

“LIFE IS HARDER.” THE PERCEIVED IMPACT OF  
A NEWSPAPER CLOSURE ON COMMUNITY MEMBERS

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In Partial Fulfillment  
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by  
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The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined the thesis entitled

“LIFE IS HARDER:” THE PERCEIVED IMPACT OF  
A NEWSPAPER CLOSURE ON COMMUNITY MEMBERS

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*To Diane, who makes everything possible*

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Abstract

This study presents findings from 18 in-depth interviews with residents of a recent news desert and offers a systematic qualitative investigation of the perceived impact of a newspaper’s closure on community members’ everyday lives and, just as important, their sense of community. This case study, using the psychological theory of sense of community as its theoretical framework, shows a noticeable negative effect on community members’ sense of community, with participants missing celebrated gatherings, suffering from an increased sensation of isolation and diminished pride in the community. In addition, without newspaper reporters stationed in the county, residents function as reporters themselves, laboring to obtain information. Overall, these findings present a picture of life in Caroline County, Virginia, following the *Caroline Progress*’ closure after 99 years of service to the county.

## Chapter 1: Introduction

The *Caroline Progress*' obituary measured less than 300 words, headlined “*Caroline Progress* closes its doors after nearly 100 years,” with this final paragraph: “The first edition of the *Caroline Progress* was published Sept. 5, 1919. The last edition of the weekly was published March 29, 2018.” The story, placed just below the nameplate and the mantra “Providing Community News for Caroline County since 1919,” navigated the history of the newspaper’s ownership, including the most recent purchase by Lakeway Publishers, Inc., in 2007. R. Jack Fishman, the president of Lakeway Publishers, Inc., offered these words: “This was a very difficult decision” and “we greatly appreciate the opportunity to have served the Caroline County community for the past decade.”

In its final Thursday edition, *the Caroline Progress* did not celebrate its 99 years of weekly service to Caroline County. There was no commemorative content, no highlights of its legacy, no fond farewell. There was only the short story, still on [www.carolineprogress.com](http://www.carolineprogress.com), with Fishman saying, “unfortunately, the paper was no longer commercially viable.” Fishman had much more to say elsewhere. On the company’s “From the president” webpage, the person who made the decision to close the *Caroline Progress* just 18 months shy of its centennial anniversary, wrote:

Community journalism is greatly important to communities across our nation; it plays a key role in informing our citizens of the news and the many activities in their communities. It is the major media for our merchants and businesses communicating their values and services to our citizens in small to medium communities. It is critically important in the digital age to have qualified reporters

and editors reporting and analyzing community activities. It is equally important that community newspapers play a vital role in the development of their town's infrastructure and education. In a free enterprise system, newspapers play a vital role and one that is important for the preservation of our freedoms, our communities and our cities (Fishman).

It is appropriate then to ask, what happens to these communities, and the community residents, when the newspaper is not there to provide this "vital role?"

Much scholarship has been dedicated to the overall institution of journalism as the Caroline Progresses of this country continue to shutter, leaving reporters out of work and communities out of touch. It is noteworthy that journalists "emphasize the social harm of diminished news coverage rather than the individual fate of unemployed reporters" (Carlson, 2017, p. 35). There are almost 200 counties in the United States without a newspaper (Abernathy, 2018). Abernathy labels them "news deserts." For this research, these counties will be clarified as "newspaper deserts." In the conclusion to her recent study, Abernathy wrote, "Our sense of community and our trust in democracy at all levels suffer when journalism is lost or diminished" (2018, p. 46).

To better understand the theoretical concept of "sense of community," this study builds on the seminal research of McMillian and Chavis (1986). The duo's definition of a community consisted of four elements — membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs and shared emotional connection (p. 14). If a person cannot attend the annual festival, for example, where does he or she turn for that shared emotional connection? In small-town America, often that is the local newspaper.

Despite the vastness of the small, community newspaper segment, which far outweighs large metro newspapers in title and circulation numbers and, thus, has been labeled the “silent majority” (Radcliffe & Ali, 2017, p. 18), and despite the rapidly increasing number of newspaper deserts across the country, there has been little scholarship dedicated to systematic qualitative research exploring the perceived impact of losing a community newspaper. Specifically, this article, addressing that gap, uses a case study approach, based on Caroline County, Va., and the 99-year-old *Caroline Progress*, and the psychological theory of sense of community as its theoretical framework to garner further insight into this understudied aspect of the struggling journalism industry, the citizens left behind when a newspaper closes.

## **Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework and Literature Review**

The purpose of this section of the study is to examine the theoretical framework used and to review previous relevant literature on the subject. McMillan and Chavis (1986) developed the psychological theory of sense of community, which will be the theoretical framework utilized for this study. “It is clear that sense of community is a powerful force in our culture,” wrote McMillan and Chavis (p. 20). The review of the literature also examines the current state of the newspaper industry, specifically how financial struggles have led to newspaper closures, shrinking newsrooms and dramatically altered roles for the reporters who remain. The specific segment of smaller newspapers is examined further as well. Finally, the literature review explores the relationship between a community and its newspaper and, using examples, demonstrates that research repeatedly has confirmed that there is a strong relationship between psychological sense of community and newspaper readership. The functions of a newspaper, which include democratic functions, personal functions and community functions, also are explored in this section. Finally, within this section, the three research questions, which will serve as the focus of the study, are identified.

### **Sense of Community Theory**

Sarason (1974) first presented the concept of “sense of community.” The Yale University professor defined sense of community as the overarching value of community psychology and said it plays a significant role in self-definition. However, even in his much-cited work, he admitted the concept was difficult to grasp and was not well-suited for science. “You know when you have it and when you don’t,” Sarason (1974, p. 156) wrote. He continued:

It is a phrase which is associated in the minds of many psychologists with a kind of maudlin togetherness, a tear-soaked emotional drappiness that misguided do-gooders seek to experience. And yet there is no psychologist who has any doubt whatsoever about when he is experiencing the presence or absence of the psychological sense of community. ... Sense of community is not a mystery to the person who experiences it. It is a mystery to those who do not experience it but hunger for it (1974, p. 156).

Sarason attempted to define the sense of community's basic characteristics, including the perception of similarity with others and interdependence with others based on giving to or doing for them what one expects in return. He concluded sense of community is "the feeling that one is part of a larger dependable and stable structure" (p. 157). Researchers soon expanded on Sarason's work and began to further explain sense of community. Gusfield (1975) distinguished between two major uses of the term community. One was the geographical view of community, referring to a neighborhood, city, region, etc. The second was the more relational view of community, emphasizing the quality of connection with others without the limitation of location. This refers to communities of interest, including work settings, school settings, clubs, churches, etc.

Twelve years after Sarason's work, McMillian and Chavis (1986) developed the seminal psychological theory of sense of community. They defined sense of community succinctly as "a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together" (p. 9). In more detail, they explained the four elements of their definition as follows:

- Membership: “Feeling of belonging or of sharing a sense of personal relatedness.”
- Influence: “Sense of mattering, of making a difference to the group and of the group mattering to its members.”
- Integration and fulfillment of needs: “The feeling that members’ needs will be met by the resources received through their membership in the group.”
- Shared emotional connection: “The commitment and belief that members have shared and will share history, common places, time together, and similar experiences” (p. 9).

The final element from McMillan and Chavis is explored further, as it will become a larger element to this study. McMillan and Chavis wrote “a shared emotional connection is based, in part, on a shared history. It is not necessary that group members have participated in the history in order to share it, but they must identify with it” (p. 13). McMillan and Chavis offered seven features of shared emotional connection:

- Contact hypothesis: “The more people interact, the more likely they are to become close.”
- Quality of interaction: “The more positive the experience and the relationships, the greater the bond. Success facilitates cohesion.”
- Closure to events: “If the interaction is ambiguous and the community’s tasks are left unresolved, group cohesiveness will be inhibited.”
- Shared valent event hypothesis: “The more important the shared event is to those involved, the greater the community bond.”

- Investment: “Determines the importance to the member of the community’s history and current status.” For example, if a person donates money or time, he or she will be more emotionally involved.
- Effect of honor and humiliation on community members: “Reward or humiliation in the presence of community has a significant impact on attractiveness (or adverseness) of the community to the person.”
- Spiritual bond: “This is present to some degree in all communities. Often the spiritual connection of the community experience is the primary purpose of religious and quasi-religious communities and cults.” (p. 12-13).

In conclusion to their work, McMillan and Chavis noted, “the theoretical framework presented here has the potential for a broad range of applications” (1986, p. 19). Researchers have focused on online graduate program communities (Berry, 2018), online game communities (Chuang, 2015), work communities (Garrett, L. E., Spreitzer, G. M., & Bacevice, P. A., 2017) and CrossFit communities (Blenkarn, 2018) — just to list a small sampling.

An initial lack of empirical measures for sense of community limited the examination of McMillan and Chavis’ theory. In response, the two joined two other scholars and created a measure of sense of community using Brunswik’s (1947) theory of probabilistic functionalism, “which suggests that the characteristics of a phenomenon that is not easily measured can be inferred from a set of judges’ responses to variables associated with that phenomenon” (Mersey, 2009). The research team of Chavis, Hogge, McMillan and Wandersman (1986) created a list of 23 indicators of sense of community, based on the original four elements established by McMillan and Chavis, and are often

credited with developing the sense of community index (SCI). Another measurement that followed was a 12-item measure, rooted in the original sense of community definition by McMillan and Chavis, from Perkins, Florin, Rich, Wandersman and Chavis (1990). The development of these measurements set the stage for extensive use of the sense of community theory. In later study, Chipuer and Pretty (1999) conducted multiple factor analyses across different communities and confirmed the legitimacy of the SCI. “Across communities and across populations, items on the SCI can provide a foundation for scale development that is couched within the McMillan and Chavis model,” Chipuer and Pretty (1999, p. 653) wrote.

### **The State of the Industry**

The United States has had a net loss of 1,779 newspapers since 2004 (Abernathy, 2018). “This net loss takes into account more than 100 dailies that shifted to weekly publication, as well as several dozen new weeklies that were established during that period. In total, 62 dailies and 1,749 weeklies closed or merged with other papers,” explains Abernathy (2018, p. 12). These closures have left 171 of the 3,143 counties in the United States without a newspaper — weekly or daily — with about 3.2 million residents in those counties (Abernathy, 2018). These vast newspapers deserts concern scholars as well as top practitioners. “The gap left by the demise of legitimate local news outlets is being filled by outlets with less journalistic, and more partisan, agendas,” wrote Napoli, Weber, McCullough & Wang (2018, p. 5). *New York Times Executive Editor* Dean Baquet identified the biggest crisis in American journalism as “local news. I don’t think it’s quite understood and accepted” (Warren, 2017).

More than 2,000 counties in the United States do not have a daily newspaper, which means residents in those counties must rely on news outlets in adjacent counties or faraway metro cities (Abernathy, 2018). Those bigger metro news outlets “provide only sporadic coverage of these counties without a daily paper” (Abernathy, 2018, p. 16). Many of the larger newspapers are limiting circulation, no longer delivering to more rural counties. For instance, *The St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, with a circulation of 150,000, distributes to 30 fewer counties (17 fewer counties in Missouri and 13 fewer in Illinois) than it did in 2004, when it had a circulation of almost 300,000. The Wichita Eagle circulates in 10 counties in Kansas, compared to more than 70 counties in 1992 (Abernathy, 2018). The reason for the dramatic pullback in circulation is that most advertisers in the metro newspaper have little interest in reaching consumers in remote communities. “Publishers began to take a hard look at the return on the investment from circulating print copies outside their metro area,” wrote Abernathy (2018, p. 21).

Per the Pew Research Center (2018), the estimated total U.S. daily newspaper circulation (when combining print and digital) in 2017 was 31 million for weekday and 34 million for Sunday. That’s a drop of 11 percent and 10 percent, respectively, from 2016. In addition, the estimated newspaper industry advertising revenue overall for 2017 was \$16.5 billion, a decrease of 10 percent from 2016 (Pew, 2018).

As a result of the continued business struggles, newsroom staff sizes across the country have shrunk. From 2008 to 2017, the decline in newspaper newsroom employees dropped by 45 percent, from about 71,000 workers to 39,000 (Grieco, 2018). Pew (2018), citing data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics’ Occupational Employment Statistics, reported 39,210 people worked as reporters, editors, photographers, or film and video

editors in the newspaper industry in 2017. That was a decline of 15 percent from 2014 and 45 percent from 2004. To make matters worse, the job of “newspaper reporter” was one of the worst, No. 218 out of 220, professions in the American labor force in Career Cast’s most recent ranking (2018). Also, at a national level, only 59 percent of Americans have a “great deal” or “fair amount” of trust in national newspapers (Guess, Nyhan, & Reifler, 2018). The jobs of the journalists who remain in newsrooms have changed dramatically as well, according to a Federal Communications Commission report (Waldman, 2011).

They can describe the landscape, but they have less time to turn over rocks. They can convey what they see before their eyes — often better and faster than ever — but they have less time to discover the stories lurking in the shadows or to unearth the information that powerful institutions want to conceal (Waldman, 2011, p. 13).

### **Functions of a Newspaper**

The industry’s long-trusted watchdog role is one of four democratic functions of newspapers explored by Ali, Radcliffe, Schmidt and Donald (2018). The others are informing, agenda setting and improving civic engagement. The accountability role, especially, has suffered within the industry because of the commitment in time and expenses to execute such stories (McChesney and Nichols, 2010). The Communications Policy Research Network (2012) found eight categories of “critical information needs” within a community, information provided by newspapers. Those needs include emergencies/risks, health/welfare, education, transportation, economic opportunities,

environment, civic information and political information (CPRN, 2012). Through informing communities, newspapers also perform an agenda-setting role.

The importance of the civic engagement role was explored in a study of the *Cincinnati Post* closure (Schulhofer-Wohl & Garrido, 2009). Researchers found in 2008, the year after the closure, fewer candidates ran for office in the Kentucky suburbs reliant on the *Post* coverage, incumbents became more likely to win re-election and voter turnout and campaign spending fell. “Our findings suggest that even a small newspaper — the *Post* sold about 27,000 copies daily in 2007, compared with 200,000 for the *(Cincinnati) Enquirer* — can make local politics more vibrant” (Schulhofer-Wohl & Garrido, 2009, p. 2). Mersey commented on the Schulhofer-Wohl and Garrido report, writing, “While the small sample size and limited time frame make the results tentative, the study nonetheless suggests the troubling consequences of what could be called the fast-and-furious closure trend in the newspaper business” (2010, p. 519).

In addition to democratic functions, newspapers provide what could be identified as personal functions for individual readers and functions for the community overall. Many of these functions were explored by Berelson (1949). His analysis centered on the 17-day 1945 New York newspaper delivery strike and the readers of eight major newspapers who did not get their usual daily newspaper. The headline on the research was “What ‘Missing the Newspaper’ means.” Berelson used a questionnaire to frame interviews with 60 people through rental areas of Manhattan. The uses Berelson listed included:

- For information about and interpretation of public affairs
- As a tool for daily living (weather forecast, etc)

- For respite (comics, etc.)
- For social prestige (allowing readers to feel more informed in social gatherings)
- For social contact (through human interest stories, personal advice columns)

In addition, Berelson reported the habitual nature of newspaper reading. “When you are used to something, you miss it,” one respondent said. Another said, “Something is missing in my life” (p. 126). Fifty years later, Bentley (1998) re-confirmed Berelson’s work. Bentley interviewed 35 newspaper subscribers in Oregon who did not receive the newspaper over a period of two weeks in March 1998. Bentley concluded: “Despite a physical separation of some 2,000 miles and the more dramatic historical distance of five decades, Bernard Berelson could have cited many of the comments received from the rural Oregonians who participated in this study.”

The community functions of a newspaper have been explored at great lengths in academic research. Such community functioning tasks include acting as a champion for the community, acting as the symbolic center of the community, setting the standards and norms of the community and telling the community about its history. “Acting as a local champion is another way local newspapers help fashion, maintain, and celebrate community solidarity and identity,” wrote Radcliffe and Ali (2017). The thought about understanding its history points directly at McMillian and Chavis’ fourth element of sense of community, the shared emotional connection. The sentiment was echoed by Dagger (1997), who wrote a city needs a “memory,” a recollection of events, protagonists and developments that together make up its history. For a bond among residents, civic memory needs to exist. “People who know a city’s local history, even if only to a limited

degree, will feel more involved with it and be inclined sooner to consider themselves part of it” (Dagger, p. 164). The report on the *Humboldt (Kan.) Union* (Smethers, Bressers, Willard, Harvey & Freeland, 2007) found the longer people lived in the community, the more likely they were to agree they relied on the community newspaper. The researchers concluded: “This may be because the longer people lived in the community, the more they learned the *Union* was a good source in many aspects of their lives and became more important to them” (p. 17).

Newspapers are trying to demonstrate they are more than just print and online products (Ali et al., 2018). As an example, the *Daily Coloradoan* created an engagement team with the goal of furthering “our relationship with our readers in a meaningful way” (p. 12). The researchers reported more frequently newspapers are holding events to discuss community concerns, hosting local awards to celebrate the community and opening editorial meetings to the public (2018).

### **What Do Readers Want Most?**

With the democratic, personal and community functions in mind, a fair and important question to ask is, “What do readers most want their newspapers to deliver?” The answer, it seems, is different from what the newspaper staff members want to deliver the community. Poindexter, Heider and McCombs (2006) found 70 percent of journalists stated that traditional journalism’s role of watchdog is extremely important. That compares to 47 percent of the general public. Jeffres and Kumar (2014) confirmed the journalists’ mentality. They surveyed 527 newspaper publishers and editors regarding the importance they place on press functions and roles within a community. The No. 1 role was that of the traditional community watchdog role. Even the Federal Communications

Commission (Waldman, 2011) acknowledged the importance of the “independent watchdog function that the Founding Fathers envisioned for journalism,” reporting that a lack of such content leads “to the kinds of problems that are, not surprisingly, associated with a lack of accountability — more government waste, more local corruption, less effective schools, and other serious community problems” (p. 5).

However, Poindexter et al. (2006) reported what readers wanted most from the local newspaper was that it was a “good neighbor.” The good neighbor role focused on public/civic journalism, “caring about the community, reporting on interesting people and groups, understanding the local community, and offering solutions” (p. 78). Similarly, in case studies in Amsterdam and Rotterdam (Meijer, 2010), citizens expected local journalists to first adopt the role of good neighbors. Interestingly, Poindexter et al. noted, “this good neighbor–watchdog dichotomy may be one of the keys to understanding the reasons behind the public’s increasing disaffection with the press” (2006, p. 85).

In a study of audience and journalistic capital, Vos, Eichholz and Karaliova (2018) discussed this misalignment between readers and journalists as well, noting journalists and members of the public differ greatly in their perceptions of journalistic roles’ importance. The findings again showed journalists value roles such as scrutinizing political and business leaders more than audiences. “We would argue that the misalignment between the two groups is indicative of broader changes regarding the profession’s external legitimacy” (Vos, Eichholz and Karaliova (2018, p. 15).

### **Community Journalism**

As this study focuses on a weekly newspaper, it is appropriate to discuss the small newspaper segment, which includes weekly newspapers, in greater detail. These small

newspapers are often labeled as “community journalism,” first done so by Byerly (1961). While there has been a few influential books on community journalism, including Byerly (1961), Kennedy (1974) and Lauterer (2006), and there has been a recent resurgence in scholarship on community journalism, including multiple publications from each Radcliffe, Ali and Reader, there is an identified need for further research on this small newspaper segment. Many scholars, including Radcliffe and Ali (2017) and Lauterer (2006), use the threshold of 50,000 circulation as a marker for “small newspapers.” In a 2014 extraction of the Editor & Publisher’s searchable database (Radcliffe & Ali, 2017), 6,851 of 7,071 newspapers (daily or weekly) in the United States were small newspapers. This is a “major cohort that we as a community of researchers know very little about,” wrote Radcliffe and Ali (2017, p. 18). They identified this segment as “the silent majority.”

Previous research has compared small newspapers and their metro cousins. Unlike daily newspapers, which rely on subscription revenue, single-copy sales are a major factor for weekly newspapers. “People are making the buying decision every single week, plunking down fifty cents, or seventy-five cents, or even a dollar for a paper,” said Director of the Institute for Rural Journalism and Community Issues (Radcliffe & Ali, 2017, p. 31). Although change “may be coming more slowly,” small newspapers are adjusting to the digital tidal wave in media (Radcliffe & Ali, 2017, p. 31). Sixty-seven percent of community newspapers were on Facebook and 24 percent on Twitter (Holcomb, 2018). “Social media is a vital information lifeline for these communities, or can be,” said Les Zaitz, publisher of the Malheur Enterprise in Vale, Oregon (Radcliffe & Ali, 2017, p. 47). Wrote Radcliffe and Ali (2017, p. 47): “Weekly, small-market

newspapers, like their daily and metro counterparts, understand that audience expectations around the availability of content is shifting.”

Small newspapers have advantages. Wrote Radcliffe, Ali, Donald (2017, p. 59):

The size of small-market newspapers is an asset, not a weakness. Local journalists are physically and attitudinally close to the communities they cover, meaning that they are perhaps less likely than their counterparts at larger outlets to be detached from the hopes, aspirations and experiences of their readers.

More practically speaking, small-market newspapers tell stories untold by any other media organizations and better can support small businesses, whose advertisements are less effective in larger markets and more expensive (Radcliffe, Ali & Donald, 2017).

Some research identified that small newspapers might serve different functions than larger newspapers (Reader, 2006), perhaps explaining why many readers of weekly newspapers also purchase a daily newspaper (Garfrerick, 2010). Weekly newspapers are “like an extended member of the family who tirelessly record the life happenings of relatives, as if in the pages of a cherished family album” (Garfrerick, 2010, p. 152).

Weekly newspapers embrace the community members. Said one respondent to Radcliffe, Ali and Donald: “Get off your high horse and be willing to cover the smallest event from time to time. Gets local names/faces in the paper (and not just the same old ones that are in there every week)” (2017, p. 58). Smaller newspapers also get more names in the paper, sometimes as bylines. “Citizen journalists thrived in weekly newspapers before they were designated as such,” wrote Garfrerick (2010, p. 153).

The biggest difference between small and large newspapers discussed in previous research focused on the previous discussion of good neighbor versus watchdog, with

smaller newspapers more likely to steer toward advocacy journalism or solutions journalism. Jan Schaffer, the Executive Director of the Institute for Interactive Journalism, said a key mission of small newspapers is to “figure out how not just to cover community, but to build it as well. ... The engagement that counts (is) wow, we helped our community fix a problem, do something better. And I think that’s still a skill to be learned.” (Radcliffe & Ali, 2017, p. 51). Said Lauren Gustus, then executive editor at the *Coloradoan* in Fort Collins:

The lens through which we view our work is: How do we contribute to making Fort Collins the place we all want to live? And that doesn’t mean we don’t get critical. We certainly do. Sometimes it’s advocacy and sometimes it’s ‘We have twenty breweries in town. You should try these five this week’ (Radcliffe & Ali, 2017, p. 55).

Ultimately, Lauterer wrote, community journalism offers “extended family-ness” and provides an “affirmation of sense of community” (2006, p. 33).

### **Relationship Between Communities and Newspapers**

As a conclusion to this literature review, it is important to step back and explore the relationship between communities and newspapers. Stamm, Emig and Hesse (1997), citing the work of communications scholars like Park (1929) and Janowitz (1952), wrote “that in addition to interpersonal channels, local media, such as newspapers, are essential to community” (p. 97). In his work on newspaper use and community ties that is often cited today, Stamm (1985) detailed that the relationship between a community and a newspaper exists in two ways: 1) Community ties are a result of newspaper readership, and 2) Newspaper readership is a determinant of community ties. “We can just as easily

imagine a paradigm in which community ties both precede and follow from newspaper use” in a cyclical relationship (Stamm, 1985, p. 8). Research repeatedly has confirmed that there is a strong relationship between psychological sense of community and newspaper readership. Two examples come from research by Davidson and Cotter (1997) and Mersey (2009).

Davidson and Cotter randomly selected 1,007 respondents in two states, using telephone interviews to judge newspaper readership. They conducted three surveys in 1994 with county-wide samples in Arkansas (Baxter County) and North Carolina (Columbus County and Watauga County). The study, using the sense of community index, found respondents who scored higher in psychological sense of community, compared with other respondents, more frequently reported they were very interested in reading about local, state and national news. Those with higher SCI also reported that they read more sections of the newspaper frequently, a pattern confirmed in respondents from two counties who read different newspapers. “This study showed that newspapers are an important source of information to citizens who have a strong psychological sense of community,” wrote Davidson and Cotter (1997, p. 665). Also, reading the newspaper “may influence their sense of community, based on the nature of the information, and it probably deepens their knowledge of people, events, and circumstances that are sometimes important in community affairs” (p. 664). Mersey (2009) examined the relationship between local print news and local online news, in relation to sense of community, using the SCI scale. Mersey used a self-administered mail survey of a sample of 1,250 adults living in Maricopa County, Ariz., the home to the *Arizona Republic* and its website, *azcentral.com*, in the fall of 2006. Mersey found there was a

relationship between print and online readership. A frequent reader of one is more likely to be a frequent reader of the other, and an infrequent reader of one is more likely to be an infrequent reader of the other. Ultimately, Mersey confirmed Stamm and Davidson and Cotter that there was a correlation between sense of community and the print and online readership of the newspaper, noting individuals with a heightened sense of community were regular print newspaper readers, and vice versa.

Previous scholarship on the relationship between community and newspapers has utilized other theoretical framework. For instance, Hess (2015) used the notion of “mediated social capital,” which, she noted, is an extension of political scientist Robert Putnam’s social capital theory from the 1990s. Hess defined mediated social capital as “the power of news media to connect people, both consciously and unconsciously, across various social, economic and cultural spaces and to link people with those in positions of power.” (Hess, 2015, p. 486). Hess wrote that the power comes through bridging, linking and bonding. Bridging centers around the information the newspapers provides that connects readers on a personal level, not necessarily a level focused on civic engagement. Linking connects ordinary citizens with those citizens in positions of power in the community. Linking, in Hess’ definition, includes the practice of advocacy journalism. “Advocacy journalism as a form of linking social capital helps to theorise this in terms of the media’s powerful position and relationship to elites and its ability to use this power to connect people,” wrote Hess (2015, p. 490). Bonding is “the news media’s ability to foster, both consciously and unconsciously, the idea of ‘community,’ ‘close ties’ or ‘psychological bonds’ that audiences have with the ‘places’ and networks the news outlets serve” (Hess, 2015, p. 486). Through bonding, the “local newspaper can ... be

seen to play a deliberate and active role in generating a sense of community” (Hess, 2015, p. 486).

As so often the case, scholarship returns to the root idea of this research, the sense of community. Using the seminal 1986 work of McMillan and Chavis as the theoretical framework, this study explores how the absence of a newspaper plays in the overall sense of community and, specifically, in the fourth element of McMillan’s definition of sense of community — shared emotional connection (1986). Writing of shared emotional connection, McMillan and Chavis concluded it is the “definitive element for true community” (1986, p. 14).

Thus, the three research questions for this research are as follows:

**RQ1:** How do community members perceive the impact of a newspaper’s closing on their overall sense of community?

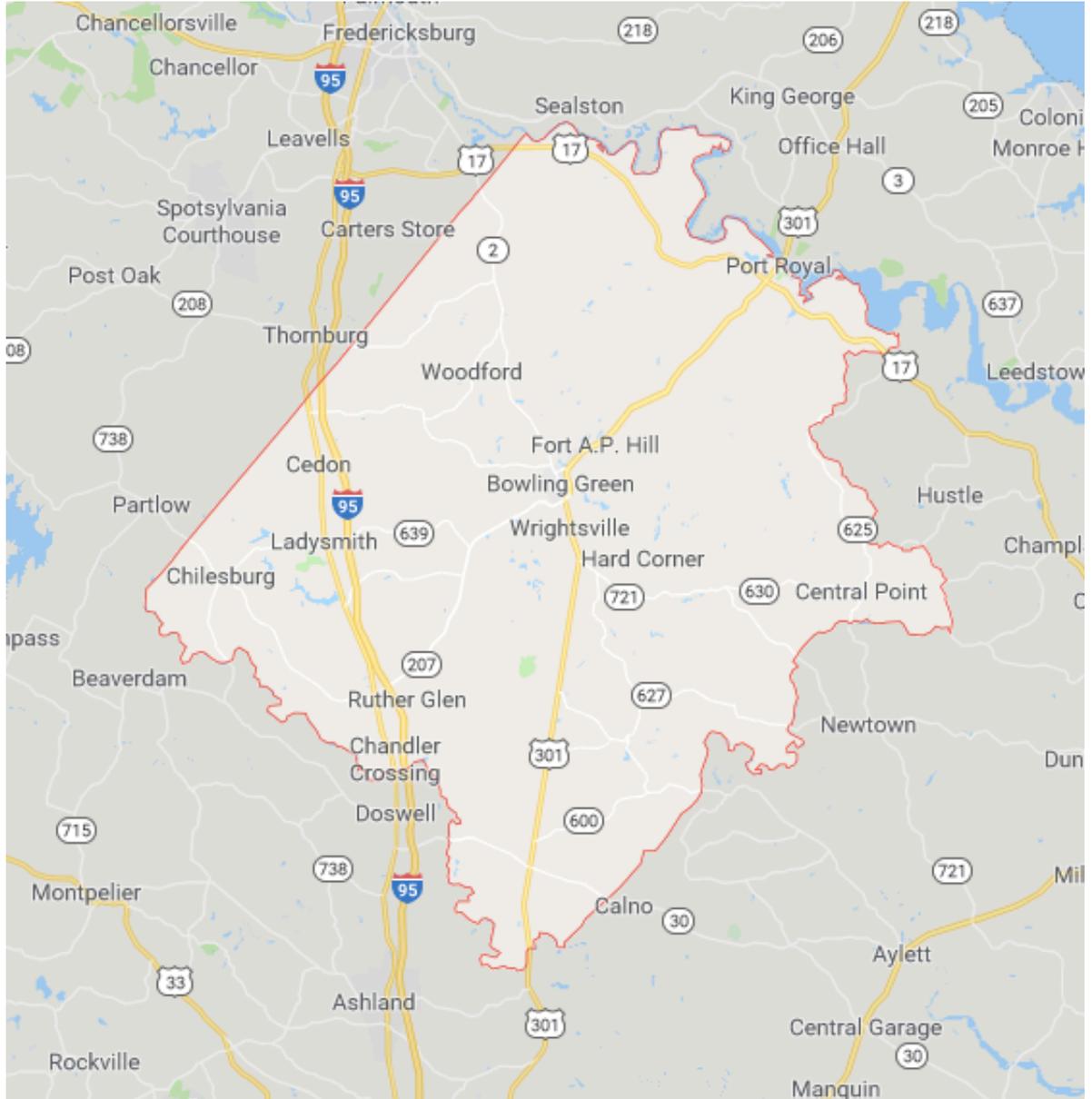
**RQ2:** How do community members perceive the impact of a newspaper’s closing on their shared emotional connection with other community members?

**RQ3:** How do community members perceive the impact of a newspaper’s closure on their everyday lives?

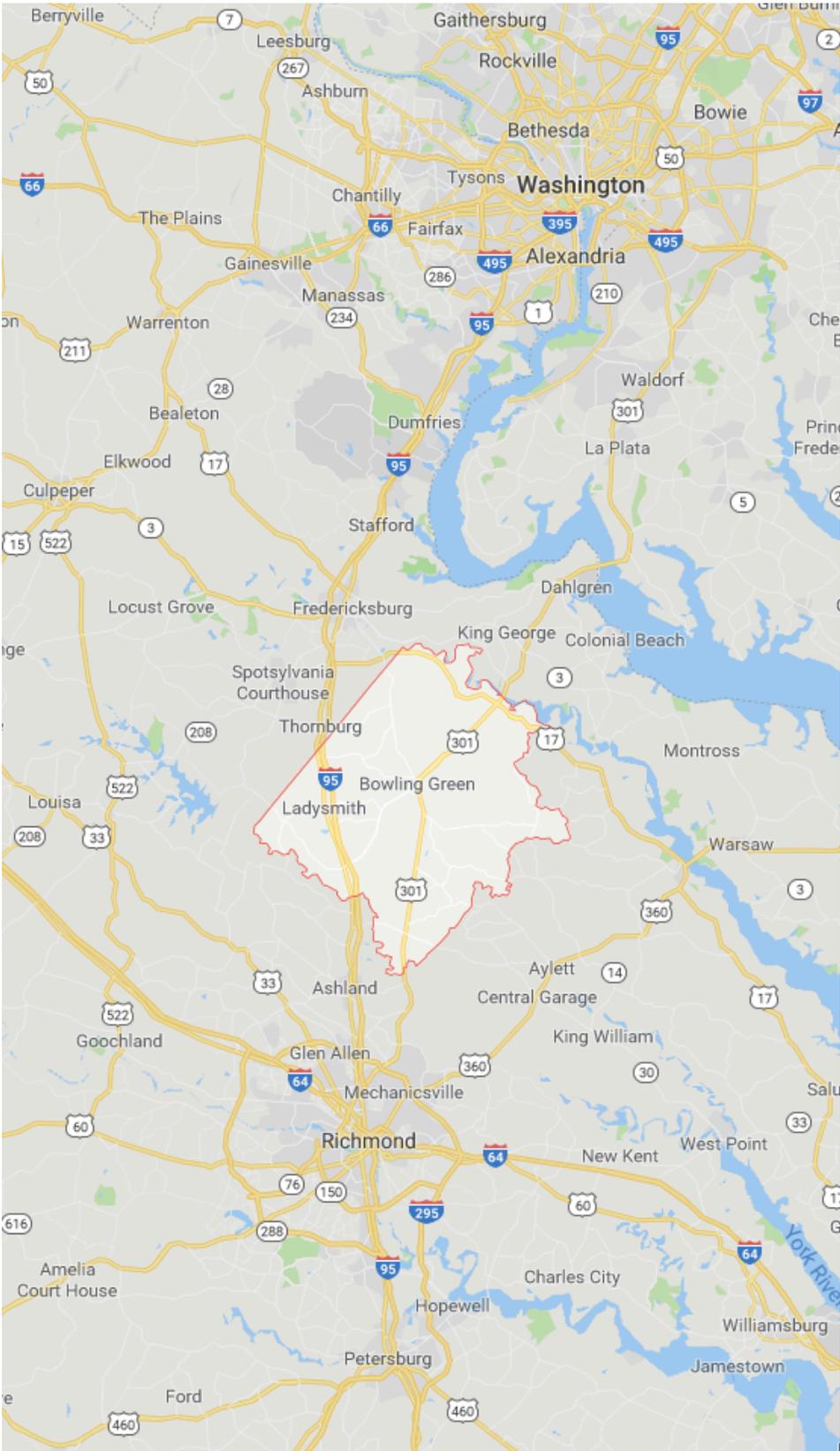
### **Chapter 3: Methods**

To answer the three research questions, this study embarked on a series of 18 in-depth interviews, conducted on five weekend days over a four-week span in January-February 2019, with residents of Caroline County, Va., a county of 30,772 people in July 2017 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). Bowling Green, the county seat and a town of 1,111 people, is situated about 75 miles south of Washington D.C., 20 miles south of Fredericksburg and 40 miles north of Richmond. Port Royal, with 205 people, is the only other incorporated town in Caroline County. People in Caroline County have longer mean travel time to work (35.6 minutes) than the rest of Virginia (28.6). Additionally, Caroline County (54.1 persons per square mile) is much less population dense than the state of Virginia (202.6 persons per square mile) on average. Also, in Caroline County, 66.6 percent of households have internet subscription, compared to 80.0 percent of Virginia. (See maps below of Caroline County and the area surrounding Caroline County).

## Caroline County



**Area surrounding Caroline County**



A critical instance case study approach was adopted for this research to evaluate the perceived impact the closure of a newspaper, in this case the *Caroline Progress*, had on community members' sense of community and their overall everyday lives. Yin (1989, p. 23) defined a case study as research that “investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context” and said the approach was best used to answer “how” and “why” questions. All three of the research questions for this study are “how” questions. In addition, the critical instance case study approach was appropriate for this research, using a specific situation and moment, in this case the closing of the *Caroline Progress*, to highlight a larger societal issue, in this case the struggling news industry (Davey, 1991).

To begin this project, the researcher noted the newspaper deserts in Virginia, identified by Abernathy (2018), and had email exchanges and a phone call with a member of Abernathy's research team in October 2018 to fully understand their findings. Virginia, for instance, is different than most states, as it includes counties and independent cities, which are not included in counties. Abernathy's team identified eight newspaper deserts, six counties and two independent cities, in Virginia.

The selection of the community chosen for this study was based on the timing of its shuttering and its location. The *Caroline Progress* closed in March 2018, leaving Caroline County as the most recent newspaper desert in Virginia. Bowling Green, the county seat of Caroline County, is about two hours from the researcher's home in Charlottesville. This shorter drive allowed trips from Charlottesville to Caroline County five weekend days (three Saturdays, two Sundays) in a four-week span.

## Participant Characteristics

Eighteen semi-structured interviews were conducted for this qualitative research study. Ten females and eight males were interviewed. The age range was from 37 to 86, with a mean age of 68.8. Fifteen of the participants were college graduates. Eight of the participants were natives of Caroline County. The participants were granted anonymity.

Tony Ares agreed to have his real name included. Ares is the founder of the *Virginia Connection*, a publication based in Caroline County that started in July 2018, four months after *the Caroline Progress*' closure. Ares' *Virginia Connection* product was mentioned, unsolicited, in nine participant interviews. Ares was interviewed for this research, but he was not included as a participant and his comments are contained to one section of the results. The researcher had not met, nor heard of, Ares or the *Virginia Connection* until fieldwork.

In fact, before fieldwork, the researcher did not know one person in Caroline County. However, a colleague at the University of Virginia introduced a longtime resident of Caroline County. While that connection did not lead directly to a participant interview, it successfully started the snowball process of connecting with residents. A key event during fieldwork was when the researcher was invited to a quarterly meeting of a community organization. That meeting, in which the researcher was introduced in front of a group of 30 people, led to multiple interviews and connections. Also, at that meeting, the researcher met Ares for the first time. In another effort to recruit participants, the researcher requested and received admission into a private 3,800-member Facebook group, Tell Me Something Good Caroline County. The day before the final visit to Caroline County, the researcher wrote a post on that Facebook group and included the

following: “I am a university graduate student conducting research on Caroline County and the impact of the *Caroline Progress* closure. ... (If) you are interested in discussing the subject with me, please direct message me.” Two individuals responded privately and were later interviewed. Four participant interviews resulted from random initial conversations with me in a public location.

Study participants all subscribed to the *Caroline Progress*, either through home delivery or through their place of business, during its final days. This subset of community members, subscribers, was chosen as they were the most engaged readers and, potentially, could best recognize the impact of the newspaper’s closure on the sense of community. This type of sampling was purposeful homogenous sampling (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007). “If the goal is not to generalize to a population but to obtain insights into a phenomenon, individuals, or events, as will typically be the case in qualitative research, then the researcher purposefully selects individuals, groups, and settings that maximize understanding of the phenomenon” (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007, p. 111). With homogenous sampling, the individuals share similar characteristics or attributes. In this study, they were former newspaper subscribers and members of the same community.

Respondents have been identified as Participant A, Participant B, etc. These identifications are without mention of age, specific residence (town, neighborhood), current or former profession, length of residency in Caroline County or highest education achievement, all data gathered during fieldwork. This decision has been made to ensure the anonymity of the participants. A snowball method was used for participant selection, and many of the participants are acquaintances. Additionally, my presence in the county,

especially in the small town of Bowling Green, drew attention. On the third weekend of visits, for instance, the researcher was greeted at an eatery by the owner, who had not talked with the me in three weeks but greeted me warmly by saying, “Oh, I heard you were coming in town again this weekend.” Also, on multiple occasions during interviews in public places, the interviews were interrupted as participants were greeted by others from the community.

### **Interview Characteristics**

The interviews ranged from 21 to 93 minutes, with an average of 43 minutes. The advantage of in-depth interviews is that they provide more detailed information than other types of data collection, like surveys (Boyce & Neale, 2006). Surveys have been a predominant method of studying newspapers and sense of community theory. A prime example was mentioned in the literature review, in which Smethers, et al., (2007) explored the impact of the *Humboldt (Kan.) Union* closure by distributing 500 surveys to the town’s churches. In addition to gaining more information, in-depth interviews provide a potentially more relaxed and naturalistic setting (Boyce & Neale, 2006).

A semi-structured approach was used, consisting of several key questions about the participants’ perceived impact the *Caroline Progress*’ closure had on the feeling of belonging in the community, connections with other community members and overall day-to-day life in the community. Interviews had a conversational tone, weaving naturally between points of interest. If important topics did not emerge in conversation, the researcher introduced them during the interview. This method allowed a divergence in order to pursue a response in greater detail (Gill, Stewart, Treasure & Chadwick, 2008). This approach also “allows for the discovery or elaboration of information that is

important to participants but may not have previously been thought of as pertinent by the research team” (Gill et al., p. 291). All interviews were conducted in person. Face-to-face interviews can provide information that can be added to oral answers (Opdenakker, 2006). A person’s voice and body language, for instance, provide information not available on surveys or in interviews conducted via phone calls.

Fourteen of the interviews were conducted the first two weekends of fieldwork. During the final few of those 14 interviews, the overall commonalities of the interviews became repetitive and no new themes emerged. It was at that point that theoretical saturation, a key requirement for good descriptive research, was reached (Stebbins, 2001). Stebbins (2001) noted that a smaller sample of 10–12 is often used for community-centered research designs. Initially, the only interview scheduled on the final day of fieldwork was with the *Virginia Connection’s* Tony Ares. Since the researcher was driving to Caroline County, more interviews were conducted. Confirming data saturation, no new themes emerged.

The data from the interviews was analyzed by developing common conceptually robust themes. Analysis was conducted after each weekend of interviews, allowing for use of the constant comparative method. While constant comparative method often is synonymous with Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), others have emphasized the benefits of using constant comparative method outside of Grounded Theory (Fram, 2013). Using constant comparison techniques, themes were compared, collapsed and abstracted to more parsimonious levels of meaning so that commonly shared participants’ perspectives were made understandable. In addition, careful attention was paid to discussing discerning topics and evidence, including aspects in which participants

perceived the newspaper's closure had no impact. Elements of theoretical sampling, "which means that the emerging results direct in which direction to go and what questions to ask in order to saturate each emerging category/concept" (Hallberg, 2006, p. 143) were used as well. Examples in this research include exhaustive explanation and more questions about the perceived impact of the *Virginia Connection's* emergence. To ensure accurate coding of data, interviews were recorded using a digital recorder and transcribed, using Express Scribe software, into a Word document.

### **Research Rigor**

Four criteria by which qualitative research is judged were proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985) — credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability. The categories form the framework for determining the rigor of the research. Credibility is established by stating clearly the procedures by which the study was conducted, the data was analyzed and the conclusions were drawn. Member-checking, additionally, is a form of credibility that was used. Before each interview, it was explained to the participant that he/she was encouraged to edit, add or retract comments up until publication of this project. Seven of the 18 interviewed denied a review of the transcript. The remaining 11 were either emailed or mailed the transcript, and six responded. Four people approved with no changes, one person made small inconsequential edits and one person retracted multiple comments from the transcript.

Dependability is a thorough explanation of the internal process and the way the researcher accounts for changing conditions, and confirmability is the extent to which the characteristics of the data can be confirmed by others who read or review the results (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). An audit of the research process and findings is a major

technique to establish dependability and confirmability. The researcher kept thorough notes on the interviews and, especially, the coding of data using the constant comparative method. Multiple versions of the codebook, following multiple levels of editing and collapsing themes, were kept. Transferability, defined by Lincoln and Guba (1985), is whether or not the research is useful in another situation. It was a focus during this research to provide rich descriptions of the community and the perceived impact of the newspaper's closure, in order for others to understand the general themes and concepts of the issue and to be able to compare the study with others that emerge.

### **Reflexivity**

At this point, a matter of reflexivity, or self-examination, is important. Hand (2003) highlighted the need for reflexivity, writing any assumptions, prejudices and influences of the researcher must be addressed and that true reflexivity offers credibility to the research. Spencer, Ritchie, Lewis and Dillon (2003) identified three components of reflexivity: 1) Demonstrate an awareness of how biases may emerge, 2) Attempt to minimize the impact of the researcher on data collected, 3) Attempt to address bias through systematic and comprehensive analysis, and reflectiveness on the research methods, the decisions made, and the consequent limitations of the study.

I am a native of Pekin, Ill., a small Central Illinois town in which the newspaper is printed five days a week, versus daily in 1997, when I most recently lived in Pekin. I started working as a freelance writer for the *Pekin Daily Times* the day I turned 16 years old. I went to the University of Missouri with the sole intention of graduating with a Bachelor of Journalism. After graduation, I worked full-time in the journalism industry from 2001-2017, in a variety of roles, including reporter, page designer, copy editor,

assistant sports editor, sports editor and regional editor-in-chief. My final newspaper position was that of Central Virginia Regional Editor for Berkshire Hathaway, overseeing all news operations for the daily newspapers in Charlottesville, Waynesboro and Culpeper and the weekly newspaper in Orange, Madison and Greene counties. (The *Culpeper Star-Exponent* was daily when I was regional editor, but it currently prints five days a week). Currently, I am the Freedom of Information Act Officer at the University of Virginia. In addition, I teach, as an adjunct professor, a course on news reporting and news writing at James Madison University.

## Chapter 4: Results

The results of this research are divided into six sections, including one section for each of the three research questions. Those research questions are inter-related and work in concert, with certain overlap emerging across the sections. For instance, RQ2 emphasizes the perceived impact of the newspaper's closure on the participants' shared emotional connection with other community members. Shared emotional connection is one of four components, including membership, influence and integration and fulfillment of needs, to the overall sense of community, which is addressed in RQ1. Aspects of RQ1 and RQ2, especially event notification, affect participants' everyday lives, addressed in RQ3. The final two sections of the results explore the void left by the *Caroline Progress*' closure. The first of those sections is highlighted by a discussion of Facebook and how participants use the social media platform as a replacement for the *Caroline Progress*. The final section focuses on one person, Tony Ares, and his product, *The Virginia Connection*. Ares' reasons for starting *The Virginia Connection*, especially the weekly print product, serve as reinforcement of the participant comments on the perceived impact of the closure of the *Caroline Progress*. Taken as a whole, the results demonstrate, as one participant said, "Life is harder in Caroline County without the *Caroline Progress*."

### Changes in the County

Before venturing into the research questions and addressing the perceived impact of the newspaper's closure on sense of community, the place to begin is an understanding of the participants' thoughts on the individual elements, the newspaper and the community. The participants perceived both to change greatly in the last 10 years,

certainly before the *Caroline Progress*' closure in 2018. The one topic introduced unsolicited by each participant, was the perceived deterioration of the *Caroline Progress* in its final years. The related feelings of abandonment, disappointment and, even, anger toward the *Caroline Progress*, coupled with the changes in the county itself, have unknown effects on participants' thoughts on the perceived impact of the March 2018 closure of the newspaper.

As mentioned previously, much of Caroline County is rural and, in many ways, the same as it was decades ago. This is especially true for the eastern and central portions of the county, which are farther away from Interstate 95. Bowling Green, the county seat in the center of the county, is about 15 minutes away from the interstate and about as close to small-town Americana as one can imagine. This idea, of small-town Bowling Green, was summarized, in a rather humorous way by Participant A:

This town hasn't changed. I tell people, when they haven't been here before, this is how you get here: You get off (Interstate) 95, take (Virginia Route) 207 and go 12 miles. Take a right at the light, and go back 70 years. It just doesn't change.

That's why I like this way of life down here, because it's like it used to be.

However, all participants noted the change in the county's western portion with new residential and commercial areas. This portion of the county, in the unincorporated town of Ladysmith, is very near Interstate 95, which connects residents to bigger cities (and job markets) like Richmond, Fredericksburg and, even, Washington D.C. This flood of new residents and businesses is changing the culture and nature of the county. Said Participant A:

You have a lot of commuters now. They can jump on 95, and away they go to their jobs. They don't have internal history here. Most of them probably don't care. They come home, they go to bed. They get up to go to work. They come home, go to bed. You know, it's a routine. They don't get involved in anything.

Participant B explained how this population change potentially affected *the Caroline Progress* in its final years, as more Caroline County residents read surrounding newspapers, like the Fredericksburg *Free Lance-Star*, the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* or the *Washington Post*.

I think among the older members of our community, who felt a significant tie to the Caroline County community, the importance of the *Caroline Progress* as a vehicle to obtain information about the community itself was very important. Now, the Fredericksburg *Free Lance-Star* also has a substantial circulation in Caroline, even at the height of the circulation of the *Caroline Progress*. With the influx of new residents and commuters, who were not necessarily oriented to Caroline County, but more oriented to the places they worked, where there are larger shopping centers, more things to do and so on, they subscribed to the Fredericksburg paper, which is a more regional paper. And many, too, of course, the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, which has a pretty large state-wide circulation.

Participant B believed that changes in Caroline County's population sparked a change in the county's overall sense of community before the *Caroline Progress*' closure, but Participant B also believed the *Caroline Progress* provided an important role in the overall sense of community of the county.

As that changing occurs, it tends to be a reduction, I think, in a feeling of community. The people who subscribed to the Progress are those that needed to feel a sense of community. They always had that sense. They see that it was kind of drifting away. And the Progress helped them kind of feel secure that there still was some semblance of community here in this area. ... As we talk about community being a group of people feeling the same thing, wanting to do the same things, living in an area together with everybody else, I think the tendency is for that feeling to be reduced as time goes on as the community changes. I think without the *Caroline Progress*, that reduction in sense of community will be increased.

Overall, the participants felt abandoned by the *Caroline Progress* before it actually shuttered. Participants discussed disappointment in content, in the print and digital products, turnover of reporters and editors and the resulting disconnection from readers, and, perhaps most significant, a final change of office location from Bowling Green to Ashland. Participants exhibited sadness when discussing the closure of the *Caroline Progress*, saying it was “a loss of the heart and soul of the community” (Participant C) and “it was the end of an era” (Participant D). However, participants seem to fondly remember the *Caroline Progress* from years or decades ago, not the *Caroline Progress* of 2018. “I miss more of what it used to be than what it had become” (Participant E) and “the paper had been going downhill for quite some time” (Participant D) were central themes. Participant H summarized the participants’ thoughts:

It was really sad when it happened; it’s still sad. People, I don’t know if they feel like it’s made an impact or not, but I know that people miss having a paper. But I

think that people were missing having a paper before the paper went out of business.

The perceived deterioration of the *Caroline Progress*, as well as the newspaper industry overall, led many participants to express feelings of inevitability regarding the *Caroline Progress*' closure, with participants saying "I wasn't surprised when I heard it; I was just hurt" (Participant E) and "I think that many people who were reading the *Caroline Progress* were surprised it lasted as long as it did" (Participant D). Said Participant N:

I was aware of the trend of dailies and had knowledge that other small newspapers had closed. I was also aware of the fact that some of the people ... had a sense that there wasn't a great deal of news any longer in the *Caroline Progress*.

Participants were upset at the size of the print product, the volume of content and quality of content in its final years. "If you could see the front page, in the box, you saw everything," Participant F said. Echoed Participant G: "You could almost flip from the front page to the back page and feel like you haven't seen anything. It just went down to nothing, I have to tell you the sorry truth." Participant H discussed the volume but also focused on one embarrassing and memorable *Caroline Progress* error.

It had gotten to a dire state, where it was a four-page, six-page newspaper with very little relevant content that spoke to what was really happening in Caroline. Often times, the articles that were in the newspaper were sometimes inaccurate — with the wrong titles for events or something. Sometimes long-time community events, such as our Harvest Festival, that has been going on for 30 years, would be called Harvest Day, something like that. Little things like that make you realize, there's a major disconnect between the paper and what's really happening

in this town. ... You can't call Harvest Festival Harvest Day because dozens and dozens and dozens of volunteers in this community make this event happen. And they worked their butts off to make it a successful event. If you call it Harvest Day, it just sends a clear message 'we're not in touch. We don't know what is happening in Caroline County.'

The majority of participant discussions focused on the *Caroline Progress*' print product, but the organization also maintained a website and social media accounts. Some participants weren't aware the newspaper had a Facebook page, and others were upset by the perceived lack of timely updates. "I begrudge the fact that the Progress was not keeping up with their online. The Progress' online would be way out of date, or things would be really hard to find," Participant J said. Said Participant H:

I remember going to their Facebook page and trying to get updated news, or a recap of whatever was printed in the last week, and it was never updated. It was never updated, and their website as well. They really missed the mark there.

A disconnect between the *Caroline Progress* and Caroline County residents was mentioned by multiple participants, with some citing frequent changes in the editor and reporter positions. It was not only that the Caroline County staffers were new, but that they never ingrained fully in the Caroline County culture. Participants said it was well known when reporters or editors did not live in Bowling Green or Caroline County. "They didn't have a true sense of what was happening in town," Participant H said. Participants, however, understood the turnover, realizing young reporters and editors often use short stints at small newspapers, like the *Caroline Progress*, to gain needed experience for positions at larger news media products, which bring added exposure and,

often, income. While there was disappointment with the turnover, each new *Caroline Progress* hire brought optimism. Said Participant H:

I think that there was always a sense of hope that, well, maybe this reporter will really be interested and really buy in to what's happening here in Bowling Green. And the same with the editors. I think there was a lot of hope, maybe this next editor is going to pay attention and make sure to get the dates right.

The most egregious *Caroline Progress* action, the participants said, was the move out of Caroline County. In Fall 2015, the *Caroline Progress* office moved from downtown Bowling Green, in the center of Caroline County, to Ashland, in neighboring Hanover County. The *Caroline Progress* shared an office space with its sister publication, The *Herald-Progress*, in Ashland. "The *Caroline Progress* always had an office in town. ... All of a sudden, the reporters who were assigned to Bowling Green, they are working out of an Ashland office. They're not in touch. They're not there every day," Participant H said. "It's impossible to be local if you're not. That means something to kind of grassroots America," Participant E said. Participant K became angry when discussing the *Caroline Progress*' office move. "I think that really pissed a lot of people off. Don't tell me this is a local paper anymore. Really? You are in Ashland." And, of the eventual closure, Participant K said, "It wasn't like a death. It made you mad before it died, so therefore you couldn't really grieve the death as much." Even though Participant G, a longtime subscriber, continued to get the *Caroline Progress* until its last issue, the move to Ashland was "the last straw" and signaled the end of the *Caroline Progress*, well before its March 2018 shuttering. Said Participant G: "I really haven't missed it that much, I'm sorry to say. It's something that you have been connected with for years, it's a

little empty spot there. I loved the *Caroline Progress*. I wish that it would come back tomorrow — as the *Caroline Progress* that I knew and loved.”

### **Research Question 1**

This section explores the first research question presented, “How do community members perceive the impact of a newspaper’s closing on their overall sense of community?” There are four elements of McMillan and Chavis’ sense of community theory — membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs and shared emotional connection. This section examines the perceived impact the newspaper’s closing had on the participants’ first three elements of sense of community. The fourth element, shared emotional connection, is closely examined in the following section.

**Membership.** A sense of belonging and identification, identified as a critical component of membership by McMillan and Chavis, emphasizes the feeling that one identifies with a community and that one feels connected to the community. Gaining that sense of belonging and identifying with Caroline County, participants say, will be more challenging for future county newcomers. “I think it’s difficult for people coming in now to develop a sense of community,” Participant I said. Participant I described the role the *Caroline Progress* played in moving into Caroline County.

It was important for me when I first came back and for the years that follow in terms of reconciling or getting involved and knowing what was going on in the community, what the issues of concerns were and that kind of thing. . . . So much of what I picked up, I mean, my adaptation to living in this place was greatly facilitated by my weekly copy of the *Caroline Progress*.

Participants said their sense of belonging to Caroline County has changed without the *Caroline Progress*. They now identify more by neighborhood or town, instead of the county overall. “I miss that sense of community and being part of a whole county. I’m more (neighborhood)-centered now. We are sort of cut off over here,” Participant L said.

Said Participant M:

I used to go elsewhere in the county a lot more. But I haven’t done that in a while. I don’t even think about it. Because I’m not seeing anything about anything going on over there in the newspaper. I’ve been sticking to my local community more in the last year.

Participant L said:

Without the *Caroline Progress*, I am more isolated. I think we all are. I think the paper was the one thing that kept us together. Since that’s been gone, there’s more isolation than I even realize. We are missing that connection, I think, of togetherness because it was a county paper.

**Influence.** Influence, the second element of sense of community, comes in many ways, including traditional positions of community leadership (mayor, county board, etc.) and volunteerism. In the case of the *Caroline Progress*, the power of members to influence the community comes in a unique way, by creating content for the product.

The *Caroline Progress* contained numerous stories featuring people of influence in the community. “There’s a certain recognition, a certain influence, that can come from the *Caroline Progress*. Oh, they are serving on this commission,” Participant N said.

Additionally, the *Caroline Progress*, through editorials and news coverage, played a role

in determining the influencers in the community. Volunteerism, through stories and photos, is recognized in the *Caroline Progress* as well. Said Participant C:

My husband and I have tried to instill (to children) a sense of giving back to the community, where you grew up. I think setting examples of being mentors to our young folks, and that being promoted in the paper, I think that may instill a fire in them to maybe give back to their community.

Since the *Caroline Progress*' closure, Participant I has noticed a shrinking number of volunteers within organizations, citing the lack of coverage of volunteer efforts.

It's bound to have an effect. Not that people do these things because they want public exposure, but it ... does reinforce the worthiness of what you have chosen to do, or you have chosen to invest yourself. And what you care about it.

Because the *Caroline Progress* was a small paper with limited resources, it frequently printed content from community members who volunteered without pay. This provided community members influence over the product and influence over the community, shedding light on topics of their interest. The content, most often, recognized positive aspects of the community, like student accomplishments, employee awards, etc.

"It's a lot of work to sit down and write those things, but it's important. And that's why I did little news articles for the *Caroline Progress*," Participant L said. Said Participant O:

I miss the fact that I can't write an article and get it in the paper about something that I enjoy writing about – whatever it is. I enjoyed doing that. ... Not that I had to do it, but I did do it. Because they printed it. It was a happy thing to see. No byline. But they had the article in there. It was a good thing.

It was the same for photography from events. “They would put those in the paper. ... My photographs wouldn’t mean anything to Fredericksburg,” Participant O said of the larger newspaper.

**Integration and fulfillment of needs.** The third element of McMillan and Chavis’ definition of sense of community is integration and fulfillment of needs, which, the authors wrote, “translated into ordinary terms, is reinforcement” (1986, p. 12). This is reinforcement that community members are in the right place and a member of the right community. This, put even another way, is pride in a community. The *Caroline Progress* played a vital role in the participants feeling pride in Caroline County — a role that participants unanimously said has been missed since the newspaper shuttered. Additionally that specific role of the newspaper made participants proud of the *Caroline Progress* itself, with Participant J saying, “It’s odd how this would be, but you feel a sense of ownership — that the *Caroline Progress* is our paper.” Said Participant H:

It provided a great platform for community pride. It’s your local paper. ... This is small-town living, so the newspaper played a huge part because it was our paper. It wasn’t the Fredericksburg paper, it wasn’t the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*. Many residents in Bowling Green probably subscribed to all three. But the *Caroline Progress* was our paper. And for a small town, you take pride in that. Caroline County, we’re not making big news in Fredericksburg or in Richmond. But, it was our little source of our own pride.

Participant K proudly discussed the *Caroline Progress*’ nearly century-long run of business in Caroline County, saying, “99 years! Can you believe something was around

for 99 years. That doesn't happen anymore. Nobody is in business for that long anymore. That's awesome.”

Without the *Caroline Progress*, Participant C said, “we don't have a voice for us now. That's the way I feel without the paper. There's no local voice for us.” That voice provided positive reinforcement, both internally to residents and externally to outsiders, that Caroline County is a good place to live. “I think positives articles you would see in the *Progress* are a confirmation of values. And those values are important. (They reinforce) I made the right choice to move (to Caroline County),” Participant I said. Other participants said the *Caroline Progress* coverage lifted community moral. “The *Progress* published a lot of good things that people do -- something that gives us all a boost,” Participant L said. “It was kind of tooting our own horn,” Participant C said. Participants offered the perception that Caroline County often is positioned in a negative light in other area publications. “A lot of times all we hear ... is the bad stuff that is going on Caroline County. But the *Caroline Progress* was there to promote the good stuff,” Participant C said. Said Participant K:

I know all of the bad stuff about town because I live here, but (positive coverage) makes us look like what we really want our community to be. For a second, it removes all of the negativity. It makes us feel special. ... The *Caroline Progress*, galvanized everyone's mind, ‘Hey, this is Mayberry. My God. This is great.’

## **Research Question 2**

This section explores the second research question presented, “How do community members perceive the impact of a newspaper's closing on their shared emotional connection with other community members?” The shared emotional

connection, defined by McMillan and Chavis, is the “commitment and belief that members have shared and will share history, common places, time together, and similar experiences” (1986, p. 9). Events, thus, are a critical component of shared emotional connection and sense of community, and in small-community life overall. The shared emotional connection, McMillan and Chavis wrote, is strengthened through three main factors: 1) a higher frequency of events and interactions, 2) a positive nature of the event experience and, 3) the importance of the event. Participants said all three factors have been negatively impacted by the loss of the *Caroline Progress*. Without event notifications in the *Caroline Progress*, residents have knowledge of and attend fewer events. Without the coverage of the events in the *Caroline Progress*, the success of events is not celebrated and the importance of the events is negatively affected.

**The Harvest Festival.** The most important annual event in Caroline County is the Harvest Festival in October. The first Harvest Festival was in 1990. The most recent Harvest Festival, in 2018, was the first to occur since the *Caroline Progress*' closure. Participant B explained the significance of the event:

“The Harvest Festival, has been and continues to be, the largest single-day event in Caroline County and probably a much larger area, too. The town of Bowling Green, the census was good to us last time, our population was 1,111. But on the day of the Harvest Festival, there were anywhere from 12-15,000 people walking around Main Street, town square here in Bowling Green. It’s a day that the Caroline County community looked forward to because it might have been the only day out of the year where you meet people you haven’t seen since last

Harvest Festival. We bring in a lot of people from outside of the county, but most of the people are Caroline County residents. It's a great day.

In the edition before the Harvest Festivals, participants said, the *Caroline Progress* would print and insert a guide to the festival, including a map of all of the vendors, food stations, etc. "That went out to get everybody fired up about the Harvest Festival. That guide was something I think everyone looked forward to," Participant K said. "I am sure it impacted people getting revved up about it this year."

Participant H said, "I don't think that the *Caroline Progress* going out of business really had much of an impact on the Harvest Festival." The argument, Participant H made, is that the Harvest Festival has been happening on the third Saturday of October every year for almost 30 years. "People know when it is and when it's happening, and they expect it," Participant H said. However, that was not the case with another research participant, who has lived in the county for almost 10 years and missed out on the 2018 Harvest Festival. Said Participant M:

I forgot about it. I had gone in previous years and really enjoyed it. I can't remember what I was doing that day, but it wasn't important, I'm sure. I would have gone. I would have looked forward to going. But it wasn't in front of me. I didn't see it in the paper.

Participant M, surely, was not the only person in all of Caroline County who simply forgot about the Harvest Festival in 2018. "Over the length of time, it's going to hurt the attendance at the festival," Participant K said. Without the Harvest Festival coverage in the following edition of the *Caroline Progress*, residents might fail to realize what they missed. "It hurts," Participant A said of the lack of post-event coverage. "It hurts some

after its over and the publicity on it. How are you going to publicize something that was successful? You don't have the newspaper."

**Event notifications.** Participant A explained why all events, not just the Harvest Festival, are important in the lives of rural counties like Caroline County. "You have neighbors here that live two miles down the road. Richmond, your neighbor is next to you. So when people get together here, I think it means more. You don't see them that often," Participant A said. Events like Little League tournaments or Boy Scout gatherings are county-wide, bringing people together. "People from that side of the county coming here, we go over there for different things, so you got to know people, you have a closer net because of that," Participant A said. "The paper provided a lot of that information where people could get together for different things."

It's that event notification, already demonstrated previously with a participant missing the Harvest Festival, that is sorely missed without the *Caroline Progress*, participants said. "That's the kind of thing that a local newspaper does. It gives the public the opportunity to see what's out there and what we can participate in," Participant O said. A high school sports game, a fish fry and a charity BBQ were some events that participants said they missed since the newspaper's closure, with each person citing the lack of event notification in the *Caroline Progress* as the reason for the absence. Participant O gave another example:

There's a young group of actors on the western side of the county. They have a theater over there. They put on a dinner theater. We didn't hear about it over here. And it's only, what, 4 or 5 miles away. If we had a newspaper, that would have been in the paper, and we'd all know about it.

The calendar of events was a highlight of every edition of the *Caroline Progress*, and it was robust because the newspaper staff made it easy for community members to add events, participants said. Participant A explained the overall importance of the calendar of events and its role in the shared emotional connection and sense of community of Caroline County members:

People enjoyed that. It was there. Everything. If there was an event, there was news on it. That's what gave a sense of belonging, you knew what was going on and could participate in things. You knew when they were going to have an oyster roast. Those things were advertised in the paper. You had that closeness because you knew what was going on. I think there is a loss of the quality of life, with people not being as close because you don't have the paper.

The *Caroline Progress*' closure has impacted not only the potential attendees of events but also the event organizers. Said Participant L:

We used to have a full page in the paper, advertising what we do. Last July, we didn't have that. We felt like, 'Well, I hope local people know we are doing this.' But you can't really put it in front of them. You can put up a flyer here or there, but it's not the same as knowing that a majority of your people were seeing that in the *Caroline Progress*.

Participant M organized a fundraising event, which took place in a specific neighborhood subdivision but was open to participants across the county and beyond. Participant M blamed the *Caroline Progress*' closure for the disappointing results of the fundraiser.

Participant M explained:

There are probably 25-30 Facebook pages that have to do with Caroline County. I posted on all of them, multiple times. We got very, very little response from anybody beyond our little subdivision, even though we reached out. We were able to raise a good bit of money, but it should have been more. With the newspaper, we would have had press releases, advertising, news coverage. More people would have known. That hurt me, not being able to get the story out the way I would have liked.

That experience, coupled with missing out on the 2018 Harvest Festival, left Participant M worried about the future of events in Caroline County. Said Participant M:

Events can't be promoted properly without a newspaper here. Which means, this year might be even worse. Next year, it might be gone. It's a shame. It's a sad thing. Things have changed because people aren't getting the information. Then they lose interest in it. I see it. It's not just a theory, it's happening.

**History.** When discussing shared emotional connection, McMillan and Chavis emphasized the importance of members sharing history. They noted it was not necessary for members to participate in history, but they must know about it and understand the significance. In the case of Caroline County, if residents do not participate in an event, without the *Caroline Progress*, they may not know about it or understand the significance. "There's not documentation to show that it has happened," Participant O said. Said Participant H: "Are we going to be able to pull up our Facebook memories and hope that's how we documented our history and our experiences? I don't know. That seems sad to me." To many participants, documenting the history of Caroline County was a primary role of the *Caroline Progress*, leaving participants worried and disheartened.

“For small counties like that, it’s gone at that point. Your history is kind of gone,” Participant K said. Said Participant P of the newspaper’s closure: “It was like losing a friend, and it was like losing a recorder of local history.”

### **Research Question 3**

This section explores the third and final research question presented, “How do community members perceive the impact of a newspaper’s closure on their everyday lives?” The three functions of a newspaper – democratic, community and personal – that were examined in the literature review serve as the backdrop to this discussion. A primary democratic function of a newspaper, simply, is to inform its audience. It is a broad notion that includes information, for instance, about town council, new businesses or, even, a new sidewalk in downtown. Participants emphasized citizens have not been as informed about the community since the newspaper’s closing.

**Democratic functions.** Access to information is more difficult without the *Caroline Progress*. Said Participant A:

Everybody doesn’t use a computer. You have to think about where you’re at. We’re in a rural county. There are many areas that you don’t have the internet here. There are a lot of people that don’t use it, can’t have it, can’t get it right now. They need the newspaper. They need it. They need it to live their lives. And it’s not here.

In particular, older citizens, who are not as willing or able to access information online as younger citizens, have been impacted greatly by the closing of the newspaper. “As far as they’re concerned, they don’t have a news source other than what gets printed on the back of their water bill. ... They’re just uninformed,” Participant H said.

The *Caroline Progress* played a critical role in connecting the local government entities to the citizens. Without the newspaper, there is a void for both government officials and citizens. Said one participant, who was involved in local government:

I can remember times when the *Caroline Progress* reporter was the only person in the room besides us. And really felt like ... what are we doing? This is a waste. Nobody is watching us. Sometimes, it just felt like a useless exercise. But it wasn't useless. We had an audience because it was being reported in the *Caroline Progress*. ... Now, you go to any meeting, there's no reporter from anywhere there.

Participant L described frustrations about attending a December county board meeting and the overall concerns resulting from the experience.

I didn't know what was on the agenda – had no idea. At the meeting, they talked about several things in which I didn't know anything about. They said, 'Well, we talked about this at the last meeting.' Well, how was I supposed to know. There's a sense of 'I don't know. What don't I know? And why don't I know?' You start to question yourself. Maybe I should be more involved. But I can't go to every supervisors meeting and sit there two or three hours. Most people can't. Most people don't. You can't go to everything — this meeting and that meeting and this other meeting — to learn about what's going on and what's important. You could. It's open to the public. But you can't do that. We relied on the *Caroline Progress* for that. It kept me informed and let me know what's important to me and to the people in the county.

Participant L further explained being “lucky” to know government officials personally and feel comfortable to contact them to address questions or concerns. “But not everyone is that lucky. I could make a phone call, but not everyone can do that. I understand that. They need the newspaper, and it’s not here.” Similar situations, of spending extra effort to become informed, were described by numerous participants. Without the *Caroline Progress* and its reporters, citizens function as reporters themselves. This theme was brought to light in an interview with Participant J.

Participant J: I make sure I keep an eye out more for things coming across — zoning stuff going on in the county. I more often specifically go to web pages, let’s say the county’s web page or Facebook page — to try and look through to see what announcements have come. So, I have been much more intent and intentionally going to certain places to try to gather information.

Researcher: You were not trained as a journalist.

Participant J: No.

Researcher: You were not trained as a reporter.

Participant J: No.

Researcher: But you are one, in many ways.

Participant J: In a lot of ways, yes. In a lot of ways. Definitely. Have to be. I basically do essentially what a reporter would do — go around and look through the sources and put the whole story together.

“You have to dig around for information, if it’s something you want to know,”

Participant L said. Said Participant M: “You have to go looking for it, and you may or may not find what you are looking for. ... And sometimes you get a lot of false

information, too.” Participant L noted many people likely only put forth the extra effort to seek for information they want to know. “Unless it’s something important to you, you don’t take time to do that. Whereas, if it’s all listed in the paper, you can see it easily.” Participant D said some of the information in the *Caroline Progress* was information you may not like, or may not want to know, but it’s good for you to understand. “As a citizen our job is to be informed. It’s not as easy now,” Participant D said. Without the single, consolidated source of information in the *Caroline Progress*, citizens must search multiple sources. “We’re more connected now than ever before, but it’s harder to get information. In other words, you might have to like 20 different Facebook groups or pages to get the same information that you used to get from one source,” Participant J said. Said Participant O: “If you want to be informed, you can be informed. But it takes a whole lot more on your part to be informed. It’s not easy like it used to be. Life is harder in Caroline County without the *Caroline Progress*.”

Another democratic role of a newspaper is agenda setting. Participants said the *Caroline Progress* performed the role well, informing citizens about what issues to think about and not telling citizens how to think about the issues. Said Participant J:

We always felt like the local paper, the *Caroline Progress*, was not attempting to persuade us. It didn’t have the same agenda that, let’s say, some of these other bigger papers coming out of wherever cities. In those, I’ll look on those and see almost a spin game, this kind of thing. The *Caroline Progress* was a place where it was just more news. It was just this is what happened, he said this, she said that. I think that was a huge value of the local paper. I didn’t feel like I had to go and

fact check those articles that were coming from the Progress. I might have done that with other news sources.

Participant K agreed, saying, “I never felt the *Caroline Progress* was slanted. You got the exact news, and you made your decision, I guess. You don’t have that anymore.”

**Community functions.** An important community function of newspapers is acting as the symbolic center of the community. In this sub-section, the participants describe the impact of the *Caroline Progress*’ absence in terms of acting as an advertising vehicle for the community. Said Participant A:

I don’t know that people appreciate what the newspaper really did for a locality. Subscribers who read it, they benefited. The businesses benefited. Everybody benefited. ... The advertisements for the businesses, you knew what was on sale, you knew where to go. Now, everything is advertised for Fredericksburg. I’ll just say Sears, and Kohl’s and Targets and Wal-Mart. We don’t have those here. So, people have to go to Fredericksburg. If we had a newspaper here that was advertising more local things, maybe people would shop local. And you see some vacant buildings, on Main Street, and that’s why.

The notion that the *Caroline Progress*’ closure led to other businesses shuttering might be extreme, but the newspaper’s closure, taking with it advertising exposure, has impacted businesses in some degree. Said one participant, a local business owner:

I think advertising for local businesses was great in the *Caroline Progress*. For me, it was the only reasonable place for me to advertise. It was the most targeted place I could put money that made any sense at all. For us small businesses, it’s a

void. I don't do any advertising anymore. I used to in the *Caroline Progress*. But I don't do any newspaper advertising.

Said a different participant, also a business owner:

The effectiveness of advertising is always a question. What touch or what piece did the trick? But, in a town like this, that was THE paper, so being that we have a regular presence on the front page often, on the top or bottom banner, hey there's a reinforcement. We're still here, we're still working, we'll work for you. ... We miss that.

Advertising in area regional markets is not effective targeting and also is more expensive.

Said Participant A:

Even up to when it closed you had a lot of local businesses that advertised in there. It was much cheaper here. Now if they want to advertise, which a lot of them don't, they have to advertise in Fredericksburg. But it gets lost in the paper in Fredericksburg. Who are they going to pull from Fredericksburg to come down here? To shop? So, if they did, the cost is probably three times as high advertising in Fredericksburg. ... So the businesses can't advertise locally because they don't have anything to advertise in.

While not emphasized as much by participants, it's important to note the added cost is the same for other announcements like obituaries, births and weddings.

Local businesses miss, not only on the paid advertisements, but the free advertisements. Said a participant and businessman: "We would ask them to do an article on something. All we were doing was asking them to not charge us for an ad. It was the best kind of ad because it was journalism. It was legitimate. That was important." This

was especially important for start-up businesses. “Every new business had a little article and a picture in the *Caroline Progress*. They definitely lose out,” Participant B said.

Participant L shared frustrations of missing out on a new business:

Recently, I heard two of my friends at church talking about a new thrift shop that opened and about something they bought and how wonderful it was. And I’m saying, ‘Where is that? I never heard we got a new thrift shop in the county.’ I missed that because we are missing the paper. They would have had a picture from the grand opening. That kind of thing was always in the local paper. People standing there, ribbon-cuttings, all of those kinds of things. We don’t have as many new businesses anymore. We are more limited. Therefore, when something does open, it really is good to know about. That’s why I was so concerned I didn’t know about the thrift store.

**Personal functions.** The *Caroline Progress* performed personal functions, offering social contact and conversation topics and, perhaps most important to longtime subscribers, fulfilling habitual behavior. Said Participant H:

In Caroline, being a small town, people would read the Progress and the Progress would serve as this kind of conversation piece amongst folks at the local coffee shop or the local burger joint or whatever. People would read something in the *Caroline Progress* and they’d talk about it. So, this older generation, I think, is missing out a little bit on, I hate to say, gossip, but we can say community camaraderie, or whatever that is. But they miss kind of having those conversations with one another about what’s going on in town because we just simply don’t have access to that information.

Participant L described the *Caroline Progress* as a “people-oriented paper” and said “I miss the connection with the people that you got through the paper. ... You feel like you know these people. Even if you don’t.” Participant I agreed, saying that the sense of social connection to people “is gone.” Said Participant G: “You felt that you were reading things about friends. ... I miss the intimacy of the local stuff and local people that I read in the paper.”

The *Caroline Progress* also fit into readers’ schedule, at their convenience. Said Participant M:

When you get the newspaper, it’s going to be there on the coffee table all week. You might pick it up, from time to time. When I get something on email or Facebook, I look at it, and it’s gone. I don’t go back and refer to it again, even if I save it in a file, which I do quite often. But I never go back. But when I have a newspaper, it’s there when I have time.

To Participant L, Thursdays were memorable, as the *Caroline Progress* was delivered to the house on the same day week after week, year after year. “It’s the thing you looked forward to on Thursday. It was the mentality of, Thursday. That’s when the *Caroline Progress* came. That used to be special. I miss that. It’s like something is missing from my life,” Participant L said.

### **Filling the Void**

This section explores the capacity to which the perceived void, created when the *Caroline Progress* closed down in March 2018, has been filled in Caroline County. Participants said citizens have used newer means (notably Facebook) and older means (post office flyers, phone calls, conversation) to communicate news and information.

Participants hoped other media outlets would give more attention to Caroline County, but they said that has not been the case.

**Facebook.** When the *Caroline Progress* shuttered, many participants turned to the omnipresent social media platform Facebook. Participant E, for instance, joined Facebook as a result of the *Caroline Progress*' closure. "Without the paper, everybody, of course, turns to Facebook," Participant J said. "There is some stuff being posted on Facebook. That's really about it, I guess. There's no other place," Participant M said. Said Participant K: "I guess Facebook is filling the void. It's the only thing that can fill the void of the *Caroline Progress*. It's not the same." The Facebook option, however, is not as easy for some. "Of course, people of my age, we're not that handy with Facebook and the internet. With the paper out of business, we're the ones who are left out in the cold," Participant B said.

Private groups dedicated to the interests of Caroline County have sprouted on Facebook, and, to one participant, are doing an adequate job of replacing the *Caroline Progress*. Said Participant H:

Now you see like private groups coming up like 'We the Towns People of Bowling Green' and 'Tell Me Something Good Caroline County,' and this is where people brag about each other, give appreciation to strong community volunteers and civic organizations and this is where the recognition is happening now. A decade ago and earlier, the paper was that tool. ... I think there was value then in print media, print news, but today I think people have it right at their fingertips and can get some of the same gratification.

Participant J said the private groups have become popular because of the need for reinforcement of community values. “Tell Me Something Good Caroline County,” for instance, combats perceived negative attention, often from other regional media outlets, placed on Caroline County. “Someone felt, hey, we need something where we can actually talk about some positive things, too. So someone literally called it ‘Tell Me Something Good,’ ” Participant J said.

Participant J, though, sees a negative side of the private groups, and Facebook overall, especially when compared to the *Caroline Progress*. Said Participant J:

I am a member of some of these groups, but the groups have rules. And I think that is something that is different from the paper versus these groups. A group administrator, if you want to share a post or want to say something, can delete it. It’s maybe one person or two, and they moderate the voice if you will. And so, having a paper, the community at large is not moderating that voice. Journalists can go and write an article and it can be published, so basically things that need to be said can be said, too.

Participant J, and other participants, meanwhile, lament there is no content control in individual Facebook pages. “There’s no checks and balances there. There’s no editor, there’s no code of conduct let’s say, that I am going to adhere to,” Participant J said. Said Participant M of Facebook content: “It depends on who is writing the post. It’s a lot of hearsay.” Said Participant K:

I feel like you have to really read it good because there’s bias, slant and negativity. Maybe I know the author. Maybe I don’t. Maybe I’ve heard of the author. Maybe I haven’t. I felt like the *Caroline Progress*, just about its whole

time, had some real strong standards about what they were going to say and not say. I don't feel that anyway anymore. ... I hate the comments. Nobody could fire off a comment (immediately) about an article in the *Caroline Progress*. Maybe they could wait a week and cool down and decide not to send a letter to the editor or something. Everybody who read the paper was thinking things, but they couldn't put it out there. Now, the negative comments are everywhere.

**Other local means.** As mentioned previously, getting information to some people, especially elder citizens, can be a challenge without the *Caroline Progress*. "There's some organizations that I am in that some of the people do not have email. And you know, some people thinking, well, everybody ought to have email, everybody doesn't. I've been the one that's made the (phone) calls," Participant D said. Participant O described another way Caroline County residents are spreading information, harkening back to decades of old.

In the window of the Post Office. That's where people are posting things. They run it off on their computer and they put it up. We do that with our oyster roast at church. We do it with our BBQs at church. We put it up. Before, we always put it in the paper. Now, it's the front window. It's filled with advertisements. It wasn't always like that. The folks at the post office used to gripe. I haven't heard any gripes at all in the last six months. I do not know if they are just OK with it now, or if it's just since the newspaper is not there, they are allowing it. I can't answer that. But I'm glad.

**Other media outlets.** Participants said that regional media outlets, from newspapers to radio stations to TV stations, have not taken advantage of the *Caroline Progress*' closure and given more attention to the county. Said Participant M:

The TV stations and other newspapers are in large-market areas. They have no interest in what happens here in Caroline County. It's a small area, with not a lot of population and not a lot going on. But it's important to us.

As for radio stations, Participant B said "if you could pay for it, they were very friendly. ... You write a nice check, they're very happy to talk with you and see what special deals they can arrange and so on."

Getting the attention of media members, in hopes of covering an event of interest, is more difficult without the reporters based in Caroline County. Said Participant B:

Other (regional) reporters, you had to ask them to come here, or call them if they were available, if not, well, you missed out. But the reporters for the Progress were here. That's a difference between a community-oriented paper and a more regional paper in that generally, those community reporters are available. And their concern is with the Caroline County community, so they care about getting this information to get it out to the public.

### **The Virginia Connection**

The final section of results explores one Caroline County resident who is attempting to fill the perceived void since the *Caroline Progress*' closure, Tony Ares. This section is predominately based off an 80-minute interview between the researcher and Ares, conducted on the morning of Saturday, Feb. 16, 2019, at the Caroline County

Public Library. Every quotation and every fact about Ares and his business are sourced from that interview.

**Tony Ares and His Mission.** Tony Ares, 46 years old at the time of the interview, is an Army veteran and Fayetteville, N.C., native. He moved to Caroline County in 2004, though he was not initially an active resident of the county. Ares is a pastor at a non-denominational church outside Caroline County and in the hometown area of his wife. Ares also commuted to work outside of the county as a defense contractor. The work was unfulfilling. “I worked for 10 years in a job where I was always constantly trying to find value,” he said. Unhappy at work, Ares said he left his job in September 2017 and began searching for another opportunity. Ares said he “had already kind of gotten an entrepreneurial bug,” before leaving his position, but in the time after, the desire to “provide value through products to customers” grew stronger.

In March 2018, the *Caroline Progress* closed. “But I didn’t hear about it until May,” Ares said. “That’s how disconnected I was.” Ares said, at the time, he did not know, nor care, about what was going on outside his close area in Caroline County. That was much of the reason Ares was not a subscriber to the *Caroline Progress*. “I was not connected to the county,” he said. “I was the person that I am trying to reach now.”

When Ares understood the county newspaper closed, he said he felt there was a renewed need to connect the disconnected people like him. This is at the heart of previous discussions in this research about an erosion of an overall Caroline County sense of community and the shared emotional connection between residents. Ares, especially, observed the divide between the western and eastern portions of the county and the increasing sense of isolationism in the county. When asked, “Do you feel in any way that

it's your job to bring them together," Ares replied: "Absolutely. That's why we called it the Virginia Connection."

In July 2018, Ares, with the help of his wife, launched the *Virginia Connection*, with a website and social media presence. Said Ares of the organization's mission:

My hope, my dream is to awaken the western side of the county and then to bring them into this sense of culture and community that eastern side of the county already has. ... The money is on the western side of the county, but they're not connected to community. If they would connect to community and if they would realize that they have something beautiful here, then their influence would pull the eastern side of the county along and I see a beautiful merger. And the reason why I say it's a beautiful merger is, I'm the prototype. I now love the eastern side of the county.

Ares had no experience in journalism before launching the product. His wife understood some of the technology in the background, especially with web design and social media promotion. "The way I look at myself is, I'm not a journalist, I'm an entrepreneur," Ares said. He later expounded:

As other entrepreneurs lay out, they say you have to have a need and you have to have a particular skill set. When the need meets the skill set, that's when you have a business. A need. A skill set. And an idea. *Caroline Progress* goes out of business. At first, I said, I don't know anything about journalism. I don't know what I'm doing. But my wife knows websites and I have been working in the community in some way since 1997 or so in a ministerial capacity. I saw a need with the *Caroline*

*Progress* going out of business, I saw we had some skills that might be able to crossover and an idea.

Without the *Caroline Progress*, Ares identified the need for connection, the need for hyper-local information and, specifically, the need for event notifications. Ares, like participants in previous sections, said events play a critical role in bringing together members of the community. A unified event calendar, missing since the *Caroline Progress*' closure, has been a top priority for Ares' mission. Said Ares:

My wife is very meticulous with it. The problem with it is there's a school calendar, there's a board of supervisor calendar, then there are church calendars. So my wife tries to take all of those and she puts them all together in a week forecast. ...

Having that one place, is what we aspire to do, but it's just getting that all in one place and then educating the public that we are the central location. It's challenging.

Ares set out to keep the content hyperlocal on Caroline County and keep the costs down by "not having all of the extras that a newspaper would have." One of the "extras" in the beginning of the venture was a print product. Ares drew revenue from online advertisements and digital subscriptions and wanted to use the first three months to explore the viability of the idea. After three months, he understood "the numbers weren't there," but he had fallen in love with the idea.

Getting out in the community, meeting the people, covering the stories. ... People appreciating you're in the fight, you're trying to tell their story, even though you don't have a huge platform. I started to really fall in love with it. When it was time to do the numbers crunching, and then give up if the numbers weren't right, the

numbers weren't there. But then I told my wife, can we try a little longer? Try a little farther? And can we make certain financial sacrifices so that we can try a little farther, go a little farther. And she agreed. After 10 years of working on a job where it's just soul killing, ... this is just the best job I've ever had since I sold yogurt when I was 16 years old.

**A print product.** For the first five months of operation, the *Virginia Connection* remained digital only. A December community meeting changed that. During the meeting, Ares said, a community member told him, "You're an online product, I can't find anything. ... I want a paper. We miss the paper. I want a paper." Ares said he heard "amens" in the crowd that night. After the meeting, two residents together approached Ares. Said Ares:

They said, 'Tony, I want a tactile paper that I can feel. That's what I miss. I want my paper back.' And I began to think, 'If I don't give it to them, somebody else is going to give it to them.' This is an attention game, and I'm trying to keep their attention. At least the two women that I spoke to that night, to me, ... they represent a lot of people in Caroline County.

Two weeks later, Ares printed the first copy of the *Virginia Connection*. Ares pays for the printing of 1,000 copies and gives the product out for free, distributing it in piles across the county. One place he delivers to, for instance, is the coffee shop in downtown Bowling Green. "I kind of look at it as an ad for what we are doing," Ares said of the print product. "It's marketing." Ares said he received immediate positive feedback.

Most of the older people have been very pleased and very happy and some of them are beginning to say, 'Oh, you're a real paper now. You're a real news source now.'

Just because we have a printed product. Some of them are beginning to come around and say that.

The print product, while pleasing some, added higher costs, the “extras,” Ares hoped to avoid in the beginning of the adventure. In addition to the added costs, the print product adds to an already tiring workload for Ares.

You have to understand, I’m just a rookie, and I don’t know what I’m doing, so it takes me around 12 hours to write those four stories, to make sure the facts are straight, to proof read it, to re-proof read it, to put all that together and then on top of that, it’s another 6-8 hours of disseminating that throughout the county. When you’re talking about how much time you’ve spent, now you’re spending almost a quarter of your work week in producing this paper product. While that’s happening, there’s events going on.

At the time of this interview, Ares had printed a weekly product for less than three months. He already was thinking about the future of the product and asking whether or not to “do away with the paper product” and “just focus online.” He continued the thought:

Focus on the future and realize that we’re going to make some people mad regarding print. ... Maybe trying to please folks, to give them some nostalgia with this tactile paper, we’re allowing them to lead us into the ‘50s, instead of us leading the county into the 21st century, and maybe we’ve allowed them to distract us from what we’re supposed to be doing. But I don’t know. I don’t know the answer to that.

**What Makes the Virginia Connection Different?** Toward the end of the interview, Ares was asked a challenging question: As a start-up business, how do you expect to make it when a news organization that was almost a century old just failed?

First of all, I have a tremendous amount of respect for the elders who laid that foundation. I have respect for all entrepreneurs now, of anyone who's been able to lay those foundations and to start something from scratch that endures. That's the positive thing I'll say. I guess the negative thing and it's not negative, it's just a lesson for all of us, is that you've got to be willing to innovate and anticipate or you're going to end up like Blockbuster. ... Somewhere along the line, the caretakers have allowed themselves to be Blockbuster and not Netflix."

Ares continued, explaining the differences between the products, "just guessing and guesstimating, is that some of these papers when they closed down, they do have some fat." Ares compared his old government job to that "fat."

I've never been, and I hope this doesn't come off offensive to a journalist, but I've never been in a real newsroom of old, but I would assume from my Department of Defense culture, that there's a lot of jobs in the Department of Defense that they don't need to exist. They just exist because they've always been there, and they exist from a culture that's hundreds of years old, and it's just tradition to keep those jobs around. My old job was one of them, that really shouldn't have even existed. I am assuming that perhaps that led to some of the older legacy papers and the culture just that, 'we've got to have this, and we've got to have that,' and maybe you don't.

He further explained, with a relatively stream-of-consciousness thought:

I'm hoping that since we don't have that infrastructure and we don't have any fat, since we don't have any fat, if I stay in the game, and I stay focused and I grow in reputation and influence and if I get better and I produce a better product — cause you also have to keep in mind I've only been doing this job for months — so then hopefully I can incrementally get 1 percent better. There's a book I read on the power of habit, where if you get 1 percent better every day, you're like 270 percent better in a year. If I can get 1 percent better as a journalist, as a marketer, as a whatever, then I'm hoping that without the fat, that we can get better and we can create a platform.

Ares aspires to “create the platform” and create enough revenue to hire a small staff to continue the work of the *Virginia Connection* in Caroline County. Then, Ares would move on to other areas, replicating the model in Caroline County. “That's why we don't call it the *Caroline Connection*, we call it the *Virginia Connection* so that we can have some flexibility and go to different things,” he said. He later added:

Maybe if we just start with a skeletal crew, and build from there, and improve the processes from there. Will we ever employ 12 people? No, but maybe we can make enough income for two reporters and one web designer and maybe that will be enough to cover Caroline County news as we refine processes and systems. That's my hope.

The personal financial sacrifice and risk are wearing on Ares. “The stress gets greater as the months go on,” he said. Ares believes there is a need left by the *Caroline Progress*' shuttering. But there is also the reality of a start-up business, in existence for

seven months at the time of this interview, trying to fill the space left by a 99-year product that was omnipresent in the county. Explained Ares:

I'll be blunt, ... I don't know if it will be me. I'm hoping. I have prayer, and I'm relentless. But at some point, you have to go and make a rational decision. At some point, you can only try to reach out and reach out and reach out, and sometimes you may have to pull the plug and say, OK, maybe this model doesn't work here, maybe this model will work somewhere else. ... Or maybe it doesn't work.

As a final note on the *Virginia Connection* and Tony Ares, it is important to emphasize the participants said they were thankful of his efforts. "I appreciate that someone has stepped up to the plate, so to speak, and said, 'I'm going to try this and see what happens,' " Participant O said. "Tony Ares is doing a good job, as best he can. He's one person." While they appreciate the effort, some participants have yet to engage in the product. "I haven't felt the need to subscribe to whatever it is," Participant N said. "You can subscribe online, which I have done," Participant L said. "But, to tell you the truth, I have not taken the time to pull it up." Said Participant A: "Tony does a great job, and he tries. The *Virginia Connection* helps, but it's not the same as the *Caroline Progress*."

## Chapter 5: Conclusions

Previous research, from Davidson and Cotter (1997) and Mersey (2009) demonstrated there is a strong relationship between psychological sense of community, as defined by McMillan and Chavis, and newspaper readership. Much of the previous work on this relationship has been quantitative. The same can be said for previous studies of news deserts, including recent work from Abernathy (2018). That's where this research strives to be different, adding systematic qualitative investigation to these issues, exploring the perceived impact of a newspaper's closure on community members' everyday lives and their sense of community.

When examining the first two research questions, which focus on the sense of community theory, this research expanded on McMillan and Chavis' work in interesting ways. In regards to the duo's concept of membership, this research indicated the interviewees still felt they were members of a community, but the community in which they were members changed. "I miss that sense of community and being part of a whole county," one participant said. "I'm more (neighborhood)-centered now." Another said, "Without the *Caroline Progress*, I am more isolated." This research also built on the idea of influence and added to the discussion of how a newspaper helps citizens feel they influence others. In this case, participants cherished being able to write in the *Caroline Progress*. "I miss the fact that I can't write an article and get it in the paper about something that I enjoy writing about – whatever it is," one participant said. In terms of integration and fulfillment of needs, this research reaffirmed how a newspaper provides reinforcement and pride. "It provided a great platform for community pride," one participant said. "It's your local paper."

With regards to the second research question, specifically, this research confirmed the importance of the shared emotional connection. Events, and event notification, play a critical role in this shared emotional connection. The one aspect of the *Caroline Progress* missed the most by participants was the half-page listing of community events on the inside of each weekly edition. “If there was an event, there was news on it,” one participant said. “That’s what gave a sense of belonging.” Becoming the one-stop shop for a community event calendar was a top priority for Tony Ares and the *Virginia Connection* as well. Participants acknowledged a concern for the future of events in the county without the newspaper, and that will affect the quality of interaction of members of the community. “Events can’t be promoted properly without a newspaper here,” one participant said. These observations confirm the statement from McMillan and Chavis that shared emotional connection is the “definitive element for true community.”

When exploring the final research question, which focuses on the everyday impact of a newspaper’s closure, this research harkened back to previous research on the absence of newspapers. In the 1940s, a participant told Berelson, “something is missing from my life” (1949, p. 126). Some 70 years later, a Caroline County resident used those exact words, “something is missing from my life.” The important difference, obviously, is that Berelson’s study was on temporary absence of the newspaper and this study is on the permanent absence of the newspaper. Without the newspaper reporters in the county, participants said they must act as reporters themselves. This is a task that, even almost a year after the newspaper’s closure, participants were still trying to adjust. “Life is harder in Caroline County without the *Caroline Progress*,” one participant said.

This research added to Berelson's famous work on what missing the newspaper means by exploring the ever-rising presence of Facebook, which participants say is filling the void left by the newspaper's closure. "There's no other place," one participant said. Interestingly, participants said they trusted the newspaper, written by their neighbors, confirming the research of Poindexter et al. (2006), but they did not trust Facebook posts about the community, the great majority of them written by the neighbors. The platform mattered to them. "We always felt like the local paper, the *Caroline Progress*, was not attempting to persuade us," one participant said. But, in referencing Facebook, another participant said, "there's no checks and balances there. There's no editor, there's no code of conduct."

The biggest limitation to this research, a limitation typical to qualitative work and case studies, is that this research may not be representative of all news deserts. Hopefully, though, this research offers a thematic foundation for future studies. This could include qualitative research involving individuals from several news deserts across the country, and/or it could include multiple case studies, selecting a community from the West, Midwest, North and South, for instance. Also, comparing a United States case study to that of another country would be noteworthy. Additionally, as this research focused solely on subscribers, future studies could compare the perceived impact on subscribers and non-subscribers.

Examining the question of how a community is impacted when its community newspaper closes is of imperative importance in academic research as well as journalistic practice. In scholarship, there is a rich body of journalism research on a wide variety of sub-topics related to the recent struggles of the newspaper industry, but far too little

attention has been directed at the people in the community left behind when a newspaper closes. This research endeavored to fill that gap. In journalistic practice, newspaper owners and industry leaders must understand the impact the ultimate decision to close a community newspaper has on the community residents.

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