet is not universal across the country and there are still communities that rely on dial-up, satellite or cellular connections. There is little impetus for weekly papers in these communities to allocate resources to websites that are likely to garner only limited local traffic. For these publishers, the needs of the community dictate they focus solely on the printed edition (Hinds, 2013).

Corporately-owned newspapers, meanwhile, have access to a centrally-created website template the parent company has mandated individual papers use, thus corporate papers in small, rural communities operate a website alongside the printed paper.

Metroland Media's newspapers, for example, use the same format across the chain and all their newspapers are online (Lannan, 2013). The independent papers, however, are a mixed bag. Approximately 25 community papers in Ontario alone had no web presence as late as spring 2013 while independent newspapers such as *Sudbury Northern Life* have a very robust website (Lannan, 2013). *Northern Life's* website is a consistent industry award-winner and is an example of an independent that is "just way ahead of the curve, and that's just enlightened ownership and innovative thinking" (Hinds, 2013).

While this examination focuses on those papers that have already established an online presence that goes well beyond the static web page, it is also relevant for those newspapers that have not yet taken the digital leap. With the growth of mobile, one can probably assume there will eventually be a growth in digital audiences in these communities, if there isn't already. "When you're in rural or remote Canada, you can watch urban trends and know they're coming" (Hinds, 2013).

Even the last hold-outs will eventually need to adapt to remain relevant in the market. A strong web presence is necessary, due in large part, to reader preference. Glacier Media estimates that 80 per cent of its audience still reads the printed product, but there is a migration of readership, with an increasing number of readers using a mixed distribution model to obtain information. Only 20 per cent of readers get their news exclusively from Glacier Media's newspaper websites, but 50 per cent use a mix of print and digital (Kvarnstrom, 2013). Half of readers might wait for the newspaper, but they are still checking online for new information.

As readers increasingly turn to online formats for information, newspapers must ensure they are a credible and relevant player in that sphere. “You’re there to serve your readers and if this is one of the ways they want to receive your information, you need to be there” (Lannan, 2013). And if newspapers are not online, given the low barriers to entry, it is only a matter of time before someone else comes in to fill that niche.

A strong belief that newspapers need to be online to survive is what spurred one industry association to take on the financial burden of developing, hosting and maintaining websites for Canada’s independent weeklies. With funding from Heritage Canada, the Ontario Community Newspapers Association has created a website template that is available to all independent papers across Canada. The association’s executive director, however, emphasizes that this is only a new distribution model for newspapers and does not mean a departure from the core principles discussed in the first chapter.

It’s important to stress that the Internet is a vehicle of distribution. A community newspaper ... has been and will continue to be that core hub of communication. They distribute it by print, they distribute it electronically. That’s just the distribution method. The core function will always be the same (Lannan, 2013).

On a fundamental level, the Internet is merely a distribution method that does not alter the role and function of the community press. However, given the nature of the technology and how it can be utilized, the workflow and duties assumed by print journalists has changed substantially since community newspapers established companion websites.

First and foremost is the notion of time. Community newspaper journalists no longer work toward weekly deadlines. The community press is now a daily or even by-the-hour publisher (Kierstead, 2013). Some newsrooms are mandated to post stories to their websites daily or hourly (Laird, 2013). And, according to those interviewed, most journalists working at community papers are expected to post breaking news online immediately. When it comes to web, “the mantra is to get it on there as soon as possible” (Descoteau, 2013).

Publishing to web first does not, in and of itself, mean a greater volume of stories for journalists. It simply changes the publication cycle. Stories need to be filed daily instead of being hoarded and written to the weekly printed deadline. Arguably, “the volume of news hasn’t changed, just the frequency and workflow” (Kvarnstrom, 2013).

Yet immediacy online is not simply about publication frequency. It ultimately requires additional work by journalists. Where reporters would file one story for print, they are potentially filing multiple versions of the same story for different media during the weekly cycle. Most of the reporters interviewed for this project indicated they are following breaking news, posting updates online as events unfold, and are now writing the story as it happens instead of following up closer to the print deadline and filing a single, second-day lead story.

Every newsroom we operate in our industry is today challenged with the fact that they are breaking news every day most every hour and you cannot save it up for the print edition or operate on that cycle of publishing anymore (Kvarnstrom, 2013).

Before going online, community news journalists could not match the publication speed of broadcast or even daily media. When breaking news took place in the community, the local weekly press approach was not that of news-as-it-happens, but was instead a more fulsome exploration of the impact of the situation. The coverage by the community press was complementary to that of broadcast or daily newspaper coverage that had the advantage of timeliness.

For example, Kevin Laird, the news director for Glacier Media's Southern Vancouver Island publications, said his newspapers differentiate themselves from the local daily by looking for enterprise stories at the local level. The local daily covers the "institutional stuff," such as reporting on what transpires at council meetings (Laird, 2013). The weekly reporters do not necessarily attend council to report on proceedings and decisions as breaking news, but instead go over the council agenda and do an enterprise story that delves into a particular issue up for discussion that affects local readers, providing a "real story (that) answers questions that the daily just doesn't have time to do and we can dig into" (Laird, 2013).

Prior to the advent of the World Wide Web, storytelling by the community press was often predicated on finding a new or unique angle that had yet to be explored by the daily or broadcast media when the story was significant enough for those other media to take notice. This was a function of being unable to compete with the publication cycle of those media, which held a monopoly on immediacy. It was relevancy that trumped story selection at weekly newspapers, not timeliness.

Now, with the click of a few buttons, journalists at community newspapers across the country can share information faster than they have ever been able to in the past. Elections results, for example, can be uploaded immediately, and seat counts can be shown in real time. No longer must the community journalist wait until the next print publication, which could be a week away, to announce news from local races. This allows community newspapers to compete, at least in some small measure, with larger media. Weeklies, via their websites, can become the first source of major local breaking news.

This ability to be a provider of timely information has resulted in an altered workflow that is more pronounced in Canada's smallest newsrooms where staffing levels are low (averaging one to five people per newsroom).

In an attempt to cover breaking news for the community, one British Columbia newsroom expended almost all its resources to one story. Two reporters were sent out into the field after a propane tank exploded in Saanich, B.C., while those in the office were tasked with assisting from their desks (Laird, 2013). One story monopolized the small newsroom, as the news director explained:

All of our resources were pushed to get this on our website. After that's all done, most of the time we don't take the stories and just put them in the newspaper, we develop sort of secondary stories for our print edition, and as they're developed they're put on our website (Laird, 2013).

At first blush, it might seem that the faster publishing times have not contributed to a greater number of stories being written by journalists, yet the nature of breaking news has led reporters to write multiple versions of the same story, which translates into

writing more copy to satisfy the demands of two media: print and online. The ability to follow breaking news is certainly a boon when it comes to the ability to inform quickly, but it can be a drain on resources, particularly in newsrooms with fewer journalists producing content. Breaking news “can eat up a reporter’s day like nothing, you could have had two to three interviews lined up, those aren’t going to be done now because all the effort is being put on the website” (Laird, 2013).

Writing multiple versions of a single story does not, in and of itself, translate into newsroom staff being overburdened with additional tasks, but it does speak to the insidious nature of increasing demands on journalists. When initially asked to describe the impact the addition of websites has had on newsroom workflow, most publishers and owners of newspapers suggested there was little to no effect on workload. Yet as interviews progressed and were later compared with those from journalists working in the field, the various shifts in labour use emerged to reveal a different pattern. Journalists have, and continue to, assume additional tasks without the benefit of additional staff.

While there are inherent advantages to publishing faster (competition, reader expectation, etc.), there are also drawbacks. Community papers tend to employ fewer journalists, so many are being required to multi-task and assume additional duties. “They’re doing more all the time, so the demands are higher, what you’re looking for in terms of skill set is higher. They’re just working harder and smarter and you know, perhaps longer” (Hennigar 2013).

Immediacy has not only altered the publication cycle for reporters. Many journalists at community newspapers are also responsible for multimedia (photography, videos) as well as a handful of tasks that have not historically been part of newsroom functions. The weekly press has experienced a slow but steady shift of editorial function that has ultimately changed the job description of community journalist.

Jack of all trades

During the devastating 2013 Alberta floods, Marc Vigliotti, the associate editor of the High River Times, was responsible for laying out the printed newspaper, writing stories about the flood, updating the website and managing social media. “Sometimes there’s a lot to juggle as opposed to if I was working at a daily paper I’d be responsible for just reporting” (Vigliotti, 2013).

His experience is not so different from those in community newspapers across the country, where journalists double as photographers, graphic designers, curators and distributors. Many reporters at community newspapers are responsible for more than reportage. They lay out the printed paper, upload content to the website, take their own photographs, shoot and edit video, and manage social media accounts. The division of labour that once existed in the industry has been slowly eroded. The introduction of daily websites, which brings various media forms under one platform (print and broadcast), has exacerbated the growing concerns.

Perhaps one of the first additional tasks journalists at the community press added to their skill set was photography. During the early days, weeklies made very limited use of

local pictures due to the expense and delay in sending away for cuts, which were required when newspapers were printed by means of a raised surface letterpress. Starting in the late 1930s, innovation and changes to newspaper production techniques – namely the slow switch from letterpress to offset press – coupled with advances in camera technology, brought with it the ability for more pictorial storytelling in community newspapers.

Daily newsrooms, with their bigger budgets and higher staffing levels (and requirement for higher volume output), generally separated the duties of photographer and writer, a separation of skill set that generally persists today (although is seeing its own slow erosion with the proliferation of camera phones and newsroom cutbacks). With fewer resources at their disposal, the weekly press did not generally have the luxury of hiring photographers. Instead, publishers of community newspapers did what they had always done: found ways to make do with available staff. Thus, journalists historically trained to tell stories through the written word found themselves hauling cameras around.

“Veteran editors and reporters had to learn how to use cameras and to ‘think pictures’ when they were out on a story” (Karolevitz 150). The role of reporter/photographer was born.

It is a role that has become so prolific that most job postings today for newsroom positions in Canada’s weekly press either list the job title as reporter/photographer or clearly state in the job description that experience in photography is mandatory. Weekly

newsrooms with a photography department do exist, but they are so rare as to be the exception to the rule.

Capturing images is, arguably, not a departure from the core function of the journalist but is instead a visual extension of reportage. Photographs have long since been held as a means of visually telling a story or sharing information. Curiously, where the telephone may have tied the journalist to the newsroom, the camera sent community reporters out into the field. The nature of the technology, however, saw some journalists tied to darkrooms for extended periods of time, taking them away from their reporting duties. The switch to digital cameras has, of course, saved time by bringing these reporters out of the darkroom.

Not all work undertaken by community journalists can be classified as an element of reportage in the way photography has come to be synonymous with journalism. Most journalists at community newspapers today are responsible for laying out the pages of the newspaper, a function historically undertaken by typesetters and compositors. In the early days, typesetters, who were usually women – many married to the publisher (Karolevitz 76) – managed what today would be known as page layout. Early division of labour was born of necessity. Laying out the paper, literally letter-by-letter, was long, tedious and required a certain dexterity.

The introduction of computers in the newsroom changed the labour dynamic. Technological advances brought with it workflow efficiencies and allowed publishers to increasingly blur the lines between specializations. “At their VDTs (video display

terminals), reporters became copy editors, headline-writers, proofreaders and typesetters all rolled into one. It placed heavy responsibility on newswriters” (Karolevitz 157).

Armed with a machine that could do it all, multi-tasking was introduced to the newsroom in new ways. No longer was it enough for a reporter to research and write news or an editor to maintain quality control. They also had to assume the duties of producing the newspaper. “In the past we did our layout on a piece of paper and gave it to a production person and they did it. Now we’re expected to know about picas and gutters and wrapping things” (Laird, 2013). A new skillset was added to the ever-growing repertoire of community journalist.

Laying out a newspaper today using desktop publishing programs is most assuredly faster than setting up a page letter-by-letter or cutting and pasting phototypeset. Over time, the software has become more user friendly, with templates to ensure some semblance of quality control and ease of use. Efficiencies have been built into the workflow through innovation, allowing more to be accomplished in less time.

If gains in one area of the business mean a loss in another area, that is not necessarily efficient or practical, particularly when journalists are being asked to be a jack of all trades. Reporters in most weekly newsrooms must not only be researchers, writers and photographers, they must also be proficient with desktop publishing (and a myriad of other tasks, as will be addressed below). Regardless of how much faster the process has become, having a journalist do the job of a graphic designer ultimately takes time away

from reporting or editing duties. Any potential time savings has been taken up with other tasks. One news director said the addition of layout means there is no longer time left for “proper editing. A lot of times it’s just a real quick edit” (Laird, 2013). Reporters and editors at community newsrooms today lose hours or even days to layout, depending on the number of papers or editions being produced by a single team.

This shift in job function has not gone unnoticed. Using its corporate heft to establish economies of scale, Transcontinental Media separated the role of graphic designer and reporter at its Nova Scotia weeklies, choosing instead to establish a centralized production facility to manage most layout duties. There are other examples of media companies finding greater efficiencies by decoupling job descriptions (ex. GateHouse Media’s production hub in Austin, Texas), yet most of the reporters and editors interviewed are still required to lay out the newspaper.

The addition of photography and layout duties happened years ago (even decades ago in some cases). The issue of journalism and labour has come into sharper focus in recent years as the role of journalist continues to expand. Reporters and editors are now required to manage a new distribution vehicle while also creating more multimedia content for a digital audience.

Adding multimedia to community newsrooms

News websites do more than give journalists the ability to publish information faster. Much like the printed product itself, websites need to be managed, with content

uploaded and curated for maximum effectiveness. The job of managing the website has fallen to the newsroom.

The amount of time and effort dedicated to managing a website varies considerably.

Some newsrooms are heavily automated and journalists can upload their content to one system and, with the press of a button, publish it to multiple platforms. Others require more hands-on management by newsroom staff who control the placement of stories on the website (content curation), create hyperlinks within those stories, add photos and captions to articles, write headlines that are optimized for search engines, and generally manage the many elements that go hand-in-hand with maintaining a robust web presence.

The time it takes journalists to upload content or even manage the website might seem negligible, but it needs to be understood in the broader context of the newsroom workflow. “There is only so many hours in the day so there is no doubt every hour that you take for a person to push a button or publish to another channel is going to take away from something else” (Kvarnstrom, 2013). That something else, inevitably, is reportage.

The Internet, combined with advances in camera technology and software, has also helped blur the lines between print and broadcast journalists. Video production, once the sole domain of broadcast media, has made its way into print newsrooms across the country.

The inclusion of video is likely spurred by the consumption habits of online readers.

Research by Pew Institute suggests 36 per cent of American adults watch news videos online (Olmstead et al, 2014). “The digital platform lends itself very well to video, it’s far more engaging, people spend more time watching video than they do reading today, so (newspapers) need to be there” (Kvarnstrom, 2013). Adding video is a means of utilizing technology to maintain a grip on the audience.

Many community newspapers are at the vanguard of innovation, using strides in technological development to improve or expand on both content and its delivery in an attempt to stay relevant. Multimedia is being slowly integrated into the print newsroom as community newspapers look to better leverage technology. Using the LAYAR app, both Glacier Media and Island Press Limited (P.E.I) were in the beginning stages of introducing augmented reality to their products (Kvarnstrom, MacNeill). With the app, readers can point their smartphone camera at a specific article on the printed page to access additional information, including video and photo galleries. The app is also to be used for advertisements, the potential revenue gains perhaps being the real impetus for taking a chance on augmented reality before it is mainstream and fully understood by the audience.

“It brings a sort of sexy current modern twist” to what is often perceived to be old media (MacNeill, 2013). “There’s the print, there’s online, there’s video, there’s social media, all within the parameters of old fashioned newspaper” (MacNeill, 2013).

Marrying print with online allows journalists to create a complete package of information, linking the media in a way that has not been possible before. And while it means additional work for reporters, “the technology is dead easy. It’s literally drag and drop videos or drag and drop hyperlinks” (MacNeill, 2013).

While Glacier Media and Island Press move forward to integrate multimedia into the print reading experience, other newsrooms are still focused on bringing visual storytelling techniques to their websites regardless of integration with the printed paper.

Journalists working at Transcontinental Media’s Nova Scotia weeklies were supplied iPhones with the intent that reporters and editors would shoot video for the website (Killen, 2013) while reporters at Glacier Media’s papers are expected to receive iPhones in the near future (Kvarnstrom, 2013), no doubt in part due to the launch of the LAYAR app.

The addition of video to a journalist’s repertoire can be an excellent way of communicating information, but it comes with its disadvantages, especially when added to an already growing list of duties journalists are expected to complete. As one reporter explained it:

The hardest part is not necessarily putting the video together ... it really hits you when you’re at an event and then all of a sudden you find yourself taking photos, getting quotes and trying to get video all at the same time. And also in between all of that just trying to make sure you’re not rushing and you’ve got something comprehensive ... I sometimes worry when I’m at something and I’m videoing or taking a photo that I’m thinking about all those different things I’m doing and I might miss something someone says or

some sort of tidbit or news thing because I was too busy making sure my camera was focused (Aldous, 2013).

Multitasking has never been particularly efficient. With one's attention divided between tasks (or having to rapidly switch tasks), no one element receives the care it is due.

Journalists functioning under such conditions run the risk of missing key details or introducing more errors into their work, particularly if an issue being covered is complex. It is all too easy for a journalist fiddling with camera settings or live tweeting an earlier comment to miss important information.

In some cases, the requirement to multitask has reached absurd levels. A reporter at the *Squamish Chief* in British Columbia says she sometimes covers municipal council via video streaming. It's a positive in that it allows her to multitask and complete other duties, but it raises questions about what is being missed that might be happening off camera. "The unfortunate thing is that our council is Tuesdays which is also the day that we are laying out the paper and getting everything in" (Aldous, 2013). Hers is not the only example of reporters covering meetings or events via video in an effort to juggle competing demands.

Social media has also been added to the tasks a journalist is expected to undertake. At a very basic level, that generally entails managing the newspaper's Twitter and Facebook pages, but can also be expanded to include Youtube and Instagram accounts, as well as live tweeting.

One of the key attributes that sets community journalism apart, as discussed in the first chapter, is its closeness with the members of its community. An interactive dialogue is

often at the heart of community newspapers. Community journalists tend to be more accessible and visible, in part given the hyperlocal nature of their coverage. Social media is yet another tool these newspapers can use to create and maintain links to their communities, offering another form of engagement and interaction, thus it is natural for journalists to utilize these tools to both share and garner information.

However, it could be argued these social media channels are more than just a means of having a conversation with the public. It goes beyond the historic interaction provided by the telephone or conversations around the water cooler because these channels have become a measurable distribution method. Social media is increasingly being viewed as a means of getting news to the reader, a function historically relegated to distribution centres and newspaper carriers. Twitter and Facebook are both measurable, and analytics are increasingly becoming defining benchmarks within the industry, where success is measured by followers, likes, reach and clicks. Under this scenario, journalists are not just having a social conversation with the public but are also assuming the dual role of virtual newspaper carrier and marketing coordinator, a responsibility that brings with it the need to implement new and additional best practices.

Each element that takes a journalist away from reporting also takes a journalist away from researching and writing about important issues within the community, namely the core function of the community press. While investigative features and issues-based stories are still being produced in the weekly press, journalists in Canada's smaller

newsrooms are finding it increasingly difficult to put the time and effort into such enterprise reporting given the expanded role they are expected to play.

The common refrain from reporters and editors was that there is little to no time to undertake investigative work given the myriad duties that now fall under the purview of journalist. And in at least one case, such work is discouraged (see Chapter 5 case study *The West Island Chronicle*). While community journalists are still finding ways to explore difficult issues, as explained in Chapter 1, the ability to work on behalf of the public interest is increasingly under threat.

Only one individual interviewed indicated reporters today are filing better researched stories despite increased demands on their time (Descoteau, 2013). The publication where he is employed – the *Victoria News* in British Columbia – is part of the Black Press corporate family and is thus able to rely on resources at neighbouring papers owned by the same company. Descoteau explained individual reporters used to file 10 or more stories per issue, but now it is half that number. The ability to share content ultimately provides these newsrooms with a larger reporting base not all community newspapers can utilize. That advantage has not gone unremarked:

We're kind of lucky in this newsroom we can kind of share stories, in a metropolitan area there are stories that affect multiple municipalities and so we don't have to necessarily bash our brains out to write those 10 stories every issue to fill the paper (Descoteau, 2013).

Of note, the newspaper shares a regional website with its sister publications, thus all the content is pooled together for maximum benefit both online and offline. Readers who read the print edition will get news specific to their distribution area as well as shared

content that was deemed relevant to them. Online, however, readers have access to all the pooled content.

There is little question newspapers (and to some extent journalists) need to use these various storytelling techniques and distribution channels to survive. This is what readers are looking for and where they are getting their information. Newspapers must be mindful of reader preference and they must utilize what tools they can in a world of rapid information flow. But they must do so in a way that does not threaten the very foundation of their core mandate. Efficiencies realized by advances in technology should not translate into demands that a small complement of newsroom staff shoulder the majority of tasks. To do so is to devalue the primary role and function of journalist and to erode the quality of the product. The community press needs to have a strong digital strategy, but that requires some investment in newsroom resources (and/or a separation of duties that have been shuffled into the newsroom, such as layout). Community newspapers cannot focus on their core competencies (namely local, relevant content) if journalists are too busy juggling competing demands that are not directly related to content generation.

Conclusion

When asked if journalists have been reduced to a jack-of-all-trades and a master of none, the news director for Glacier Media on Southern Vancouver Island indicated that was an unfair assessment. “I think on the newspaper side of things they’re still reporters and they’re still journalists and that’s where their heart is” (Laird, 2013). He is not

wrong. Based on more than a decade of working in or observing over a dozen community newsrooms in Nova Scotia and Ontario, coupled with responses from interviews conducted for this study, it is apparent journalists are still reporters at their core, regardless of the other demands they face. They still believe journalism to be the cornerstone of a functioning democracy, and they strive to ensure they produce well-researched, comprehensive articles.

Not surprisingly, journalists working in community newspapers across the country indicated that juggling the various demands was a challenge. Some simply accepted it as the new normal, or in the case of younger reporters, simply as normal. Others were less optimistic, suggesting demands related to websites are just adding to the misery of journalists. “You’ve got under paid, overworked, fed up and tired reporters” (Tardiff, 2013). In almost every case, though, journalists expressed worry that newsroom cutbacks would continue and those still employed would have to somehow manage the additional workload. As would be expected from any good journalist, the dominant concern is for editorial quality.

Over the decades, the lines between specializations within the community press have become increasingly blurred, putting more demands on newsroom staff. Journalists are increasingly taking on the function of distributor, curator, graphic designer, videographer, and production coordinator. Technology has facilitated faster processing times and created efficiencies, but each time a journalist is tasked with non-content production – namely roles beyond the scope of reportage – it has an impact on the

quality of journalism being undertaken as well as the quantity of stories being covered.

The depth and scope of coverage suffers in a newsroom defined by multi-tasking.

This challenge becomes more noticeable in smaller newsrooms with fewer staff to shoulder the workload. Community newsrooms across the country are increasingly being squeezed as corporations seek to stabilize (or increase) profit margins, exacerbating an already troubling trend.

At the core of this is the dual role journalism plays as both a public good and a commodity. It has been a delicate (and controversial) balance since the advent of modern-day journalism, which has always been advertising supported. New technology has allowed for a change in the production process – namely individual tasks and organizational forms – but this all must be understood within the context of the existing capitalist structure. The following chapter examines the current structure of Canada's community newspaper industry, with a focus on the impact that has on editorial quality.

Chapter 4

The structure of Canada's weeklies

Canada's media landscape is constantly evolving, in part due to corporate consolidation and media concentration, as well as the advent of new technologies. The structure has changed markedly in recent years as companies try to diversify in an attempt to increase profit. Acquisitions and mergers have led to increased corporate ownership across Canada's media sector, including smaller-scale community newspapers, highlighting longstanding questions about whether media in the hands of a few privately-owned companies can remain independent and truly meet the needs and reflect the interests of Canadians.

Media convergence is certainly not new. The practice of combining various forms of communication under a single owner has been in place a century or more. As discussed in Chapter 2, with the advent of radio, some newspaper publishers stepped into the realm of broadcasting, shifting from a newspaper business model to a news business model based on a multimedia approach (Stamm 256). This evolution in media convergence came to play a role in the current structure of the news media industry, in terms of the emergence of radio, the advent of television and later the emergence of the Internet, as news businesses brought these various media under one roof. Historian David Nasaw noted, "Decades before synergy became a corporate cliché, Hearst put the concept into practice" (qtd. in Stamm 256).

Concentration of ownership in Canada's newspaper industry, meanwhile, began as early as 1897 when the Southam family, which owned the *Hamilton Spectator*, set out to purchase the *Ottawa Citizen* (Skinner, Compton and Gasher 58).

Consolidation and convergence generally go hand-in-hand.

Convergence gained greater significance in the 1980s and 1990s as media companies sought cost-saving measures by sharing content across their individual holdings, which allowed corporations to sell advertising across multiple platforms while using one journalist to cover a story for multiple outlets. By 1980 two groups in Canada (Southam and Thomson) held 48 per cent of daily newspaper circulation (Skinner, Compton and Gasher 58). Meanwhile, "the January 2000 merger of Time Warner and America Online galvanized corporate enthusiasm for convergence just as a new millennium dawned," although accounting irregularities and the bursting of the technological stock bubble helped make "AOL-Time Warner perhaps the most disastrous corporate merger in business history" (Edge 1267). For some, it seemed the benefits of convergence were found to be unrealistic.

Part of the problem with convergence is that media companies take on high levels of debt to acquire other holdings (Edge 1267). This weakens their economic foundation and they become vulnerable to market fluctuations. This was exemplified in the case of Canwest Global Communication's eventual bankruptcy. The Canadian media giant had taken on close to \$4 billion in debt through its acquisition of the Southam newspaper chain, which was the biggest media deal in

Canadian history at the time (“Media convergence, acquisitions and sales in Canada” 2012). Combined with the recession in the early 2000s, this led the company to post a quarterly loss of \$37 million by the end of 2001 (Edge 1269). “Advertising sales slowed with the deepening recession and Canwest struggled with the cost of servicing its debt. From a high of \$22 in 2000, its share price fell below \$7 in mid 2002” (Edge 1269).

Canwest filed for bankruptcy protection in 2009 and its newspaper holdings were sold to a bondholder group for \$1.1 billion (“Media convergence, acquisitions and sales in Canada” 2012). The newspaper holdings are now under the Postmedia banner, which has recently acquired Sun Media’s English-language newspapers (including more than 100 community papers) and digital properties in a \$316-million deal with Quebecor. Whether Postmedia is treading the same path as Canwest remains to be seen.

Despite these high-profile collapses, convergence in Canada, which is among the world’s highest (Winseck 2002), remains a concern. Those concerns date back decades. In the early 1970s, a special committee of the Senate known as the Davey Committee investigated concentration of ownership of Canadian mass media. A Royal Commission on Newspapers, known as the Kent Commission, was conducted in 1980 in response to growing concerns about media concentration. Then in 2006 the Standing Senate Committee on Transport and Communications released its report on the status of Canadian media.

While the latter report briefly made note of community newspapers, in general most studies do not focus on these smaller publications. It is possible community newspapers are dismissed given their smaller scale; however, their market penetration is not insignificant. As a combined group of over 1,000 titles they reach almost 20 million Canadian households a week (“Newspapers Canada database” 2012). Research suggests 74 per cent of Canadian adults read a community newspaper and approximately one quarter of Canadians only read a community newspaper as opposed to other newspapers (“The Strength of Community Newspapers” 2011).

In general, community newspapers report on the issues of the community it represents, whether it is municipal affairs, school board decisions, infrastructure development, community association meetings, amateur sports or even the local strawberry social, as explored in the first chapter. These newspapers also provide birth and death notifications and local, regional and national advertising. As Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel note in their work *The Elements of Journalism*, “The primary purpose of journalism is to provide citizens with the information they need to be free and self-governing” (qtd. in Sawisky 34). Community newspapers provide this service at a localized level and studies suggest reading these smaller-scale newspapers is closely intertwined with strong community ties (Martin 31).

Despite the impact and market penetration of community newspapers, few scholars seem to have examined the political economy of these publications. The

aim of this chapter is to examine the long-term viability of community newspapers via an analysis of structural trends. Both use of and response to digital technologies – namely the Internet – by the weekly press is tied to this structure. Decisions regarding digital integration, staffing levels and access to resources are ultimately determined by the structure of the industry. The increasing demands placed on journalists to grow page views and, thus, advertising opportunities, can be traced to the underlying framework built to maximize profit.

David Croteau and William Hoynes identified four overlapping and interrelated structural trends in the media industry: growth, integration, globalization and concentration of ownership (77). This chapter will focus on growth, integration and concentration of ownership, where growth is defined as mergers and buyouts, which often lead to concentration of ownership. Integration will be broken into two types: horizontal and vertical. Horizontal is the use of multiple platforms, such as film, publishing and broadcast, while vertical integration refers to the ownership of different stages of production and distribution (Croteau and Hoynes, 77). This analysis will conclude with a brief discussion about how this structure affects the role and function of community newspapers in Canada.

Growth and concentration of ownership

Of the 1,031 titles listed in Newspapers Canada's May 2012 database, 274 are single title independents and an additional 141 belong to 47 independent groups (independent

groups are a single owner that holds a cluster of two to nine titles).¹ The federal government is responsible for 12 Department of National Defence titles, leaving 604 titles under corporate ownership. That means an estimated 58 per cent of all Canadian community newspapers are corporately owned. If the smaller independent groups are added to that measurement, the number rises to 72 per cent.

Not only do corporations own the majority of Canada's community newspapers, they also have greater market penetration. According to the database, independent newspapers have an average circulation of less than 10,000 per title whereas most corporate-owned titles have higher average circulation figures (13,000-48,000). The total circulation of all single title independents is 2.58 million while all the titles under independent group ownership reached 1.27 million Canadians. Torstar/Metroland Media Group Ltd.'s 112 weeklies alone reached more than 5.3 million readers. With circulation used as a measure, 58 per cent of titles, which are corporately owned, reach 79 per cent of community news readers. The majority of readers are thus getting their information from corporately owned media, even at the community level.

It is difficult to empirically determine long-term trends with respect to Canadian community newspaper ownership because Newspapers Canada changed the measurement criteria of its database in 2009 from member-only newspapers to all community newspapers. The industry organization also does not make its full report available to the public or researchers, but instead publishes a snapshot, leaving unanswered questions regarding methodology.

¹ See Appendix A for database.

Some information is available for Ontario's community newspapers. Between 2009 and 2011 the number of independent and corporate owners in Ontario shrank by 19 per cent, yet the number of titles during that same time increased by 22 per cent (Washburn, 2013). That means there was clearly growth in the community newspaper sector, given there was an overall increase in the number of titles, but those titles are increasingly in the hands of fewer owners. In other words, the number of individual newspapers grew, yet the number of owners decreased.

Trends in the community newspaper market in the United States would also suggest there is increasing concentration of ownership in this media segment. During an 11-year study in Georgia, the number of group-owned weeklies increased by 220 per cent while the number of individually owned papers declined by 23 per cent during the same period (Martin 37). Weeklies south of the border are also being "consolidated under common ownership within and across geographically adjacent markets," which allows corporations to take advantage of economies of scale (Martin 44). The Canadian experience appears to match that seen in the United States.

While long-term empirical analysis isn't currently available, it is possible to make a direct comparison of Canadian community newspaper ownership between 2011 and 2012.

From 2011 to 2012, 13 fewer titles were published by single independents while group independents dropped 11 titles. With the exception of Postmedia, which dropped 19 titles from 2011 to 2012, corporations either added or maintained the number of titles they publish. Since the overall number of community titles only dropped by three, many

of these gains and losses were likely due to shifts within the market through acquisitions and mergers.

Postmedia, for example, sold some of its British Columbia holdings to Glacier Media in December 2011 (Postmedia 2011). Three daily newspapers and 20 weekly and biweekly newspapers were sold for \$86.5 million, which Postmedia applied to its debt repayment (Postmedia 2011) it inherited from Canwest. At the time of the announcement, The Canadian Press noted the deal “significantly increases Glacier’s presence in B.C. and gives the Vancouver-area based publisher the broadest local newspaper coverage in Western Canada” (“*Victoria Times Colonist* sold to B.C. company” 2011). Glacier Media took on more debt to finance the purchase with bank loans, but the company indicated the debt load was manageable and its cash flow would increase (“*Victoria Times Colonist* sold to B.C. company” 2011). Between 2011 and 2012, Glacier Media added a total of 23 community titles to its holdings, according to Newspapers Canada’s database.

Meanwhile, Metroland Media Group Ltd. increased the number of titles it published in 2011 by 11 in 2012. This increase was achieved, in part, due to the acquisition of Performance Printing, a family-owned Eastern Ontario publisher of 14 community newspapers under the EMC banner.² In communities where both an EMC and Metroland title existed, the newspapers were consolidated, effectively creating one-newspaper towns in many communities. Furthermore, some of the satellite offices were closed, specifically the offices in Carleton Place and Kemptville. Not only have those

² The author of this paper was a managing editor for Metroland Media at the time of the acquisition and oversaw the merge of editorial functions in Ottawa, Arnprior and Renfrew.

communities lost the “storefront” presence of their local press, editorial staff members from those communities now work remotely from the Smiths Falls office. The press at the *Renfrew Mercury* (Renfrew, Ont.) location, meanwhile, was relocated to Smiths Falls where printing and insertion was centralized.

This apparent trend of increasing corporate ownership of Canada’s community newspapers has not gone unnoticed. The federal government’s final report on the Canadian news media, undertaken by the Standing Senate Committee on Transport and Communications, indicated there was “significant concentration” of ownership of various media in Canada, including community newspapers. The report specifically made mention of Transcontinental’s 2004 acquisition of Optipress, which left the Quebec-based media company in control of all the daily and weekly newspapers in Newfoundland (Bacon 2006).

The government report expressed concern about increasing media concentration, noting the Competition Bureau was well suited to analysing markets for goods and services, but not the news media market, where readers generally purchase papers for news content and not the advertisements. Advertising costs, which are generally used by the Competition Bureau in its analysis, are not the best indicator of market conditions because the issue of public interest rests with the diversity of news and opinion, the report noted.

The Bureau’s prescribed frame of reference – what some have called a silo approach – misses a critical dimension of news and information, namely, the importance of the plurality of owners and the diversity of voices, not just in a given community but in the wider regional and national landscape.

This is in sharp contrast to the regulatory regimes in countries such as France, the United Kingdom, Germany, Australia and the United States. Each of those countries has laws and regulations that question or prevent high levels of ownership concentration in media markets. The objective is to foster a plurality of owners within specific markets and to ensure that a diversity of news and information sources is available (Bacon 2006)

What the report failed to mention, however, is that Transcontinental Media's purchase of Optipress was just continued concentration in a region that was already slowly being consolidated under one owner. Optipress was created after two smaller newspaper chains in Atlantic Canada merged. In June 2002, Cameron Publication's 10 Nova Scotia weeklies and Robinson-Blackmore's 15 community newspapers in Newfoundland and Labrador merged "to form the largest newspaper chain in Atlantic Canada, called Optipress Inc" (Deon 2003). Under Optipress, Nova Scotia's 10 weeklies dropped to nine with the merger of the *Middleton Mirror-Examiner* and *Bridgetown Monitor* to form the *Monitor-Examiner* (Deon 2003). What the Senate Committee could not know was that, in 2006, Transcontinental further reduced the number of weeklies published in Nova Scotia. The *Monitor-Examiner*, already a product of an earlier marriage, was merged with the *Annapolis Royal Spectator* to create the *Annapolis County Spectator*, while the *Berwick Register* was merged with the *Kentville Advertiser* to create the *Kings County Register/Advertiser*, further reducing the number of community newspapers in the region.³

In 2010, Transcontinental continued to consolidate its holdings in the Atlantic region by centralizing production of advertising, graphics and newspaper layout (pre-press) for its

³ The author worked as a reporter/photographer and later a news editor at the Annapolis Royal Spectator from 2003 to 2006.

Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island papers (“N.S. newspaper jobs head for P.E.I.” 2010). The shift to the new production centre in Charlottetown, P.E.I. resulted in layoffs elsewhere in the region, including 75 workers at the Cape Breton Post (“N.S. newspaper jobs head for P.E.I.” 2010) and an unknown number at the Yarmouth office where most of its Nova Scotia weeklies were previously processed.

Consolidation of assets is not uncommon when corporations acquire titles. Black Press shut down four of the 11 B.C. community newspapers it purchased in 2010. A spokesperson for the company, blaming declining paid circulation and poor economic conditions, indicated that the papers were losing a lot of money but were part of a package deal (“4 B.C. newspapers to shut down” 2010). However, it is important to note that Black Press already owned competing publications in the four affected communities (“4 B.C. newspapers to shut down” 2010). While perhaps not the intent, the closure of these four papers effectively shut down the competition and silenced another voice within the public sphere.

Clearly the trend toward media convergence and centralization has affected the ownership and management of community newspapers in Canada. “The face of community newspapers is changing from locally owned to corporately managed” (Kierans 2004). Both the creation of one-newspaper towns and consolidation of community newspapers mean a loss of diverse content and opinion. It might also lead to less locally-specific content and an increase in generic stories. The thrice-merged *Annapolis County Spectator*, for example, must now serve the needs of three separate

towns – Middleton, Bridgetown and Annapolis Royal – as well as the smaller villages and hamlets scattered across all of Annapolis County. According to Google Maps, Annapolis County covers over 3,000 square-kilometres in area. In 2004, that area was served by two distinct community newspapers with separate offices in different towns, with a combined staff of two editors and three full-time reporters and no daily website. The combined *Annapolis County Spectator* serves the same geographic area from one office with one editor and one full-time reporter, raising obvious questions about quality and the ability to adequately cover issues affecting the various communities within its large distribution area, especially given the addition of web duties (see Chapter 3).

Mergers such as that seen with the *Annapolis County Spectator* occur, in part, because “the larger a newspaper’s circulation, the lower the cost to each paper it produces” (Skinner, Compton and Gasher 57). It is more cost effective to have a single press run of, say, 20,000 copies than it is to have two press runs of 10,000 copies, or even three at 6,500. Labour costs are also substantially reduced not only with the reduction in the number of editorial employees, but also in other areas of the business, such as graphics (only one newspaper has to be paginated). Meanwhile, chains have a competitive advantage in that they can “cut costs through sharing editorial material, production and management facilities, and purchasing newsprint and other materials in bulk” (Skinner, Compton and Gasher 57). Small publications under a single owner clustered in a neat geographic area can also share a single, regional website, using their combined editorial efforts to pad out page views and unique visitors, offering advertisers access to a larger digital audience. Ultimately, acquiring community newspapers, clustering holdings and

merging smaller publications provides corporations with an economic advantage through the use of economies of scale.

Horizontal and vertical integration

Many of the corporate owners also operate other media holdings. Quebecor, which topped the list of corporate community newspaper publishers (before Postmedia's recent acquisition of Sun Media's English-language papers), grew to become one of Canada's biggest media companies, largely through acquisitions ("Media convergence, acquisitions and sales in Canada" 2012). The Quebec-based company purchased Sun Media's newspapers in 1999, Osprey's chain of smaller dailies and weeklies in 2007, and expanded into television broadcast with the acquisition of Vidéotron in 2000 and the launch of Sun News Network in 2010 ("Media convergence, acquisitions and sales in Canada" 2012). Quebecor published 165 community newspapers (before its sell-off to Postmedia), more than a handful of dailies, Canoe.ca, and it is a major publisher of French-language books and controls the largest video store chain in Quebec.

Torstar, meanwhile, not only publishes 112 of its own community newspapers but also owns a 19.35 per cent share of Black Press, which publishes more than 150 daily and weekly papers in Canada and the United States ("Media convergence, acquisitions and sales in Canada" 2012). Torstar also publishes its own dailies, the flagship being the *Toronto Star*, and many free commuter dailies under the *Metro* brand, including *Halifax Metro* which is jointly owned with Transcontinental, Canada's second largest publisher of local and regional newspapers. Harlequin, the world's biggest publisher of romance

fiction, was recently sold by Torstar, the money from which was used, in part, to pay its debts. The media giant has a half-interest in the online job search website Workopolis and Sing Tao, Canada's largest Chinese-language daily ("Media convergence, acquisitions and sales in Canada" 2012). In 2011 Torstar expanded into broadcast when it acquired a 25 per cent stake in Blue Ant Media Inc., a privately held television broadcaster ("Torstar acquires 25 per cent stake in Blue Ant Media" 2011).

Quebec-based Transcontinental Media publishes 112 weeklies, 10 dailies, and is a major publisher of consumer and speciality magazines ("Media convergence, acquisitions and sales in Canada" 2012). It is also a wholly owned subsidiary of Transcontinental Inc., which is Canada's largest commercial printer. Like many other media corporations, Transcontinental has tried to leverage new technology and has invested in various web-related activities, including the online auction site Bidgo.ca and inmemoriam.ca, a site dedicated to obituaries.

This trend toward horizontal and vertical integration works to squeeze out the remaining independent community newspapers. It is difficult for these smaller papers to remain competitive because their corporate counterparts benefit from economies of scale in design, advertising and news gathering (Kierans 164). In the United States, group-owned weeklies have been shown to hold down advertising prices while distributing more free circulation papers to increase their competitive advantage (Martin 37). "Readers are likely to include weeklies in a mix of different media only if weeklies add utility to that mix at a cost the readers consider attractive" (Martin 38).

Free is a very attractive cost. Meanwhile, the industry trend is toward free distribution (Korski 2013).

When it comes to free distribution, corporate newspapers have the upper hand because they can garner additional advertising revenues not generally available to independent weeklies, and there is not the same concern about giving news away free online because it's often already being delivered free to homes in print. Revenue from subscriptions is not a factor, particularly in urban markets. Given their often centralized national sales force, corporate community newspapers benefit not only from national display ads but also flyers and other inserts. Flyer distribution in Canada is a highly competitive and lucrative market. These free weeklies are often focused on creating a large distribution network because newspapers can bring in significant revenue by charging other parties to "piggyback" on the distribution system (Dornan 63). A 2010 KubasPrimedia study found that "preprint (flyers and inserts) is probably two to three times more than online ad revenue. But the attention it gets is miniscule compared to digital" (qtd. in Dornan 63). This focus on total market coverage for the sake of creating a distribution network that satisfies the needs of preprint customers ultimately has nothing to do with the core product itself, namely the news contained within the newspaper that wraps around the flyers (Dornan 63). Corporate or group owned weeklies, with their regional and national clusters, are able to offer national advertisers a one-stop shop for flyer distribution. In fact, such clusters are now going head-to-head with daily newspapers for flyer contracts because they can offer a combined circulation that is often higher than that of the local daily, particularly if they are freely distributed to almost every home.

This competition between weeklies and dailies was captured by James Rosse who, in the mid-1970s, introduced the umbrella model of newspaper competition, where newspapers were divided into layers based on geography, content and publication style (Lacy, Coulson and Cho 2002). The layers include metropolitan dailies, satellite-city dailies, suburban dailies and weekly newspapers. The basic hypothesis of the model is that little competition exists among newspapers within each layer because competitors rarely share the same circulation zones (Lacy, Coulson and Cho 23). Competition instead takes place between layers, meaning dailies and weeklies within the same market compete against one another. While Rosse's hypothesis was based on market conditions in San Francisco, Stephen Lacy, David Coulson and Hiromi Cho tested the umbrella model in a study of 381 United States counties outside metropolitan areas. They found that umbrella competition does exist throughout the United States. While the study was focused predominantly on competition for readers, readership and advertising are inextricably linked because the newspaper is the means by which advertisers reach readers. More readers generally means a newspaper can sell more ads. The authors of the study also noted that the Observer-Eccentric Group of 15 non-daily newspapers in the suburbs of Detroit provide more market power to the company than independent weeklies would because they can sell advertising in several suburbs for a combined rate (Lacy, Coulson and Cho 23).

Not only are corporations consolidating market power through acquisitions, many also hold the balance of power when it comes to printing costs because they often own the presses many independents rely upon. This can be a challenge for the smaller

newspapers, as Glen Mazza of the family-owned Alberta weekly *The Mountaineer* noted,

A small family-owned paper typically doesn't have a printing press so your printing costs are higher whereas Sun Media has printing plants where they will print 15 other products as well. It's a disadvantage (Sawisky 51).

Growth hasn't just led to concentrated ownership of the end product, namely newspapers, but has also meant other necessary aspects of the business are in fewer, more powerful hands. The printing market is much smaller since chains started buying independent newspapers (Kierans 158), some of which might have had their own legacy presses. In 2004, Kim Kierans, then director of the School of Journalism at King's College in Halifax, examined three independent Maritime community newspapers. During her study the *Miramichi Leader* was sold to Brunswick News, which is controlled by the Irving family, who owns all the dailies and most of the weeklies in New Brunswick. A relatively strong and stable independent, the *Miramichi Leader* had its own press, but after the acquisition Brunswick News shut it down in favour of the corporation's underutilized press in Moncton (Kierans 2004).

The other two independents in her study – the *Inverness Oran* in Nova Scotia and the *Eastern Graphic* in P.E.I. – were printed at an independent press in Amherst that was purchased by Transcontinental, which raised its printing rates (Kierans 2004). Given the increased concentration of ownership, when printing costs at one company rise, small independent newspapers have few options and are often “at the mercy of corporate printers” (Kierans 10). “There may come a time when independently-owned papers find their revenue from advertisements and subscriptions will no longer cover the costs of

news gathering, printing and distributing a weekly newspaper” (Kierans 158). Not only does concentration of press ownership put independent community newspapers in a vulnerable position vis-à-vis their corporate counterparts, it also increases barriers to entry into the market by others. Ultimately, “the independents have a huge job if they wish to challenge the corporate media” (Kierans 164).

Impact on community newspapers

There are often assumptions that independent newspapers are more valuable to a community, or that corporate media reduce diversity of content and opinion. There is an important distinction that needs to be made between ownership and management. A community newspaper can be corporately owned but locally managed, where editorial decisions are still made at the individual papers. And the additional resources available through corporate connections can actually improve upon the quality of the information provided to readers.

About a year after the Robinson-Blackmore and Cameron groups merged to form Optipress in Atlantic Canada, its vice-president of publishing, Peter Kapryka, indicated that big chains are not always bad news. He said independently-owned papers often don’t have the money, equipment and skilled people to improve their newspaper (Deon 2003). As a conglomerate, Optipress was able to co-ordinate training for its staff and launch its own wire news service where all of its papers could share photos and stories (Deon 2003), although the service was not used often by local editors who instead opted to focus on local issues. At the time, Kierans told the *King’s College Journalism Review*

that the quality of content in the Cameron papers had improved following the merger, attributing the change to better staff training opportunities (Deon 2003).

Frank McTighe, publisher of the independent *Fort MacLeod Gazette* in Alberta, noted that,

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

It's the staff of the newspaper that makes a great difference in how the newspaper performs in the community. If you're doing a good job I don't think people are aware of who owns you. They are more concerned with the product that they receive once a week or twice a week (Sawisky 51)

Meanwhile, United States survey data conducted in the mid-1990s suggests that "as newspapers become 'more corporatized,' they place more emphasis on quality and less on profits, and their editorial content becomes more critical of the status quo" (Skinner, Compton and Gasher 55). That appears to have been the case with the Cameron group of newspapers after it merged with Robinson-Blackmore. Given the market power of these corporately-owned media, managers and journalists are better insulated from special interest groups, advertisers, government and even their owners, giving them the freedom to be more critical in their reporting (Skinner, Compton and Gasher 55).

The argument in favor of big media is that size gives them audience reach, human resources, capital, and technological resources to invest in content, the durability to take chances and absorb short-term losses, promotional power and independence from parochial political and/or local advertiser concerns (Skinner, Compton and Gasher 55).

The Kent Commission ultimately concluded that chain-owned papers are not necessarily worse editorially than independent papers (Skinner, Compton and Gasher 62).

While it is important to note that corporate ownership can provide benefits, such optimism comes with many cautions. The Committee on Canadian Heritage, for example, noted that “these advantages are too rarely exploited for the purpose of diversifying and otherwise improving content” (Skinner, Compton and Gasher 55). The closure and merger of community newspapers, which often leads to one-newspaper towns, suggests diversity is slowly being eroded. And while the commission could not find much evidence to suggest direct editorial meddling by owners, there have been cases that have raised questions.

In 2006 the *Digby Courier’s* editor was demoted after an advertiser complained about an editorial he wrote that was critical of noisy motorcycles on quiet town streets (McLeod 2006). Alex Joannides, owner of the local Canadian Tire and an organizer of a group of businesses promoting a motorcycling event in the small Nova Scotia town, contacted Transcontinental Media, which owns the paper, to say he and other organizers would not be advertising in the paper again and he was also going to encourage other businesses to boycott the *Courier* (McLeod 2006). “A week later, (John) DeMings was removed as editor” and given the role of reporter, while an editor in another town took over remotely (McLeod 2006).

While Joannides claimed credit for the demotion, Caroline Andrews, group publisher for Transcontinental Media, denied any connection, arguing it was a structural change to

improve the quality of the newspaper's content (McLeod 2006). Regardless of the true motivations, the situation brought to the forefront concerns about editorial independence, corporate management and the loss of local content and control. The consequences were not lost on residents in the area. Ron Cooper Sr., a Digby-area business owner and friend of DeMings, said,

This came at a time where, as it happens with a lot of small towns, you start to lose things. They just disappear. Annapolis Valley radio used to be here. They had their whole staff here and had their whole operation here. But now it's remote. It's gone. There used to be two papers in Digby, now it's down to just one again, and now we even lose the editor. It slips away (qtd. in McLeod 2006).

The situation in New Brunswick is also a red flag. It's problematic having a single family own most of the media in the province as well as a long list of other industry holdings, including oil, forestry, transportation, shipbuilding and much more. It raises the question of how a newspaper can be "editorially independent when its owners are involved in almost every facet of economic life in the province" (Kierans 12). While the general manager of the community newspaper division disagrees, Tom Kent, chair of the Kent Commission, maintains that reporters and editors at Brunswick News are not free to comment or report fully on Irving-related industries (Kierans 12). Alden Nowlan, who was a reporter and editor at the *Saint John Telegraph-Journal* from 1963-1968, aptly noted that if it were not for the Irvings, the media in the province would be owned by another baronial family, such as the McCains, or by Southam or Thomson (68). This may be true, but the situation with the Irvings is unique in that the family not only holds a virtual monopoly on the local press, but they are also involved in numerous industries

that impact the daily lives of those in New Brunswick. It is difficult for the public to have a free and rigorous discussion about the impact of those operations if that discussion is mediated by the owners of those industries.

Indeed, given the potential for editorial interference by corporate owners via budgets, editorial policies and hiring decisions, the commission found: “The structure of the industry that has now been created, that existing law and public policy have permitted, is clearly and directly contrary to the public interest” (qtd. in Skinner, Compton and Gasher 63). It is a sentiment that has been repeated by another commission and a Senate standing committee. Yet little has changed and community newspapers continue to become concentrated in the hands of a few.

What sets newspapers apart from most other industries is the tension between public interest and capitalist interests. As United States Supreme Court Justice Hugo Black stated in 1944 in the case of the *Associated Press v. United States*, “The widest possible dissemination of information from diverse and antagonistic sources is essential to the welfare of the public... a free press is a condition of a free society” (qtd. in Kierans 2004). Thus newspapers are a necessary component within democracy. Journalism’s obligation is to provide “citizens with the information they need in order to be free and self-governing, [and] the government with the information it needs in order to make decisions in the common interest sensitive to public sentiments” (qtd. in Sjøvaag 875). This is the public interest aspect.

Yet at their core, newspapers are a manufactured commodity produced for financial gain (Cronin 580). They are locally-produced artefacts that “represent the essence of capitalist production, distribution and consumption” (Cronin 578). The use of advertising as a source of revenue and, in some cases, the sale of subscriptions, has created competition within the media market that relies upon and mimics the rhythms of capitalism. Thus the very structure of the press is attuned to market conditions, leading to growth, integration and concentration of ownership, which is embedded within commodity production.

The reality, however, is that quality and profits are inextricably linked, which means the public good aspect cannot be entirely disconnected from profit motivations if community newspapers are to remain financially viable.

An econometric analysis of 12 years of longitudinal data from an American hybrid newspaper – that is a newspaper that publishes both in print and online, as most papers now do, including community papers – demonstrates that news gathering is a creator of value and directly brings in additional print and online revenue. The authors concluded that newspapers seeking to increase revenue may need to increase, rather than decrease, investment levels in the newsroom (Tang, Sridhar and Mantrala 2011). Past research by journalism scholars has shown that reducing newsroom personnel leads to loss of diversity and content as well as a direct loss of circulation, but this study quantified the impact of newsroom investments. While the study focused on a medium-sized newspaper with an annual subscription of less than 85,000, its findings are still

useful and relevant to all newspapers, including community newspapers. The newspaper was a monopolist in its region, and the same newsroom staff wrote news for the printed and online version of the paper, which is a common practice in community news.

The authors of the study found that a one-per-cent increase in newsroom investments would lead to increases of 0.151 per cent in subscriptions, 0.256 per cent in print advertising revenue and 0.494 per cent in online advertising revenue (Tang, Sridhar and Mantrala 121). This study shows that an already well-established marketing principle is at play, namely that product quality results in a high return on investment. “Yet, faced with troubling economic times, newspapers have reacted to competitive threats with cost control measures, including sharp cutbacks to newsroom staffing, employment, and investments – the very core of journalistic quality” (Tang, Sridhar and Mantrala 123).

There is a caution here for community newspapers, which are increasingly answerable and vulnerable to shareholders. Shareholders might not be making decisions reflective of the individual markets in which these papers operate as they pursue growth and integration while increasing investments in non-print related activities outside the newsroom. Assuming high levels of debt in an effort to diversify portfolios or making investments and redirecting resources to other business ventures might be diminishing the effectiveness of what was once a core product: news. Dennis Merrill, executive director of the Alberta Weekly Newspapers Association, noted that,

Quebecor, owner of Sun Media, just like Canwest Global, are in particular situations that have resulted in them having to trim a lot of expenditures.

There have been layoffs that may or may not bear direct relevance to what's happening in the local marketplace. These companies are making decisions across the board in Montreal that affects the *Crows Nest Pass Promoter*. There is a reduction in staff that might not have a direct correlation to what's going on in the local marketplace (Sawisky 51).

As noted earlier, Canwest took on close to \$4 billion in debt to finance its acquisitions, effectively overextending itself. This became particularly problematic when the recession hit in the early 2000s and revenue dropped. Yet financial problems experienced by large media companies in Canada have been revealed to be transitory and related to economic downturns (Edge 1274). History has demonstrated this tends to be the case. As outlined in the second chapter, radio saw a 90-per-cent increase in advertising revenues between 1929 and 1931 while newspaper ad sales dropped (McChesney 1991). Newspapers' advertising revenue dropped from \$800 million in 1929 to \$490 million in 1932 before rebounding to \$600 million in 1937, while radio revenue climbed from \$40 million in 1929 to \$80 million in 1932 to \$145 million in 1937 (Stamm 256). A survey by the American Newspaper Publishers Association in 1931 showed that over 90 per cent of its members, including some that owned broadcasting stations, blamed the emergence of radio for some of the loss in newspaper advertising revenue (McChesney 1991), just as many companies today blame the Internet. Yet radio had just grown into an advertising supported medium, with no officially recorded direct advertising just five years prior to 1931 (McChesney 1991). Meanwhile, the Depression at the time would have undoubtedly affected advertising spending. The upswing in revenue newspapers generated in 1937 suggests the loss they experienced in the early part of the decade had more to do with the Depression than the emergence of radio.

A study of financial statements of the eight largest media companies in Canada from 1995 to 2009 found that all were consistently profitable (Winseck 2010). Thus the financial problems that were related to economic downturns would have been exacerbated for those who took on high debt, such as Canwest. As Dwayne Winseck noted,

Even Canwest has been profitable, sometimes extremely so, every year since 1991 in terms of operating profits and all but two years (2004 and 2008) in terms of return on equity.... Its profits were in the low- to mid-20% range for the last decade before falling to 16% on the eve of its demise in 2009. How is it possible for highly profitable firms to be in such disarray? The answer is debt (qtd. in Edge 1275)

And yet newspaper companies are, in the words of Winseck, slashing and burning their way to excess profitability (Winseck 2012). Cuts made to community papers are hard to track; in part because taken alone, they represent but a fraction of jobs or readers and thus do not garner much, if any, attention. More often, their numbers are hidden in the larger story of a corporation laying off hundreds of journalists. The closure of eight weeklies by Sun Media in 2013 captured headlines only because so many papers were closed at one time. But what the stories didn't say is that other, less obvious cuts were also being made. Monitoring of social media and cross-referencing rumours with online editions of community papers revealed that Quebecor not only closed those weeklies, but also merged two Alberta weeklies: *Canmore Leader* and *Banff Crag & Canyon*. News of that merger, which effectively meant the loss of yet another community newspaper, was absent. That oversight not only raises questions about what else was left unsaid, it also demonstrates the difficulty in monitoring cuts to weeklies.

It's not just closures and mergers that can be hard to track. Job losses at community newspapers are also difficult to monitor because the numbers are often so low. The loss of one journalist at a newspaper might not seem relevant, but taken as a percentage, that can be a quarter or even half of a community newspaper's newsroom staff. The impact of these losses is exacerbated by the increased demands of online production placed on remaining staff. That Annapolis County, Nova Scotia is being served by two journalists expected to publish in print and online instead of five who were predominantly print exclusive does not garner much attention, except perhaps by those in the community who see less contextualization by reporting staff and more stenography. Community newspapers are faced with cutbacks that affect the overall production of news on all platforms, but their story is often lost.

In their tireless pursuit to maintain double-digit profits, corporate media owners are making short-term decisions in an attempt to offset declining revenue and satisfy shareholder expectations – expectations that are erroneously rooted in the political economy of the past.

A double-digit profit margin is very respectable, especially when compared with the average margin of about eight per cent for all industries in Canada (Winseck 2012). That those margins are dipping for media companies is not in dispute. But it might be more a market correction than the demise of the industry. Competition for audience has grown fierce. Lower barriers to entry have given new players access to the historically monopolistic media environment. Just as there is convergence at the corporate level,

there is also divergence within the larger sector, with blogs and digital start-ups vying for the same audience. The economic climate of the last half of the 20th century has evolved, yet the structure and expectations that emerged during the early half of the same century seem largely unchanged. Instead of redefining success, corporate media cling to the margins of bygone days.

The corporate structure itself might be part of the problem, at least in some few cases. While corporate media benefit from economies of scale, in what might seem a surprising twist, it is possible that an independent can operate a quality community newspaper and companion website at a lower cost than its corporate counterpart.

Without the burden of union contracts, debt management fees and corporate management fees, an independent owner can sometimes take a struggling corporate paper and turn it into a profitable stand-alone publication. It might not garner the double-digit profits corporate media cling to, but it can still stay afloat with modest earnings. Economies of scale can provide corporate media with strategic advantages, but the very structure of the corporate model can also adversely affect smaller papers in markets where profit margins are very low.

While media companies attempt to increase profit through growth and integration, they run the risk of stretching their resources too thin, forcing cutbacks, mergers or losses that are not necessarily a true reflection of market conditions, potentially leaving their media holdings in progressively vulnerable positions. With community newspapers

increasingly under corporate ownership, their fate becomes tied to commercial expansionist endeavours.

In general, community newspapers are well positioned to compete and even thrive as niche players because they have a monopoly on local content both in print and online. This is likely why community newspapers are being purchased by corporations interested in growing and integrating their holdings. But the strength of weeklies is dependent not merely on the fact that they are niche publications, but their viability is instead predicated on how they are managed. Papers like the thrice-merged *Annapolis County Spectator* run the risk of becoming irrelevant to readers, and thus advertisers, if they become little more than regional weeklies barely able to scrape the surface of the many issues affecting the numerous and diverse communities within the paper's coverage area. As Tang, Sridhar and Mantrala's quantitative analysis demonstrated, there is a correlation between newsroom investment and revenue. Based on this model, investment in community newsrooms should help ensure long-term viability of the weekly press for its corporate owners. This does not mean removing editorial functions from these communities and centralizing news gathering operations, which ultimately defeats the purpose of publishing highly-localized content. Slashing staffing levels when additional digital production duties are being added to the already long list of editorial functions is counterproductive given it is a reduction in newsroom investment.

As community newspaper ownership is increasingly concentrated, it becomes important for local managers and editors to maintain some semblance of local control, lest editorial excellence and independence give way to the corporate business model.

Chapter 5

A tale of two community papers

Beset by challenges in the marketplace, community newspapers across the country have adapted in numerous ways with varying levels of newsroom investment based on differing philosophical approaches to content generation. Where some have placed a renewed focus on their editorial teams, others have maintained the status quo or, worse yet, slashed newsroom budgets.

Given the correlation between newsroom investment and revenue, as outlined by Tang, Sridhar and Mantrala, the strength of a newspaper's editorial mandate may well be a predictor of viability, particularly at a time when the role and function of journalist is being systematically eroded.

This chapter examines how newsroom investment at two Canadian community newspapers appears to have a correlation not just with the quality of the product, but also its viability. Both Sudbury's independently owned *Northern Life* and Montreal's corporate owned *West Island Chronicle* are English-language, free-distribution newspapers serving a (mostly) urban audience in highly competitive markets. Both operate a website and have a web-first approach, although as will become clear, only one has a true digital strategy. Despite these similarities, *Northern Life* has made significant investments in its newsroom operations while the *West Island Chronicle* has slashed its newsroom budget.

It was easy to make a comparison between staffing levels and newsroom workflow at both papers, but it was challenging to dig into the rationale for these changes at the *West Island Chronicle*. It was impossible to make a full comparison that includes a better understanding of revenue trends and business plans because multiple requests to speak with Transcontinental Media executives were not answered. One can assume the profit margin is behind decision making, but knowing the precise nature of what is behind Transcontinental Media's decisions would undoubtedly be enlightening and help better frame the situation. The lack of information, however, does not change what is happening in the newsroom and how it affects the quality of the *West Island Chronicle*.

What emerges in this comparison is a tale of two extremes. *Northern Life* has made strategic investments in its product, reinventing newsroom operations to better manage the requirements of publishing both print and online. The *West Island Chronicle*, meanwhile, has abandoned its editorial mandate in favour of cutting costs. The result is a barely functioning newspaper that lacks the resources to effectively publish on any medium.

Sudbury Northern Life

Sudbury Northern Life stands out in the community newspaper industry because, early on, the independent made meaningful investments in its content strategy. Armed with a background in computer programming, the publisher of Sudbury's independent community newspaper knew sticking with print alone would not lead to a successful future for the publication. Instead of simply adding web duties to the print newsroom,

as so many community papers have, there was a concerted effort to build a true digital news operation with a thought to appropriate allocation of resources.

This aggressive strategy is, in part, the product of operating in a highly competitive media environment. Sun Media publishes the area's daily newspaper, the *Sudbury Star*. There are seven or eight radio stations, a weekly French-language community paper and two television stations. By investing in itself, *Northern Life* has developed a successful business model to emerge as a community leader in local news.

Founded in 1973, *Sudbury Northern Life* is a twice-weekly community newspaper serving the northern city of Sudbury, Ontario. It is independently owned by Laurentian Publishing, which also publishes a handful of magazines. As has been seen elsewhere in the industry, *Northern Life* has reduced its print distribution frequency. A third edition was distributed on Sundays, but when the Internet took hold as a stronger communication vehicle, the paper grew weaker, according to Laurentian Publishing vice-president Abbas Homayed. Before the edition was eliminated, the Sunday publication was a mere 20 pages with no flyers and was no longer profitable (Homayed, 2013). The Sunday edition was scrapped in 2006 and the community paper returned to a twice-weekly publication schedule.

Sudbury has a large rural area surrounding the city. The Tuesday edition of *Northern Life* focuses on the urban area while the Thursday edition is total market coverage (known as TMC) that includes the rural area – one route alone is 150 km long. The paper operates on a voluntary pay model, where the carrier can knock on a door and see if

readers are willing to pay. Approximately 30 per cent pay, with a “big portion” going to the carrier and driver (Homayed, 2013). A percentage also goes to a community care fund, with more than \$10,000 being donated to charities each year. The bulk of the revenue still comes from advertising and flyers.

It is this relationship with community that sets the community paper apart in a market that is very competitive. *Northern Life* puts a focus on community involvement. The publisher is a key member of the community, having been a chairperson at one time or another for the local United Way, hospice and chamber of commerce. That strong commitment to the local community is part of *Northern Life*’s recipe for success. The newspaper is an integral part of Sudbury, taking ownership of being an active and trusted participant in the daily lives of its neighbours.

Northern Life has weathered economic ups and downs. National advertising was a bit soft in the summer of 2013 – a financial reality that undoubtedly led to the elimination of a reporting position through attrition during the course of this study – but local advertising was still strong (Homayed, 2013). Some advertising dollars have migrated to the web, with some national companies and even government opting for web-only campaigns hosted on sites other than newspapers, but print is still profitable, with the flyer business bringing in significant revenue. *Northern Life* distributes over 73 million flyers each year (Homayed, 2013). It is not the Internet that determines the newspaper’s viability so much as the economic climate. “When the mining companies are doing well,

believe me, everyone is doing well, but when they're not, right now, nobody does well" (Homayed, 2013).

The newspaper saw a significant decline in the summer of 2013. It was not a gradual decline either, with revenue from big retailers and car dealerships drying up. "We're talking tens of thousands of dollars in advertising" (Gentili, 2013). This was on top of a soft first quarter (Gentili, 2013).

The publication has reacted to the downs not with a scramble to cut costs (which often entails slashing staff), but with a focus on its core objectives. The Internet can be viewed as an expense by some – a medium that leeches revenue from newspapers and sucks up newsroom resources – but Homayed sees the web as an investment. Competing against a daily in print is not an option. But the website has given Sudbury's weekly press the ability to flex its might as the first source for local news.

Before, you tried to compete against dailies ... but if there was an event on Thursday and you don't come out until Tuesday, good luck. The daily would have four or five stories by then. That has changed (Homayed, 2013).

Creating that competitive online presence takes determination and a willingness to invest in the newsroom. It also takes managerial courage – the resolve to implement untried strategic initiatives and learn from failure, because inevitably there will be failure along the way. *Northern Life* has demonstrated both courage and a commitment to its operations and, by extension, its product.

"It's not easy. You have to have the content, the reporters, the video" (Homayed, 2013).

Journalists in community newsrooms across the country are expected to juggle many

demands, creating content for print and online, designing pages, uploading web content, managing social media accounts and, increasingly, creating video. Newsroom staff at *Northern Life* has not experienced the same erosion of journalistic function that permeates so much of the industry. This is because the owners of the publication believe it is necessary to separate those various functions.

Northern Life employs an unusually high number of newsroom staff when compared with most community newspapers. There is a managing editor, web editor, videographer/new media reporter, part-time photographer and two reporters. A third reporter moved on to another job elsewhere during the study period and the position was not replaced, resulting in downsizing by attrition. The decision not to replace was strictly monetary, given the decline in ad revenues (Gentili, 2013). The managing editor fought for an increased freelance budget because it would be difficult to have the staff reporters cover the shortfall, so some of the work will be taken on by freelancers. The newspaper already uses a sports freelancer after their sports editor switched to a sports magazine the company started. Work should thus only increase slightly for the reporters remaining on staff; however, it will make more work for the editors because they will have to keep tabs on the beats to assign stories to freelancers. (Update: by 2015 there are again three reporters on staff with the addition of an assistant content editor.)

Unlike many of their colleagues in the industry, reporting staff at *Northern Life* are not required to lay out pages. A designer is on staff to build the print editions. Reporters take their own photos, manage their social media accounts and post to web. The

priority, however, is writing stories and taking photos (MacDonald, 2013). While reporters are normally responsible for shooting their own photos, there is a part-time photographer available for significant events that require a reporter's undivided attention (Ulrichsen, 2013).

The video editing position was added around 2008. Working in the newsroom, Heather Green-Oliver, the video editor, gathers with staff each morning to talk about assignments. If it seems an assignment will lend itself well to a visual element, the video editor will go out with the reporter to shoot video and conduct interviews (Green-Oliver, 2013). The reporter returns to the office to focus on writing the story while the video editor focuses on preparing the video to complement that story.

Sometimes Green-Oliver will go out on her own assignments, depending on the type of story being shot or how in-depth it is. Breaking news, such as accident scenes and fires, are usually covered visually by the video editor.

This division of labour is a product of *Northern Life* choosing to put an emphasis on online video. "We decided to specialize in video because video is very popular and a lot of people watch video, and we did not go on the cheap" (Homayed, 2013). Indeed, the newsroom has two main video cameras and three smaller ones, with the price of the average camera pegged at about \$2,500 (Homayed, 2013). This investment was made because "video is the next content king" (Homayed, 2013). Video tells its own story, or it complements written articles. Plus it allows the newspaper to compete against broadcast media.

The underlying reason for the push to include sophisticated video storytelling is the drive to be the best source of local news. *Northern Life* is not just competing against other print publications, but it is also going head-to-head with the local television stations. To do this, the newspaper had to step up its game. Staff decided live video would give them the competitive edge. The paper invested tens of thousands of dollars to equip itself to stream live video on its website. The cameras are equipped to feed video back to the website over a WiFi signal, directly through Ethernet cable, or a hub that works over cell towers.

Implemented December 2013, the initiative is relatively new and there are still learnings to be had about how to best utilize the tool. Not surprisingly, the most successful video was a live feed from the scene of a fire. Five hundred viewers watched the video while it was being streamed, and another 10,000 people viewed it after the fact, when it was saved to the site (Green-Oliver, 2013). Not all live streams, however, have been so successful. This is a case where it can be all too easy to let the technology drive decision making instead of remembering live streaming is a tool to be used when needed. The video editor acknowledges this potential pitfall. “We feel like we have this technology, let’s use it” (Green-Oliver, 2013). When the mayor gave a speech, the news team felt an obligation to use their newest tool, although they knew it wouldn’t garner much web traffic.

And live streaming takes more resources than simply shooting, editing and posting a final cut. The video editor needs to be on scene capturing the action. Depending on the

nature of the situation, a reporter is also required to work off camera, arranging for sources to step into the camera's field to answer questions and speak to what is happening. Meanwhile, a third person is needed in the office to monitor the visual feed and let the video editor on scene know if there are problems with sightlines or audio. "It's going to take three people away just to cover the mayor's speech, that's resources that could go to something else" (Green-Oliver, 2013). As the newsroom becomes more familiar with technology, they are starting to become more strategic in how the tool is used. Green-Oliver said she would cover a fire live again, but they would not stream the mayor's speech because that was not a good use of available resources.

Introduction of live video not only cements *Northern Life's* role as the primary source of local news, it also helps the newspaper build audience. "In media, especially online, from any marketing standpoint, the online audience doesn't care where they get their information as long as they get it right away" (Green-Oliver, 2013). If a reader hears there's a fire at a complex in Sudbury, they search for information on Google and follow the link to whoever has the information, so it is important to get information online quickly to ensure a higher ranking in the search results. "Loyalty is out the window online" (Green-Oliver, 2013).

Video, of course, is not the only important element in the newspaper's digital strategy. As with almost all community newsrooms, reporters are writing to daily deadlines and are expected to have their stories ready to go online quickly (MacDonald, Ulrichsen). The intent, however, is to allow reporters the ability to dig into issues and write stories.

“You need focus,” the publisher says, explaining why certain newsroom duties have not been merged as they have been in other news operations across the country.

According to the publisher, there is no time for staff to shoot and edit video. Oliver-Green spends about one to two hours editing an average video. A reporter should be focused on getting a good story and writing it, not editing video for web. Meanwhile, the video editor is knowledgeable in production techniques and can put together a more sophisticated piece. Separating duties thus maintains a high standard of quality. “If you want to present video you need a producer” (Homayed, 2013).

The belief in separation of specialization at *Northern Life* goes beyond just video production. The publisher is a firm believer that different roles require a different skill set. A web editor, for example, will see things differently, thinking about links, web traffic and social media best practices. It is the responsibility of the web editor to understand the digital reader. A traditional newspaper editor might not make an ideal web editor because the focus and knowledge is different. “They are both very important to us, they both do different jobs” (Homayed, 2013). Besides, effectively managing online content throughout the day is a full time job (Gentili, 2013). Ultimately, *Northern Life* has invested in its newsroom operations, separating duties where possible.

It is, perhaps, an enlightened approach, but it is not without its challenges. Despite the additional resources and separation of function, reporting staff indicate it is still a challenge juggling multiple tasks. The biggest challenge is that more is still expected of the reporters. Before the advent of online publishing, only so many stories needed to be

written to fill the printed editions, but now there's no limit to how much information can run, so there is more pressure to produce more (MacDonald, 2013). The approach has changed to maximize quantity. "The more you can produce, the happier everyone is" (MacDonald, 2013).

Weekend coverage at *Northern Life* can be particularly challenging for staff. Only one newsroom staff member works on Saturdays and Sundays on a rotation. This leaves one person responsible for written stories, photography and video. "It's harder on weekends. We're doing triple duty" (MacDonald, 2013). It can be hard for reporters to keep up with all the demands, so they are forced to really consider their goals when heading out on assignment. Based on those goals, they concentrate on either capturing video, shooting still photos, or live tweeting. It's about setting priorities to ensure quality is not sacrificed. It is helpful that, during the week, they have a dedicated staffer for video production.

Reporters at *Northern Life* not only are able to make time to undertake investigative work or write long-form stories, they are encouraged to do so (MacDonald, Ulrichsen). Before leaving the paper, the third reporter examined how the burgeoning local film industry was helping Sudbury's economy. Another reporter delved into a piece about the home care industry, while the city hall reporter took a deep dive into planning issues. Without the burden of videography, newspaper layout and online content management, reporters are able to dedicate the time needed to pursue important

stories. This separation of duty, coupled with relatively higher staffing levels, has had a positive impact on the newsroom's ability to produce relevant content.

Curiously, other independent papers contacted also had higher editorial staffing levels than their corporate counterparts. This could be a function of not being answerable to shareholders or a corporate mothership, or it could be the result of being unable to share resources with neighbouring sister papers like the Black Press Vancouver weeklies. The underlying reason for this anecdotal trend of seeing slightly higher staffing numbers at independent papers was beyond the purview of this project, but merits closer examination. Particularly when the model at Sudbury *Northern Life* is compared against that at Transcontinental Media's *West Island Chronicle*, which has a predictable corporate formula that is undermining the newspaper's capacity to meet its mandate.

West Island Chronicle

Where *Sudbury Northern Life* is an example of a community newspaper that is surviving shifting market trends with courage and innovation, Montreal's *West Island Chronicle* is a newspaper that appears to be taking its last gasps.

In April 2013, Transcontinental Media announced it would reduce staff at its 22 weeklies in the Montreal area, which includes the *West Island Chronicle*, from 23 to 12 journalists. The news was, understandably, jarring for the people who lost their jobs, but also for "those who may have had some connection to these once respectable papers that have since been left to rot into empty shells for advertising" ("Montreal's community papers must make do without journalists"). The reduction in headcount

meant each paper would have the equivalent of half a reporter. The industry was about to see first-hand what would happen to a newspaper without journalists.

The *West Island Chronicle* has a proud tradition dating back to 1925 serving Montreal's West Island. The English-language weekly was a paid circulation paper before eventually switching to total market coverage, a free distribution model used by most urban and suburban Canadian community newspapers. Distributed on Wednesdays, the *Chronicle* bears little resemblance to its former self. As the executive director of the Quebec Community Newspapers Association explains:

You take a 36 pager of the *Chronicle* ... and you compare it to today and anyone can see that there's a major difference. And then you've got to find out why, and with a little bit of snooping you'll discover that Transcontinental decided to make it a business: cut, cut, cut, cut, cut (Tardif, 2013).

The announcement to slash about half the reporting staff is only the most recent in a list of changes that have been made at the once respectable paper. In 2009, five days before Christmas, Transcontinental Media announced it would lay off a reporter at the *West Island Chronicle* and demote its editor to reporter, a move the editor rejected, choosing instead to leave the paper ("Merry Christmas from Transcontinental"). Indeed, the slow demise of the *West Island Chronicle* is worth a full study unto itself. The purpose of this case study, meanwhile, is to focus on key aspects that are affecting the future of this community newspaper.

Given the skeleton staff at the *Chronicle*, the 2013 reductions exacerbated an already difficult situation. For at least one editorial staff member, restructuring meant

responsibilities were sextupled. The editor-in-chief for the *West Island Chronicle* was given a new title, director of content and community relations, along with responsibility for six area newspapers and an expanded job description. Instead of managing editorial strategy, as most editors-in-chief, the director was suddenly responsible for layout, editing content, and overseeing the production of editorial. One person became the last line of defence for six papers and six websites. Community relations was also handed to the newly titled position, meaning the director must also attend community social and networking functions on behalf of Transcontinental Media, a duty once assumed by the publishers (whose job description was also changed).

In making such a drastic reduction in its workforce, Transcontinental Media rolled several jobs into one, burdening its newsroom staff with non-journalistic functions and making it exceedingly difficult to continue filling the paper, let alone working on important, relevant stories that do more than skim the surface or go beyond rewriting press releases. One editor-plus and three reporters found themselves responsible for six printed papers and six websites, including all the usual work that entails (layout, uploading content to the websites, managing social media accounts, shooting and editing video, etc.).

The layoffs and subsequent restructure brought with it a change in editorial direction. With fewer staff dedicated to reporting on the community, the *West Island Chronicle* was reinvented. Instead of competing directly with other media in the area, the *Chronicle* adopted an evening paper-model with an emphasis on more photo essays and

community outreach (Lalonde, 2013). “People in Montreal live with angst on a daily basis. They live with it day in and day out. We are inundated by it so we’ve tried to pull some of the angst out of our newspapers” (Lalonde, 2013).

On April 27, 2013, Denis Therrien, the director general (new title for publishers) explained the new editorial approach on the pages of the *Chronicle*, suggesting the shift in focus was a means of differentiating the product from other media.

Due to the profound transformation taking place within the media industry, Montreal has been subjected to a high level of media concentration. This situation has resulted in information overload and repetition of news items: local news is no exception. (Therrien)

Therrien further explained the *Chronicle* would adapt “its content to the tempo of the lives of citizens” by “highlighting the vitality of the community, with special attention given to organizations and community life, photo essays and columns that focus on the interests of the community.”

For those who knew that staff numbers had been slashed, this optimistic outlook undoubtedly raised questions as to how the paper would accomplish this new mandate. It seems even the upbeat piece from the director general hinted at the need for free labour to offset the loss of professional journalists. “More immediately, there are several plans under way that will lead to closer collaboration and partnerships” Therrien wrote. That would prove to be code for greater community contributions in lieu of reporting undertaken by trained journalists.

More concerning was the new editorial direction. The union representing Transcontinental editorial employees released a statement saying the remaining journalists would not be allowed to cover a host of events, work on in-depth reports or undertake investigative work (“La conseil municipal de Montréal s’oppose aux compressions dans les hebdomas locaux de TC Media”). News coverage in some districts would be replaced by the publication of press releases issued by the borough council, depriving citizens of independent information (“La conseil municipal de Montréal s’oppose aux compressions dans les hebdomas locaux de TC Media”). Official statements, it seems, were meant to replace stories.

“We don’t really have any choice but to go out and solicit op eds from the community or run photo essays and stuff like that,” one employee said, adding each week is very stressful. If one reporter can’t make it to work, is off for vacation or has a story fall through, it becomes a problem for the newsroom because there are no other places to turn, other than perhaps the community and press releases.

Following Canada Day 2013, the paper put a call out asking readers to share their pictures, with a promise they might be used in the paper. As one employee put it, the paper had resorted to “crowdsourcing content.” Another term to describe the change could be begging. Relying on free content from the community is a precarious position for any media. Readers can be unreliable. They do not adhere to strict print deadlines and they are not professional reporters, trained to verify information, question sources and dig for truth. Often, submissions come from those who have an interest in a

particular topic, association with a group or event, or who have a vested interest in sharing certain information in a specific way.

Aside from the obvious concerns regarding bias, verification and ethics, submitted content is often riddled with errors and isn't written to journalistic standards, nor does it follow the newspaper's style guide. One editorial staffer said it might seem like the company is saving time and money by using so-called citizen journalists, but in the end the editing process for one submitted piece can take over an hour. "I think for the most part people underestimate what journalists do," the employee said.

Official statements and press releases cannot be expected to replace independent reporting. No organization, for example, will out itself for making mistakes, just as no politician will submit a report to the newspaper outlining corruption within his or her office. Any publication that relies on official statements as a source of content runs the risk of being, at best, nothing more than a mouthpiece for the self-congratulating, and, at worst, a conduit for misinformation. The official view tends to be censored and thus skewed, robbing readers of context and, potentially, truth. The community is indeed an important partner, particularly when it comes to the weekly press, but reader submissions are used to augment professional reporting, not replace it. A newspaper that relies on free community submissions and official statements cannot claim to be an independent voice.

Transcontinental Media took a very curious approach to differentiating the *Chronicle* from its competitors. The Fédération Professionnelle des Journalistes du Québec

questioned whether Montreal was indeed faced with repetitive news content from competing media. Community journalism monitors local issues that often pass under the radar of other media, serving a watchdog function on issues that are important to a smaller geographically-defined group. But without reporters, that function is lost, turning the newspaper into a community bulletin board.

To make up for the shortfall in staff produced content, the *Chronicle* is not only forced to use more submitted pieces, but must also stretch out what they have as much as possible to fill space in the print edition. More photo essays, additional headlines, pull quotes and anything other than “actual text” is used to help fill the paper. Occasionally staff create a graph to help illustrate a point, but this is difficult because there is no one with the time to create these additional visual elements.

Multiple entry points into a story has a long tradition in print media, but it needs to be executed with purpose, not to desperately fill space. Pull quotes, graphs and photos can help draw a reader into a story and better illustrate points, but only if they are compelling and relevant. Used too often or without a specific intent makes it look like what it is: filler. And used too often it can clutter a page, rendering the content visually unappealing.

Employees were told restructuring was a monetary decision. “Money. We don’t have as much of it as we used to. And on the Island of Montreal we are beset by competition so that’s a problem and that’s how our company has decided to deal with the problem,” one employee said.

How Transcontinental Media planned to compete against other media and maintain its business by slashing its staff at the *Chronicle* is unknown. Content is the driver of readership. With the exception of flyers, people pick up the newspaper because they are interested in the stories being told and they want to be informed. This is more so the case online, where readers follow a link because they are genuinely interested in the article, not the ad that might run alongside the story. Advertising is the add-on that pays for the creation of content. It is journalist work that drives readership and clicks. Without that content the death of a newspaper becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The slow demise of the *West Island Chronicle* may well be the result of previous business decisions. Only a full and direct study can uncover the underlying nuances that led the *Chronicle* down this path, but it is likely the paper found itself beset by competitors due, at least in large part, to changes in its business model, and not due to the “profound transformation taking place within the media industry” as Therrien suggested. This is undoubtedly a tale of death by a thousand cuts. If, as has been suggested, Transcontinental Media has been making cuts and structural changes over the years, it stands to reason the erosion in quality started long ago, leaving the market open to new competitors. If newcomers were able to enter the market and so effectively rob the incumbent of audience and advertisers, the paper with history and tradition behind it probably left a glaring gap in the market that start-ups were able to more effectively fill.

It isn't the only example of Transcontinental Media slashing staff and eroding the quality of community newspapers. What happened in Montreal happened at the company's Ottawa operations, albeit on a much smaller scale. The *Orléans Star* and *Weekly Journal* (later *East Ottawa Star*) once boasted a newsroom of three reporters and an editor-in-chief. Structural changes saw staff reduced by one reporter in 2006/2007 and an additional reporter in 2009. Around the same time the editor at the *West Island Chronicle* was offered a demotion to reporter, so too was the editor-in-chief at the *Orléans Star*. The systematic demotion of editors was chain-wide ("Merry Christmas from Transcontinental"). In Ottawa, the editor for the French language weeklies *L'Express Ottawa* and *La Nouvelle* was assigned responsibility for the English language newspapers as well. The offices for the papers were later relocated out of the community into neighbouring Gatineau in Quebec. Today, those papers are also described as being a shadow of what they once represented (Tardif, 2013), a function of business decisions that stripped the papers of relevant, compelling content.

Cutting editorial staff, merging roles and eroding the quality of content seems to be a common refrain when it comes to Transcontinental Media.

This trend comes as no surprise to QCNA's executive director Richard Tardif, who refused to mince words when he declared that Transcontinental Media (along with Quebecor) are destroying community newspapers (Tardif, 2013). He has watched first-hand the decline of the *West Island Chronicle* and many other Transcontinental papers in Quebec.

The *Chronicle*, about 10-15 years ago, was anywhere from a 32-36 (page) tabloid with the big office and lots of advertising and some really good stories. Some stories that changed things. And now it's a mere shadow of itself. I mean, its 12-16 pages on average and the stories are shorter (Tardif, 2013).

What Tardif could not know in 2013 is that, within two years, the *Chronicle* would be reduced to an eight page publication (Aug. 12, 2015) with no editorial page. Indeed, the newspaper appears to have been reduced to little more than a newsletter with less than a handful of stories. A full page photo on the Aug. 12, 2015 cover turns to the main story on page three about the mayor refusing to cooperate with an investigation. A short story about a drowning is on page four while page six features an article about competitions at the local pool and a standalone photo of a cheque presentation for a local charity that appears to be submitted. With the exception of the standalone photo, all the stories carry staff bylines. The remainder of the pages are filled with ads or advertorial content.

It is difficult to classify the *West Island Chronicle* as a newspaper anymore. One of the core functions of the weekly press is to be the voice of the community and to ensure readers are provided with independently verified information that helps inform their decision-making. It must educate, engage, entertain and challenge the status quo and be a record keeper for the community. A newspaper should be the nexus of community discussion and debate. And yet, the *West Island Chronicle* lacks one of the key elements that ensures a publication meets those basic requirements. It no longer has an editorial page. Opinion, and thus the ability to challenge assumptions, lead debate and encourage reader discussion, is non-existent. The *Chronicle* has abandoned its ability to

provide context and analysis and has instead assumed the role of transcriber. The editorial page is so intrinsic to the role newspapers play that most industry associations require potential member publications to have a “clearly defined editorial page with opinion and masthead, and with opportunity for letters to the editor from members of the public” (OCNA Member Application Form).

The *Chronicle* does include stories researched and written by professional journalists, and their work should not be dismissed, but as a whole the *West Island Chronicle* it is not fulfilling its mandate of being a thought-leader in the community. In short, it is no longer functioning in its capacity as a community newspaper but has instead become a glorified newsletter.

Conclusion

Given the nature of the case studies it would be too easy to assume this is a tale of independents versus corporate media. That unintended contrast is a product of comparing a strong independent against a weak corporate paper. The strength of an individual newspaper goes beyond ownership, although that certainly plays a role in how these newspapers have been managed.

It would be wrong to discount the many other corporately-owned newspapers that retain a relatively strong editorial mandate. Not all corporate-owned newspapers are being slashed and burned to the same extent as Transcontinental’s *West Island Chronicle*. Other corporate community newspapers have certainly been subjected to various rounds of newsroom layoffs and voluntary buyouts, which puts additional pressures on remaining journalists and has an overall deleterious effect on the quality of

content; however, a certain standard of care is still being maintained by these publications and they have not been reduced to printing what no longer seems to meet the definition of newspaper.

Faced with declining revenues and fierce competition, the *West Island Chronicle* made a strategic retreat when it should have taken bold steps to reassert itself as the newspaper of record. Instead of reinvesting in its product and directly challenging the competition, Transcontinental Media decided to drastically cut newsroom staff in an attempt to reinvent itself as a grassroots paper built on community partnerships, when in fact it actually created a product forced to beg readers to fill in as unpaid labour.

Regardless of how executives tried to package the message, what it really served to do was demonstrate to readers and advertisers that Transcontinental Media no longer had any confidence in its own newspaper. If the company was not willing to invest in itself, how could it expect advertisers to do the same? Time has shown this approach has not been successful. How long the *Chronicle* can continue to operate under this model is anyone's guess (Update: The *West Island Chronicle* ceased operations October 2015).

In contrast, *Sudbury Northern Life* saw the Internet for what it is: a tool that requires some level of investment to become the great equalizer. Competition in Sudbury was, in part, the impetus for a renewed focus on editorial at *Northern Life*. Instead of making a strategic retreat, executives at Laurentian Publishing demonstrated both confidence and pride in their product. They put money into their newsroom, giving journalists the tools required to create a strong web presence while also maintaining a credible printed

edition. The result is a rich array of content that informs, entertains, and challenges. The results of this investment help confirm the findings of Tang, Sridhar and Mantrala, who quantitatively demonstrated there is a correlation between newsroom investment and revenue.

The newsroom at *Northern Life* has not escaped the tough economic realities within the industry. There has been downsizing through attrition, but the losses have been undertaken in a measured fashion, with an increased freelance budget to help offset the decrease in resources. This suggests the newsroom is an integral part of the overall business plan. Instead of succumbing to its competitors, Laurentian Publishing has chosen to invest in the future of its newspaper.

Where *Sudbury Northern Life* holds to its core function and mandate, the *West Island Chronicle* has been the author of its own demise. Ultimately, it is the business model that has determined the direction and viability of these newspapers.

Most community newspapers in Canada fall somewhere in the middle of the spectrum, between *Northern Life* and the *West Island Chronicle*. There is some emphasis on editorial, but there is little appetite to invest in newsrooms. As the economy slips into another recession and revenues continue to decline, it might be all too easy for some newspapers to start moving closer toward the *Chronicle's* doomed model. The *Chronicle's* experiences should stand as a warning that slashing newsroom resources is not a viable long term solution.

Like the *West Island Chronicle*, *Sudbury Northern Life*, perhaps, deserves a deeper study of its practices and business acumen over a longer period of time. Beset by its own challenges and most assuredly dogged by its own missteps, it has managed to maintain a strong foothold, focusing on editorial excellence and creating what appears to be a sustainable model of community journalism. It is proof that investing in the newsroom is just sound business in an industry that seems too quick to rip the heart out of its operations when times get tough.

Conclusion

When community newspapers first emerged in North America, they sprung up not just in established towns, but followed the path of migration into the frontier regions. Filled with an entrepreneurial spirit, these early newspapermen set up their rudimentary hand presses in settlements across the country, carving for themselves a niche role within the nation's slowly emerging news ecology, becoming not just chroniclers of history, but a key source of communal information.

The slow rise of the weekly press is testament to society's intrinsic need to be informed. Be it pre-modern cave drawings, posted Roman news scrolls, or town criers, people have an innate desire to share knowledge. Like their widely varying predecessors, weekly newspapers offered a means of communicating information to a larger audience. The pages of these early gazettes provided information, recorded shared experiences and generally built a sense of collective identity. The very presence of a newspaper spoke to the vitality and permanency of a settlement (Karolevitz 67). This core mandate remains unchanged, although the means by which the weekly press communicates information has evolved and expanded.

Frontier journalism was "a perilous, precarious and thankless task" (Karolevitz 50) fraught with challenges. Many tried to keep newspapers afloat in difficult conditions where subscriptions were low and advertising limited. Owners suffered through paper shortages and news lags, and some early publishers accepted wood, tallow, and honey as well as cash (Karolevitz 50) or took commissions as a public printer to make ends

meet (Karolevitz 24). Many early community newspapers simply went broke and ceased operation (Karolevitz 24). Newspapering has rarely been an easy venture.

These hardships are an important reminder of how newspapers struggled and either succeeded or failed. Today, there is a corporate memory of the so-called golden era – revenue was high, classifieds alone covered much (if not all, with money to spare) costs, and community newspapers were highly profitable. Before the proliferation of the Internet as a means of communication, the joke was that printing a newspaper was a license to print money. Forgotten were the hardships early community newspaper entrepreneurs faced. The industry began to rest on its laurels, grew fat with enviable profit margins and became complicit.

The maturation of the community press is a story of both technological innovation and the rise of the corporate media industry. The ability to collect and disseminate the news has been tied to technology since the beginning. Be it innovation in press technology, communication tools, or distribution methods, the history of the community press is inextricably linked to advances in and adoption of technology. Indeed, the story of the community press is a history that continues to unfold today with the implementation of digital communication tools.

As technology advances, questions invariably arise regarding the future of the printed medium as readers utilize other communications tools. The viability of newspapers in an environment where there is increased competition for reader attention and ad dollars becomes an almost all consuming question. It has become a topic of much discussion in

recent years as newspapers struggle with additional challenges, and point to the proliferation of digital media as the cause of much upset in the industry.

Yet no technology is self-defining. New technology, be it radio, television, or the Internet, just extends existing basic social integration. The speed, scope and scale of communication have changed, but the nature of that communication – the dissemination of information – remains the same. History has demonstrated that one technology does not replace another. Technology is not a linear line of succession, with each overwriting the previous. Instead, the systems are separate and entangled as they operate over time (Edwards Paul N. et al.). Radio did not kill the newspaper, nor did television. The power balance within the media industry was renegotiated as new media forms entered and were eventually absorbed into the evolving news ecology.

The Internet has once again spurred a change in the balance of power, as the industry shifts to accommodate and utilize the newest technological entrant. Much as newspapers experimented with radio, so, too, have they experimented with digital media. Many community newspapers went online with much enthusiasm, eager to utilize a medium that promised to be the great equalizer. No longer held back by a weekly print distribution cycle, the community press had an opportunity to reach a broader audience, and by extension, increase revenue opportunities in a way that was not previously available to the country's smallest newspapers.

Community newspapers across Canada have established websites they update on a daily basis, or at least more often than the printed edition. Newsroom labour has shifted to

accommodate new storytelling techniques once relegated to individual media forms.

There is no longer as clear a distinction between a broadcast journalist, a print journalist, a photographer or a videographer. The lines are increasingly being blurred as individuals are tasked with multimedia production. Words, pictures, sound, video and graphics all converge on a single platform: the Internet.

As a result, community newspapers have seen the most dramatic shift since the advent of the World Wide Web. There is more news being disseminated at a faster pace to a broader audience. Breaking news and immediacy are now part of weekly press coverage. Community journalists have become daily reporters without the benefit of the resources (or wages) found at daily newspapers.

There has been a flurry of activity within the weekly press as newsrooms adapt and shift to a multimedia strategy, switching from a print model to a digital news operation. No longer is it sufficient to record, investigate and present information in the weekly printed product. Armed with advances in technology, community journalists are assuming multiple roles, some of which once required specific specialization, and report on a daily schedule. Once a master of researching the intelligence of the day (or week), community newspaper journalists must also understand videography, design, web analytics, search engine optimization, social media best practices and a slew of other skills never before required in a print environment.

These additional work duties are being undertaken in an environment where staffing has historically been low given the demands of weekly print deadlines. The result is an

overburdened newsroom that struggles to meet increasing demands as the core function of journalist is slowly eroded in favour of pursuing new ways to engage audience and remain relevant.

Relevancy, however, is not defined merely by one's presence online. It is instead defined by the content one produces in conjunction with the way in which that content is shared. Community newspapers are expected to provide unique information that provides depth and context both online and in print. The platform might be different, but the mandate is the same. Maintaining that mandate becomes increasingly difficult when newsroom resources are scarce.

In an attempt to grow audience and realize the promise of the Internet, community newspapers have driven headlong into the digital realm with methodless enthusiasm. Newspapers are looking for new ways to engage readers, and technology often provides the tools for experimentation. Glacier Media and Island Press Limited are forging ahead with the Layar app, which allows readers to view video on their mobile devices related to stories they are reading in the print edition. These initiatives are seen as a means of providing information to readers where they choose to engage with the product. Experimentation, it seems, continues unabated.

But all this enthusiasm for the digital realm comes with cautions:

Getting the return on investment is the difficult thing because it takes a lot of extra effort to do the videos, to put up the photo spreads and that type of thing. And to be constantly updating. At the end of the week the product that makes the money is your print product. And you've got to remember that. But also, too, you've got to be cognizant that to be relevant you've got

to be on the digital side somehow. The trick is to find the happy medium. We haven't necessarily found that yet (MacNeill).

Newspapers cannot expect to effectively grow digital when their journalists are being pulled in multiple directions. The needs of a print publication are different than that of online media and one cannot be substituted for the other. Too many community newsrooms call themselves digital operations when in fact they are merely taking print content and repurposing it for an online audience. The addition of video or photo galleries does not, in and of itself, make a news site a truly digital operation, nor does the addition of breaking news. Such newsrooms are web-first in that they publish online first, but they are not a true digital newsroom. The online realm has needs specific to that communication medium, be it a strong link economy, embedded multimedia elements, search engine optimized headlines, social media optimization, appropriate curation, effective use of multiple social media channels, interactivity and non-linear storytelling.

An engaging and relevant news site requires a focused effort. Yet a general lack of resources in community newsrooms across the country has hindered innovation and stifled the entrepreneurial spirit that once helped ensure success.

Meanwhile, forcing journalists to multitask shifts the focus away from the print publication, which is still the core product in terms of revenue generation. The Internet has offered community newspapers access to a larger audience, but the revenue potential of the web has not been realized. The ability to monetize news websites has

been hampered by the low advertising rates set by competitors such as Google (Kvarnstrom, 2013).

To survive, community newspapers need to emphasize what they do well regardless of the medium used for distribution. That means refocusing on the core competencies of the newsroom: the production of relevant content. The weekly press must continue to inform, engage, and entertain, act as watchdog and thought-leader, provoke discussion and provide a space for shared experiences and community dialogue in a geographically defined area of influence. But it cannot do that when newsroom budgets are continually slashed.

This concentration on core competencies requires investment in news operations. And it requires an emphasis on audience, which has always been at the centre of the business model. Advertisers, after all, use media to reach that audience. Without audience, there is nothing.

Currently community newspapers have more audience than they've ever had before. A look at readership surveys over the years demonstrates that the readership for the weekly press has remained relatively stable. Meanwhile, these smaller papers now reach a much wider audience via their websites. But as newsroom resources continue to be stretched, the hold on that audience could be in jeopardy.

The deep cuts made to Transcontinental Media's *West Island Chronicle's* newsroom left what was once the newspaper of record a mere shadow of its former self. With the loss of staff and addition of web duties, the newsroom was unable to meet its mandate as

both a recorder and interpreter of news. It has become a farcical excuse for a newspaper, rendered impotent on all platforms.

Targeting audience requires meaningful and strategic investments in the newsroom. Yet community newsrooms across the country are seeing their numbers slowly drop, making it more difficult to maintain the core function of news operations, let alone manage additional tasks related to new distribution forms. The case of Transcontinental Media's *West Island Chronicle* is an extreme example of a newsroom where resources have been slashed, but the effect of downsizing has been felt at many community newspapers. It is difficult to track community newsroom losses specifically because they are piecemeal, but many media companies including Transcontinental Media, Postmedia, Sun Media and Torstar (Metroland Media) have all seen some downsizing in their newsroom operations at the community level, either through layoffs or buy outs.

Other media companies, such as Glacier Media, suggest they have maintained staffing levels:

We have not reduced the amount (sic) of people in our news-gathering operations over the last decade, what we have done is we've found other areas of our business where we are able to reduce our costs, or operating costs, to deal with our fiscal reality that were not key to generating content (Kvarnstrom, 2013).

Some may not have slashed their newsroom staff, but they have also generally not added newsroom resources. The expectation is that existing reporters and editors will manage the demands of both a weekly print product and daily website.

The adoption of digital media differs from its predecessors in that it has been absorbed into existing newsrooms. When radio came on the scene, it was treated as a distinct distribution method, and grew into a separate operation, albeit with some crossover. Instead of seeing the Internet as a distribution model that requires some level of investment and specialization to be fully realized, digital media has become an add-on in most community newsrooms, leaving journalists scrambling to fill a bottomless pit every day while also working to maintain a credible print publication.

In some newsrooms, the emphasis on the digital sphere is almost all-consuming. Programs that show real-time analytics (visitors to the site, page views, etc.) have grown in popularity, letting newsrooms know when their online numbers start to dwindle at any given time. Editors are increasingly responsible for growing those numbers, as they translate into potential revenue via ad impressions. This has the potential to lead to content decisions based not on news judgment, but instead on the likelihood of it garnering page views. Whether this means newsrooms will start to privilege stories with the potential to go viral over content of a more serious nature remains to be seen.

This emphasis on growing audience in such a way is curious, since audience, in general, is not the problem. The struggle relates to declining revenue and the industry's inability to adequately demonstrate the value of its products and the unique audience it offers advertisers. Caught up in the rhetoric of technological determinism, the industry is perpetuating the myth that print is dead. Each time a newsroom lays off staff or closes a

newspaper, it sends a message of retreat to both readers and advertisers, which is not reassuring and does not accurately reflect what these publications have to offer.

Sudbury Northern Life stands out in the community newspaper industry because it has made some strategic investment in its newsroom operations, separating duties to maximize the effectiveness of two media with limited staff resources. The independent has faced the same challenges as its counterparts – declining revenue, economic downturns, and renegotiating its place in an evolving networked news ecology – yet its owners made a conscious decision to invest in the product. The newsroom has been a key part of the publisher's overall business plan, which privileges audience needs. To that end, journalists at *Northern Life* were given the tools required to create both a robust web presence while also maintaining a strong printed edition. What has emerged is a hybrid news operation prepared to see the company into the future.

The case of *Northern Life* helps confirm the findings of Tang, Sridhar and Mantrala, who concluded that newspapers seeking to increase revenue may need to increase, rather than decrease, investment levels in the newsroom. The trio found that news gathering is a creator of value and directly brings in additional print and online revenue. In other words, content is indeed king, and the continued viability of newspapers depends on newsroom investment.

Yet the industry continues to see newsroom cuts as revenues shrink and the economy slides into a recession. This is, in part, due to the structure of the industry, which is entangled in this web of technological change and power renegotiation. The nature of

the structure informs much of the decision making taking place at individual newspapers. Media companies have taken on high levels of debt to grow their business and acquire other holdings, thus weakening their economic foundation. Under this system, media have become more vulnerable to market fluctuations. Reliant on advertising, this becomes problematic when the economy slumps and advertising spending dwindles. Unprepared to weather downturns, media companies faced with decreasing revenue make short-term decisions that invariably adversely affect the long term viability of their core product, thus creating a vicious cycle. Too often the solution to ease revenue decline is to slash budgets and cut staff, lowering the value of the product and thus limiting reader engagement and, in turn, advertiser investment.

A newspaper that is unwilling to believe in itself and demonstrate confidence in its products cannot expect to sell its audience to advertisers. Wrapped up in the discourse of technological determinism and a slave to an uncompromising structure, media are making short term decisions that undermine their core mandate. Under this strategy community newspapers are sure to be the authors of their own obituaries, just as Transcontinental Media has already dug the grave for the *West Island Chronicle*.

The media landscape has changed and the weekly press must evolve and operate in an environment where profit margins are lower and competition for ad dollars more fierce. This will require a change in expectations and shift in structure, with a renewed emphasis on the industry's core competencies and fundamental role within social democratic inquiry.

The central function of community newspapers has remained relatively unchanged throughout the century. Regardless of whether they are online or in print, the role of the weekly press is the collection and dissemination of essential information that is applicable to a geographically-defined audience. The need for such information has not changed. In fact, it has become even more important in a world where an abundance of unreliable information is found, shared and circulated. Now, more than ever, there is a need for compelling, engaging, unique, relevant, and above all, trustworthy, sources of information. Community newspapers, with a long history of being a credible source of news, are well positioned to thrive as niche players in the evolving news ecology. But the strength of Canada's weeklies is not dependent on the fact that they are niche products. Their viability depends on the value they offer their audience and, in turn, advertisers. Continued cutbacks and the lack of strategic investment in digital media threaten to erode the core function of community newspapers and leave weeklies in a progressively vulnerable position.

Canada's community press has a viable future, but that future will only be realized if there is a return to the core mandate of the weekly press, with meaningful investments in newsroom operations. Editorial has never been more important than it is now, with online page views and ad impressions wholly dependent on and a result of quality content. But that quality content cannot be created without meaningful investment. Historically, the weekly press was never an easy venture. It is long past time newspaper owners were reminded of that. Community newspapers that re-define what success really means in this evolving news ecology and re-invest appropriately in their

operations will continue to create a product of value to both readers and advertisers. To be sustainable requires a focused effort and strategic investment in both the print and online newsrooms because both will be needed to remain relevant. The weekly press must continue to develop its niche audience while better championing its ability to reach that audience. It is through this emphasis on its principal product – news – that the industry will find ways to continue a healthy business under an altered definition of success. To do otherwise is to destroy the very foundation of community journalism and shatter the inherent strength of Canada’s weeklies. Any newspaper that continues to cut at its heart will find itself trapped in a slow, but inevitable, death spiral, much like the *West Island Chronicle*.

APPENDIX A

Ownership of Canada's community newspapers, 2012

Owner	# Titles	# Titles 2011	+/- since 2011	Total circulation	Average circulation
Independent (single titles)	274	287	(13)	2,589,278	9,348
Independent groups (47 groups w/ 2-9 titles)	141	152	(11)	1,444,700	9,895
Quebecor/Sun Media	165	162	3	2,637,708	15,159
Torstar/Metroland Media Group Ltd.	112	101	11	5,332,169	35,080
TC Transcontinental	101	100	1	2,094,739	18,215
Black Press Group Ltd.	84	84	0	2,420,885	23,278
Glacier Media Group	76	53	23	1,832,398	19,087
Brunswick News Inc.	20	19	1	285,656	13,603
Great West Newspapers, LP.	18	18	0	161,461	8,498
Department of National Defence	12	11	1	53,002	4,417
Multimedia Nova Corporation	11	11	0	298,945	27,177
Postmedia Network Inc.	7	26	(19)	217,504	31,072
FP Newspapers Inc.	7	7	0	195,722	27,960
The Halifax Herald Ltd.	3	3	0	145,009	48,336
TOTAL	1,031	1,034	(3)	19,709,176	17,228

*Glacier Ventures International Corp. is a 50% shareholder of Great West Newspapers, LP.

Source: Newspapers Canada database, May 2012

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