ONLINE MEDIA AT WESTERN NORTH CAROLINA COMMUNITY NEWSPAPERS

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Definitions

Community newspaper

A publication that serves 15,000 or fewer readers; a general definition for community newspapers puts 50,000 readers as the threshold, but this work focuses on the smaller, intimate publications in rural areas. All qualifying newspapers in Western North Carolina were contacted to gauge interest in the research.

Online media

This is every form of online publishing these newspapers utilize from their websites and blogs to social media interaction from Twitter, Facebook, RSS feeds, etc.

In-depth website

An in-depth website will be defined as one that is updated multiple times daily and possesses several features including reader comment forums, photo and/or video galleries, multiple blogs, numerous news stories and archives, and breaking news posts, among other aspects.

Internal support

A newspaper’s internal support refers to the management’s willingness to invest in new or deeper online pursuits for the publication as well as the paper’s personnel and their ability to produce an in-depth local news website.

Rural

For the purposes of this research, rural will be an objective quantitative measure. The White House Office of Management and Budget designates areas as metropolitan by each metropolitan statistical area that includes at least one city with 50,000 or more inhabitants
or an urbanized area with at least 50,000 inhabitants and a total metropolitan statistical area of at least 100,000. All other areas are considered rural. None of the newspapers in this study serve a city of 50,000 residents or more.

**Western North Carolina mountains**

The Western North Carolina region consists of 23 counties and more than 9,700 square miles. I excluded Buncombe, Haywood, Watauga, and Henderson counties, the four most populous counties in the region, and focused on the counties of Alleghany, Avery, Madison, Ashe, Caldwell, Transylvania, Alexander, Mitchell, Yancey, Swain, Graham, Cherokee, Clay, Macon, Wilkes, and Jackson. The other Western North Carolina counties, Rutherford, Burke, and McDowell, were excluded because the publications in those counties have circulations above 15,000.

**Community newspaper editor or publisher**

This is the editor or publisher of a community newspaper in the Western North Carolina mountains whose paper has a circulation of less than 15,000. With small publications, roles are not always as clearly defined. An editor may also be a publisher, and a publisher may be the ad salesman. The person who would be best equipped to answer these questions is the one involved in the business decisions of the newspaper. That was either the editor or publisher, and it was dependent upon the newspaper’s structure.

**Newspaper structure**

This will refer to the number of employees, their experience, their expertise, and the newspaper’s financial budgets for online development at each particular newspaper.
Community dynamics

This term will refer to the demographics—average age, income, etc.—as well as the technological infrastructure and availability of new technologies in each particular community.

Assumptions

This research will work under several assumptions. The first and primary assumption is that the online publishing and use of new technologies that is an integral part of models at metropolitan newspapers is considered superior to the traditional format that is still overwhelmingly the hub at many small, rural community newspapers. Larger newspapers are utilizing online publishing to develop greater access for their readers and reach new, diverse audiences, while many of the smaller community newspapers are thought to be falling behind the curve in their abilities to evolve with the shifting culture in the newspaper industry. Another assumption is that in the coming years, the demographics of the areas under study might not alter greatly, but the residents’ use of and ability to adapt to online initiatives and future technological advancements will increase.
Chapter 1: Introduction

Arguably the number one goal of community newspapers is to be a community reflector, mixing local values with traditional ethics to deliver a product that is more relatable to its intimate readership base without sacrificing the tenets of the profession. It’s a process that varies slightly from one community to the next, but it does not take long for community-minded editors to know whether their recipe is right or wrong. Their sources are their neighbors. Their readers recognize their faces at the grocery store. A successful community newspaper is one that immerses itself in the community it serves and becomes part of its fabric. These facets to community newspaper reporting make it a unique branch of journalism. It is not a practice everyone comprehends. Frank (2003) found reporters at major newspapers used many of the same conventional clichés to describe small towns that served as both a detriment to the readers and to the communities they were trying to cover. Journalists at these newspapers have to comprehend the “soul” of small towns, and the ones that do can enjoy great success. Because of the trust and credibility these small newspapers have built in areas that other news outlets usually only drift into when there’s a salacious story, a good number have solid roots in their communities that act as signs of hope for a struggling industry.

Many critics of the print industry say that ink and paper publications will need a niche and specific content to survive, a formula many of these rural community newspapers have been honing for years. However, as 21st Century technology continues to seep into 20th Century towns, these small newspapers are facing decisions about how to adapt to and utilize new media technologies. The shift to online news is not a new phenomenon, but the rate at which it is moving and evolving is an issue for these
newspapers. As of March 2010, the Internet ranked as the third most popular news platform, behind local and national television outlets, and local print newspapers ranked as the fifth most popular news sources, with 50 percent of respondents to a national survey saying they get news this way (Greer, et al., 2010). It is a trend these newspapers have been and will continue to be forced to tackle.

Digital news consumption is changing in three fundamental ways. News is now more mobile, more personalized, and the sources are more diversified than ever before. According to a study from the Pew Internet and American Life Project, a substantial number of readers are now getting their news on the go, with 33 percent of cell phone users accessing news on their mobile phones; people are personalizing their digital news to fit their interests, with 28 percent of Internet users customizing their homepages to get feeds from specific sources or on narrow topics; and more consumers are actively participating in disseminating the news than ever before, with 37 percent of Internet users saying they either created news through blogging or posts, commented about news, or shared news on social media sites like Facebook or Twitter. (Greer, et al., 2010). An in-depth, interactive website has become a necessity at larger publications in recent years, and many small, rural newspapers have fallen behind in terms of online development. This research takes a look at 13 community newspapers in Western North Carolina and determines how their structure and the dynamics of the communities they serve are affecting their ability to publish an in-depth news website.
Chapter 2: Literature review

In preparing for research into this area, a review of relevant literature was conducted. A theory emerged that was particularly relevant to this study of how local, online news can function in rural communities – Beniger’s interpretative history of communication innovations.

Beniger’s interpretative history of communication innovations

The theory that will be used in these findings is Beniger’s interpretative history of communication innovations. Beniger’s theory states that whatever the potential for technological innovation, the needs of commerce and industry have done most to promote development and determine how innovations are used (McQuail, 2005). Using theory in this research gathers an interrelated set with constructs that specify a relationship among variables (Creswell, 2009). Strauss and Corbin (1994) said theory consists of plausible relationships produced among concepts and sets of concepts. Theories arrange sets of concepts to define and explain phenomenon (Silverman, 2004). In this case, the phenomenon is any lack of Web development at rural community newspapers in the Western North Carolina mountains. By analyzing both small newspapers and the communities they intimately serve, this research sought to determine whether the dynamics of the community—including the demographics, the readers’ use of the papers’ websites and the availability of suitable technologies—have either directly or indirectly affected the development of online media at the community newspapers under study. Beniger’s theory helped explain the existence of any limitations in each community. Beniger traced the origins of his phenomenon to the mid-19th Century where
developments in the steam engine, railroads, and postal service birthed out of the Industrial Revolution led to a crisis of control that gave way to a revolution in societal control that society is still experiencing—at least, in Beniger’s analysis, through the latter part of the 20th Century—on a global scale (Beniger, 1986). He analyzed how modern societies use information technologies—from the earliest that were spawned in primitive forms from practical needs in the 1800s to the digital revolution of today—to keep order and maintain functionality. His theory is a functionalist one. The use of innovations is directly tied to the needs—primarily, the need for profit—in society. Beniger theorized that communities will use these innovations if they fit within the framework of the community and further its development.

**Application of theory**

This theory is especially valuable to this study because it deals with the advancement and use of technology, such as high-speed Internet, as demanded by the society in which it is being used. Looking on a local level at select, rural communities in North Carolina, Beniger’s theory was used in conjunction with an evaluation of each newspaper’s structure as well as the community dynamics of the areas under study in hopes of finding a link between the status of online media at each community newspaper and the dynamics of the community in this research.

**The mission of community newspapers**

Community newspapers are an integral but often overlooked aspect of the media industry. Some of these papers have been able to carve out a niche and survive during the industry’s current struggles. Community newspapers are not immune to the problems, but because smaller papers serve smaller audiences they seem to be more insulated from the
vicissitudes of the Internet and the weak economy (Lauterer, 2000). A 2008 survey by the National Newspaper Association found that 86 percent of adult readers in markets served by a newspaper with a circulation of less than 25,000 read a newspaper at least once a week and those local community newspapers were the readers’ prime source of both information and advertising by a 5-1 margin over the next most popular media (Greer, 2008). Fifty-nine percent of readers surveyed do not go to the Internet for local news, a statistic that surprised experts (Greer, 2008). Those studies also found that 81 percent of participants believed those papers understood the interests of the communities (Greer, 2008). A NNA 2007 study revealed 83 percent of adult readers looked at papers with a circulation of less than 50,000, and 81 percent of adult readers said they read papers with a circulation of less than 100,000 in 2005, indicating that readers may be more loyal to smaller papers (Greer, 2008). A portion of the success gained by a community newspaper is found in its ability to adhere to the tenets of community journalism.

Community journalism is a vaguely defined term, but most everyone—from scholars, to journalists, to readers—understands what the concept means. Lauterer (2000) said community journalism that is practiced through these small newspapers chronicles and comments on the everyday topics that shape peoples’ lives in neighborhoods and towns. Certainly, the most striking difference is the size of these community papers—within the newsroom, the number of pages they produce as well as the number of readers that follow them. While larger publications have name recognition, underestimating the number of newspapers that fall into the community category would be a disservice to the industry. Brian Steffens, former executive director at the NAA, said 1,200 dailies and 8,000 weeklies fall under the community newspaper category, which is having a
circulation of less than 50,000 (“Internet,” 2009). While some small publications are no more than a printed collection of events, obituaries, and wedding announcements and do little to further conversation in a community, many others fill a specific need in the community and provide a source of news that may be otherwise unobtainable. They tell a story about the community through the community’s voice (Brozana, et al., 2008). From the opening pages to the last section, most can recognize that community newspapers have different agendas from their larger brethren.

A community newspaper is involved intensely with its community, always leading, teaching, reflecting, and telling the community about itself (Lauterer, 2000). Community journalism is the bonding between reader and newspaper that occurs when a genuine caring relationship replaces profit motive (Waddle, 2003). A positive and intimate relationship between a newspaper and its community is what sets small-town papers apart from big-city dailies (Lauterer, 2000). Reader (2006) noted there are differences between large and small newspapers, and those differences affect the organizational culture. The organizational culture of small newspapers is integral in Tichenor, Donohue, and Oilen’s studies on structural pluralism. Community structural pluralism is an indicator of the size and degree of differentiation of the newspaper’s community (Hindman, et al., 2001). The theory is often viewed as a constraint that limits the way an editor plays his or her role in the community (Hindman, et al., 1999). Bunton (1998) in her study of 85 community newspapers in Minnesota surmised that smaller newspapers cover conflict less than larger newspapers and that when the smaller newspapers do cover conflict, their coverage reflects the agenda and structure of the community’s power structure rather than the concerns of the citizens largely because
small staffs and constant turnover impede a paper’s inability to cover controversy. Another study by Tichenor, Donohue, and Oilen—also on Minnesota community newspapers—earlier revealed the newspapers in markets over 3,500 printed stories with conflict, while only 33 percent in markets under 3,500 were inclined to run controversial articles (Mazza, et al., 1976). Still, the building of relationships—a vital element of developing an effective, community-oriented website—seems to be stronger at community newspapers. Tichenor, Donohue, and Oilen (1980) suggested when researching community/press relationships in Minnesota that size and structure of the community can be seen as major characteristics affecting newspapers, and connections between journalists and their communities tend to become more impersonal in larger markets. The personal nature many community newspapers take on seems to build trust with the readers. Beaudoin and Thorson (2004) found in their study involving local newspapers in rural areas that community newspapers developed a significant path from social networks to social trust and from social trust to social networks. Meyer (2004) found in his study of 21 different media markets that newspapers in smaller markets had higher credibility among readers than did newspapers in larger markets. There are studies that indicate that trust and credibility extend to community newspaper websites where there are higher rates of participation. A study published in 2006 of user involvement in posting forums found nearly 25 percent of readers of papers with a circulation of less than 50,000 participated online, three times as many as those who followed online forums associated with newspapers that carried a circulation of 50,000 to 100,000 (Li, et al., 2006). Adams (2007) argued that community newspapers “are in a better position than
traditional media to extend their brand in the local community with their online newspapers.” Even though statistics indicate readership at community newspapers is still high, the foundation appears to be in place for small, community newspapers to produce viable online content, a development considered vital in their efforts to continue to engage readers and secure their future in the marketplace.

**Moving online**

Ever since audiences began to decline, newspapers have sought ways to better engage their audiences. While it is usually casually attributed to the rapid rise of the Internet, some link the decline in newspaper titles and readership to sociological changes in work and lifestyle that predate the Internet (Franklin, 2008). However, when advertising—classified and retail—began moving to the Web, the industry finally woke up and took notice by developing websites of their own (Franklin, 2008). In the early days of newspapers migrating to the Internet, some served as an ISP or hosted and created advertisers’ Web pages, but as access to Web development became more readily available to the general public, those strategies were abandoned, and newspaper websites used their online products to enhance advertising, break, and post news, as well as connect to the readers (Greer, et al., 2004). Scott (2005) said most content on online newspapers during this incubation period was merely “shovelware, reproductions of content that appeared in a news organization’s primary distribution channels,” and it was not until later that newspapers took note of finding ways to push readers to their site through the development of RSS feeds—and later the use of social networking sites and mobile delivery—rather than simply waiting for their sites to be found. Interactivity and its potential to strengthen and broaden readerships launched thousands of online
newspapers and millions of online news consumers (Abdulla, et al., 2010). The fundamental draw of the online conversation was its openness to everyone and that usability encouraged interested individuals to join in on discussions on public issues (Chae, 2005). Chung (2009) surveyed 113 readers of the website of a community newspaper with a circulation of roughly 8,000 and found that online news audiences looked for their newspaper websites to include the readers in the processes of news delivery and presentation as well as mobilize their interests. Her studies found that visitors to community newspaper websites were interested in customization features that allowed them to voice their opinion and views. Fostering conversation with and among their readers became the greatest challenge for newspapers looking to migrate their products to the Internet.

The conversation between newspapers and their readers became a two-way street with forums and other interactive features where readers were able to experience news in a new and personal way. In some areas, citizen journalists picked up the ball where media may have stopped or missed the story. Christians, Ferre, and Fackler (1993) argued that the traditional press has acted as a vehicle of expert transmission rather than a network for community discussion, and the public would reawaken when they are encouraged to fully join the talk and are addressed as a conversational partner. Gillmor (2004) wrote that the tipping point in the cultural landscape was the attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001. Reporters were frantically transmitting information, newscasters were putting images into words, but the sheer number of people involved seized the opportunities provided by the Internet. They were using technological tools to report and broadcast news mainstream media missed. This idea of readers being
able to play a part in the traditional news experience in an online forum became known as convergence, a place where news outlets and citizen participation joined forces. Kerry Northrup, former director of Newsplex—a group at the University of South Carolina that offers training to traditional journalists adapting to a shifting landscape—said that convergence offered the audience new ways of absorbing news rather than just offering journalists new ways of presenting it (Quinn, 2005). Following the firing of CBS anchorman Dan Rather due to the diligent investigative work by bloggers, the movement had officially arrived (Scott, 2007).

Bruns (2008) described this blurring of roles as produsage, a combination of producer and consumer. Some major newspapers—such as The Chicago Tribune—followed a community newspaper model with online products known as hyperlocal sites that recruited citizen journalists to report intimate details of neighborhoods. The success of these ventures has been limited. For every success story, such as the Northwest Voice and the Southwest Voice hyperlocal sites aligned with The Bakersfield Californian, there are 10 failures. Some of the problems have included an urgency to brand successful ventures across the country, an overzealous rush to turn a profit and a lack of training for these new community voices (Glaser, 2007). Others believed the experiments are important for newspapers to at least try and find out where they lead, even if it is not a panacea for the industry (Farhi, 2007). Some were able to point to signs of success, as newspapers revenue from online products jumped from $1.2 billion in 2003 to $2.7 billion in 2007, a double-digit increase even though it still represented a fraction of print revenue (Farhi, 2008). In an increasingly mobile society, other studies found that eyes were getting on the pages, one way or the other. In a study of 11 markets, Lynn, Cooper,
and Turner (2007) discovered that the newspapers in those markets had a cumulative circulation—print and website page views—of 270 million, nearly 80 times the usage of city-specific websites such as independent blogs, surmising that traditional media outlets such as newspapers were still the main source of local news in their communities. On average in 2008, a visitor spent a little over one minute per day on a newspaper website, compared with the 27 minutes per day that newspaper readers say they spent perusing the print product on a weekday, and 57 minutes on Sundays, according to a survey by Northwestern University's Research Institute (Nesbitt, 2008). That same study determined a significant proportion of locals do not engage with local online news—at least not enough to seek out regular doses of it—as 62 percent of respondents in a survey of over 100 markets with newspapers with circulations greater than 10,000 said they have never visited the local newspaper website (Nesbitt, 2008). A more recent study of papers with circulations 8,000 and less found even more support for print publications in small towns. A 2010 survey conducted by the Center for Advanced Social Research (CASR) of The Reynolds Journalism Institute and Missouri's School of Journalism for the National Newspaper Association found that 62 percent of readers read local news very often in their community newspapers, 54 percent never read local news online, and 9 percent read local news very often online (Robertson, 2011). Also, generating profits from their online ventures was still the exception rather than the rule, prompting some to say there was no business model for newspapers to make money online (Franklin, 2008). A 2007 study of 160 newspaper websites of varying circulation found that the national brands—*The New York Times*, for instance—were seeing increases in Web traffic while online visitors at smaller newspapers were steadily decreasing (Farhi, 2008). The study noted how the
Internet was redistributing audiences, predicting local newspapers would continue to receive smaller pieces of the pie (Farhi, 2008). The lack of an immediate financial payoff for newspaper websites was one of the hindrances keeping many community newspapers from effectively reacting to the shifting cultural landscape in the industry.

**Adapting to a shifting landscape**

Financially limited organizations—such as many locally owned community newspapers—were not likely to adopt expensive technologies that did not seem to pay off, while larger, corporate-owned newspapers were more likely to take the economic risks associated with early adoption of information technologies, particularly if the technologies were required by the parent organization (Hindman et. al., 2001). At least one study by Greer and Yan (2010) indicated these smaller newspapers were active and continued to pursue free and easy-to-maintain social networking sites such as Twitter and Facebook although they found that on average only roughly 7 percent of these papers’ print circulation base was following their social network updates. It was the development and upkeep of in-depth interactive news websites where these community papers were lagging. The costs of operating websites and forums—as well as the manpower needed to maintain and update content—were a major obstacle for community newspapers jumpstarting online projects (Lowery, 2003). Editors from smaller, locally owned newspapers showed more concern with maintaining the economic viability of the organization than larger, metropolitan papers (Oilen, et al., 1988). Hindman, Ernst, and Richardson (2001) feared when online productions became profitable for newspapers, small, community publications would be left out because of their inability to utilize technologies with less obvious or immediate benefits. Many newspaper websites—while
they may have found some ways to make money—are still a drain on the companies that support them (Franklin, 2008). Revenue generated from online editions still represented a fraction of print revenues (Farhi, 2008). Some smaller papers used online host publishers such as SmallTownPapers that digitalizes their archives and makes them available for users to the site at no cost to the browser or publishers; other similar sites had paid access to the site but still provided the service at no cost to the newspaper publisher (Banks, et al., 2006). Lowery (2003) proposed smaller newspapers should utilize vendors to produce their online content until the Internet model became more secure. Others agreed, finding that until newspaper websites were profitable enough, traditional newspapers pushing their consumers to the Web did so at the risk of cannibalizing their print—and main economic—base (Franklin, 2008).

Other internal issues for smaller community newspapers were the minuscule staffs at many of these publications. Some felt they were spread too thin to create interactive and unique content for the Web (Lowery, 2003). The Web was thought to be an equalizer, but a study of 83 newspaper websites from 1997-2003 uncovered that smaller newspapers had less complex websites—which the researchers in turn theorized that it was a reflection of the lack of resources—and if the adoption rates of new technologies continued at their current pace, small newspaper websites would always lag behind their larger brethren (Greer, et al., 2004). Greer and Mensing (2004) went on to say that because smaller papers are in smaller markets less dependent on online communication, it is hard for papers to justify “spending scarce resources on a product that captures only a small percentage of the audience.” A study by Green and Yan (2010) of 141 community newspapers with circulations below 50,000 found that smaller papers, especially
weeklies, put out by a news staff of two or three, don’t have the human resources available to add online and connectivity tools. There were also issues that did not exist inside the newsroom, but rather in the infrastructure of the communities they served.

In some cases, community newspapers publishers had to examine the availability of suitable technology for their online products. Community structural pluralism—the degree of differentiation in the social system—may have played a role in smaller newspapers trying to satisfy the online need. Whereas metropolitan papers had a wider variety of audience—both socially and economically—there were still limitations early during the convergence era posed by the lack of telecommunications infrastructure in smaller communities, such as limited or slow Internet access, that may have led to readers’ beliefs that information technologies were not relevant to their needs (Ernst et. al., 2001). It was largely dependent on the area. Hesston Record publisher Bob Latta moved the bulk of his 70-year-old publication online in 2003 because he felt it best served his rural Kansas community of 3,500 (Quill, 2003). There is no doubt information technologies such as the Internet offer increased capabilities in the user experience, but only in areas where that technology is widely available. Gaps developed because information technologies are often designed for higher status groups and because the high cost of early adoption favors groups with more resources (Hindman, et al., 2001). The e-NC Authority commissioned Strategic Network Groups to survey 6,200 business and 1,500 households in 2010 finding that the Internet and broadband are key economic growth factors for North Carolina. Over a 12-month period, 17.5 percent of new jobs created across the state were attributed to Internet usage. For small businesses with less than 20 employees, 28 percent of new jobs were attributed to Internet usage (“e-
The lack of broadband access has also been found to hobble economic development (Hesseldahl, 2008). The federal government took notice of the gaps in 2009 when The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 was enacted and included provisions to provide broadband Internet to help accelerate deployment to rural areas and to strategic institutions that are likely to create jobs or provide significant public benefits. Gaps in broadband availability have increasingly negative economic and social development consequences, whether in un-served communities or broadband coverage areas with un-served pockets. The National Telecommunications and Information Administration found in 2010 that in a survey of 100,000 people, 40 percent had no personal broadband or high-speed Internet access, 30 percent had no personal Internet access at all, and in many rural areas, responders without high-speed Internet access mainly cited the scarcity of broadband in their area as a reason (Whitney, 2010). A spokesperson from broadband carrier Comcast stated in 2008 that the cable company looked to install new broadband lines in more urban areas where there were at least 25 homes per mile as well as other criteria (Hesseldahl, 2008).

However, the federal stimulus package helped the availability of high speed Internet in many Western North Carolina areas. In August 2010, ERC Broadband was awarded more than $77 million in stimulus funds to install 105 combined miles of fiber optic cables into several Western North Carolina counties—including Buncombe, Avery, Mitchell, Madison and McDowell—that gives local Internet companies and cable corporations an on-ramp for providing broadband access (“ERC Broadband,” 2010). The e-NC Authority for rural economic development received 6.6 million for broadband development in 2009 (“State Broadband Initiative,” 2009). The United States Department
of Agriculture (USDA) through the Rural Utility Service (RUS) announced in August 2010 that French Broad Electric’s application for approximately $2 million in stimulus money was approved, paving the way for the company to install broadband over power line technology to reach roughly 1,800 customers in the areas of Madison County, North Carolina, that did not have any options for high speed internet service and would not have any options in the foreseeable future (‘Broadband over’). Groups in Clay County met in March 2011 with officials from Frontier Communications and the Blue Ridge Mountain EMC (BRMEMC) to discuss the development of high-speed Internet in the area. A Frontier spokesperson said the region was experiencing tremendous growth in Internet services and improvements to the system where expected by the third or fourth quarter (Tomas, 2011). He added the BRMEMC and Frontier had agreed to work together to investigate providing more fiber-optic lines to current switch boxes which creates access to additional DSL capability (Tomas, 2011). There were other, less tangible roadblocks facing community newspapers as well.

Another decision for community newspapers surveying a move to online news was how to properly develop community discussion, an integral facet in many of their print publications. Sunline, a chain of weeklies and dailies in south Florida, built an online model that included everything from news to pages dedicated to area organizations, musicians, nonprofits and government agencies in the area, as well as offering places where users can post pictures, information and even movie recommendations (Lasica, 1998). But, there was usually an issue of the community itself that made building a model across all community newspapers difficult. Media organizations in one structural environment perform differently than organizations in
another structural environment (Tichenor, et al., 1980). Similarly, the size and complexity of a news organization tends to be closely associated with the size and complexity of the community served by the medium (Hindman, et al., 2001). Some theorized if a small, community newspaper served a specific readership with a lowered economic base in a rural area, a complex, interactive website may not have been needed or even wanted. Studies have been mixed. Hindman, Ernst, and Richardson (2001) theorized smaller, less pluralistic communities would not demand newspaper websites, but found such a relationship did not prove significant, while Lowery (2003) studied newspapers of all sizes in Mississippi and found that community pluralism was a strong indicator of site interactivity, and the more pluralistic a community was, the more likely it was to desire a complex media website. In a study of readers of the print, *The Arizona Republic*, and a counterpart website, azcentral.com, Mersey (2009) found the readers’ sense of community was stronger with the print readers than the website followers. She found traditional newspaper staffs still command more respect and had greater influence on their readers, suggesting it might take a generation or two before online news sites can catch up. While the needs may vary, what was clear is that when looking to develop online initiatives at small, rural newspapers, management should be able to read the community.

Rural, community newspapers serve a small and unique audience, so when discussing where to invest in the future—whether it is in print or online—management needed to survey the dynamics of their intimate readerships. Some still saw value in print, especially in smaller communities. Richard Anderson, a publisher in Maine who runs both print and online newspapers, said in 2010 after trying to stay ahead of the curve, he
now sees the value of print and because of the weight it continues to carry with advertisers and readers, he will continue to incorporate both models into his businesses (Carpenter, 2010). Fellow Maine community newspaper publisher Alan Baker generates revenue online by putting a portion of his papers’ content behind a pay wall. Since community newspapers generally publish some unique news, developing a website that offers a mixture of free and paid content has shown success for Baker and others in his position. His papers were seeing modest circulation increases in 2010 after he put a charge on the papers’ online content (Carpenter, 2010). Walter Hussman—the publisher of the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette, a much larger paper—concurred in 2007, saying his paper’s circulation increased after putting some of their Web content behind a pay wall (Farhi, 2008). Still, charging for content has not been a salve for many because of the wealth of similar—or in some cases identical—news content available on the Web. Worldwide quality brands such as The Wall Street Journal had success on Web subscriptions because they offer specialized content. Many small, community newspapers as well provide news that cannot be accessed elsewhere. It could be considered comparable to small-town retail stores, who have found success utilizing the Web to market their niche products and protect themselves from big-box competitors (Schneider, 2005). Randy Novak, director of newsprint strategy at NSA Media, said in 2010 that pay walls on Web editions of newspapers worked best on brand papers with differentiating editorial content and smaller papers with unique content, but those that do not offer much in the way of specialized news were going to struggle with that strategy (Ives, 2010). A few community newspapers with circulations below 10,000, such as the Norwalk
*Reflector* in Ohio, reported in 2010 minuscule circulation increases after putting some content behind a pay wall online but no conclusions could yet be drawn (Ives, 2010).

Even so, there were still unique difficulties for small newspapers in making any sort of transition to an online model. Community newspapers were essentially faced with decisions to adequately prepare for the future while keeping an engaging and profitable print product in tow. Some of the difficulties facing newspapers in their efforts to promote convergence—especially unique community dynamics, lack of technology infrastructure and others—could be expected to even out over time. Vidich and Bensman (1969) believed small towns are continuously and increasingly drawn into the central institutions and processes of total society. Small towns where print ruled for decades have found room for online publications. In rural Rappahannock County, Virginia, the weekly newspaper found itself battling an upstart local news blog published by a retired journalist and while the audience was small, in two years it was growing, and the impact immediate news coverage had on a community accustomed to one weekly newspaper was palpable (Rector, 2008). Community newspapers were facing many of the same issues larger newspapers were as the industry recalibrated to new means of production and distribution. But smaller publications in rural communities did have unique functions, structures, and circumstances that had an effect on the development of their online ventures. Rural communities are also often the last to get up-to-date information technology infrastructure such as fiber optic cables and other means of accessing high-speed Internet (Dillman, et al., 1989). However, some have projected that newspapers in rural communities could benefit from an in-depth online presence as people move away
and may become willing to pay for a subscription in order to receive hometown news (Hindman, et al., 2001).
Chapter 3: Hypotheses and methodology

The following research questions were looked at in this research:

Research questions

1) Do community dynamics affect the online business models for community newspapers?

2) Do websites and online media at community newspapers generate enough interest for the newspaper to commit substantial resources to their maintenance and development?

3) How does the newspaper’s structure affect the development of in-depth websites at community newspapers?

4) How are community newspapers preparing for future developments in their industry?

The following hypotheses were formed and tested in this research:

Hypotheses

1) The lack of high-speed Internet available in rural areas is a factor in the amount of online news community newspapers produce.

2) Community newspapers are limited in the amount of online news they publish because of their readers’ low use of their websites.

3) The lack of internal support at community newspapers make it less likely they will produce an in-depth local news website.
Research methods

Wimmer and Dominick (2006) said online media research falls into two categories: competition between Internet news sites and traditional newspapers and the relationship between a newspaper’s Web version and its print version. This research touches on a bit of the latter topic. The purpose of this research is to explore three major issues affecting community newspapers in the digital age: How community newspapers are adjusting to new media with limited financial and physical resources; whether there are larger, societal issues in the communities they serve that are limiting their production of in-depth, interactive online news; and how these newspapers are preparing for the future. These papers were selected based on their geographical location, as well as the size of their circulation and market. These newspapers all have a circulation of less than 15,000 readers. Those selected to respond to this study were an editor or publisher of one of these newspapers. In order to participate, they needed to be intimately involved with finances of the publication, both the print and online products, as well as be able to provide qualified opinions on the readers their newspapers serve. This quantitative research was driven by a survey of editors or publishers of 13 community newspapers in Western North Carolina. While the survey fielded answers from editors or publishers of community newspapers, each individual newspaper is a unit of analysis in this study. Balnaves and Caputi (2001) said establishing units of analysis is a critical first step in quantitative research. A quantitative methodology was used in this study because it tested philosophical questions of whether community dynamics and newspaper structure affect the abilities of small newspapers to publish in-depth online news and how these newspapers were preparing for the future. To prove or disprove that notion, the research
examined relationships among and between the variables that are controlled through the experiment design and provide measures for answering the hypotheses (Creswell, 2009). The success of extracting desirable information needed for this study was dependent upon a qualified experiment design. One of the first steps to take when designing an experiment is to establish variables.

Independent variables—also known as treatment, manipulated, antecedent, or predictor variables—are those that cause, influence, or affect outcomes while dependent variables are the outcomes or results of the influence of independent variables (Creswell, 2009). The independent variables used in this study were the availability of Internet in these communities and the readers’ usage of the community newspapers websites. The dependent variable was the newspapers’ website. Once variables are established and a survey had been formulated, validity and any potential threats are considered. Fowler (2009) said sampling error—or the possible error that stems solely from the fact that data are collected from a sample rather than from every single member of the population—is a common problem for survey researchers. But, since this survey is only intended for select community newspaper editors or publishers, this was not an issue. Fowler (2009) also said bias can occur if all the answers are not received or answered properly because of misunderstandings between the participant and administrator of the survey. I remained in contact with the participants throughout the survey process, fielding and answering questions when necessary. The questions asked in the survey were weighed by their construct validity and their ability to measure the variables put forth in the research questions. Construct validity can also include whether the results serve a useful purpose and have positive consequences when they are used in practice (Humbley, et al., 1996).
To quantify this research, a survey was administered to the appropriate participants. A survey design provides a quantitative or numeric description of trends, attitudes, or opinions of a population by studying a sample of that population (Creswell, 2009).

**Survey design**

This study used an analytical survey in hopes of describing and explaining why there might be constraints on Web development at small newspapers from both inside and outside the newsroom. The results allowed for an examination of the interrelationships among the variables and development of explanatory inferences (Wimmer, et al., 2006). In order to obtain this information, the survey was sent to editors or publishers of the selected newspapers who agreed to participate. The design of the survey was a multi-part questionnaire. The first section gave the participants an opportunity to answer basic questions about their publication and the paper’s usage of online media. The second section was measured nominally and utilizes a scale ranging from 1 to 5 ranging on topics related to the research. A third and final part was a short survey of the participants’ demographics.

When designing the survey, several guidelines are to be followed. Fowler (2002) suggested when designing a self-administered questionnaire or survey, the questionnaire should be self-explanatory, have limited instructions and a simple layout. For this research, the structure of the questions has a logistical flow, opening with easier questions. Layout is important as well. Respondents were able to easily follow instructions and how to answer each question. Potential participants were first contacted by telephone to solicit participation. Once participation was agreed upon, a link was sent
to the responders to the survey hosting site surveymonkey.com, virtually eliminating any costs and allowing the participants to answer the questions at their leisure, an advantage in this research considering the length of the survey. Follow-up emails were sent to check on the status and if there are any questions or problems.

In addition to gauging the level of online media at community newspapers, this research also seeks to find if two specific correlations exist: influence of newspaper structure on online media and influence of community dynamics on online media. Correlations may not uncover why something occurs—although they can in certain circumstances—but they can still provide interesting material about relationships (Berger, 1998). By selecting the specific newspapers that fit the criteria and soliciting participation before sending the link to the survey, this design ensured the representative sample is a proper group to answer the questions and test the correlations. Once the questionnaires were submitted from the participants in the surveys, the answers were paired with basic demographic information of the communities and/or readerships. Information considered included average age, income levels, population, education, and leading industries of each specific community or area as well as technological infrastructure and/or usage of high-speed Internet.

**Limitations**

This research could be an indicator for editors and publishers in other and larger markets and be used to assess the development of online projects in their areas. However, three limitations of this research are that smaller communities tend to be less diverse than larger communities, the study focuses on a certain stratification of newspapers in a
specific market, and the potential for geographic diversity because differences exist in different regions around the country. Thus, conclusions or areas of further research this work offers will be more relevant to rural community newspapers.
Chapter 4: Participants

Thirteen newspapers participated in this survey. Ten chose to be identified – The Andrews Journal in Andrews, NC, Crossroads Chronicle in Cashiers, NC, Clay County Progress in Hayesville, NC, Smoky Mountain Sentinel in Hayesville, NC, The Avery Journal Times in Newland, NC, The Sylva Herald in Sylva, NC, The Macon County News in Franklin, NC, The Cherokee Scout in Murphy, NC, The Graham Star in Robbinsville, NC, and Cherokee Sentinel in Murphy, NC. Three other newspapers in the Western North Carolina (WNC) area participated, but chose not to be identified. Of those responding, all were in a management position at the newspaper. Ten managers participated. Of those responding, all 10 were white/Anglo/Caucasian, nine were males and one was female. Three responders were older than 55 years, two were between the ages of 46 and 55, four were between the ages of 36 and 45, and one was between the ages of 26 and 35. Four had worked at their current publications for at least 10 years, three worked for five-to-seven years, and three had worked at their current newspapers for one-to-four years. Six had worked in the newspaper business for more than 20 years, two had worked 16-20 years, one had worked 11-15 years, and one had worked 6-10 years.

Three of the newspapers in this study—two unidentified papers and The Cherokee Scout—have been publishing since the 19th Century. Another unidentified newspaper has been publishing for more than 80 years, and the rest have been publishing since the second half of the 20th Century. All are weekly or bi-weekly publications. Circulations range from 1,900 at The Andrews Journal to 13,000 at The Macon County News. Two of the newspapers—The Sylva Herald and The Macon County News—were family owned,
and the rest were owned by local, community newspaper chains. The number of employees at these papers range from one to eight.

**Newspaper website information**

All but one—*The Avery News-Journal*—had functioning websites at the time of the study. *The Sylva Herald* and another unidentified newspaper began publishing online in 1999, and the rest began in the early or middle of the first decade of the 21st Century. Two of the unidentified newspapers provided some information about their websites, while the other did not disclose any website information. All of the papers had basic news on their websites, such as stories, community calendars, and weather. *The Sylva Herald* had the most options for interactivity on their website with a breaking news page, a live webcam, Twitter feed, and photo galleries, among other options. It also had the most traffic (583,547 page views per month) and had six online advertisers, the second highest total among the papers surveyed. Two of the papers did not have any online advertisers. The National Newspaper Association of America—using numbers measured by Nielsen to gauge a variety of statistics on newspaper websites—reported U.S. newspapers, on average, received 23,547 visitors daily or an average of more than 700,000 per month during April 2011 (“Aggregated U.S. Newspapers”). The number of page views received varied widely by each website of the newspapers surveyed in this study. The average for the eight newspapers in this study that provided its per-month page view statistics was around 110,000 views a month, and they were all well below the national average.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Website</th>
<th>Online features</th>
<th>Page views per month</th>
<th>Online advertisers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Crossroads Chronicle</td>
<td>crossroadschronicle.com</td>
<td>Story clips, calendar</td>
<td>18,500</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Avery News-Journal</td>
<td>No website at time of survey</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Cherokee Scout</td>
<td>cherokeescout.com</td>
<td>Story clips, directories, photos</td>
<td>100,000+</td>
<td>Several</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clay County Progress</td>
<td>claycountyprogress.com</td>
<td>Story clips, calendar, poll</td>
<td>30,000</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smoky Mountain Sentinel</td>
<td>wncsentinel.net</td>
<td>Stories, videos, photos</td>
<td>Unsure</td>
<td>Negligible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cherokee Sentinel</td>
<td>wncsentinel.net</td>
<td>Stories, videos, photos</td>
<td>Unsure</td>
<td>Negligible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Andrews Journal</td>
<td>theandrewsjournal.com</td>
<td>Story clips, calendar, obits</td>
<td>10,000</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Sylva Herald</td>
<td>thesylvaherald.com</td>
<td>News, webcam, blog, Twitter</td>
<td>583,547</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Macon County News</td>
<td>maconnews.com</td>
<td>Stories, calendar, eating guide</td>
<td>40,000-50,000</td>
<td>5-6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Graham Star</td>
<td>grahamstar.com</td>
<td>Story clips</td>
<td>100,000</td>
<td>2-3</td>
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<td>Unidentified WNC paper</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unidentified WNC paper</td>
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<td>10</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unidentified WNC paper</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>1,100</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
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</table>
Chapter 5: Findings

This study examined the ways 13 community newspapers in Western North Carolina are publishing their news online: How community newspapers are adjusting to new media with limited financial and physical resources; whether there are larger, societal issues in the communities they serve that are limiting their production of in-depth, interactive online news; and how these newspapers are preparing for the future. A quantitative content analysis was used to evaluate a selected sample of 13 newspapers in rural areas in the North Carolina mountains, driven by a survey of the publishers or editors of the selected publications.

The survey was divided into three parts. The first part of the survey gathered general background information about the paper such as its circulation, website page views and size of its staff. The second part addressed issues related the paper’s website and plans for the future as well as information about the paper’s readers that relate to the topic of this research with a series of questions on a scale of 1 to 5. The third part gathered demographic information about the person responding.

Newspaper website

These questions polled respondents on the depth of their papers’ websites on a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 being not at all and 5 being very much. Participating community newspaper editors and publishers were asked how much their websites differ from their print editions (Figure 1A), whether their websites drew page views from within (Figure 1B) and outside the print circulation (Figure 1C), whether their newsrooms were using current Web technologies (Figure 1D), if their papers’ websites had photo and/or video galleries (Figure 1E), how much users could interact with their websites (Figure 1F), and
if there were links to social media accounts like Facebook and Twitter on their website homepages (Figure 1G).

In Figures 1B and 1C, all of the newspapers but one responded that they received at least some page views from both inside and outside their circulation areas. In Figure 1D, ten newspapers answered with a 3 or less when asked whether their publications used current Web technologies. In Figure 1F, when asked about the readers’ access to participate on their websites, five answered 1 and six answered 2. One other newspaper answered 4. In Figure 1G, six of the newspapers did not have links to newspaper-associated Twitter or Facebook accounts on their website homepages.

**Figure 1A – Same info**

**Figure 1B – Circulation page views**

**Figure 1C – Outside area views**

**Figure 1D – Current technology**

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Reader response

These questions asked how respondents saw their readers responding to local news on a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 being not at all and 5 being very much. They were asked whether their readers requested more online news (Figure 2A), had access to Internet (Figure 2B) and high-speed Internet at home (Figure 2C), whether they clicked on advertisements on the local newspaper websites (Figure 2D), if they preferred local news (Figure 2E) and used other media outlets for news (Figure 2F), and if they interacted with the newspaper website (Figure 2G).

In Figure 2A, nine newspapers answered with a 3 or less when asked if their readers asked for more online local news. In Figure 2C, eight papers listed a 2, four
papers listed a 3, and one paper listed a 1 when asked if their readers had access to high-speed Internet at home. In Figure 2D, 11 of the newspapers answered with a 3 or less if they believed online readers were clicking on advertisements on the newspaper website. In Figure 2G, 11 newspapers answered with a 2 or less when asked if online readers interacted with the newspaper websites.

**Figure 2A – More online news**

**Figure 2B – Home Web access**

**Figure 2C – High-speed access**

**Figure 2D – Ad clicks**

**Figure 2E – Prefer local news**

**Figure 2F – Use other outlets**
Strategy

This section of the survey asked respondents to disclose some of their online strategies on a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 being not at all and 5 being definitely. They were asked whether their publications were likely to expand their Web operations in the coming year (Figure 3A), whether an in-depth would alienate a portion of the print readers (Figure 3B), whether their management would invest in the Web (Figure 3C), if the community would support on in-depth local news site (Figure 3D), if there were inherent issues at small papers that would prevent the development of online news (Figure 3E), how important online publishing skills were for potential employees (Figure 3F) and how confident their staffs were in their online skills (Figure 3G), if Web was the focus of their businesses (Figure 3H), and if their publication would be Web-only in the next 10 years (Figure 3I).

In Figure 3B, four responders said more Web publishing would not alienate any of their readers at all, six answered with a 3, two answered with a 4, and one answered with a 5. In Figure 3C, on a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 being not at all and 5 being definitely, two of the newspapers answered with a 1 when asked about their owners’ willingness to invest. Seven answered with a 2. However, two more answered with a 4 and two others
answered with a 5. In Figure 3D, eight of the newspapers listed a 2 when asked whether their communities would support an in-depth news website. Only one newspaper responded with a 5. In Figure 3E, two newspapers answered with a 1, three newspapers answered with a 2, four newspapers answered with a 3, four newspapers answered with a 4, and three newspapers answered with a 5 when asked about built-in disadvantages for small newspapers when building in-depth news websites. In Figure 3G, when asked how confident their staffs were in their online skills, four answered with a 2, eight answered with a 3, and one answered with a 4. In Figure 3F, three answered with a 1, four answered with a 2, five answered with a 3, and one answered with a 4 when asked if online publishing skills were a pre-requisite for new employees. In Figure 3H, on a scale of 1 to 5 with one being not at all and 5 being definitely, all 13 papers responded with a 2 or less when asked if the Web was the focus of their organizations. In Figure 3I, all 13 also answered on that same scale with a 3 or less when asked a similar question about whether they will be producing Web-only publications within the next 10 years.

Figure 3A – Likely to expand  
Figure 3B - Readers
Figure 3C - Investment

Figure 3D – Town support

Figure 3E - Issues

Figure 3F – Web experience

Figure 3G - Confidence

Figure 3H – Web focus
Operations

The final part of the second survey asked community newspaper publishers or editors about the operations. They were asked how much of their ad revenue came from online sales (Figure 4A), what portion of their total readership accessed their publications via the Web (Figure 4B), how many of their print readers went to their online sites (Figure 4C), what portion of their strategy the next five years was dependent on the Web (Figure 4D), and how much of their newsroom is able to publish to the Web (Figure 4E). Responses were gauged on a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 being 0 percent, 2 being 1-25 percent, 3 being 26-50 percent, 4, being 51-75 percent, and 5 being 76-100 percent.

In Figure 4A, all of the responding newspapers were receiving 25 percent or less of their total advertising revenue from the Web. In Figure 4B, 10 newspapers believed 25 percent or less of their total readership was accessing them online in Figure 4B, and in Figure 4C, eight felt that same amount of print readers were going to their websites. In Figure 4D, 11 newspapers felt 50 percent or less of their strategy the next five years was dependent on the Web.
Towns under study

There were eight towns in Western North Carolina under study: Franklin, Newland, Cashiers, Sylva, Robbinsville, Murphy, Hayesville, and Andrews. Two groups of the newspapers—Smoky Mountain Sentinel and Clay County Progress in Hayesville
and *Cherokee Sentinel* and *The Cherokee Scout* in Murphy—are located in the same respective towns. Three newspapers participated but declined to be identified, so information from their towns was not included.

Five factors in each of the eight areas were analyzed: population, median household income, median resident age, education level of residents, and main industries. Population information was gathered through 2010 U.S. Census Bureau statistics and the American Fact Finder website. Since 2010 statistics were not yet available at the time of the study for the other demographics being analyzed, data from the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) that used demographic statistics from the U.S. Census Bureau’s American Community Survey 2005-2009 five-year estimates as well as GeoLytics, a private company that provides population and demographic estimates at the block level, was used for age, income level, and education. The N.C. Department of Commerce provided a list of leading industries by county in the second quarter of 2010.

**State and town demographic information**

A 2008 Gallup poll found that while Internet usage continues to growing across nearly every demographic, large age, education, and income gaps continue to exist (Morales, 2009). The residents of these towns skewed younger than the state median with an average of 59.65 percent of the residents of these towns being 35 years or older compared to the state average of 63.1 (National Broadband Map – North Carolina). The average education levels of these towns compared to the state average was also close with an average of 80.73 of the residents having at least a high school diploma compared to the state average of 83.1 (National Broadband Map – North Carolina). The most
noticeable demographic where the eight surveyed towns fall below state averages is in median income. According to a Pew Research study in 2010, two-thirds of American adults now have a broadband Internet connection at home; however, household income is the greatest predictor of Internet usage and the richest households are twice as likely to read online news as the poorest (Wayne, 2010). The average income of these eight towns is $35,833, more than $10,000 below the state median of $46,106. There were also slightly more residents at or below the poverty level with an average 17.05 percent of the residents of these towns at that mark compared to the state average of 15 percent.

Table 2 – State and town demographic statistics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Place</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Median household income</th>
<th>Poverty rate</th>
<th>Age &gt; or = 35</th>
<th>High school education</th>
<th>Leading industries</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>North Carolina</td>
<td>9,535,483</td>
<td>$46,106</td>
<td>15 percent</td>
<td>63.1 percent</td>
<td>83.2 percent</td>
<td>Manufacturing, textiles, financial services, energy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Population - U.S. 2010 Census
* Income, poverty rate, age, education - National Broadband Map, North Carolina
* Leading industries – N.C. Department of Commerce

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Place</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cashiers</td>
<td>157</td>
<td>$37,672</td>
<td>20.1 percent</td>
<td>69.1 percent</td>
<td>83.2 percent</td>
<td>Food services, health care, retail</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Population – American Fact Finder, Cashiers, NC
* Income, poverty rate, age, education - National Broadband Map, Cashiers, NC
* Leading industries – N.C. Department of Commerce, Jackson County

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Place</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Median household income</th>
<th>Poverty rate</th>
<th>Age &gt; or = 35</th>
<th>High school education</th>
<th>Leading industries</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Newland</td>
<td>698</td>
<td>$34,676</td>
<td>13.1 percent</td>
<td>58.7 percent</td>
<td>81.6 percent</td>
<td>Food services, health care, retail</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Population – American Fact Finder, Newland, NC
* Income, poverty rate, age, education - National Broadband Map, Newland, NC
* Leading industries – N.C. Department of Commerce, Avery County

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Place</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Median household income</th>
<th>Poverty rate</th>
<th>Age &gt; or = 35</th>
<th>High school education</th>
<th>Leading industries</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Murphy</td>
<td>1,627</td>
<td>$37,708</td>
<td>14.6 percent</td>
<td>58.1 percent</td>
<td>81.5 percent</td>
<td>Food services, retail, manufacturing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Population – American Fact Finder, Murphy, NC
* Income, poverty rate, age, education - National Broadband Map, Murphy, NC
* Leading industries – N.C. Department of Commerce, Cherokee County
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Place</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Median household income</th>
<th>Poverty rate</th>
<th>Age ≥ 35</th>
<th>High school education</th>
<th>Leading industries</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hayesville</td>
<td>311</td>
<td>$35,089</td>
<td>18.2 percent</td>
<td>63.6 percent</td>
<td>81.3 percent</td>
<td>Education, construction, retail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrews</td>
<td>1,781</td>
<td>$37,708</td>
<td>14.6 percent</td>
<td>58.1 percent</td>
<td>81.5 percent</td>
<td>Food services, manufacturing, retail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sylva</td>
<td>2,588</td>
<td>$37,672</td>
<td>20.1 percent</td>
<td>58.4 percent</td>
<td>80.9 percent</td>
<td>Food services, health care, retail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Franklin</td>
<td>3,845</td>
<td>$38,351</td>
<td>14.4 percent</td>
<td>57.1 percent</td>
<td>83.9 percent</td>
<td>Food services, health care, retail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robbinsville</td>
<td>640</td>
<td>$27,786</td>
<td>21.3 percent</td>
<td>54.1 percent</td>
<td>83.2 percent</td>
<td>Construction, health care, education</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Population – American Fact Finder, Hayesville, NC  
* Income, poverty rate, age, education - National Broadband Map, Hayesville, NC  
* Leading industries – N.C. Department of Commerce, Clay County

Internet availability and usage

The e-NC Authority listed the main Internet providers in each community as well as the available speeds. The National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) provided breakdowns by community. The NTIA figures were as of June 30, 2010. The areas analyzed in this research were number of wireline and wireless service providers, available technologies, and speed. The NTIA wireline service provider figures are the wired broadband providers that the population of the given area
can access, including DSL, cable, copper, or fiber; wireless service providers are the number of wireless broadband providers that the population of the given area can access but does not include satellite providers; technology lists the general categories of technology collected including DSL, fiber, cable, or wireless and other technologies, such as broadband over power line are included in the other category; and speed are the upload and download speeds available to the population of the given area.

**State and town Internet statistics**

Separating urban and rural areas within the state illustrates a disparity in broadband coverage. A February 2011 study by the NTIA shed some light on the availability of high-speed Internet in rural areas in North Carolina. The study found that 89.4 percent of rural residents, as defined by the 2000 U.S. Census, in the state had access to at least one wireline provider, and 88.8 percent of residents had access to at least one wireless provider (“Broadband availability,” 2011). The most common forms of technology were cable modem, with availability to 73.3 percent of rural residents, and DSL, with availability to 68 percent of residents (“Broadband availability,” 2011). As far as speed, 95.8 of rural residents are able to access download speeds of 3 mbps or greater and upload speeds of 768 kbps or greater, and the statewide average is 98.5 percent (“Broadband availability,” 2011).

Of the eight towns surveyed here, suitable speeds and technology were available in all areas, although not all of the residents had access. On average, 98.5 percent of state residents have access to download speeds of 3 mbps or greater and upload speeds of 768 kbps or greater. The number is only slightly less in these eight towns with 91.4 percent on average of residents had that same access. The residents of these areas do not have the
access to providers that is available to residents of urban areas in North Carolina. The residents of these areas had on average fewer than three providers in their communities while 100 percent of residents in urban areas statewide had access to at least three providers (“Broadband availability,” 2011). Also, only an average of 48.69 percent of these residents had access to one or more wireline provider compared to 95.7 statewide and 89.4 rural residents in the state having the same or greater access to providers.

Access to wireless providers was more favorable in these eight communities compared to state averages. Statewide in North Carolina, 98.8 percent of residents had access to one or more wireless provider while 99.85 of residents in these communities had that same or higher level of access.

While some of the statistics from these rural mountain towns do not differ greatly from the level of access in urban areas, some studies have indicated that actual usage of the Internet differs greatly in rural communities, especially those in the South. The U.S. Department of Agriculture reported in 2009 that 72.6 percent of urban Americans use the Internet somewhere—though not necessarily at home—while that number falls to 63.3 percent of rural residents (Anderson, 2009). Internet usage at home dipped even further in the South, with 61.7 percent of urban residents in the South using the Internet at home while only 46.4 percent of rural residents used the Internet at home, by far the lowest numbers per region in the country (Anderson, 2009).

Table 3 – State and town Internet statistics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Place</th>
<th># of providers</th>
<th>Max speeds</th>
<th>Access to 3 mbps/768kbps</th>
<th>Technologies</th>
<th>Access to 1 or more wireline</th>
<th>Access to 1 or more wireless</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N. Carolina</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Upload: 3 mbps Download: 25 mbps</td>
<td>98.5 percent</td>
<td>Fiber, cable, DSL wireless</td>
<td>95.7 percent</td>
<td>98.8 percent</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Speed, access to max speeds, technologies, wireline, and wireless - National Broadband Map, North Carolina
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Place</th>
<th># of providers</th>
<th>Max speeds</th>
<th>Access to 3 mbps/768kbps</th>
<th>Technologies</th>
<th>Access to 1 or more wireline</th>
<th>Access to 1 or more wireless</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cashiers</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Upload: 1.5 mbps Download: 3 mbps</td>
<td>81.9 percent</td>
<td>Wireless, cable</td>
<td>20.3 percent</td>
<td>100 percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* Number of providers, max speeds – North Carolina Broadband Map, Cashiers, NC</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* Access to max speeds, technologies, wireline, and wireless - National Broadband Map, Cashiers, NC</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newland</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Upload: 1.5 mbps Download: 10 mbps</td>
<td>100 percent</td>
<td>Fiber, cable, DSL, wireless</td>
<td>98.5 percent</td>
<td>100 percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* Number of providers, max speeds – North Carolina Broadband Map, Newland, NC</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>* Access to max speeds, technologies, wireline, and wireless - National Broadband Map, Newland, NC</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Murphy</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Upload: 1.5 mbps Download: 3 mbps</td>
<td>96 percent</td>
<td>Wireless, cable</td>
<td>0.9 percent</td>
<td>100 percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* Number of providers, max speeds – North Carolina Broadband Map, Murphy, NC</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* Access to max speeds, technologies, wireline, and wireless - National Broadband Map, Murphy, NC</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hayesville</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Upload: 1.5 mbps Download: 3 mbps</td>
<td>85.5 percent</td>
<td>Fiber, wireless</td>
<td>1.9 percent</td>
<td>100 percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* Number of providers, max speeds – North Carolina Broadband Map, Hayesville, NC</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>* Access to max speeds, technologies, wireline, and wireless - National Broadband Map, Hayesville, NC</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrews</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Upload: 1.5 mbps Download: 3 mbps</td>
<td>92.6 percent</td>
<td>Wireless</td>
<td>0 percent</td>
<td>100 percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* Number of providers, max speeds – North Carolina Broadband Map, Andrews, NC</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* Access to max speeds, technologies, wireline, and wireless - National Broadband Map, Andrews, NC</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sylva</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Upload: 1.5 mbps Download: 10 mbps</td>
<td>92.4 percent</td>
<td>Fiber, cable, wireless</td>
<td>84.3 percent</td>
<td>100 percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* Number of providers, max speeds – North Carolina Broadband Map, Sylva, NC</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* Access to max speeds, technologies, wireline, and wireless - National Broadband Map, Sylva, NC</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Franklin</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Upload: 1.5 mbps Download: 10 mbps</td>
<td>94.1 percent</td>
<td>Fiber, cable, wireless</td>
<td>87.9 percent</td>
<td>100 percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* Number of providers, max speeds – North Carolina Broadband Map, Franklin, NC</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* Access to max speeds, technologies, wireline, and wireless - National Broadband Map, Franklin, NC</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robbinsville</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Upload: 1.5 mbps Download: 3 mbps</td>
<td>88.7 percent</td>
<td>Fiber, wireless</td>
<td>13.4 percent</td>
<td>100 percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* Number of providers, max speeds – North Carolina Broadband Map, Robbinsville, NC</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* Access to max speeds, technologies, wireline, and wireless - National Broadband Map, Robbinsville, NC</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 6: Discussion and conclusions

**H1:** *The lack of high-speed Internet available in rural areas is a factor in the amount of online news community newspapers produce.*

While broadband development is improving daily for rural areas in Western North Carolina, there are large price tags attached to this development. With the Internet, research has shown there is potential to add to or diminish inequities between urban and rural communities (Hudson, et al., 1990). While the Internet offers the ability to disseminate information worldwide instantaneously, critics believed gaps could even widen between rural and urban communities due to the potentially prohibitive costs of equipment required to run technology (Ettema, 1984). The high cost of providing services across the more widely dispersed rural population is one barrier to the development of infrastructure in rural areas; as a result, rural areas lag behind in the infrastructure required for optimal Internet use—such as broadband or other high-speed service—and rural residents have lower reported use of the Internet than urban residents (Bennett, et al., 2011). Many of the participants in this survey felt high-speed Internet was lacking in their Western North Carolina communities, limiting their online capabilities since more Web publishing would not be available to at least a portion of their readers.

In Figure 2C, none of the 13 participants in the survey said readers of their papers definitely had access to high-speed Internet at home. Later in the survey in Figure 3B, nine respondents answered with a 3 or higher when asked if more Web publishing would not be available to at least a portion of their readers. The design of these websites is reflective of the considerations expressed in these answers. All of the newspaper websites
under this study had stories, pictures, and other basic functionalities. However, there were several areas where their websites were lacking. A popular feature on many current newspaper websites is comment forums and other ways for readers to participate in community discussions. In Figure 1F, only one of the newspapers responding indicated their website allowed for a good deal of reader interaction. The other papers answered their websites had little to no reader interaction. None of the websites had locally produced videos at the time of this study, a fixture on many newspaper websites in more metropolitan areas where faster Internet speeds are more common.

As noted in Table 3, Internet availability is less in these rural areas in terms of speed and available providers. It is shaping what these newspapers can and will do with their online publishing, a development Beniger noted in his interpretive history of communication innovations. He found that technology defines the limits of what a society can do (Beniger, 1986). In this research, Internet availability and speeds are shaping how these newspapers develop their online products for their communities.

These answers and figures indicate that there is less accessibility to high-speed Internet in rural areas in Western North Carolina as opposed to the availability in other areas in the state. Not only is the disparity in the access, but studies have shown usage among rural residents is lower as well with a United States Department of Agriculture studying showing in 2009 that at-home Internet usage among rural residents in the South was 46.4 percent (“Rural U.S. Internet,” 2009). Until the rural and urban gaps close—and it remains to be seen whether they will—Internet usage and availability is a consideration for community newspapers in rural areas looking to invest more in the Web portion of their businesses. The responses from the participating publications reaffirm that notion,
and the gap in technology and usage in rural areas is a factor in the decisions these newspapers are making about their online business models. This hypothesis was supported.

**H2:** *Community newspapers are limited in the amount of online news they publish because of their readers’ low use of their websites.*

In community newspapers such as these in Western North Carolina, their print editions are still overwhelmingly the main focus, but they have been working with online publishing for at least several years. All the papers had been publishing online several years with most launching the websites in the early 2000s, while two others began online in 1999. While all the websites had regularly updated community information, on the whole they lacked the level of interactivity—i.e. Facebook, Twitter, videos, and reader talkback forums—that are commonplace on larger newspapers websites. In Figure 1G, six websites did not have newspaper-related Facebook or Twitter links on their home pages. None of the newspaper websites in this study had a pay wall, although some had only portions of stories on their websites, and none had their entire print content on their websites. A 2010 study found that smaller newspapers with circulations less than 25,000 suffered only a slight drop-off—and an occasional increase—in print circulations as compared to larger papers after installing pay walls (Ives, 2010). Several of the newspapers offered full editions of their newspaper online to their print subscribers. In regards to online advertising, one unidentified newspaper had 10 advertisers on its website, although most had anywhere from two to six. Four of the newspapers did not have online advertisers, and one publication did not provide a number.
Despite some of these numbers, six of the newspapers said they definitely planned to expand online operations in the next year (Figure 3A). However, only one newspaper (Figure 3D) said its community would definitely support an in-depth online local news site. In Figure 2A, nine of the responding newspapers answered with a 3 or less—with 1 being not at all and 5 being very much—when asked whether their readers ask for more online news. In addition, there is also the question of how well a sense of local community—a source of pride for many in rural areas—can be achieved through an online publication.

Fostering community and retaining those geographic identifiers online has been the quest of local website development since its inception. McQuail (2005) believed some features of real communities can be attained, including interaction, a common purpose, a sense of identity and belonging, various norms, and unwritten rules with possibilities for exclusion or rejection. Beniger’s theory can also be seen in the development of community through technological advances such as the Internet. Beniger forecasted that advanced information technology would bring with it an unintended infrastructure of pseudo-community, a hybrid of interpersonal and mass communication born largely of computer technology (Golden, et al., 2009). He believed communication amongst machines and between people and machines would become as easy as communications between people, but the distinctions among information types would be blurred, affecting how this pseudo-technology community is used (Beniger, 1986).

There were strong indicators here these newspapers were not going to great lengths to foster that online community. The greatest efforts these newspapers made on their websites to develop an online community—outside of publishing their printed
content—were in creating photo galleries, community calendars, and local weather features. There were not forums for community discussion or community submissions. In Figure 1F, 11 newspapers answered with a 2 or less—with 1 being not at all and 5 being very much—when asked about the readers’ access to participate on their websites. A similar question in Figure 2G was asked about the level of reader interaction with the website, and again 11 answered with a 2 or less. There are several conclusions that can be drawn from this data.

The websites in this study lag behind—in many cases, greatly—national averages for newspaper website page views as noted in Table 1. A majority of the respondents expressed trepidation about whether their communities would support more online news. In Figure 2D, only one newspaper had double-digit online advertisers and none answered a 5—indicating very much—when asked whether their readers clicked on ads. These figures indicate that while these community newspapers are not ignoring their sites and would likely consider exploring more Web publishing—either now or in the near future—the demand from their readerships is not currently great enough to justify an investment. This hypothesis was supported.

**H3:** The lack of internal support at community newspapers make it less likely they will produce an in-depth local news website.

Tichenor, Donohue, and Oilen (1997) in their extensive studies on community newspapers discussed—among other things—the multiple roles journalists at these small papers have to perform. Many community newspapers in rural areas have a multi-functional staff, so roles are not as clearly defined as those at larger papers. That type of
flexibility is found at the papers in this survey as well. The largest newsroom in this study had eight employees. Eight of the 13 newspapers responding to this survey said 25 percent or less of their staff worked on the paper’s website, although five others said 76 to 100 percent of their staff publishes online content (Figure 4E). None of the newspapers had dedicated online editors. In Figure 3G, 12 of the 13 newspapers answered with a 3 or less—with 1 being not at all and 5 being definitely—about the level of confidence their staffs had in their online skills. However, having a detailed knowledge of online publishing is not necessarily a pre-requisite at these papers. That same number of newspapers answered with a 3 or less about if having a detailed knowledge of online publishing is a pre-requisite at their papers (Figure 3F). These newspapers did say their papers used at least some current Web technologies. In addition to whether these newspapers had the proper staff in place to produce in-depth news sites, another question is if the papers’ owners would be willing to invest in a product that would likely not provide immediate financial returns.

There are many ways media companies are trying to develop in-depth, financially viable websites for their products. Mersey (2009) recommended that local community newspapers stay geographically relevant with their online products, utilizing citizen-produced content, formal or informal blogs and other tools to deliver cheap, effective, and locally produced news. What was discovered in this study is that a majority of these newspapers were not confident their owners would invest in more online publishing until a consistent model and profit could be produced. The papers were split (Figure 3C) on their owners’ willingness to invest in an online product that was not profitable, with nine answering with a 2 or less and four answering with a 4 or more on a scale of 1 to 5 with 1
being not at all and 5 being definitely. Despite these apparent roadblocks, there was little consensus about whether small newspapers were internally hindered in their abilities to produce an in-depth website. In Figure 3E, the respondents were widely split on whether small newspapers had internal disadvantages in building in-depth local news websites. Beniger (1986) argued in his theory of interpretative history of communication innovations that society will dictate how technology is used; thus community newspapers will be forced to follow the trends—driven by technological infrastructure, online traits of their readers, and the demographics of their communities—to determine how, and in what form, they will continue to publish news. So the majority of power to dictate the papers’ online development may even be outside the paper’s internal structure. Wajcman (2002) used similar logic when she explained technological change is shaped by the social circumstances that surround it, and eventually, one technology will triumph over another simply because it is “the best.” In this way, she argued, technology is patterned by the conditions of its use and innovation and is therefore a socio-technical product (Wajcman, 2002). Nevertheless, the results from this survey suggest some community newspapers recognized internal liabilities—including a limited amount of online skills among their staffs and a lack of financial commitment from their owners. But the survey was not conclusive in finding whether a lack of internal support specifically prevented rural community newspapers in Western North Carolina from developing and publishing in-depth local news websites. This hypothesis was not supported.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hypothesis #1</th>
<th>Hypothesis #2</th>
<th>Hypothesis #3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lack of high-speed Internet affects website development</td>
<td>Lack of reader use affects website development</td>
<td>Less internal support, less likely to produce in-depth website</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supported: Yes</td>
<td>Supported: Yes</td>
<td>Supported: No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

54
Areas of future research

One advantage or development that appears to be growing stronger by the day is the development of Web-enabled smartphones and their ability to serve individuals who may have limited or no regular access to the Internet. According to the Pew Internet and American Life Project, cell phones help to bridge the digital divide for both teens and adults by providing Internet access to less privileged community members, including those with economic, social and/or geographic disadvantages (Horrigan, 2009). For some disadvantaged communities, combining Internet, and, sometimes, television bills into one monthly payment have proved advantageous. Although the digital divide is closing, studies still indicate residents of lower income areas have less access to the Internet or access in ways other than traditional computer use. A 2010 study showed 41 percent of teens from households earning less than $30,000 annually access the Internet with their cell phone, although 30 percent of this income group does not have a computer in the home (Lenhart, 2010). A 2011 report from Pew Internet and American Life Project found that 47 percent of Americans get some kind of local news from their cell phones or tablet computers, although it pertained more to weather and business listings rather than general news updates (Mitchell, et al., 2011). Despite geographic limitations and subsequent inconsistent cell service, user behavior data for a sample of audience members for The Parsons Advocate, a community newspaper located in rural West Virginia, from a survey conducted spring 2010 reveals that 51.3 percent of respondents own a web-enabled smartphone, 30 percent use their cell phone to access the web, and 28 percent use mobile applications 2-3 times daily (Cicci, et al., 2010). Greer and Yan (2010) in their study of
141 community newspapers with circulations under 50,000 found that the gap between those who can and cannot readily access the Internet would shrink as mobile delivery continued to grow.

None of the papers in this study had mobile applications—or text alerts—at the time of this study. This market may still be a few years out for small community newspapers. The 2011 Pew Internet study also found that 36 percent of Americans pay for local news in some context—be it a print newspaper subscription, special online content, or a mobile application—but 31 percent of those Americans are paying for the printed paper (Mitchell, et al., 2011). Further research is needed into how mobile-based Internet is affecting rural areas and if local newspapers have the means to effectively utilize this trend.

**Conclusion**

This research found there are some internal and external constraints in rural communities in Western North Carolina that are having effects on the amount of online news community newspapers publish. The study worked under several assumptions, primarily that the online initiatives put forth by many metropolitan newspapers is superior to the traditional mediums rural community newspapers still rely on to represent an overwhelming majority of their businesses. The editors and publishers of these newspapers are challenging that notion by showing the value community publications still represent in their intimate areas. Newspapers have spent the better part of the past two decades in a period of significant change as the industry strived to reach readers and turn profits through two mediums. As readers drifted away from traditional news sources, premium and niche content has been sought by both publishers and readers alike.
This is where community newspapers fit into the landscape. The future of these papers is vital to the industry. Empirical evidence shows many readers are still picking up their small, hometown newspapers. Many critics of print say the best scenario moving forward for ink-and-paper publications is to deliver a niche product, a craft many small, rural newspapers have been honing for decades, including the papers in this study. However, new media technologies are progressing at such a rate that these small papers with their limited budgets have to work furiously to catch up to these developments.

Findings from this study suggest that obstacles exist for community newspapers in rural Western North Carolina to produce in-depth news websites, some of which the newspapers cannot control. These include the amount of available high-speed Internet and their readers’ usage of local online news. Beniger’s interpretative history of communication innovations theory said that whatever the potential for technological innovation, the needs of commerce and industry have done most to promote development and determine how innovations are used, a phenomenon of how technological innovations shape a community that he called the “control revolution” (Beniger, 1986). Responses from the newspapers managers in this study and research into the dynamics of these communities indicate that in-depth news websites are not ready for widespread use in rural Western North Carolina, and thus the newspapers are being “controlled” by what they can deliver in terms of an online product. Beniger theorized that society’s needs—primarily, commerce—will dictate how technological innovations are used, so his conjecture was born out in this case. The online products of these publications appear to serving the current needs of their communities. The development of local news websites
for these papers is tied to the use from their rural readerships, the money that the sites can generate, and the availability of high-speed Internet in these small, mountain towns.

Even so, the newspapers in this research need more options and uses on their current websites to get readers engaged so the publications can begin the process of building larger online audiences, attract more online advertisers, and become well-diversified news organizations. Each website needs more opportunities for reader interactivity both with the newspaper’s editorial content as well as with each other. These newspapers must emphasize how online publishing could potentially shape their future models and have personnel in place that can successfully build and maintain viable online content. In order to further entrench themselves as necessary news providers in their communities, these newspapers in rural Western North Carolina will need to follow how trends continue to develop among online local news and how readers respond to and use their local newspaper websites. Having a staff that is trained in Web publishing is important so these papers can properly analyze the trends and effectively serve the needs of their readers moving forward.

Large newspapers have been utilizing and building in-depth news websites since the last decade of the 20th Century. In general rural community newspapers, including those in this study, have not been publishing websites as long, nor do their sites have the range of functionality as their larger counterparts. Only two of the papers—The Sylva Herald and an unidentified newspaper—in this study had been publishing online since the 20th Century. Of the publications in this study, none of the papers suggested in-depth Internet sites for their publications would or could replace their print products in the next 10 years (Figure 3I), nor was the Web a focal point of their organization (Figure 3H).
This research also looked at the amount of money community newspapers were making off their online products and whether their readers were accessing their websites as much as their printed publications.

All of the responding newspapers said that 25 percent or less of their advertising dollars was generated by their websites (Figure 4A). In terms of readers, all of the responding newspapers said 50 percent or less of their total readership accessed them online (Figure 4B), and eight said 25 percent or less of their print readers visited their websites (Figure 4C). In Figure 4D, 11 newspapers said that 50 percent or less of their strategies in the next five years involved the Web, meaning—at worst—they plan for their print products to represent at least half of their revenue in the next half-decade.

Further research into how community newspapers can take advantage of smartphone technology will be needed in the coming years because empirical evidence cited in this research shows more and more rural residents are using mobile Internet devices in hopes of lessening costly technological service fees. Smartphones and future mobile technology would likely change, augment, or alter results found here. In-depth online news sites are not currently a practical option for many small Western North Carolina newspapers. However, they also must prepare for a shifting media landscape that could affect how local news is disseminated in rural communities both in Western North Carolina and beyond.
Appendix #1

Sample survey

Part 1
Background information

1. How long has your publication been printing?
2. How often do you print and how many pages/sections are in a typical edition?
3. How many readers does your publication serve?
4. How many newsroom staffers does your publication employ?
5. Who or what company owns your publication?
6. When did your publication begin publishing news online?
7. How many website page views does your newspaper receive each month?
8. Does your publication have online advertisers? If so, roughly how many?

Part 2
Newspaper website

On a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is not at all and 5 is very much, does your paper's Web edition:

-- Contain the same information as the print edition
-- Draw page views from within the print circulation area
-- Draw page views from outside the print circulation area
-- Have updates three times a day or more
-- Uses current Web technologies
-- Has photo and/or video galleries
-- Gives readers access to participation through talkback forums or ability to add links
-- Provides links to other online initiatives such as Facebook and Twitter

Reader response

On a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is not at all and 5 is very much, do your paper's readers:

-- Ask for more online news
-- Have access to the Internet at home
-- Have high-speed broadband Internet at home
-- Click on ads for the website
-- Prefer local news to national news
-- Use other outlets to get news and information
-- Interact with your website with comments

Strategy

On a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is not at all and 5 is definitely:

-- How likely are you to expand Web operations in the next year?
-- Would more Web publishing alienate a portion of your readership?
Would your newspaper invest in an online model that is not immediately successful financially?
Do you feel your community will support an in-depth local news website?
Do you feel a small newspaper has built-in disadvantages from developing in-depth websites?
Is a detailed knowledge of online publishing a pre-requisite for employment there?
How confident is your staff in their Web skills?
Is Web publishing and its development the focal point of your publication?
Will you convert to total online publishing in the next 10 years?

Operations
On a five-point scale, where 1 is not at all, 2 is 1 to 25%, 3 is 26-50%, 4 is 51-75%, and 5 is 76-100%:
What portion of your ad revenue comes from online?
What portion of your total readership accesses you via the Web?
What portion of your print readers also read the Web edition?
What portion of your strategy for the next five years is dependent upon online?
What portion of your newsroom is involved with the paper’s Web publishing?

Part 3:
How long have you worked at your current newspaper?
- Less than 1 year
- 1-4 years
- 5-7 years
- 8-10 years
- More than 10 years

How long have you worked in the newspaper business?
- Less than 1 year
- 1-5 years
- 6-10 years
- 11-15 years
- 16-20 years
- More than 20 years

What are your primary job duties? (Answer all that apply)
- Editorial/Management
- Reporting/Photography
- Website management
- Business/Ad sales
- Other ___________________ (please explain)

What is your age?
- 18-25
- 26-35
- 36-45
- 46-55
- 55+

What is your last year of education completed?
- GED or high school diploma equivalent
- High school graduate
- Vocational/trade school
- Some college
- Undergraduate degree
- Master’s degree
- Doctorate
- Other ___________________(please explain).

What is your gender?
- Male
- Female

What is your ethnicity?
- White/Anglo/Caucasian
- Spanish/Hispanic/Latino
- Black/African American
- Asian/Pacific Islander
- American Indian
- Other ___________________(please specify).
Appendix 2
Website and newspaper information

Crossroads Chronicle, Cashiers, NC

The Crossroads Chronicle has been publishing its weekly edition for approximately 28 years. It publishes between 18-32 pages each edition and has a circulation of roughly 2,800. It is owned by Community Newspapers, Inc., a company overseeing a chain of community weeklies in Western North Carolina and Georgia. It began publishing online in 2004. The newsroom has four employees. Approximately 18,500 page views are registered at the website each month, and there are five online advertisers.

Avery Journal-Times – Newland, NC

The Avery Journal-Times is a part of Jones Media that owns several community newspapers in Western North Carolina and Eastern Tennessee. The newspaper has been publishing since 1959. It is a weekly with six newsroom employees. Anywhere from 36-100 pages are in each edition. It has been publishing online news since 2001, but at the time the survey was administered, The Avery Journal-Times had quit publishing a website in order to unveil a new online product that was launched in late spring 2011. Jones Media, with 12 papers in its chain, has more than 100 online advertisers amongst its publications.
The Cherokee Scout – Murphy, NC

The Cherokee Scout is a weekly newspaper that has been publishing since 1889. It has two sections totaling 30 pages. At a circulation of 9,500, it is one of the largest of newspapers under this study. It is owned by Community Newspapers, Inc., and has eight employees. The Scout has been publishing online since 2002 and has 100,000-plus page views on its website per month. There are several businesses that exclusively advertise online.
The Clay County Progress has been in existence for around 30 years as a standalone publication. It is a weekly 20-28-page newspaper that serves 4,400 readers. The newsroom employs four workers. It is owned by Community Newspapers, Inc., and has been publishing online since 2002. The Clay County Progress website receives 30,000 hits per month and currently has six online advertisers.
These two newspapers form a Western North Carolina branch of a four-paper operation that extends into North Georgia. The two Western North Carolina newspapers form the WNC Sentinel branch and are both online at wncsentinel.net. The Smoky Mountain Sentinel and Cherokee Sentinel have been publishing since 1987. They are weekly 16-page papers, although the responder noted the papers used to be 2-3 page sections with 24-40 pages. The circulation for the entire four-newspaper chain is 17,000. There are seven employees. The newspapers began publishing online in the mid-2000s. The respondent was unsure of how many website page views the site receives but said traffic has dwindled over the years. The respondent also said there are online advertisers but the amount is negligible.
The Andrews Journal has been in business for 51 years. It offers a weekly 8-14-page section. With a circulation of 1,900 and two employees, it is one of the smallest newspapers under study. It is owned by Community Newspapers, Inc. It has been publishing online since 2002 and receives about 10,000 page views per month. There are no advertisers.
Local schools to add two instructional days next year - As if the school year weren’t already long enough for most students, state legislators recently mandated an extra five days. To reach that 185 days, the state revoked the requirement that teachers have five mandatory workdays – days when students stay home. State Superintendent June Atkinson can approve waivers from the rule, but schools must spend the extra time on staff development, said recently retired Jackson County Superintendent Sue Nations last week. “I think adding more instructional days is the way to go,” Nations said. “It would be nice if teachers were paid for these days, but you can’t take away an opportunity for a child.” Nations announced.

Kantz named CVS principal - Kathryn Kantz will replace Nathan Frizzell as principal of Cullowhee Valley School. Frizzell, who left the CVS to pursue other interests, will become an English teacher at Smoky Mountain High School. Kantz’ transfer from Fairview assistant principal to CVS principal was announced at the June 28 school board meeting. She was given a two-year contract, and her annual salary will be $58,112. “I’m excited about it,” Kantz said when contacted last week. “I met a lot of the teachers, and I’m impressed with their enthusiasm. I’m looking forward to working with them. They seem like a really great group of people – teachers and staff.” Kantz has been assistant principal for five years at Fairview, working with...
The Macon County News has been publishing for 28 years. It is a free, weekly publication with 32-40 pages, although the responder noted it was printing as much as 48-64 pages before the recession. It is the largest newspaper under study with a circulation of 13,000. Its coverage area spreads across several Western North Carolina counties and extends to Northern Georgia. It began publishing online around 2004 and currently receives approximately 40,000-50,000 page views per month. The website has around five or six online advertisers.
The Graham Star – Robbinsville, NC

The Graham Star has been publishing since 1955. It is a 10-12-page weekly with a circulation of around 3,200. Three full-time employees and two part-time employees staff the newsroom. It is owned by Community Newspapers, Inc. The Graham Star has been publishing online since 2004. The website receives 100,000 page views per month and has two or three online advertisers.

Unidentified Western North Carolina community newspaper
One Western North Carolina community newspaper has been publishing for approximately 128 years. It prints a two-section weekly with 18-20 pages per edition. It has a circulation of around 3,500. It employs two people in the newsroom. It is owned by Community Newspapers, Inc., and has been publishing online since 2003. The respondent did not disclose how many website page views the paper’s website received or the amount of online advertisers it maintained.

Unidentified Western North Carolina community newspaper
A community newspaper in Western North Carolina has been publishing for 125 years. It prints twice a week and typically contains 22 pages per edition. Its circulation is around 8,600. It is owned by Community Newspapers, Inc., and it employs seven newsroom staff members. It began publishing online in 2005 and has 10 online advertisers.
Unidentified Western North Carolina community newspaper

The paper has been printing for 84 years. They currently have a weekly publication with 16-20 pages. It has a circulation of 4,700 and has one newsroom employee. The publisher declined to say what company owned their publication. They have been publishing news online since 1999. The website receives 1,100 page views per month but does not have any online advertisers.
Works Cited


