

EXPLORING “CONNECTIVITY” AT THE COLLEGE NEWSPAPER:
CAN IT HELP EXPLAIN THE SUCCESS OF THE COLLEGIATE PRESS?

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The undersigned, appointed by the Dean of the Graduate School, have examined the thesis entitled

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Presented by Brian L. Thompson

A candidate for the degree of Master of Arts.

And hereby certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.

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This work is dedicated to my wife, Nancy, and my daughter, Amelie, for their support and for putting up with me while I completed this study and the entire graduate program. It was a major commitment not only by me, but also by them. They share in my success.

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to explore whether "connectivity" — the level of intimacy journalists have with their communities and how it influences their jobs — is at work in collegiate journalism. This qualitative study used interviews with editors at college newspapers throughout Florida to better understand the close-knit relationships they have with members of the college community and whether these journalists take advantage of these connections as newsgatherers. The study found that editors’ strong personal relationships with fellow students and members of the college community do often help them find and develop stories that are newsworthy and relevant to their readership. In addition, editors interviewed recognize this advantage and use naturally strong community connections as an “insider advantage” as they go about their work.

Chapter I: Introduction

Bad news continues for the newspaper industry. Circulations are dropping and advertising has fled the scene. Revenues are down. Papers are cutting everything from newsroom staffs to the size of their issues, not to mention a handful who have shutdown print operations altogether. It is clear that the industry is in trouble, and with the advent of the Internet, a fractured media environment, waning interest by the public, a devastating economic recession that has battered newspaper companies, and too many new media devices in competition, the future for newspapers is uncertain.

Yet, through all this doom and gloom, there is at least one segment of the industry that over the years has continued to serve as a bright spot, and may be able to weather this bleak economic environment — the college newspaper. In fact, it is not the Web edition that has seen success, but the actual ink-and-newsprint version that today's youth and young adult market is supposed to loathe.

If the rest of the industry is in decline, why isn't the same happening to college papers? More importantly, are collegiate journalists doing something different than professional journalists, especially to better connect with a young and fickle demographic that usually seems so averse to newspaper reading? Have these young journalists found a way to get a better read on their audience and produce the kind of content that they know will appeal to students?

Likely there is no one single reason why college newspapers have generally bucked the trend, but instead several. For instance, college papers are distributed free on campuses, and they have virtual monopolies as the sole providers of news at a college.

College newspapers also have the benefit of a very narrow demographic to target, which means they can focus all of their energy there. Other papers need to cast a much wider net to capture wider, more diverse audiences.

There is another possible reason, though, which this research study explores: Whether collegiate journalists' connections to the community around them and relationships they build with fellow students provides another part of the answer to their success. Reader (2006) called it "connectivity," which he defined as the concept that "the level of intimacy journalists have with their communities can influence how journalists do their jobs" (p.852). He advanced the idea in a study that found that professional journalists' connections to their communities impacted how they dealt with ethical dilemmas. On this issue he found that journalists in smaller markets were more likely to be in touch with, and more concerned with, community values than journalists in larger markets.

If connectivity can play a role in ethical decision-making at newspapers, it stands to reason that close connections might also help student journalists when it comes to news judgment, editorial decision-making, and the crafting of stories. In other words, making student newspapers more appealing to readers. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to better understand the collegiate journalist's relationship with the community around them, and whether being active members of the college community gives them an advantage as journalists. As part of the "tribe," can they more easily tap into and further build on these bonds and relationships to gain a greater awareness of the community's interests and what it considers news?

This study examines the relationship between collegiate journalists and their community: How close do they feel to the community around them, and does it help in gathering story ideas? What role does “connectivity” — the level of intimacy journalists have with their communities — play in how they do their jobs? How do collegiate journalists rate the importance of knowing the audience’s needs and interests when it comes to choosing stories to cover? As importantly, how do collegiate journalists view objectivity and journalistic independence, and how do they avoid bias and unfairness?

There is growing evidence that circulations and national advertising in college newspapers has been increasing the past several years. Alloy Media + Marketing’s College Newspaper Audience study found that 76 percent of students say they’ve read a copy of their college newspaper in the past month, and 55 percent have read an issue in the last week. Alloy calls the college newspaper a “top mass media choice among today’s matriculating college students” (2008). CollegePublisher reported in its 2006 College Newspaper Readership Survey that 77 percent of the survey’s undergraduate respondents read the print edition of the campus newspaper at least once each month.

Student Monitor, a college student market research firm, said in a 2005 study that 76 percent of college students are reading at least one of the last five issues of their college paper — the first such increase it has seen since 1998. On that study, Student Monitor’s Milly Gichner said in a release, “College students are loyal readers of their campus newspaper. In fact, nearly two-thirds spend more than 10 minutes reading a typical issue.” A 2005 College Media Advisers study found college media “healthy and growing, and evolving to meet the needs of their campus communities” (p. 20).

Bressers and Bergen studied college student media habits and reported 93 percent of respondents read their campus newspaper (2002). Add to this the fact that corporate media organizations have begun entering this field as a way to tap this tantalizing demographic. Several years ago, MTV purchased CollegePublisher, the leading host and service provider for hundreds of college newspaper Web sites. In 2006, Gannett purchased FSView and Florida Flambeau, the independent newspaper at Florida State University in Tallahassee, and then in 2007, bought the University of Central Florida's independent paper, *The Future*. *The Wall Street Journal* even proclaimed in a 2006 feature on the subject that, "College papers around the U.S. are drawing young readers and luring major advertisers."

However, it is important not to overstate this "phenomenon." Not all college newspapers are thriving, and even those that are growing still get dwarfed in size by traditional newspapers, both in revenue and circulation. Many college papers do not stand on their own financially, and even successful ones often depend on funding from their colleges and universities if they want to stay afloat. And while some studies on college newspaper readership might be eye-opening, the reality is that students still are more likely to prefer "new media" to "old" when it comes to news consumption (Patterson, 2007).

The current economic recession might also be a game-changer for collegiate media, and there is some evidence this is already happening (Murley, 2009; Walters, 2009). Advertising revenue has begun to drop and many collegiate papers across the country have had to deal with cuts to funding. This has meant "many college newspapers are scrambling to deal with the squeeze" (Murley, 2009), and some have had to make

cuts that include reducing how often newspapers are published. That said, many others report that revenue hasn't dropped, and some like Alloy Media don't expect to see collegiate media hurt as badly as the rest of the industry because student readership remains strong (Murley, 2009; Walters, 2009).

So even through economic turmoil, it does appear that something noteworthy is happening in the world of collegiate journalism. In a struggling industry desperate to find solutions, any bright spot is worth looking into.

Having been both a professional journalist (as a reporter and editor) and now a collegiate newspaper adviser, I believe there are some differences between how collegiate and professional journalists practice their craft, particularly when it comes to connectivity. Professional journalists have always placed a high priority on objectivity — although many acknowledge this ideal isn't necessarily attainable and instead focus more on fairness and accuracy. That said, many journalists believe that too much involvement or connection with their readers will threaten their independence or compromise their oath to unbiased reporting (Heider and Poindexter, 2005). McQuail (2005) explains that objectivity gives a journalist freedom, but it comes at the expense of detachment from the surrounding public. It should also be noted that in an era of shrinking news staffs and added duties, it is likely harder for journalists to spend the time it would take to truly understand and connect with the large and widely diverse communities they report on.

As for collegiate journalists, it is my experience that they place less importance on objectivity and independence, and are more focused on understanding, listening to, and even engaging their readers and potential readers. They appear more willing to recognize

their own place in the world they cover, and how issues that affect them personally also affect their readers — and vice versa.

When it comes to detachment, in many respects they're unable to disconnect, as they're totally immersed in the world they cover. They take classes with sources, feel the impact of tuition increases, struggle with parking problems, get hit by funding cuts to programs and services, and even eat the same lousy food that every other student on campus complains about. You might say that objectivity, detachment, and independence are impossible here, or at least the way a professional journalist might interpret them.

This qualitative study therefore explores this idea of connectivity in the world of collegiate journalism. By observing and interviewing editors and reporters at colleges and university papers throughout Florida, I sought to understand how their relationship with the community around them plays a role in how they go about doing their jobs as newsgatherers.

Chapter II: Considering Connectivity

As noted earlier, there is sparse research on this specific subject and on collegiate journalism in general. However, there is no shortage of literature that relates to broader subjects, including Reader's research on connectivity at large and small newspapers. Also important to consider is research into community connectedness and the sociological concept known as "social capital." In addition, there is important literature to be explored on public journalism, objectivity and journalistic independence, and especially the research that does exist on collegiate journalists and college media consumers.

Reader's concept of "journalistic connectivity" built upon the work of Tichenor, Donohue, and Olien, who looked at how community influenced the press. They found that because small-town journalists were more likely to have myriad interactions with the public as both sources and in social settings, it is almost impossible for them to separate the professional relationship from the personal (Reader, 2006, p. 855).

Reader laid out two premises in his study — "that journalists routinely consider (or try to consider) their audience's desires when deciding 'what's news,'" and that journalists' "perceptions of what their audiences consider acceptable often do not match what those audiences truly believe" (2006, p. 854). In his research he uncovered several themes, including the idea that direct accountability to the community was one of the biggest differences between large and small papers when it came to ethical decision-making. Small paper editors boiled the reason for this down to "community connections,"

and an editor in the study summed it up this way: "It's a lot easier to make hard calls in a big city where you aren't likely to know the people affected" (2006, p. 860).

Reader was careful to note that simply being a small town journalist does not mean there will naturally be stronger ties to community than in bigger markets. Detachment can happen in small or big markets, he said, and journalists at larger papers no doubt have connections to their communities. However, he found fundamental differences between how small and large city journalists operate, and he wrote that, "At larger newspapers, the emphasis seems to be to preserve the reputation of the institution of the newspaper, whereas at smaller newspapers the starting point seems to be to manage journalists' individual connections with their communities" (2006, p. 861). His findings indicated that journalists at smaller papers see themselves as more connected than journalists at larger papers when it comes to ethical issues.

It should be noted that connectivity is most often used to describe technology and even Internet accessibility in how it brings people together through various devices — moving media from "one-to-many, passive proposition to a many-to-many experience premised on social connectivity" (Morrissey, 2007, p. 12). There are similarities between this idea of technological connectivity and interpersonal connectivity, but many differences as well, especially in how it pertains to journalism. When most talk of connectivity in relation to journalism, they often refer to users linking up and communicating with one another, or with press organizations, through the Web and other new media. This is often done through social networking like Facebook and Twitter, online forums, blogging, consumer-generated media, crowdsourcing, and even YouTube (Morrissey, 2007; Niles, 2007).

Many news organizations have begun using many of these new media platforms and others to tap into and take advantage of the popularity of social networks and user-generated content. These are important steps both for news agencies and citizens, and technology has obviously played a huge role in allowing new connections unthinkable before. But the connectivity being discussed in this study is much less about the technology that allows these connections, and much more about the active, face-to-face, hands-on relationships that journalists make use of to develop and build these connections.

Too often the idea of connectivity is resigned to the reaches of new media, as if it can only be achieved through the assistance of technology. It also could be argued that this technology-fed networking is more about the public connecting with journalists, rather than the other way around — journalists connecting with the public. While there is nothing wrong with readers engaging the press, the connectivity discussed in this study is more about journalists actively engaging the community around them in a proactive and deliberate manner.

Understanding Community and the Importance of Relationships

This enters into what Massey (1998) called “community connectedness” — “tuning in and acting on a community's collective concerns to deliver the kind of news that engages people in public life” (p. 395). Some researchers like Stamm (1988) have explored the interdependence between individual and community when it comes to local media, arguing that while media benefit when this relationship is strong, it cannot be

taken for granted. More importantly, media must contribute something to this relationship, as well.

Some have argued that the connection between community and communication is natural (Carey, 1989). In the ritual view of communication, the transmission of a message is not the focus, and instead takes a secondary role to communication as a form of participation, association, as well as shared beliefs within a society or community. Carey contended that news is not information, but "drama" in that it "does not describe the world but portrays an arena of dramatic forces and action; it exists solely in historical time; and it invites our participation on the basis of our assuming, often vicariously, social roles within it" (1989, p. 21).

Carey argued that a narrow-minded approach to communication has put the focus too much on politics, economics, and therapy, but failed to "expand people's powers to learn and exchange ideas and experience" (1989, p. 34) — the heart of community. But by focusing on communication as ritual, Carey called for "recasting our studies of communication," allowing us to build models that will be able to reshape common culture. It is, therefore, important at this point to better understand the sociology of communities, and especially a concept known as "social capital."

"Social capital" was popularized by Putnam (2000) who defined it as the "connections among individuals — social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them" (p. 19). Putnam said that at its core, social capital helps foster social networks that have value for a community — "Just as a screwdriver (physical capital) or a college education (human capital) can increase productivity (both

individual and collective), so too social contacts affect the productivity of individuals and groups” (2000, p. 18).

Social capital refers to the connections between individuals, as well as “the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them” (2000, p. 19). And it is a key element in communities. For instance, while “civic virtue” might be very strong in a community, it would have limited effect if the individuals with that virtue are too isolated. Only through social relations, he argues, can that civic virtue be exercised.

Much of the focus on social capital is in how it benefits communities. Fukuyama (2001) called it critical for the “efficient functioning of modern economies,” as well as the “sine qua non of stable liberal democracy. It constitutes the cultural component of modern societies, which in other respects have been organized since the Enlightenment on the basis of formal institutions, the rule of law and rationality” (p. 7). This covers a wide range of “co-operation” between individuals that runs the gamut from the reciprocity between two friends to Christianity’s doctrines.

But as Putnam (2000) pointed out, social capital does not just benefit the collective. Individuals also share in the spoils — “Social capital can ... be simultaneously a ‘private good’ and a ‘public good.’ Some of the benefit from an investment in social capital goes to bystanders, while some of the benefit rebounds to the immediate interest of the person making the investment” (p. 20). An example of social capital’s individual benefit might be a job seeker who uses networking to find employment.

Portes (1998), in examining the literature behind social capital, noted that there is growing consensus that it “stands for the ability of actors to secure benefits by virtue of membership in social networks or other social structures” (p. 6).

He wrote:

Whereas economic capital is in people's bank accounts and human capital is inside their heads, social capital inheres in the structure of their relationships. To possess social capital, a person must be related to others, and it is those others, not himself, who are the actual source of his or her advantage. (1998, p. 7)

This happens in social, democratic and economic respects, but also can be seen in the exchange of information. As Putnam (2000) pointed out, creating networks that “serve as conduits for the flow of helpful information” (p. 289) can be beneficial both to communities and individuals.

Some researchers have related this idea to journalism, and even younger generations’ shunning of traditional media like newspapers. Mindich (2005), for instance, cited Putnam's research and believes that journalism's ability to support and build community is a powerful capability that cannot be overlooked. "News can unite people in powerful ways and create powerful imaginary communities," he wrote (2005, p. 10). He looked at the abandonment of traditional media by younger demographics and saw it as a generational shift: while 70 percent of older Americans read a newspaper each day, not even 20 percent of younger Americans do the same (p. 3).

He questioned whether a major flaw in journalism is that young people do not feel attached, engaged, or included in the news — that it's not directed toward them, and therefore makes them feel isolated and excluded: "When younger generations no longer imagine themselves as part of a community, they seem themselves as alone, unaffected by others" (2005, p. 103).

This is a strong case to be made for the importance of community, its value to the news process as it concerns a younger demographic, and how news media might need to

embrace community even more, especially as it concerns college-age students and those younger. Mindich and others seem to suggest that there is a cycle here: a news media more heavily invested in community will help to strengthen that community; and a strengthened community will be more interested in news thereby strengthening news media.

Similarities with Public Journalism

Some might note that there are similarities between the idea of connectivity — or engagement, as social capital scholars might call it — and the much-maligned and misunderstood tenets of public journalism. Mindich, in fact, noted this and that many journalists have rejected public journalism (2005, p. 121).

Public journalism — which is also sometimes called civic journalism — gained interest in the early 1990s as journalists and academics worried about societal issues like declines in voter participation and civic participation. Some blamed journalism's approach to news for the disinterest and public disaffection that was being seen (Haas and Steiner, 2002, p. 238). In response, public journalism was seen as an attempt to “enhance civic commitment and participation in democratic processes and to rethink their relationships to their audiences” (Haas and Steiner, p. 239).

Proponents argued that it was time for journalism to break free of its autonomous and independent roots, thereby becoming more active participants in communities. Haas and Steiner wrote that, “instead of conceiving of themselves as providing information to ‘consumers,’ some news organizations tried out various ways to catalyze conversation among ‘citizens’” (2002, p. 239).

Weaver et al. (2007) wrote that public journalism has no unifying theory or definition, nor even a rock solid set of guidelines (p. 145). They pointed to Edmund Lambeth's "neutral definition" of the subject which boils public journalism down to: 1) listening to stories and ideas of citizens while protecting the freedom to choose what to cover; 2) looking at alternative ways of framing stories about community issues; 3) choosing frames that can help stimulate deliberation and understanding of issues by the public; 4) reporting on issues in a way that advances knowledge that can bring about potential solutions; 5) paying attention to communicating well and credibly with the public (p. 144).

We should be clear, though, that there are major differences between connectivity and public journalism. For starters, public journalism is an ideology that calls for journalism to renew and rethink itself, primarily by becoming more participatory, and even transformative, in its relationship with society. Connectivity, on the other hand, is more about the relationships themselves and less about what you are able to accomplish with those relationships in terms of community influence.

Public journalism, it could be said, makes use of connectivity. Because of these ties, it is therefore possible, and valuable, to explore research into public journalism, and in particular how journalists view it. By better understanding this, it gives us something to compare as we look into collegiate journalists' strong connections to community, especially compared to professional journalists.

Weaver et al.'s *The American Journalist in the 21st Century* (2007) is a comprehensive survey of journalists' backgrounds, ethical values and viewpoints. It also covers where journalists stand on elements of public journalism, and they found that most

journalists still stick with a more traditional view of their profession. In fact, of the 15 journalistic roles surveyed, a majority of journalists deemed only two as “extremely important”: getting information to the public quickly and investigating government claims (2007, p. 139). In addition, they found that the “interpretive function” — a combination of providing analysis and interpretation of complex problems, as well as international developments, discussing national policy and investigating claims made by government — was what most journalists saw as the most important role of the profession (p. 141).

Only about 10 percent of respondents felt an affinity toward the “populist mobilizer” function, which is closely linked to the ideals of public journalism. This minority of journalists were “eager to connect with and influence the local community” and were “most likely to accord importance to audience research” (2007, p. 152). When asked about what or who influenced newsworthiness, most journalists pointed to their journalistic training (79 percent) and their supervisors (56 percent) before more community-oriented influencers like sources (43 percent) or audience research (30 percent) (2007, p. 154).

When it comes to putting public journalism into practice, the study found that: only 32 percent felt it was very important for their newsroom to hold a meeting with the public to discuss issues; 37 percent found it very important to conduct polls to get citizen priorities; and 46 percent thought it very important to motivate citizens to participate (2007, p. 175). Although, it should be noted that 46 percent of journalists is no small number, and that while Weaver et al. noted that only a minority supported a populist mobilizer “journalistic belief system,” it has gained some traction over the years (p. 177).

In fact, 69 percent said special efforts to include ordinary citizens as sources was considered very important (p.175), which seems to show some elements of this approach to journalism have received more widespread approval. But those most likely to have civic journalism tendencies generally worked at smaller papers and whose “sense of professionalism is altruistic and strongly connected with his or her audience” (p. 176). This appears to model some of what Reader found about connectivity and ethical differences at large and small papers.

Another useful study by Heider and Poindexter (2005) compared the public’s views of local news and public journalism with the responses from the above-mentioned survey of journalists. They found that while the public agrees with journalists on the importance of traditional journalistic norms like accuracy and unbiased reporting, they do not place the same significance on other norms like serving as a watchdog of powerful people and the government. In fact, about 50 percent of respondents actually ranked several tenets of public journalism (like offering solutions to problems and providing a community forum) just as high (2005, p. 962). Among groups like women, African Americans, Hispanics, and those with less income or education, people actually looked to journalism for help, and for the profession to be a good neighbor. This “neighbor” idea was defined as caring about and understanding the community, spotlighting interesting people and groups, and offering solutions to problems facing the community (2005, p. 960).

Their research found a disconnect between the public’s perception and the journalist’s perception of what news should be, and this disconnect, they theorize, could be responsible for declining trust and interest in the news (2005, p. 963). From this we

might theorize that better connections between collegiate journalists and their community could have the opposite effect, and be partly responsible for the success of college and university newspapers.

Objectivity and Independence vs. Engagement and Connectivity

As Heider and Poindexter showed, journalists might be wise to focus more on community needs and interests as they face an age of dwindling readers and dropping revenues. In fact, there is a fair amount of literature and theory that justifies such connection to community.

St. John (2007) noted that the problems newspapers are facing today often get attributed to bad business models and the rise of electronic media. But he believes that the press' manufactured and self-imposed disconnect from the community at-large is just as responsible for the industry's current state. And he said newspapers continue to resist any kind of re-connect to avoid the appearance of peddling propaganda or serving as activists/advocates for a cause.

St. John's point is a good one, and illuminates something of an irony: journalists use objectivity to stay neutral and unbiased, thereby in their eyes better serving the public. Yet, this detached stance can come across to the public as uncaring, elitist, arrogant, and even biased — the exact effect journalists are trying to avoid. This might account for studies that show the public's view of the press as being lower than ever, especially on measures of trust and credibility (Edmunds, 2007; Carroll, 2005).

St. John called on the media to differentiate the benefits of embracing the tenets of public journalism from concerns such as a rise in propagandistic actions — "Fortress

journalism hampers newspapers' ability to assert significance in the evolving digital age," he said (2007, p. 28). Others agree that the press needs to put people first. Altschull (1996) said that the First Amendment "was not written for the benefit of the press. It was written for the benefit of the people. Under the First Amendment, everybody has the right to be heard" (p. 170).

He wrote:

Journalistic objectivity and detachment may have been fine once upon a time, but that doesn't bring communities together. It may even drive them further apart. The apathy of the public is well known. It is going to grow deeper and deeper if the public continues to see itself as separate and disconnected, uncared for and uncaring. People need to care if they are going to tune in to and read the news. (1996, p. 172)

Christians et al. (1993) made a strong case for applying communitarianism to journalism, which called for "civic transformation" and journalists taking a role in society, not just as independent observers. Many of the ideals of communitarianism, in fact, can be found in the practice of public or civic journalism (Craig, 1996, p. 108). Scholars like Christians et al. (1993) argued that the "central feature of human being is community," and called for a model based on mutuality, a term that defines community "in terms of distinct persons who find fulfillment by living for one another" (p. 72).

They wrote:

Our theory of media ethics proposes to dig a tunnel through the mountain. Instead of Band-aids and antiseptic on the wounds, structural changes are needed in the press's world view, a new occupational norm, and fundamental reforms in the way mass-media institutions hire, involve workers in management decisions, determine their audiences, and engender civic responsibility. Thus we recommend a communitarian model that features the dialogic self, community commitment, civic transformation, and mutuality in organizational culture. (1993, p. 13)

In short, they called for a press that allows all members of a community to be involved in the news process.

Hodges (1986) wrote that the press have four critical functions: political, educational, cultural, and as a bulletin board. On the idea of its educational function, Hodges said this “includes reporting on and promoting discussion of ideas, opinions, and truths toward the end of social refinement of those ideas, opinions, and truths. In this role, the press follows the tradition of the town meeting” (p. 21). He further called for finding better ways to promote public discussion and debate, something he said was the “only viable way of refining and disseminating our thoughts on such matters, and the refinement of thought on such matters is an absolute precondition for wise public policy in a democratic state.” (p. 24)

Lambeth (1992) pointed to studies and surveys of the public that found significant drops in the media’s believability, credibility, fairness, and even independence. To reverse these trends, he argued for a greater understanding of and a better relationship with communities. To build loyal readers and viewers, journalists should work to better meet the story telling needs of the community. But he found that too many journalists were out of touch with the needs of readers and viewers, as well as with the stake that they have in the politics they cover.

Mindich again brought this back to young people by calling for journalists to not only engage this young demographic, but to also give them good reasons why as citizens they should tune back into the news. He suggested a number of steps, one of which being that journalists need to make young people feel part of the discussion — like the news is also for them, and not just an older generation (2005, p. 126).

He wrote: "... if young people are included, and not just b-roll, they will begin to make their way back into the process" (2005, p. 126).

Mindich cited a study by Thomas Patterson that looked at how news stories today use fewer "collective" words like crowd, humanity, congress, and country, while they use more "self-reference" words like I, I'm, me, and mine. The conclusion he makes is that news has begun stressing the individual too much. Instead, he said the goal should be more what its value is to "us," rather than just "me" (2005, p. 108). The truth about journalism, according to Mindich, is that it "leaps across space, giving us a connection with one another, allowing us all to become members of a common expanse, to meet at a common crossroads" (Mindich, 2005, p. 109).

Understanding Collegiate Journalists and College Media Consumers

While there is very little research on collegiate journalists and their connection to the community around them, there have been some studies of how journalism students view elements of a more public or civic-focused journalism. McDevitt et al. (2002) noted the constant journalistic struggle between autonomy and public service, and looked at how college students compare to professional journalists when it comes to supporting the idea of what they termed "civic" journalism — defined as going beyond the "mere reporting of information to act as a catalyst and as a forum for the revitalization of democracy" (p. 87). They found that journalism students tend to be more supportive than professionals of initiatives associated with civic journalism including going beyond reporting to increase participation, sponsoring community meetings, and using polls to help decide coverage. Interestingly, though, was that while students who work on their

campus newspapers generally supported these ideals more than professionals, they were less supportive than journalism students who had no newsroom experience.

In a similar study, Rauch et al. (2003) looked at students in a news writing class to get their attitudes toward civic journalism and found that “students support newspapers' active engagement in communities at a high level that was previously unknown” (p. 184). In addition to support for communitarian values (almost 50 percent approved of this civic activism by papers), they also noted that the idea of objectivity was a “source of conflict” with students. Their study recommended that educators need to help students examine “the friction between press detachment and public participation, as well as explore how news organizations can engage more effectively with their communities” (p. 184).

While research on collegiate journalists is limited, there is plenty on college students and their media habits, which provides us with an interesting snapshot of what readers of college newspapers like, and are looking for, in their news. Interestingly, it is not just entertainment or soft, fluffy pieces. College students are looking for stories relevant to their lives and often will turn to media that are focused on their interests (Shalagheck, 1998; Sherr, 2005; Diddi and LaRose, 2006; Barnhurst and Wartella, 1991).

It is widely known that college-age students don't read traditional newspapers. In fact, a study for The Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy found that only 16 percent of those aged 18-30 said they read the news daily in a newspaper, and most startlingly, half of young adults said they “rarely if ever” read a paper (Patterson, 2007).

Yet, research mentioned above shows that this does not necessarily hold for college newspapers, which are seeing readership increases, or at least steady interest.

Could it be that traditional newspapers just aren't connecting with college students? Or that they aren't providing compelling enough reasons for students to pick them up? (Again, we can't overlook the fact that most college newspapers are handed out for free and this could be significant.) Are college students looking for something different in their media than traditional papers are offering? Research on this demographic seems to say so, and that college students are looking for a sense of inclusion.

Patterson (2007) found that young adults are less attuned to hard news stories, and seem to gravitate to soft news stories because they are "memorable and shareable" (p. 16). He wrote:

The subjects of many hard news stories have a numbing sameness — another act of Congress or another presidential speech — that can block them from memory even when they get heavy coverage. A lack of knowledge, too, can be a barrier to comprehending many hard news stories. Individuals who poorly understand politics or are confused by it can fail to note a hard news story, much less a key fact about it. (p. 16)

This speaks to an issue that other studies about young adults' news habits have found, and that is that these readers want news to be targeted toward their lives and something that they can relate to, and even share.

Barnhurst and Wartella (1991) looked at newspaper reading among college-age students, and specifically why they did and did not read newspapers. While their focus was on finding a correlation between political interests and newspaper reading, their results do shed light on key reasons why young adults don't embrace newspapers. One of their findings had to do with the fact that students often felt "excluded" from the facts and like outsiders to a "closed system of knowledge" that was primarily geared toward adults (p. 202).

They also found that students are critical of newspaper publishers who — thinking that students prefer soft news to hard — add “fluff” and entertainment-based features to try and gain their attention. But this is viewed as merely cosmetic to students, and the study suggests that a new tack is needed for newspapers to improve this age group’s experience with the medium. Newspapers need to study and try to understand this young consumer. If they did, they may find potential readers who want stories that relate to their lives, as well as some help from media in navigating the world around them (Shalagheck, 1998; Sherr, 2005). College students have needs, and they expect media to help them meet these needs.

Shalagheck (1998) found that to make newspaper content more desirable, newspapers need to go further than just providing information to students, and actually help them make decisions. Students were looking for advice from media on health issues, money, politics, and consumer issues, and other issues that impact their lives. Straight reporting didn’t go far enough, she found, and her work begins to lay out concrete evidence that some kind of interaction or engagement by the journalist will be necessary to capture this demographic.

Sherr (2005) looked at a series of focus groups with 18-24 year-olds where they talked about reasons they liked or disliked available news sources, as well as what they would like to see aimed toward them. Answers included: a desire for news that is concise, much more local in focus, not as negative, and not just presented by older, white men. Similar to Shalagheck’s findings, they wanted their news to be relevant to their lives and tailored to their interests. Otherwise, they tune out.

While research is limited, there is also some evidence that a sense of community does play a role in college reading habits, as Collins (2003) showed when he found that a strong relationship between a student and the campus community actually positively impacted readership of college newspapers. He found a correlation, for instance, between how long a student spends on campus and the frequency that they will read the student newspaper. He also found that participating in campus activities also played a role in readership. He shows an important connection between community and the success of a newspaper, and specifically that the more ties a student has to his school — whether that's physical, geographic, or psychological — the more likely they will be to actually read the paper.

This is similar to research done on traditional media (Davidson and Cotter, 1997; Viswanath and Finnegan, 1990) that also found an association between a strong sense of community and newspaper readership. The stronger the community ties, the more likely people will read a newspaper.

Chapter III: Research Methodology and Design

To explore whether connectivity is at work with collegiate journalists, a qualitative research study was conducted using in-depth interviews of 11 college newspaper editors in Florida. Unlike quantitative studies, which concern themselves more with statistics and cause-effect relationships, qualitative studies are exploratory. As Creswell (2003) wrote, qualitative studies are most effective when little has been written or studied on a topic or population. Researchers use these methods to “listen to participants and build an understanding based on their ideas” (p. 30).

Because this topic has seen little research, a qualitative study was the most appropriate approach to take “to understand the complex behavior of members of society without imposing any a priori categorization that may limit the field of inquiry” (Fontana and Frey, 1994, p. 366). Interviews took place between December to February of 2009. Interviews were conducted primarily by phone, except for one in-person interview and one interviewee who asked to respond to questions by e-mail.

The state of Florida provided a virtual microcosm of collegiate newspapers and a wide cross-section of collegiate journalism was represented. To that end, this study included:

- Three editors from three different state universities, one of which is a traditionally African-American school.
- An editor from an independent newspaper at a fourth state university.
- Five editors from five different private colleges/universities in the state.

While four of these colleges/universities have enrollments that range from

1,750 to 5,800 students, one is a major research university with more than 15,300 students and a nationally-known, award-winning newspaper.

- Two editors from state community colleges.

Of those interviewed, two of the editors have graduated within the past year and are now working as professional journalists. This allowed them to give perspective not just on the collegiate newspaper world, but also to provide insight into contrasts with the professional side.

Not only were a variety of different colleges and universities included in the study, but also different circulation sizes, frequencies of publication, funding sources, governing rules, etc. for the newspapers. For instance, some newspapers at private colleges are more closely aligned with the college's administration while others are much more independent with little to no oversight by anyone aside from a faculty adviser. In addition, interviewees included minority students, as well as a good balance between male and female journalists (6 male to 5 female).

Interviewees were upperclassmen (juniors or seniors), as they have more experience in journalism, better knowledge of the college community, and a better understanding of how newspapers work and function. In addition, all were either lead editors, managing editors or news editors for their papers except for three — two of which were the former editors who now work in professional media, and the third who had been his paper's editor, but stepped down his senior year to serve as the paper's online editor.

Detailed notes were taken during all interviews, and most were recorded for later transcribing. A list of questions (see appendix) was used, although interviews often

strayed away from set questions in order to develop a more natural conversation and to allow the interviewees more latitude in discussing issues.

A similar format to Reader's (2006) study of connectivity on ethical situations at large and small newspapers was followed. Participants were asked to describe their communities, what their communities generally thought about their newspaper, and who they thought their paper's strongest supporters and critics were. Readers' purpose for this opening line of questioning was to have a "priming effect" on the participants to get them to think about the role of community throughout the interview (p. 856).

A second set of questions focused on getting at how close the participant felt to the community; whether this connection was viewed as an asset and how it was used in the news process; if it helped in gathering story ideas, knowing what readers were interested in, and if it helped to define what is "newsworthy."

A third set of questions focused on getting the participant's ideas on objectivity and journalistic independence as a way to understand how they viewed journalistic norms highly valued by professional journalists. Further questioning touched on how they avoid bias, and whether they felt a need to side with fellow students over, say, administrators.

Key to qualitative research is interpretation of findings, and Creswell (2003) said it is important to filter information garnered from research through a "personal lens" (p. 182). Steps followed for data analysis and interpretation included:

1. Organizing and preparing the data. This included transcribing interviews, typing up notes and searching for themes or categories that developed throughout the interviews.

2. Reading through all information and reflecting on its meaning. This included searching for general ideas, tone, as well as an impression of the information's credibility, depth, and usefulness.
3. Using coding for detailed analysis. This included organizing the data into "chunks" — themes or categories — by labeling them with a term based on the participants' language.
4. Interpreting the data. This meant answering questions including, what does the data mean? What has the researcher learned? What personal interpretations can be made? How does the data confirm past findings or diverge from them? (2003, p. 191).

Chapter IV: Findings

As 'Students,' An Affinity with Community

One of the most striking findings from this research was how much collegiate journalists referred to themselves as students. In fact, they seemed to describe themselves as much as students as they did journalists. Often they would combine the two as “student journalists,” but the reality is that those interviewed for this study thought of themselves as students first and hold that status in high regard. This is part of their identity — who they are — and they see no reason to either deny it or make it subordinate to, say, being a journalist.

Why would this be interesting or even important? Simply because it might cause some to argue that being a journalist should trump all else. Certainly some would make a case that this affinity with “studenthood” is a misplacing of priorities and a warning sign that so-called student journalists don’t understand the need for journalistic independence and objectivity. Leonard Downie Jr., a former executive editor of the Washington Post, once told the American Journalism Review (Shepard, 1994) that he doesn't vote, doesn't read editorial pages and tries never to form opinions about issues The Post covers. He echoed what many in the profession believe, and what was outlined by journalist Walter Lippmann in the 1920s: that the press should go about its business in a purely detached manner telling stories in a “‘perspective free’ style, not writing from the view of a citizen, but instead from that of a disinterested observer” (St. John, 2007, p.9).

How, they might argue, could students be observers if they felt such a strong attachment to their “citizenry” as students? But this would be missing a very important

point: Collegiate journalists see themselves as students simply because that is what they are, first and foremost. They cannot separate themselves from this fact any more than they can separate themselves from being human, American, male/female, black/white, etc. Some referred to themselves as students of journalism, as if they are studying to become journalists and are merely “apprentices” now. In speaking of themselves as students, it’s simply a reality, and not something they would comprehend as a hindrance or hurdle to practicing journalism — not to mention unethical.

This extended to their thoughts on feeling a part of the community of students on campus, as all said they felt very connected to this community. More importantly, they value these connections both personally and as journalists. One editor remarked: “I think one of things is that you’re by default part of the community you’re covering. You have a connection to the community.”

He went on to say that there is a feeling among collegiate journalists that “this is where I go to school and I have a stake in it.” Another said she saw herself as part of the college community as a student, and not just a journalist who was looking at the scene as an outsider. Two editors at separate private colleges described it in similar ways: “The community you’re covering is your community, too” and “If it bothers us it’s bothering other students.”

But collegiate journalists take these connections one step further, those in this study said. They don’t just identify with or relate to the college community — their “tribe” of students. They also believe these personal connections and relationships benefit them as they go about their jobs as journalists. Over and over again they said these

relationships are important, even critical, to finding and reporting the news — that this gave them something of an “insider advantage.”

Some chalked these connections up to student journalists being able to relate more to the college community. “(College papers) are about as local as you can possibly be,” said an editor who had worked on a paper at a small private college of only 2,400 students. Now working for a small community newspaper in Central Florida, he said he sees similarities between his experiences as a journalist on a small college campus and a journalist in a small, tight-knit town. But he added it’s almost impossible to have the same kind of connections now that he did in college where “you know everyone. You know when something happens who to call.”

Another former editor who is today working with a community daily in Northeast Florida, said even at a large university with 50,000 students, the campus was still a very tight-knit community despite the numerous student groups, races, age groups, etc. Students, he said, are a very similar demographic and collegiate journalists have the advantage of being part of that demographic.

This was echoed by others. One female editor at a private college said as a student she naturally gets to know everybody. As a collegiate journalist she said it is vital to cultivate these relationships in order to keep the flow of tips, ideas, and information coming into the newspaper. “We have our hands wrapped around the community and we know what’s going on with it because it’s so small,” she said.

The smaller size allows them to “hear what’s going on and to sense it ... I can sort of see the college breathing ... as far as what people are talking about and what they’re

not talking about.” A former news intern with a major Florida Public Radio station, she said larger media organizations logistically aren’t able to accomplish this.

Some felt the relatively small size of college campuses (in comparison to much larger cities that professional papers cover) could be part of the reason why collegiate editors are more connected to their communities than professional editors, if that is actually the case. But that said, several editors noted that their campuses have as many students as some mid-size cities, adding that size alone can’t be the only factor at play. As a whole, they said they were willing to embrace their community and use these connections as they went about their newsgathering.

A community college editor added that by being involved in organizations on campus, going to classes or frequenting student hangouts, it keeps them tapped into what might be called the “information network.” In fact, this idea of tapping into some kind of student network and having a kind of insider knowledge came up repeatedly through interviews with students.

Tapping Into the ‘Information Network’

Editors interviewed spoke of college campuses as if they were rich information networks full of sources and stories that they could readily tap thanks to their own membership within these communities. All said there were definite advantages to being members closely-tied to the same community they covered. One likened it to being “embedded” in the school, and more importantly the fabric of the student body — a “ready-made demographic that you’re part of and already know really well.” This gives

journalists a lay of the land, not to mention the ability to find sources, build relationships, develop stories and maybe most importantly, establish trust.

“It’s all about connections,” he continued.

It also helps in allowing them to better understand what is and isn’t newsworthy from a student’s point of view. As an example, he pointed to a story his paper did about a lack of air conditioning in a particular dorm. An outside journalist might not understand why such a story would have any significance or would even be worth covering. But a student journalist who had once been in that dorm when the AC went out or who knew someone in that dorm now would be able to relate to the problem and see that there was a story there to be covered.

“You’re on the pulse of what’s happening on campus because you’re living it,” said another editor. For him a lot of stories came from professors in class who would mention possible story ideas or things they heard happening on campus. “It’s hard to NOT know what’s going on (on campus),” he said. “I never really had people come up to me and say, ‘you need to cover this.’ It’s always just a conversation and then you would look into it.” He called these relationships very natural, and the flow of information easy and casual.

It is also helpful for these editors to be so similar to their readers: “What is important to you is probably going to be important to your readers,” he said.

That differs from the professional world that he is in now where he finds the audience more diversified — tougher to get to know and understand. “You have to kind of think about who the audience is and try to figure out what they would want to read,” he said about the professional paper. On the other hand, in the student world he said he

could count on his own interests modeling pretty closely what his readership would find newsworthy.

Another editor spoke about how they get information more firsthand as student-journalists, as opposed to say an outside journalist who might be covering the same college-related story, but not receive news about it until much later, and then only through official sources or press releases. As students, collegiate journalists often know right away about tuition increases (thanks to college mass e-mails), crimes on campus (many colleges now employ emergency notification systems that send out automatic warnings to students by e-mail and text message), or parking issues. There is less time-delay in receiving news, and less of a filter effect when it comes firsthand, especially through quickly spreading campus gossip and rumor mills. Most said they often check into rumors and gossip they hear on campus to see if it is legitimate information and something they should follow up on.

As for where most stories originate, editors said it was a fairly balanced mix between talking to students or hearing something on campus vs. more official sources like press releases or administrators. “I tell people one of the best sources of stories is just talking to your friends. What are problems or issues they are facing and being affected by,” explained one editor. He said he got a story idea last year about elevator safety issues in buildings on campus from overhearing a conversation outside his political science class.

“A lot of times if I’m sitting there in the student center eating by myself, you can just start listening to people around you,” said another editor, adding that to be an

effective journalist on a college campus you need to know and understand the community “intimately.”

Trust can also be an added benefit, several said, in that students are more willing to feel a connection to student journalists and share information and ideas. “They say, ‘Hey, you’re one of me. We connect. I can trust you,’” remarked one editor.

“It’s very important to be able to relate to the people you’re talking to,” said another, “which I think is also a good thing for college journalists because we’re talking to our friends when we’re interviewing people.”

Several mentioned that diversity on their staffs — not just racially, but with students who are involved in different organizations, majors, sports, fraternities, religious groups, etc. — also brings added benefits. Take for instance a story on fraternities and sororities, said one editor. A couple of students on staff are Greek, but she isn’t, so if she’s working on a story about a fraternity, those other staffers become great sources for background information, contacts within the Greek organizations, or just insight into the story she’s writing.

Another editor also picked up on the fraternity theme saying his own membership in Greek society — which he said is really the center of so many things on campus from what events are happening to actual campus news — helps him regularly get information and tap into what is important to students.

He said he found it critical to have a newspaper staff that was fairly representative of the larger student body, especially when it comes to newsgathering. Being involved, he said, helps them better understand the campus and what’s going on. “It’s pretty important to have that diversity,” he said. “It really helps us in getting the important stories, and in

not getting left out in the dark.” He reported that his biggest gap in coverage this year was not having an athletic team member on his staff. In the past, they always did.

Advocacy, Objectivity and the Quest for Fairness

Another recurring theme that continued to come up in interviews was that these student journalists, and their student newspapers, served as a “voice for the students” or the “voice of the campus.” Several editors mentioned these were either official or unofficial mottos for their papers. Even editors who didn’t bring this up on their own agreed when asked whether they felt their papers were essentially the voice of the student body or the campus.

Said one community college editor: “We’re trying to write stories that affect us because we are students and we are our own readers. We call ourselves the ‘campus voice,’ so we are the voice of the campus.” Another editor put it this way: “Your overall responsibility is to the students. Most students can’t just call up an administrator and get some information. They rely on us.” In that sense, he called student papers a bridge between students and more official bodies on campus. While editors were not asked about this specifically, this saying does closely model a line in the Society of Professional Journalists’ Code of Ethics (1996) that reads, “Give voice to the voiceless; official and unofficial sources of information can be equally valid.” Many collegiate newspapers adhere to the SPJ code of ethics, and many schools have active SPJ chapters on their campuses that draw newspaper editors and reporters.

A community college editor noted that she feels that more than ever students are trying to find a voice on campus issues that affect them. She was unsure when asked

about reasons why that might be, but said students seem more interested in getting involved and finding a way to make their voices heard, including through letters to the editor. She noted the paper is getting more feedback from students and more interest, which she attributed to a need to be heard. This all tied into what she said was ultimately the goal of the paper: “to produce stories that will give students a reason to take some action.” She went the furthest of any journalists interviewed in describing what might be considered a “populist mobilizer” function for the newspaper. Most editors saw their roles as considerably more limited to traditional journalistic roles like disseminating information and serving as a watchdog.

This topic about “voice of the students” generally allowed for a segue way into issues about advocacy, journalistic independence, and objectivity. Editors were asked whether this represented some kind of advocacy for students that might go against the foundations of journalism or one of the pillars of the Society of Professional Journalists’ Code of Ethics: “Distinguish between advocacy and news reporting” (1996). This line of questioning started some of the most intriguing conversations of the sessions, and what sometimes seemed even contradictory statements. All denied that their approaches meant they were advocating for students. The distinction, several said, was that they didn’t take up causes for students, but rather were acting to illuminate or illustrate issues that were of importance to or affecting students.

They openly admitted that issues they cover might also affect them personally — there’s no getting around that. Everything from tuition increases to campus crime to bad food in the cafeteria does touch their lives. But they dismissed the notion that this might

mean they couldn't be unbiased or were therefore advocating for student causes, or even their own.

One editor likened being an advocate to taking sides, which he said is not what college newspapers do. By voice of the students, he said it means that they are serving as the primary source of news for students, a role that they take very seriously. Several said their roles were to be watchdogs for students and to hold people accountable, but not to be advocates by taking sides or pushing causes. Good journalists, they said, don't take sides and know there's a line you cannot cross. "You have to eliminate the obvious conflicts," said another editor.

In this way, they believe they can maintain close connections to the community without compromising a sense of fairness or balance that is key to journalism. In fact, all spoke of the need to stay fair and balanced in their stories, most importantly by allowing all sides of an issue to have their say. "While we are students and we are affected by this stuff as well, we try to keep that in mind," said an editor. "While we know what students are most interested in (on any given story), we're not necessarily going to tell them what they want to hear. We tell them what's happening."

One editor speaking on bias called journalism a responsibility that students recognize and that they stay very aware of as they perform their jobs. Taking sides, he said, is a quick way to ruin their credibility, and that's not something they're willing to compromise. They often have to write stories on issues that also affect them, but they have to put that aside as they interview both sides and try to be as fair as possible. "You can be a part of the college community without taking sides," he said.

Having good relationships doesn't mean they're biased, said another editor, adding that even though the focus of the public university's paper might be students, editors there also understand that faculty and even administrators are also part of their readership. They, too, need to be represented, he said.

One of the editors, who has since graduated and moved on to a professional paper, seemed to struggle with how best to explain it. He started by saying it's important to remain as objective as you can, but it's not easy or entirely possible. "You have to look at issues and always remember where you're coming from," he said. "You're always on the student's side of it, but you have to take yourself out of it. You need to try and find a way to be objective." He then clarified to say the key was actually remaining unbiased as he felt objectivity wasn't really attainable. "You're not trying to take one viewpoint or one side in a story," he said, adding that being part of the community is mainly used in generating stories and figuring out what's newsworthy — not being biased.

Several other editors spoke of what they called the "myth of objectivity" or how it was a noble idea, but not entirely possible either in the collegiate or professional worlds of journalism.

"I don't know how well you can be 100 percent objective as a person," said one. Another seemed to question whether journalists had to live with a certain level of bias when she said: "I don't think there can ever be a journalist who is completely unbiased," adding that the minute you choose one quote over another for a story, you're essentially being biased. But she likened it to paramedics responding to emergencies who have to disconnect certain emotions, feelings or even attachments to the victim in order to do their job properly.

All admitted their close ties to the student body did have a way of causing certain difficulties and problems that they didn't think professional journalists have to deal with on a daily basis. "It can get complicated being so connected," admitted one editor. Another said: "It can be tricky balancing being a student and being a journalist. Conflicts do arise."

But editors interviewed said they find ways to work through them, especially since there is such a passion among collegiate journalists for the job they are doing. "(Collegiate journalists) are very dedicated and more driven ... There's a hunger. You just feel like this is your paper," said one who noted they take their roles very seriously.

Where they do find problems is often with younger writers, said one editor who noted it's critical to train students and be clear early on that stories must be fair and unbiased so problems are kept to a minimum. "It's a mindset for us," he said. He saw better training as the solution to this problem, and that they needed to go over it like they would basic story construction or AP style.

Regardless of the potential problems — which they felt were minimal and preventable — the editors interviewed in this study said that the overall benefits of their close relationships to the college community far outweighed the risks of compromising objectivity and bias. As one editor said:

I think (objectivity can cause problems) if the writer isn't careful, but I think strong relationships with your readers and the community does more good than evil. For example, we have relationships with students who work in Student Government and when they see something corrupt or unethical going on, they come and tell us. We then look into it and do our own research and interviews, but we might not have known about it without someone coming to tell us what they saw or overheard.

She said student journalists being affected by issues the same way other students are is actually an asset that allows them to better know how readers feel and what they're going through. This was similar to the reaction of another editor who said being in the same financial aid lines as other students or being affected by the same university funding cuts helped them to better understand the campus and give them perspective as journalists. They were not merely isolated observers simply getting information from sources, but experiencing what it means to be a student. This understanding, she said, made them more attentive and aware of issues: "They come up and say, 'this is affecting us. You should look into it.' It's our job to dig deeper and find the stories that are affecting students."

Targeting Readers and Becoming 'Studentcentric'

One topic that came up in interviews of collegiate journalists was the significance of reader feedback, and making sure what they produced was targeted toward readers. Most editors agreed that putting their readers' needs and interests first and foremost when trying to determine newsworthiness was critical, and should take precedence even over what they thought as journalists was most newsworthy. One editor had an intriguing point when she said, "In my opinion, if you're putting out a great paper and no one is reading it then you're not very successful."

Echoing what many others expressed, she said:

We write for our audience. We are students first and cover everything going on at our university with that in mind. Overall, I am a strong believer that knowing who you are writing for and having a connection to the things you are covering and the people you are writing for does make you a better journalist because you earn credibility and have a better understanding of how people will react to your writing.

Interviewees were asked about the importance of the readership's interests, and how feedback from readers played a role in what they felt was newsworthy. This was done to try and make some comparisons to Weaver et al.'s findings that professional journalists don't place as high a priority on reader feedback or sources when it comes to determining newsworthiness — 79 percent said they relied most on their journalistic training while 56 percent said they looked to their supervisors. Sources (43 percent) and audience research (30 percent) were obviously much less critical to them, according to the study (2007, p. 154).

While it is difficult to make a direct comparison between a large quantitative study and a much smaller qualitative, it is clear from the interviewees in this research that collegiate journalists believe feedback, sources, connections and casual relationships play a crucial role in how they determine what is and isn't newsworthy. In fact, when it comes strictly to feedback, most said they don't get as much as they might like, or that one of their greatest difficulties is either not having the time or the mechanism to poll, survey or gather more reader feedback. Overall, they felt feedback helped them figure out how to better appeal to their readers. Some mentioned they've used whatever information they could gather, even if it was only anecdotal, to change up coverage, add more photos, try to get more letters to the editor into the paper, or cover issues more in line with reader interests.

Some papers do have occasional reader surveys, most of which are handled by their business offices or business managers, but this was mainly heard from editors at larger papers that had more of a professional management structure and setup. Others

agreed they would like to do surveys like this, and would find them useful, but were unsure how they could do so effectively or even set them up.

This transitioned to collegiate journalists' general beliefs that by being very targeted and focused toward their readership it was helping to boost readership and keep students interested (even if this could only be construed anecdotally or by circulation numbers that were no more precise than noting that newspaper boxes were empty by the time the next issue hit the streets.) Two editors described the ultimate goal for collegiate newspapers in almost identical terms: to be "studentcentric" or "student-centered." The second editor said this meant that the paper, which has won several major awards in the past year, needs to be where students turn when they need information and news about campus — that they would have "the corner on the market."

He was critical of past editors for forgetting that students were the primary audience, and for producing a paper that seemed to better connect with administrators and faculty than with students. That hurt them in readership numbers, he said, and after assuming the lead editor's role, he said he has made it a priority to turn the focus back on students. That has meant listening to students more, adding more student sources and comments to stories, limiting the more official news that comes straight from college administrators, and adding features that look at student interests and needs. "I think a lot of people don't put themselves in the reader's shoes," he said. "I think we do a good job of stopping and thinking about what the reader is interested in."

Knowing the reader better, they believe, does help them be more targeted, and they're unapologetic about it. Several felt that was one of the shortcomings of

professional media — that they're too general, don't know or understand their readership well enough, or produce material that fails to interest or engage readers.

One editor said she isn't able to relate to most professional newspapers, echoing what studies have often found about college students' opinions about news media (Barnhurst and Wartella, 1991; Diddi and LaRose, 2006; Patterson, 2007; Shalagheck, 1998; Sherr, 2005). The broad and general focus of newspapers misses her altogether. "I'm 20, how does that pertain to me?" she asked about front-page stories that have no bearing on her life. College newspapers, she said, know what their readers want and give it to them.

One of the former editors now working at a professional paper said he sees big differences between the collegiate and professional world when it comes to targeting readers and focus: "You have to think a little larger, I would say (about being at the community newspaper). You have to think about how something affects the larger community." On the other hand, at a college paper all he had to worry about was how it affected students who were just like him, making it easier to grasp what people would view as newsworthy and what should be covered. College papers have the luxury of the student demographic, where larger papers have to be more general and varied to reach a wider audience, he said.

An editor at one of the state's public universities, who is also interning with his area metro newspaper, said from his experience he sees relationships between student journalists and the college community as being significantly different than what he sees in the professional world of journalism. At the university, he feels these relationships are seen as a major asset and something to build on. But that's not the case at the professional

paper, he said, although he didn't know if that stemmed from journalists not believing those connections were important or if it was more due to the fact that it's harder in a larger city for a small news staff to be as well connected to the community.

On this he said: "(Professional papers) don't have a good understanding of the readers — what (their readers) want. They just don't have good interaction with them. A (college or university) campus community is a lot smaller than a city. It's much easier to be a part of the community and interact with (your readers at a college)."

Being "studentcentric" also means training younger journalists on the importance of this fact. Editors said they teach their reporters about the need to focus on the reader from story conception to final product. Said one editor:

The first question I always tell writers to ask while they write a story is: Why would students care? Sometimes we tell news that people just need to hear, but answering this question helps us figure out how to present the story.

Chapter V: Conclusion

What Has Been Learned

This study found that collegiate journalists develop strong personal relationships with their readers (the community around them), which often helps them find and develop stories that are relevant to their readership, as well as helps them determine what is newsworthy. This confirms that at these college newspapers, connectivity does play a role in how collegiate journalists practice journalism. Reader (2006) defined connectivity as a concept of how the level of intimacy journalists have with their communities actually influences their jobs. This “level of intimacy” — the relationships and community connections — does appear to play a major role in the work of collegiate journalists interviewed for this study. More importantly, it seems to be more than just an incidental or accidental part of newsgathering. While they may not use the term “connectivity” to describe it, editors interviewed for this study said the building of these connections is highly important and something that they actively try to use to their advantage. The idea of connectivity is embraced as an asset — a leg up in trying to produce highly relevant and engaging journalism. It’s seen as a way to develop stories, to gather feedback, to better understand readers, and to stay on top of what’s happening. From the research it is also apparent that collegiate journalists do rank high the importance of their audience’s needs and interests when it comes to choosing which stories to cover.

In many ways, this finding isn’t revolutionary. Professional journalists use similar connections when managing, and even massaging, regular sources. But those sources are usually of a more official nature and the pool is much smaller. With collegiate journalists

this pool of potential sources is made up of the entire college community — friends, classmates, dormmates, acquaintances, friends of friends, strangers, drinking buddies, faculty members, etc. — all of whom may also be current or potential readers. And there appears to be greater importance placed on getting story ideas and feedback from these community members than from more “official” sources like college administrators. This seems to be the opposite of what studies of professional journalists have found (Weaver et al., 2007). In this way, the relationship with the reader is not as one-way as the professional world, and takes on much more of a two-way relationship between the community and journalists.

On questions of objectivity and independence, it does not appear that collegiate journalists rank these ideals as highly as some professional journalists, and many questioned whether these were even possible or made sense considering their situation. However, the research found that they do place special significance on fairness in news stories and coverage, remaining unbiased and preserving their credibility through ethical standards.

The journalists interviewed for this study do indeed see themselves as part of and closely tied to the college communities they cover. In this way, there seems to be almost a symbiotic relationship at play between journalists and students. This suggests elements of social capital at play. Putnam (2000) explained how the creation of networks in communities helped to create conduits for the flow of information that benefitted both the community as well as individual members of the community. From the findings, it is clear that this is the case.

One interesting point that developed from the research was that those interviewed referred to themselves expressly as students. This is important to note and understand in that it helps to explain how and why they feel so connected to the community. They are not merely journalists who are trying to make inroads into the community, but instead have started out as insiders who are already a part of the community. As such, they are naturally able to tap into the information network and take advantage of it as journalists.

Putnam (2000) defined social capital as “social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them” (p. 19), and from the research gathered here, there is a strong case to be made that collegiate journalists are making use of this social capital on college campuses. They not only identify and relate with students — they ARE students, and could not disconnect themselves from that “tribe” even if they wanted. Instead, they make use of that membership in what appears to be a highly effective way. This also recalls what Carey (1989) wrote about the ritual view of communication in that the actual transmission of messages played second fiddle to the act being a form of participation, association and shared beliefs within a community.

These findings and conclusions may not sit well with some professional journalists who place strong emphasis on independence and detachment from the community around them and who often downplay the importance of taking readers into account when determining newsworthiness. Again, while it is difficult to make accurate comparisons, it is intriguing to note that studies have found professional journalists rely most heavily on themselves when it comes to determining newsworthiness (Weaver et al., 2007), while editors in this study said they relied more heavily on what they felt students

would find most newsworthy. And while reader feedback and sources weren't as highly valued among professionals, collegiate journalists felt this was critical.

The research in this study also seems to support findings by researchers like Rauch et al. (2003) who found that college students generally support many ideas and ideals from public journalism, and in this case "active engagement in communities" (p. 184). This brings to the forefront what some might consider similarities between the theory of connectivity and the always-controversial notion behind public journalism. But this study should not be used as an argument, or even vindication, for public journalism. If we boil public journalism down to 1) re-engaging communities; and 2) acting as catalysts for public debate and action (St. John, 2007), journalists in this study seem only to gravitate toward the first. Public journalism called for a press much more involved in issues, and one of the major complaints against it was that it compromised objectivity and crossed the line into advocacy or even propaganda (St. John, 2007). But, while this study did not specifically address public journalism with collegiate editors, those interviewed were concerned about serving as advocates or overstepping their bounds to take more of an "activist" role, as public journalism has called for. In fact, only one interviewee mentioned her belief that the collegiate press should motivate readers to take action, fitting what Weaver et al. termed "populist mobilizers" (2007, p. 152).

Most did not see that it was their responsibility as journalists to go that far. They felt their job was simply to connect with their readership and provide them with information that they wanted or needed. Collegiate journalists were not nearly as "activist" in their approach as some might assume a strong connection to community might create. This is evidenced by how they spoke of distancing themselves from

advocacy, bias and unfair reporting, which more than likely results from education and training that puts heavy emphasis on these ideals. For instance, most collegiate journalists often define the profession in a way similar to what is laid out in the Society of Professional Journalists' (1996) Code of Ethics, which states "the duty of the journalist is to further those ends by seeking truth and providing a fair and comprehensive account of events and issues."

Where some have worried about a journalist who "organizes the change and then covers it" (Shepard, 1994, p. 34), the notion of connectivity that collegiate journalists seem to practice stops well short. Collegiate journalists do not see themselves as agents of change. In that sense, connectivity shares with public journalism only the building of relationships to expand sources, understand readers better, and open up a larger well of story ideas. Collegiate journalists' first goal does not appear to be civic participation or expanding democracy — at the core, they are simply adhering to journalism's most fundamental role of newsgathering and disseminating information.

But they're doing so by engaging and involving readers in the process, rather than just relying on official sources, which is often alienating to readers of newspapers. As St. John (2007) wrote:

(N)ewspapers can better demonstrate their relevancy to readers when reporters move past customary official and institutional sources and explore third-places where they can receive citizen input on the shaping and framing of stories. The visible result will be stories that relate to most Americans daily lives, rather than stories about celebrity mishaps, spats between local officials or trials about bizarre criminal actions. Stories that transparently reveal citizens' voices and concerns clearly demonstrate that the newspaper's cause is not for a client, funding organization or institutional agenda, but rather to support helping American democracy go well. (p. 29)

Others have made similar points including Kovach and Rosenstiel (2001) who said, “Citizens have become an abstraction, something the press talks about but not to” (p. 27). They argued that in an age where anyone can be their own reporter or commentator by using the Web and blogs, it is more pressing than ever for journalists to move to “two-way journalism” where they act as mediators or forum leaders rather than just lecturers.

In a passage that echoes what many editors interviewed for this study said, Kovach and Rosentiel wrote:

For any assignment, journalists should ask, and audiences be able to detect, the following questions: 1. “Who is the audience for this story?” What different sorts of people have an interest in this subject, however passing? 2. “What do these people need to know about this to make up their own minds on the subject?” These simple questions can make a big difference. They direct coverage toward the citizen—the audience first, away from interest groups, insiders, and other direct participants. They also may lead the journalism to a new set of sources, not found in the old clips, if the current sources the news organization is relying on cannot answer questions citizens need answered.

It isn’t fair to say that professional journalists and editors aren’t following this advice. Nor is it fair to say that professional journalists only choose elite sources over citizens, or that their coverage ignores the general public. In fact, in the past several years numerous newspapers have put an even greater focus on community involvement and their readers, in particular through the use of technology. The advent of crowdsourcing — using a large group of readers to help gather information, news and tips by use of the Web and other electronic media (Niles, 2007) — is just one such example.

But from the findings in this study, it is apparent that collegiate journalists have been following the advice of Kovach and Rosentiel in a more fundamental way, and one that runs much deeper than just through the use of technology. These connections —

attachment to their community that also pays dividends through information — may therefore play an important role in the successes they have experienced throughout the years, and may also suggest new avenues forward for journalists looking to rethink the profession.

Limitations

This study is not without its limitations. First, interviews were conducted only on editors in Florida. While there was diversity in the kinds of newspapers chosen, as well as the actual editors in order to try and model the rest of the country, this study still represents a small sample of editors from only one state which may or may not represent fairly the rest of the country. Florida is a strong journalism state with many colleges and universities that boast strong journalism schools/programs, award-winning publications, and close ties with some of the nation's top newspapers. But this may not be the reality throughout the rest of the country, or the results of this study might be a Florida phenomenon that is not found elsewhere.

Second, qualitative studies are an exploration of a topic — a way to dig into an issue and develop new questions and deeper understandings of a topic. While this research uncovers some very enlightening and intriguing findings, it would be a mistake to assume that this represents conclusive evidence of how all collegiate journalists function, or of major differences between collegiate and professional journalists. The goal of qualitative research in media studies, according to Pauly (1991), is to "render plausible the terms by which groups explain themselves to the world and to clarify the role that mass communication plays in such explanations" (p.7). What this study has

accomplished is to illuminate common practices by numerous editors of college and university papers in Florida. However, much further study is necessary, especially in making true comparisons with professional journalists.

Finally, if connectivity does play a role in collegiate journalism, it would be overreaching to assume that it has had a major role in the success of collegiate newspapers. Further research, especially of why college students read their newspapers, would be needed to make such a connection. Connectivity might play zero role in their success, and it might have more to do with free publications distributed on tight-knit campuses where students would rather grab of all things a newspaper than study or listen to a class lecture.

It should also be noted that while many parallels to public journalism were noted in this study, most interviews only lightly touched on this issue or did not address it at all because so few interviewed had any idea what public journalism even meant. Instead, more general terms or various elements of public journalism were discussed in vague and non-specific ways.

Further Research

This topic is ripe for more study, as there appears to be no other research on it. For that matter, there is very little research on collegiate journalism in general, which is certainly a very rich field. While much is known about professional journalists, most research done on collegiate newspapers concerns censorship issues, First Amendment rights, or journalistic teaching methods on a more basic level. But there is something noteworthy happening in collegiate journalism, and further research may benefit not only

college newspapers across the country, but also professional newspapers looking for answers on how to improve their own fortunes. In addition, the college-age demographic is coveted by newspapers and advertisers, and by better understanding how collegiate journalists have been successful in capturing their readership, professional media might also learn how to capture these same readers as lifelong consumers.

For an industry in peril, it is pressing for researchers to search out any signs of success, either within the traditional newspaper industry or outside of it. Collegiate newspapers might just be one segment of the industry that too little is known about, but that much can be learned from. This study begins to shed some light on not only what differences there might be between collegiate and professional journalists, but also how some of these differences might play a role in the success of college newspapers.

A qualitative study is a good start for an issue that is little understood or researched, but there are numerous additional avenues to study on this topic. Further research should be done to try and better quantify a larger sample of collegiate journalists not just in one state, but throughout the country. It would be interesting to know if the findings in this study are the same or similar to what is happening on college campuses around the country.

Also, and along the same lines, Weaver et al. have produced a comprehensive study of professional journalists. A similar study of collegiate journalists should also allow for a better and more accurate comparison between collegiate and professional journalists on issues discussed in this study, as well as others. Only then would it be clear if there are major differences between the two.

It would also be advantageous to study the readers of college newspapers more. Only then could we begin to better understand why college students continue to pick up these “media dinosaurs” while ignoring larger, professional papers. Such research might begin to shed more light on what is happening on college campuses, why it’s happening, and most importantly, how it might be duplicated in a newspaper industry that finds itself more than ever struggling for survival. It might also help illuminate whether this notion of connectivity is truly responsible for some of collegiate journalism’s successes.

Appendix

Questions for Collegiate Newspaper Editors

- Tell me a little about your newspaper – number of issues a semester, how many copies you print, etc.?
- Describe your college/university.
- Who are the newspaper’s primary readers?
- How does the college community view the paper? Is it pretty well read on campus?
- As a journalist, how connected do you feel to your college community?
- How well do you know your primary readers/audience? How do you get to know them?
- As a newspaper editor, how valuable or important are strong connections/relationships with the college community?
- Do you view your connection to the student body and the college community as an asset as a journalist? Does it give you an advantage? Why or why not?
- Do these relationships with your community play an important role in determining whether a story is newsworthy? How?
- Do you search out the opinions of friends or classmates when determining stories, or their newsworthiness?
- Do you think the role of a college newspaper is to be the “voice of the students”?
- How do you know what your readership wants to read?
- Where do most of your story ideas come from?
- Do the interests of your readers play a part in these decisions?

- How important to you in selecting stories is reader feedback? Personal contacts?

Audience research?

- How do you define objectivity?
- Do you think strong relationships with your readers/the community around you compromises your objectivity or makes you biased?
- Do you feel you're able to stay objective and unbiased even when covering stories that somehow might affect you?
- Do you try to separate yourself in any way from your fellow college students?
- In covering stories, especially controversial that might affect all students including you, is it difficult to stay objective?
- How do you stay objective/unbiased/fair?

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