WHAT RURAL ALASKANS CAN TEACH US ABOUT LOCAL NEWS
Ryan Schuessler

KODIAK, Alaska -- The paperboy is an idyllic image in American suburbia.

He’s easy to picture: a scrawny blonde kid in a striped t-shirt, riding his Schwinn through the gridded blocks of identical houses, throwing papers into each yard. But it’s a stereotypical role that’s hard to come by in rural Alaska. Replace the kid with a round middle-aged man and the Schwinn with a two-seat Cessna from God-knows-what year. Roads turn into mountain passes, and cookie cutter houses into far-flung villages.

For years, the closest thing rural Alaska had to a paperboy were their pilots: the men and women who fly mail, cargo, and passengers to villages that have no roads connecting them to the outside world. They also took newspapers -- but not so much anymore. When it comes to news, things have changed all over the country. Outlets, especially newspapers, are scrambling to find ways to stay afloat as news consumers are rapidly changing their habits.

The United States’ most isolated places are no exception.

THE CENTRAL CITY

In 1980, researcher William Adams theorized about the role of “central cities” in media markets. Predictably, he found that coverage was dominated by news from the cities where outlets were headquartered – where the journalists themselves lived and worked. Residents of the “central city” could routinely expect to read or hear information relevant to their lives when they read the local paper or turned on the news. The same could not be said for that market’s outlying communities who were stuck with news unilaterally coming out of the “central city.” The “central city” is the gatekeeper.

The concept of the “central city” is quite possibly more entrenched in Alaska than anywhere else in the present day United States – in ways that extend far beyond news. With thousands of residents living in villages and towns hundreds, even thousands of miles from any road, air service from “hub” towns (as they’re called here) remain an essential part of life. In the past, they have also been the gatekeepers of news.

Enter: the Alaskan paperboy – the bush pilot in his Cessna – flying the nearest local paper out to a village along with grocery orders, grandma coming back from her doctor’s appointment, and the Keurig someone ordered on Amazon three weeks ago.

But that role is changing, at least when it comes to news. A lot has changed since Adams wrote about the “central city” nearly 40 years ago, mainly the development
of the Internet. Academia has produced volumes about how the development of the Internet has changed the role of information gatekeepers – mainly that it has torn down the old model. Consumers who have access to the Internet, satellite television, and social media no longer have to depend solely on Adam’s “central city” news outlets. The Internet gave them choices – the ability to place themselves into audiences online instead of being tied to whichever paper or station happened to be closest.

But what does this look like on the ground in Alaska – the place where the “central city” relationship continues to exist in an extreme form? I went to find out.

WHEELS DOWN IN KODIAK

For the past several months, I have been based in Kodiak, Alaska – a town of around 6,400 in the Kodiak Archipelago – working as a freelance journalist and researcher, exploring this question.

The Kodiak Archipelago is like its own bubble. On a physical island, the city of Kodiak is nearly 300 air miles from Anchorage, and is only accessible by air or boat. Yet, on its own, it is a “central city” as Adams would have defined it. The archipelago also hosts about half a dozen other villages of varying sizes, only one of which is connected to Kodiak by a road. The air service to the outlying villages is out of Kodiak, where there is a grocery store, Wal-Mart, and other services. In most cases, to get to these villages, one has to get to Kodiak first.

The town also boasts two local media outlets. The Kodiak Daily Mirror, a newspaper, and KMXT, a public radio station. Both outlets have fulltime staff that produce daily news content.

From Kodiak, I flew out to several of the archipelago’s villages, using the local air service. During one conversation with a pilot – who happened to be the company’s owner and whom I later saw on an overdramatized reality show called Alaskan Bush Pilots – I learned a bit about the history of the role of pilots.

“We used to fly newspapers out here all the time,” he told me en route to one village (as he let me try flying the plane). But things had changed. Now, only a few newspapers go out with the mail – usually to tribal government offices that have a subscription. This anecdote proved to be in line with what I would learn in several of the villages.

WHEN THE INTERNET CAME TO TOWN

During my time in the archipelago’s outlying villages, I spent my days trying to get that perfect shot of a bald eagle (I got it) – as well as interviewing locals about when they first had access to the Internet, and how they get their news today.
In order to avoid the timely process of securing tribal council approval to do interviews in the villages, I agreed to keep names and locations anonymous. In the end, I visited three of the archipelago’s villages and interviewed 15 residents. I interviewed slightly more women than men. The youngest interviewee was 20. The oldest was 60. The vast majority, though not all, were indigenous Alutiiq people.

The Internet first came to Kodiak’s villages in the early 2000s, locals told me. Satellite television arrived around the same time. Access to consistent, reliable Internet service remains a challenge in every village I visited.

“Internet services in rural communities is very poor,” a 53-year-old woman told me. “You’re lucky to get it. And there’s days that you don’t get it. So you can’t stay connected.”

“I was an Americorps member here, and I couldn’t do some of my projects because I didn’t have a strong enough signal,” a resident of another village told me. “Using your cellphone only works so well. So I think it’s definitely a limiting factor in our community.”

**CREATING DIGITAL AUDIENCES**

Nevertheless, the presence of the Internet and other digital media infrastructure (satellite television, cellphone service) has left a mark on the villages when it comes to news consumption, and many residents report that access to this technology lead to decreased dependence on Kodiak’s local media outlets in the villages.

As a result, residents are placing themselves into digital audiences that bypass Kodiak’s media. Not one person I spoke with pays for a subscription or online access to the *Daily Mirror*, and only a few reported that they regularly listen to or consume KMXT content.

Instead, they’re using the Internet to place themselves into statewide audiences, or creating village-level spaces online. Nearly everyone gets their news online, most over Facebook.

Nearly every resident interviewed – spanning age – listed *Alaska Dispatch News* and Anchorage’s NBC affiliate as the primary producers of news information they consume, among other national or international news organizations.

“I follow all kinds – both conservative and liberal point of view type news Faceobok pages,” one 52-year-old resident told me. “But on TV I almost always get my TV news from the same station. The Anchorage station, and the national NBC news.”

“[Yahoo! News is] just automatically where I always go to,” a 29-year-old said. “I just browse. I’m never looking for anything specific.”
Yahoo! News, CNN, and BBC were among the other networks resident consistently rely on for news information.

I asked each resident which “level” of news they most consistently consumed: local (Kodiak Daily Mirror, KMXT), state, national, or international. The vast majority of them cited state-level news, with national-level coming next. Local and international news were rarely mentioned.

Older residents who were news-conscious when the Internet was introduced into their villages cited that introduction as one of the factors that depleted dependency on local news outlets. Access to the Internet, they say, allowed them to tap into state-level audiences that they felt had more importance in their lives and communities. Younger residents, who were children when the Internet came to town, reported never having read news from Kodiak’s outlets.

In addition to allowing residents to place themselves into existing online audiences, the Internet has also allowed them to create their own at the village-level. None of the villages have traditional news outlets, but social media – particularly Facebook – has allowed for the low-cost development of village information exchanges that loosely resemble “citizen journalism.”

For example, two of the three villages I visited have community Facebook pages.

“It’s just for people – if they find a backpack on the side of the road and they don’t know whose it is, put a picture of it on there,” the resident who created one village's page told me. "Or, the school is having their annual awards assembly so people know what time to show up.”

What is interesting and telling, is that both pages have followings that exceed the present population of the villages they serve. This means that the Internet has allowed for the creation of village-level information exchanges that transcend traditional media structures. Anyone with Internet connection and an interest can access village news, which is why the groups’ followings exceed village populations.

“It’s just so easy when you’re not in the village and you have good Internet, you could follow those like [snaps fingers],” she added.

‘KODIAK-CENTRIC’

Of course, there is a reason behind why the Kodiak Archipelago’s villagers are placing themselves in state/national-level audiences or creating village-level spaces: Kodiak’s local media isn’t giving them what they want.

When asked how often they could rely on Kodiak’s news outlets for information about their villages, most villagers replied “very little,” “not at all,” “very poor,” or similar responses.
Alas, we see Adams’ “central city” in action. Residents of a market’s outlying communities (the villages) cannot expect to see news relevant to their lives from the “central city’s” (Kodiak) news outlets.

Only a handful of residents could remember when a journalist from Kodiak came to their village to cover an event. Most of those who could remember recalled when the Daily Mirror’s reporter came to cover the celebration of the 50th anniversary of their village’s founding. One individual recalled when the paper’s sports writer came to cover a school basketball game. Nobody interviewed could recall being interviewed over the phone.

Calling it a “Kodiak-centric” way of thinking, one resident said, “they’re not actively seeking information about us.”

Most villagers could think of topics that they believe should be covered. For example, over the summer the historic Russian Orthodox Cathedral in the City of Kodiak was vandalized and desecrated – an even that made local and state headlines for days. Residents of one village were quick to point out that their own historic Russian Orthodox church had been robbed a few days prior, but it was never covered.

“All of the regional issues, that affect the whole island, including us, tend to not get any coverage,” one resident said.

“I think the crime that happens here needs to be going out more,” another said.

Residents also expressed irritation that, when regional issues that impact Alaska, Kodiak and the villages are covered, villagers themselves are rarely contacted for comment.

One villager recalled seeing a story about the lack of winter snow in the Bering Strait region.

“But it seemed like they’re just talking about the Bering Sea, like it’s the only place that’s being affected,” he said. “To be honest, we only had one day of snow this whole winter. And it disappeared within two days.”

“Just a loss of connection, a loss of knowledge about what they’re doing and what we’re doing,” one resident said about not being able to easily find news about other villages. “Because we’re all replicating what we’re all doing out in the villages. And we’re isolated, so we don’t know what the other villages are doing, and there isn’t a way to share that communication.”
However, not every resident interviewed saw the lack of coverage as a problem. Two anecdotal patterns emerged. Overall, younger residents did not see it as a problem that their communities were not covered.

“There’s just nothing going on here,” one told me, a sentiment echoed by others in their twenties.

Similarly, among the three villages, residents of the one that is closest to the city of Kodiak and has the most frequent air service to town did not see the lack of coverage as a problem. Looking back at Adams’ central city theory, it makes sense that the residents with fewer geographic barriers between themselves and the “central city” would feel this way.

BUILDING COMMUNICATION

In general, it is clear that the villagers in the Kodiak Archipelago’s outlying villages are using the Internet to seek alternative sources of news, and that many are disenchanted with the media from the nearby “central city.”

There is an argument to be made, however, that they could be wrong – that they simply are not aware of coverage of their communities. This may very well be true. However, given the commercialization of media in the United States, this is a misconception that should still be addressed as if it were true. News consumers seeking alternative information sources means a smaller audience – thus smaller profits – for Kodiak’s local media.

Every resident interviewed said they would be more likely to actively seek out Kodiak’s local media outlets if they felt they could consistently find information relevant to their lives and communities. However, it is clear many are not.

In defense of Kodiak’s media outlets, it is not easy to get to these villages. Air taxies and accommodations are expensive, and there are only a handful of journalists in town to begin with. However, as one villager put it, “but it could be just a phone call. Just a phone interview. They could do it that way. I think there’s stuff that could be done better, but I think if that opportunity was here, I think you’d have somebody who would do it.”

Indeed, telecommunications can easily bridge this geographic barrier. Municipal and tribal officials would make good contacts for journalists in Kodiak, and regularly scheduled communication could offer more story ideas and insight into regional issues that, otherwise, are overlooking village perspective.

Additionally, these village-level digital spaces – the community Facebook pages – is another easy way for Kodiak journalists to keep an eye on what is going on in the villages. These pages have the potential to aid in sourcing, producing story ideas, or building connections in the villages.
Furthermore, residents in all three villages expressed interest in having members of their own community become citizen journalists.

“I think possibly the easiest way rather than getting people out there, is having a local,” one 22-year-old resident said. “A local being able to volunteer and say, ‘hey, these things are coming around.’ They’re able to relate to the people a lot more, especially if they’re from here. I think that would probably be a better way to get news out of here.”

**WHAT WE CAN LEARN**

In the past, local media – like the *Kodiak Daily* Mirror and KMXT – has been the most local media option. Clearly, the Internet has changed that. The words of these villagers offer lessons in how regional media can bridge geographic barriers and grow or keep their audiences in outlying communities.

1. **Tap into existing local networks:** In the case of Kodiak, local journalists could benefit from reaching into the digital spaces outlying villages have created for themselves, such as the community Facebook pages. Without the expense of gas or plane tickets, this is an easy way to stay tuned to what is going on in a media market beyond its “central city,” and an easy way to produce story ideas. It’s also a way to promote news organizations’ content directly to those communities and build brand recognition.

2. **Train locals:** Some communities are easier to reach than others. Local newsrooms could benefit from a small investment of time to train interested volunteers in news production. As locals in Kodiak’s villages suggested, this makes the flow of news bilateral, not just unilateral. Furthermore, local individuals already have the community understanding, perspective, and trust that “central city” journalists may initially lack.

3. **Make connections:** Internet and telephones make it easy for reporters to bridge geographic barriers that, traditionally, have lead to shortages in coverage of outlying communities. Regularly scheduled phone calls to leaders or other points of contacts in these communities could help maintain local organizations’ reputation and, most importantly, maintain or build their audiences in these places.

4. **Look beyond the “central city”:** Most importantly, stories and news do not exist in a vacuum. More often than not, issues covered in local media are also felt in that market’s outlying communities. Excluding – either intentionally or unintentionally – the voices of and perspective of those residents only serves to alienate potential consumers. Morally and pragmatically, this is problematic for news organizations. When covering a topic, local reporters could benefit from asking themselves if voices from outside the boundaries of the “central city” could complement, add to,
or improve their coverage. More often than not, such voices would add a level nuance and comprehensiveness that would otherwise be missing.

In the end – and like any community – Kodiak’s villagers simply are interested in news and information that’s relevant to their lives. They want to see their own communities in the news – not just read about others. In the past, they had little choice and were bound to the convenience of the nearest newspaper. That is not the case anymore. The Internet has given them autonomy as news consumers, and regional media is missing out on an audience.

The paperboy – be him the scrawny blonde kid or the bearded bush pilot – and everything he represented is no more. How is your newsroom going to adapt?