

THE DIGITAL DIVIDE AND NEWS CONSUMPTION:  
How rural newspapers are making online content accessible

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by  
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## **Abstract**

Lack of internet access impacts almost every facet of daily life in the modern age, from how we learn to how we connect with our communities. Consumption of online news is also impacted by the growing digital divide, and rural communities bear the brunt of that inequality. The reality of internet insecurity coupled with industry wide pressures to produce digital news content begs the question of how are we ensuring all have access to a full and accurate account of the news of the day. Eight semi structured interviews with the staff of rural newspapers in Arkansas address the strategies being implemented to ensure that digital news content produced by local newspapers is accessible in light of internet insecurity. Strategies for accessibility range from social media promotion to mobile friendly digital layouts, as well as a discussion of the continued importance of the print newspaper in connecting and informing rural communities.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

Britt Talent, publisher of the *Cleveland County Herald*, has worked in the newspaper industry for 42 years. He, like many others in his community, tries his best when it comes to getting Internet access to his home and office. Andrew Bagley, co-publisher of the *Helena World*, feels his hands are tied when it comes to ensuring access to digital news content because the news industry has no control over the cost of Internet access. Ellen Kreth, owner of the *Madison County Record*, built her paper's digital presence for years before seeing any return on investment. Lori Freeze, editor of the *Stone County Leader*, said some people on the outskirts of the county can barely get the minimum Wi-Fi speed required for a single television show to play. Tommy Goodwin, owner of the *Lafayette County Press* and early adopter of Internet in Stamps, Arkansas, tried to have a website for his newspaper but traffic rates declined to the point it became infeasible to continue it. Scott Loftis, publisher of the *Carroll County News*, has concentrated his efforts on creating a mobile friendly website to ensure those who don't have Internet access can view digital content from their smart phones. Tom White, publisher of the *Advance Monticellonian*, worries offering a digital-only subscription option will cannibalize his print product and make it impossible for him to continue.

All seven newspaper staff members interviewed for the project have grappled with a lack of Internet access in their rural communities and what that means for their digital news content. Through a series of semi-structured interviews, this project attempted to address questions of how rural newsrooms are balancing the push to produce digital content and ensure accessibility for their readership experiencing Internet insecurity. The solutions discussed ranged from mobile layout and creating a user-friendly website to social media usage as an additional avenue to

access digital content. However, every conversation pointed back to one central method to ensure access to the news: the print newspaper.

This project is organized as follows. Chapter Two summarizes the existing literature on this topic. Previous research has analyzed which communities are most impacted by the digital divide, whether the divide has widened over the years, the societal implications of lack of Internet access, and possible solutions to address the issue. While much attention has been devoted to rural and local news, the intersections of internet insecurity and rural news have not been studied as much.

Chapter Three describes the methods utilized in this project. Through a series of semi-structured interviews with the staff of rural newspapers in Arkansas, this project helps address the gaps in existing literature by approaching this discussion through a qualitative angle.

Chapter Four outlines the findings of this project. After discussing the merits of digital news models, I summarized the perspectives of staff members who were resistant to adopting online presences as well as the barriers to digital content production. For those who have adopted online presences, they have ensured the accessibility of that content through means such as creating user friendly digital platforms that convey well from desktop to mobile devices and sharing stories on social media. However, due to the reality of the need to generate revenue, the prioritization of print news remains strong for these rural publications.

Chapter Five discusses the implications of this project's findings. Throughout the interviews, the goal of accessibility was challenged and some posed alternative standards such as affordability and availability as more equitable and attainable goals.

Following the references, Appendices A through E provide additional materials pertaining to my research project including my original interview protocol, revised interview

protocol, WEHCO interview protocol, list of interviewees and their publications, and interview transcripts.

After the appendices, the professional component of this project is summarized by my weekly field notes, which includes my weekly progress on my research as well as accounts of my professional experience, and an evaluation of my time thus far at the Arkansas Department of Health for the professional component of this project.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

While the pandemic illuminated the importance of technology to the functioning of modern society, it also cast a glaring light on the growing inequality of access. The term *digital divide* describes the gap in Internet technology access and use that exists in our society. The U.S. Census Bureau defined the digital divide as “the differences between those with access to new technologies and those without” (Hindman, 2000, p. 551). A variety of socioeconomic conditions factor into this widening gap, including geographic location, income, race, and education. This project was particularly focused on the digital divide between rural and urban populations and how it effects rural news consumption. As more news shifts online, it is important to investigate not only which populations may not have access to news in this digital format, but also the implications of that lack of access.

Most literature has taken a quantitative approach in analyzing which communities are most impacted by the digital divide, whether the divide has widened over the years, and the societal implications of lack of Internet access. The literature has also analyzed potential solutions to address the digital divide, ranging from market-based to policy approaches to local coalitions that have taken it upon themselves to build creative solutions to lack of infrastructure.

However, there are critical deficiencies in the existing research base. First, many studies measure the digital divide based on computer ownership, yet personal computer ownership is not the only factor to consider. A study found that though 82% of households in the rural county of Garrett, Maryland owned a computer, only 73% had residential Internet service (Turner-Lee, 2020). This disparity is evidence of how, as the digital landscape progresses and diffuses, technology ownership alone is not a sufficient metric by which to analyze the digital divide. Further, existing literature proposes moving to online content as a solution to increase access for

rural communities as opposed to print subscriptions because of geographic barriers and costly delivery fees (Izadi, 2021). This project adds nuance to the conversation by addressing not only the downsides of digital content but also potential solutions, by asking newsrooms to share what strategies they have implemented that benefit their readers.

The purpose of this project was to identify and share the methods by which rural newsrooms are attempting to make their content more accessible to audiences that lack Internet access, as well as prompt general conversations about the responsibility of the press to prioritize access in the shift to digital content production.

### ***Social Responsibility Theory***

The U.S. press enjoys certain constitutional freedoms protecting its operations; in exchange, it plays a social and political role serving as the basis for an informed citizenship upon which a functional democracy depends (Bunton, 1998). The 1947 report of the Commission on Freedom of the Press (popularly known as the Hutchins Commission after its chair, Robert Hutchins) challenged journalists to uphold that social responsibility, tasking them to not only inform audiences but provide space for debate. The committee was comprised of 13 of the country's leading scholars, who met 17 times to analyze 225 interviews, 58 testimonials, and 176 documents regarding the state of journalism (Christians & Nordenstreng, 2004). After deliberations, the commission outlined five functions of a socially responsible press, including providing full access to a comprehensive account of the day's events as well as a forum for public debate. These requirements can also be viewed as the *social responsibility* the press has in the way it serves the community it reports on (Christians & Nordenstreng, 2004).

The final responsibility – to provide full access to the day's intelligence – is particularly relevant in the context of the threat that the digital divide poses to access to news. Since the

origins of mass communication, there are large segments of the population that desire the “fulness of a newspaper of record” and that product “should be available for all those who want them” rather than just in few metropolitan areas (Commission on Freedom of the Press, 1947, p. 67). Christians (1986) expanded on the ideal of responsibility of access from the Hutchins Commission stating that the press should be available to more than a minority of citizens and present more than the opinions of those in power (as cited in Bunton, 1998). This ideal could be specifically applied to the modern problem of lack of access to online news by rural audience, because as the definition of news expands to include digital content, so do access concerns.

The question of accessibility of news content has been codified in the First Amendment. Normative shifts in the judicial application of the First Amendment began taking place in the 1940s. This shift began with the Supreme Court’s decision in 1945 with the *Associated Press v. United States* case. In its majority opinion, the court stated that the First Amendment

rests on the assumption that the widest possible dissemination of information from diverse and antagonistic sources is essential to the welfare of the public, that a free press is a condition of free society... freedom to publish means freedom for all and not for some (as cited in Pickard, 2010, p. 394).

However, there are limitations in applying the Hutchins Commission’s ideals regarding access to modern day journalism. For example, the commission could not have foreseen the future of interactive, digital mass media; thus, the suggestions of the commission focused on content rather than delivery (Metzgar & Hornaday, 2013). The mode of delivery is now a major consideration in newsrooms with the rise of not only digital news consumption generally but also further delineations between formatting digital layout for stories for desktop and mobile consumption. This project’s consideration of the question of delivery and how it pertains to “full

access” provides another avenue into the discussion of social responsibility of the press.

Specifically, this project facilitates conversations about not only how to make the news more accessible online, but also whether modern newsroom staff think ensuring access should be their responsibility.

### *The Digital Divide and Access Issues*

A precursor to having access to online news is having access to broadband technology. Culver defines “broadband” as encompassing complex technologies but generally meaning access to the Internet at a higher data rate than preceding dial-up modem technologies. Simply put, broadband access means a high-speed Internet connection. Access to high-speed Internet is crucial to participating in modern society; thus, a patterned lack of access is a severe impediment. It is concerning that the United States ranks a mediocre 10<sup>th</sup> among other developed nations in access to high-speed Internet (Culver, 2014).

In addition to broadband access, technology usage and ownership are other factors to consider when discussing the digital divide. Evidence suggests there is a relationship between widening gaps in technological use and social indicators, such as social class and age. Gaps in information technology use between higher and lower status groups are growing because the technology was designed with the former group in mind. Early adopters of technology tend to be younger and wealthier than later adopters; thus, higher status groups have more experience with the technology and are therefore more successful in their use of it (Hindman, 2000). Further, there is room for analysis of how a seemingly infinite resource like the Internet is still impacted by concerns of scarcity and access thus requiring oversight (Betancourt, 2015). The perception of scarcity is driven by capitalism, as Internet companies’ decisions when it comes to creating the infrastructure for broadband access are motivated by profit. Specifically, high speed Internet

access is still limited in rural communities because it is not profitable for Internet companies to provide it in those less populated areas (Hindman, 2000). Ultimately, this means that those who are unable or unwilling to adopt those technologies become isolated and left out of a major medium for commerce and communication (Hindman, 2000).

The lack of funding from the U.S. federal government further exacerbates the issue of inequality. The government spends less on telecommunications as a percentage of gross domestic product than its developed counterparts (Barnes, 2010). The lack of government subsidization of Internet technologies shifts more of the burden of payment to citizens, leaving critical means of information diffusion up to free market regulation and thus manipulation and exploitation.

### ***The Information Needs of Rural Communities***

Geography exacerbates the digital divide as the divide between metropolitan and rural areas is increasingly large (Barnes, 2010; Hindman, 2000; LaRose et. al, 2007; Nguyen, 2007; Perrin, 2019; Whitacre, 2010). In 2019, roughly two-thirds of rural Americans reported having broadband Internet connection at home, which is 12% less than Americans overall. Rural adults are also less likely to have multiple devices or points of access – only about 30% of rural adults reported owning two or more devices. By contrast, 43% of suburban adults own more than four devices (Perrin, 2019). Additionally, only two out of five households have access to wireless telephone service (Hollman et al., 2021). Black residents in the rural South are nearly twice as likely as their white counterparts to lack home internet access, with a study of 152 counties across ten states finding that 38% of Black residents do not have access to Internet in their homes, compared to 23% of white residents in the same regions (Shivaram, 2021).

As a result of lack of Internet access, the groups previously mentioned are not having basic information needs met. There are eight categories of information needs for communities: Emergencies and risk, health and welfare, education, transportation, economic opportunities, environment, civic information, and political information. In other words, community members need access to information on medical resources to remain healthy and safe; access to education, employment, and business opportunities; and access to resources to make informed decisions when it comes to electing leaders and knowledge of how to act on that information (Culver, 2014). High speed Internet is the fundamental method of meeting these informational needs and is thus essential (Culver, 2014). Further, access to technology is especially important to rural residents because of structural barriers such as lack of economic diversity, retail options, information sources, and educational and career opportunities near them (Hindman, 2000). Access to digital news platforms can also help make up for the lack of daily newspapers in rural communities (Hindman, 2000). Even though this is true, the problem with utilizing the Internet as a solution to rising news deserts is that there are also Internet deserts, so to speak. Thus, those who are most impacted by news deserts are often also those most likely to lack Internet access.

### ***Rural Journalism***

Approximately 60 million people, or one in five Americans, live in rural areas (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). Rural newspapers have long been touted as historical record keepers for community life, even if their existence has been sometimes relegated as second tier to flashy, national publications with larger circulations (Garfrerick, 2010). An analysis of rural news production from the late 1930s identified the contents of the “typical country weekly” as containing births, marriages, and deaths; the town’s comings and goings; its family and club changes; and the non-economic leisure activities of its members. After the Civil War, an

evolution in rural journalism took place in which editorial commentary decreased and publications became more concerned with chronicling local matters (Riley, 1938). More recent research has found a shift in content to include matters such as schools, accidents, and crime as well as managing the business aspects of for-profit newspapers including circulation management and advertising (Reader, 2012). Further, community weekly remain the most common form of newspaper as community dailies and weeklies account for 62 percent of overall print circulation (Reader, 2018). Modern examples of community newspapers retain the localized perspective of early descriptions. Community newspapers can respond to the specific needs of their readership, especially in the sparsely populated rural areas. Their reflection of those localized needs renders them able to tell “the story of the average American daily lives more thoroughly and in a more personal manner than the big-city dailies” (Garfrerick, 2010. pp. 151-152).

Rural newspapers have a duty past just that of informing its audience, as people in rural communities and small towns depend on their local paper to connect them and advocate for them (Culver, 2014). Further, “even the tiniest paper with few resources should be advocating on behalf of its community members,” (Bunton 1998, as cited in Culver, 2014, p. 139). For large sectors of the country, large metropolitan newspapers are located hundreds of miles away; thus, the burden of keeping the citizenry informed on news both locally and nationally falls to the rural community papers (Garfrerick, 2010). Because of local papers’ role as often the acting as the sole information source for their communities, they have an even higher degree of social responsibility.

### *Summary*

Being touted as the cornerstone of democracy comes with certain responsibilities, including ensuring the citizenry it serves has full access to the information needed to make informed decisions about their leadership. With the industry wide shift towards digital news production, the question of access has shifted platforms as well. On face, it seems that online content would be more accessible; however, research on the digital divide illustrates the barriers to access due to lack of internet. The digital divide describes the gap in access in Internet technology as well as the skill set and resources to effectively utilize those technologies. There is evidence that rural communities, already isolated by geography, lack the infrastructure for high-speed Internet, impacting their ability to consume digital news. The purpose of this project is to identify and share the methods by which rural newsrooms are attempting to make their content more accessible to audiences that lack Internet access.

### Chapter 3: Method

To capture both the breadth and specificity of conversations happening in newsrooms regarding digital access, I conducted semi-structured interviews with newsroom staff about their experience with local internet connection and thoughts on industry responsibilities.

Journalists have made careers out of telling stories and the goal of this project is to serve as another platform for them to share those stories. Thus, I structured my interview methods to allow the participants that freedom as much as possible. Semi-structured interviews are particularly well suited to do that, as they address not only questions of “what” and “how” but the flexibility they offer also allows participants to get to the “why” (Fylan, 2005).

I sourced these interviews from the Arkansas Press Association member organization database. The press association director, Ashley Wimberley, acted as a liaison to help with the initial contacting of sources. Because this project asks for industry wide analysis, I planned to talk with people in various positions including reporters, editors, and publishers, reasoning that the different positions they occupy within their publication’s hierarchy would likely influence their experience within the industry. I refined my search based on the circulation and digital presence of the paper they work for, looking specifically for publications serving geographically isolated communities or covering counties and towns with smaller populations (defined as fewer than 10,000 people).

My goal was to conduct as many interviews in person as would be logistically possible. However, this was not practical and for consistency I held them via Zoom and over the phone. All interviews were recorded with the consent of the interviewee. Interviewees were given a description of the project and its goals prior to the questions. After each interview, I transcribed the recordings and analyzed the transcripts in conjunction with my notes to identify common

themes which made up my final project analysis. Because this project did not ask interviewees to reveal personal or harmful information, they are not anonymous. A list of participants and their workplaces is provided in Appendix D.

My original interview protocol was based loosely around typical journalistic interview practices. For example, I planned to start with “warm-up” questions to make the interviewee comfortable and ease them into talking, followed by specific Internet-related questions then moved to broader, more abstract industry level questions. The original interview protocol can be found in Appendix A. However, I found that many of the questions created redundancies in answers and did not flow in conversation. In the weeks between submitting my proposal for committee approval and conducting my first interview, I revisited my interview questions. First, I moved the questions regarding subscription options and website development to the beginning of the interview directly after circulation, as I found it made more sense to group all the short answer questions about the logistics of the paper together at the top. I also decided to remove the question about the importance of newspaper staff residing in the community they reported because I thought it detracted from the question of access and digital content production and felt abrupt in the context of the surrounding questions. I also removed the questions about personally experiencing a situation in which they were hindered professionally or personally by a lack of Internet access because I again felt it detracted from the specific theme of digital news consumption. Further, I moved the questions about Internet usage practices and social media to the middle section of the interview because I thought it would be best grouped with the topic of web access in the locality and its effect on digital strategy. Finally, I revised the final theoretical questions to say “responsibility” instead of “obligation” regarding the question of a duty to provide access. The revised interview questions are included in Appendix B.

Additionally, I decided to reach out to a representative from the parent company that owns *The Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* to discuss their innovative digital strategy. In 2019, the “Dem Gaz” changed their distribution model substantially, going from a daily print paper to digital-only with a Sunday print edition. Additionally, the Dem Gaz issued iPads to all paying subscribers to view the digital edition. I had not planned to address the Dem Gaz in this project, because the scope is focused on small papers serving primarily rural populations and, as the largest paper in the state with massive funding, the Dem Gaz did not fit these criteria. However, many of my initial interviews cited the digital strategy of the Dem Gaz as either an inspiration or an unrealistic standard to be held to. It was for that reason I decided to interview Jay Horton, president of the Walter E. Hussman Company (WEHCO) to provide context for the state of digital content production in Arkansas. The interview questions I asked him are included in Appendix C.

## Chapter 4: Findings

Many of the interviewees advocated not only for the benefits of digital first news models, but the inevitability of them. However, some staff of rural newspapers pushed back against this idea, citing lack of financial resources and personnel to jumpstart a digital presence, as well as concerns of lack of accountability that comes with digital content. Those who have begun shifting to a digital presence have made that content accessible by creating user-friendly layouts that translate to mobile devices and promoting it on social media channels. Conversely, the reality of the need for revenue has ensured the continued prevalence of the print product for many rural newspapers.

### *Making the Case for Digital-First News Models*

*“If anybody would like to argue that digital isn’t better than print, then they are frankly just arguing for nostalgia.” – Jay Horton, WEHCO*

*The Arkansas Democrat-Gazette’s* revolutionary shift to its digital model marked by a rollout of iPads for all subscribers was brought about by a change in revenue sources and the demands of a 24-hour news cycle, forcing a choice between cutting distribution costs or cutting journalists. “When you’re producing the news and you’ve got a deadline, say at 10 or 11 o’clock at night, so that you can produce news and people are going to read at seven eight in the morning,” Horton explained, “well, what about that entire news cycle that happens between the moment you stop putting news onto the pages and then actually get customers hands?” Horton said digital content collapses that waiting period from hours to minutes, thus making the news delivery process more expedient. **“So, when you look at efficiency, and you don’t have the paper**

and ink cost and delivery expense, all the gas carriers all that stuff, you take you look at that, it's just clear that digital is superior to print in terms of efficiency and delivering news," he said.

Large papers with extensive financial resources for digital production aren't the only ones that benefit from reduced operating costs compared to print. "When you have a digital copy, you don't have to run the print press you don't have to put it in the mail," said Talent, publisher of the *Cleveland County Herald*, with a circulation size of 1,600. "I mean, other than employment, that's your largest expense for the newspaper." Talent said that he wrote a \$230 check the day prior for printing expenses. "For a... small paper like me, you multiply that by 52 weeks and that's a lot of money," he said. "And so, what you're seeing is that we could produce our paper on digital scale, and distributed digitally, that's gonna save us money **in printing number one and** number two on postage."

In addition to overcoming delivery issues and meeting the demand of a 24-hour news cycle, digital content production also allows for greater adaptability when assembling the newspaper. Kreth, owner of the *Madison County Record* with a circulation of 4,000, described how the unexpected winter weather that hit Arkansas in February 2022 would have meant the news was simply not reported in years past. "You know, I think in years past, that ice storm would have totally freaked me out, because how do we get the newspaper out?" Kreth mused. "We didn't flinch on that this time, because we can do everything from home, even though our staff live in these rural communities."

Further, some argue the demand for digital content in rural areas exists. "I can tell you this: When the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* transitioned over to that all digital platform, all of a sudden, we started getting calls from our subscribers wanting to know when we are going to do that," said Talent. "We've actually seen a much more, a greater acceptance of the digital product

versus the traditional print product once the *Democrat-Gazette* launched their digital platform.” While many proclaim the benefits of digital production for their rural newsrooms, others are reluctant to adopt the model.

### ***Resistance to Digital***

*“Folks in the industry believe that the Internet has been really a detriment to newspapers because people have come to expect it.” - Scott Loftis, Carroll County News*

Some say digital news is simply not a fit for their community. “We never committed to it,” said Freeze, editor of the *Stone County Leader* with a circulation of 3,800. Digital companies offered to visit residents of Mountain View to persuade and educate them of the benefits of digital news content, but Freeze said that would not have gone over well. “We knew for one thing that we didn’t want strangers coming into our town to try to sell our product,” she said. “We didn’t want someone making them feel pressured, making them feel like they don’t know what’s going on.” Further, Freeze said her subscribers aren’t “sophisticated” enough for these digital models. “It doesn’t matter if someone can explain it well or not,” she said. “The guy down at farmers co-op, you know, either gets it or he doesn’t.”

Others expressed concern that cheaper digital news models threaten the revenue from their print product. “Well, I just think it’s, you know, why should I subscribe to a paper or why should I put 75 cents in the box or go to the newspaper rack to buy paper when I can punch it up on my cell phone and read everything for free?” Loftis, publisher of *Carroll County News*, which has a circulation of around 1,500, said. “It’s like if I could go to McDonald’s and buy a hamburger, or I could punch a button on my computer, and they bring the burger for free. Well,

which one are you gonna do?” Additionally, White, publisher of the *Advance Monticellonian*, circulation 2,500, said while he is considering changing his subscription options, he is thinking of leaving off a digital-only subscription package because it could “cannibalize the print product.”

Some say that they perceive digital news as posing a threat to the very values that journalism is built upon. “I find the biggest difference between social media or phone apps or whatever news distribution [platform] is they [online news distribution platforms] have zero accountability,” Goodwin, owner of the *Lafayette County Press*, circulation 1,000, stated. He said his physical presence in the news office in downtown Stamps holds him accountable to his audience and ensures a level of accuracy that he perceives digital news is not held to: “If I wrote something wrong about something that happened to somebody or somebody that was mentioned in a meeting or whatever, [they would] take a walk in my office and get my face and say ‘Look here, this is not correct.’” Further, even for those who may want to produce more digital news, there are barriers to shifting away from print.

### ***Barriers to Digital Content Production***

*“You have to spend money to make money and we just have never had it to put into an online presence.” – Tommy Goodwin, Lafayette County Press*

The revenue from print subscriptions is still the primary source of revenue for many rural newsrooms and that reality is often a barrier to switching to a digital first delivery model. “We still rely on that print product,” Kreth said. “I went to a seminar, gosh it’s been years ago, with the APA [Arkansas Press Association]... but her advice at the time was you need to trim 6% off

of expense ... and put 6% on top of that to try to gain 6% from your Internet, and, as good as it sounds in theory, it's been hard for us to do." Kreth said that though they have had a website and digital presence for years, they only recently started making a profit from Internet subscriptions and ad sales. The justification that the website will not only save news organizations money but make them money simply isn't enough to convince some. "Years and years ago they were telling us, you know, digital first... your website will pay for itself," Freeze said. "But [it] never did for us."

Lack of staff with the specific skillset for digital content production is another barrier. "If I could hire an IT person, they could come in and do a bang-up job, but I'm not making enough money to do that on our website," Kreth said. "So, it's cost prohibitive." Further, even if they had the money to hire someone, Kreth wonders if they would find someone in Madison County with the skillset to do it. "It's really hard to find someone with that technical skill here because broadband isn't accessible," she said. "I guarantee you if I put an ad in the paper tomorrow... [that says] anybody know how to do a podcast come in and I'll pay you \$100 a week to do it, I don't think I could find anybody." To those who have managed to overcome the barriers associated with the startup costs to creating a digital presence, the question then becomes: Will people who lack Internet access even know how to use it?

### ***User-Friendly Platforms***

*"We have a responsibility to try to come up with a way that's not overly complex for the non tech savvy person to access." – Andrew Bagley, Helena World*

As discussed in the literature review, access means not only being able to afford the technology but also being able to use it. Scholars have found that often technology is not designed with those in low-income or rural communities in mind and those are often also the groups who do not have the opportunities to develop those skillsets compared to their wealthier, urban peers. When considering ways to make digital news platforms more accessible to audiences, the *Helena World* prioritizes making sure their website is user friendly. “We just did a redesign of the website in hopes that it’s more now for somebody in their 70s like my mother can use,” said Bagley, co-publisher of the *Helena World*, circulation just over 930. Another element to consider when designing user-friendly digital layouts is how it will translate from desktop to mobile.

### ***From Desktop to Mobile Display***

*“There’s a cell tower on every corner now, so by way of the phone, it’s not many people who actually couldn’t get on the Internet with their phone.” – Tommy Goodwin, Lafayette County*

*Press*

The home Internet conditions in the rural Arkansas counties represented in these interviews largely follow the trends identified in the literature review: abysmal. While almost everyone in the downtown areas of the counties have high speed Internet access, the conditions worsen the further away you get from city center. This poses a problem for sprawling rural counties and the papers that are responsible for covering all of them. For instance, Madison County school district has the largest capacity for bus routes in the state, according to Kreth, which illustrates just how far out the county stretches. And for those on the outskirts of the

county who do have home Internet, it is barely functional. To combat this issue, many have turned to mobile data packages for their smart phones instead of home Internet. The use of mobile phones to view digital content was the single most mentioned topic throughout the interviews. Newspapers are using that knowledge to shape how they arrange the layout of their digital content. “A mobile device will actually take priority over our desktop stuff and because that's what most people see anyway, when it comes to place on website,” Talent said. “We are conscious where we place ads, because when you're scrolling up and down ... we'll actually test it to make sure that the ad will see [through] the word the placement of it on a mobile device.”

However, mobile data packages are rarely truly unlimited. “We have a large population that is in poverty and are making choices between food and medicine in many cases,” Bagley said. “When they are unable to have Wi-Fi to their house... they're resorting to the data packages that are coming on their phone, which [are] used up very quick.” He said the connectivity gap remains even with smart phone usage. “If you watch one TV show on your phone, your [data] package is done,” Bagley said. Thus, keeping in mind mobile access is not a solution for all, newspapers have found other avenues to ensure access to their digital content, including social media.

### ***Social Media Usage***

*“We do Facebook, but it's to point people back to the newspaper.” – Lori Freeze, Stone County*

*Leader*

Many newspapers use Facebook to direct users back to their website or to subscribe to their print edition. However, some are using Facebook to directly disseminate information to

readers. For example, the *Lafayette County Press* puts all obituaries on Facebook because of their time-sensitive nature and the fact they are only a weekly in print. “I took advantage of the Facebook presence to just put timely obituaries so that they would know about it ahead of time in case of somebody they knew or would be interested in going to a service,” Goodwin explained. Additionally, the *Stone County Leader* uses Facebook to share posts from the school district about sports tournaments and weather delays or even crime updates from the county sheriff’s page.

However, frustrations with social media are widespread. While comments on newspapers’ Facebook pages help some glean insight into what audiences want to read, others are just noise. “So, we go on there and we see people talking about issues so that lets us know what’s on people’s mind and what concerns they have but it’s also a bunch of silly stuff,” Freeze said. “We see people on there talking about an issue that’s been in the paper over the past five weeks and something big is going on, and there’ll be so many people go ‘Well how was I supposed to know?’ or ‘Or I just didn’t know, and I wish somebody would put that information out there’.” The main goal of social media usage remains to point users back to the subscription packages, because of the need for papers to make a profit.

### ***The Reality of Revenue***

*“If you don’t want to pay for the news, eventually you got to pay for not having it.” – Andrew*

*Bagley, Helena World*

The overwhelming consensus among all those interviewed is that a newspaper is a business. “If we can’t make money, we can’t put reporters in the field,” Bagley said. While

journalism still retains its function as upholding democratic functions, many noted that money to keep the lights on and pay reporters is a necessary reality to be able to uphold those functions. And that reality shapes how newspaper staff view their duties and responsibility to readers. “I do believe we are a public service and we do have a duty to provide our public with information that is important to them,” Kreth said. “I think that 20 years ago, that would have been the mantra, and I would have ended the conversation there.” But since owning her own paper, her perspective has changed somewhat and the idea of duty to the public at large has been conditioned to a responsibility to paying subscribers. The COVID-19 pandemic illustrated this paradigm shift. After making the majority of pandemic information available for free on the website, Kreth said people were irate when they stopped and said that the newspaper owed them that information: “No, I don’t owe you that information. Maybe the Arkansas Department of Health does and your hospital does, if its paid for by state funds,” she said. “But not me. I do not owe you that public service.”

Even for those with a digital-only subscription option, it is not feasible for it to be heavily discounted compared to other subscription packages. “It costs us so much to turn the lights on and have someone write a story, no matter if someone's buying... an e-edition or a subscription and getting the paper out of it,” Kreth said. “I mean, our expenses are still there.” Because the need to generate revenue exists for news publishers, the reliance on the print newspaper remains prevalent.

### ***The Importance of Print***

*“It’s still print, you know. We’re in a rural area and a lot of people are older and they like the paper product.” – Britt Talent, Cleveland County Herald*

While there were several strategies to make digital content more accessible, all conversations ultimately came back to the print product. For every individual interviewed, the comparison of digital subscribers to print subscribers is not even close. Whether it is because of inexperience with Internet or a lack of access to it, the audiences for these rural papers still have a high demand for the print newspaper. “I can’t see newspapers going away totally anytime,” Goodwin said. “From everything I’m reading and hearing other people talk that there's somewhat of a resurgence right now because of a disillusion left with some of the social media or phone contact type things become the norm anymore, that there is a certain level of dissolution but creeping in and giving sort of a resurgence to newspaper.”

The print product is not just a consequence of nostalgia but a guarantee of access. Many say there is only so much they can do in the face of Internet insecurity. They can do everything they can to lower the cost of online subscriptions and provide news on a plethora of digital platforms, but at they ultimately cannot control the price of Internet access. Thus, their solution is largely to continue devoting resources to ensuring the print product is widely available.

## Chapter 5: Discussion

My research question centered around the steps taken by rural news organizations to make their digital content more accessible. However, conversation often moved to whether or not accessibility is – or should be – the goal. Rather than looking at accessibility, some offered affordability and availability as alternative standards.

### Accessibility vs. Affordability

*“I don’t feel like we have to be free to be accessible.” – Lori Freeze, Stone County Leader*

Cost is, inevitably, a factor in the discussion of accessibility. Many drew comparisons between their yearly subscription rates coming in at less than \$100 and the *Democrat Gazette*’s substantially higher rate of over \$400 annually. Further, as referenced previously, many recognize the reality that while journalism is characterized as the fourth estate, it is primarily funded by taxes as it receives only limited subsidization. For papers to keep their lights on and produce a product, revenue is required. However, the amount of revenue is up for debate. “I don’t see someone paying me 70 cents to read an entire week’s worth of content as outrageous,” Freeze said. “So, to me that’s accessible even though we require someone to pay.” And for those that pay, another factor in accessibility is availability.

## **Accessibility vs. Availability**

*“Accessibility is, if you pay for it, we’ll do whatever we can to get it to you.” – Ellen Kreth,*

*Madison County Record*

For some, accessibility means making sure the news product is in the most places and mediums possible to ensure everyone who wants it can physically get it. Horton said their newspaper is more accessible today than ever because it is published in more places and ways than ever before. Even for those without a digital presence, their product is still accessible because it is available in a variety of locations. “I don’t think it’s our responsibility to make sure they have Internet access,” White said. “But I think your [product] needs to be available to them either they can buy it at the convenience store or subscribe to me, that’s [what makes it] available.” A part of ensuring availability is the continuation of the print product for some. Kreth said that they invest a lot of money in ensuring that, if a subscriber pays for it, they do everything in their power to get them the print paper.

## **Implications**

There are many practical lessons to be taken from this study. First, for those that are looking to make their digital content more accessible, a key component is making their online sites user friendly and accessible on mobile devices. However, another takeaway is that an all or nothing approach to content production is not a reasonable reality for many publishers. Rather than shifting entirely to digital distribution, many publishers are creating as many avenues as possible for audiences to access their content, from sharing links via Facebook to ensuring there will be a print product delivered to those who are either not interested or able to get home

internet. The shared goal for newspapers is providing the news of the day to subscribers by whatever means possible and necessary.

### **Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

It would be interesting to analyze the findings of this same interview protocol implemented 15 years in the future. My research question centered around what steps are being taken to make digital content more accessible and inherently relied on the assumption that digital content had been widely adopted by rural papers. That assumption underestimated the prevalence and continued importance of the print newspaper to rural communities. Research has shown that technology is dispersed from top to bottom over time (Hindman, 2000); in this case, it may be a number of years before the technology utilized by urban news organization makes its way to the newsrooms of rural Arkansas. The prevailing sentiment amongst the staff I spoke to, which may not be shared by larger more urban papers like the *Democrat Gazette*, was that print newspapers will never truly disappear and remain the primary means for ensuring access for their subscribers.

Internet instability proved to be not only a limitation to digital news content production but also to conducting the interviews for this project. My initial plan was to hold Zoom interviews with the newspaper staff but that quickly became unrealistic. After my first Zoom was plagued by frequent freezes and dropped connections, I began offering to do phone interviews instead. While some nuances of facial expressions and reactions are lost over phone calls, the option became considerably more convenient for those based in rural areas. All but two interviews were held over the phone.

There can be a disconnect between what news staff thinks their audience wants and experiences and the audiences' reality. Many said while they monitor metrics such as which

stories receive the most traffic, they know that does not tell the full story. Future studies could focus on the audience perspective of the topic – rather than talking with newspaper staff, researchers could interview community members on their experience with digital content and local papers. Differences and similarities between the perspectives could be compared and discussed to propose further solutions and strategies to make news more available, affordable, and accessible.

## **Conclusion**

In a series of semi-structured interviews with the staff of newspapers in rural Arkansas, there were many solutions to ensure accessibility of digital content, from mobile friendly layout to social media promotion. However, the most common solution was simply the existence of a print newspaper. What some call nostalgia, the rural Arkansan publishers call necessity, as there are many concrete barriers to creating the digital presence that larger publications seem to think rural papers must implement to remain relevant. Perhaps the greater concern should be that if the narrative of nostalgia continues to be repeated by those with power and influence, it will become reality. Perhaps we should instead question the reasons behind the perceived necessity for rural papers to convert from the print practice that has sustained their business and communities for decades. And as *Lafayette County Press* owner, Tommy Goodwin, said, it's not going anywhere anytime soon.

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## **Appendix A: Original Interview Protocol**

My interview protocol is based loosely around typical journalistic interview practices. For example, I will start with “warm-up” questions to make the interviewee comfortable and ease them into talking. After that I will go into specific Internet-related questions then will move to broader, more abstract industry level questions. Other questions will be intended to gauge the community and motivations of the paper and will be organized as follows:

### 1. Warm-up

- a. How long have you worked in the industry?
  - i. How long have you worked for your current publication?
- b. Do you live in the community and, if so, for how long?
- c. What is the circulation for your publication?
- d. How do you figure out what your audience likes?
  - i. (if answer points to paper utilizing analytics) How much traffic do you get to your online stories?
  - ii. Do you have more readers online or print subscriptions?
- e. Tell me about your publications subscription options.
  - i. Fee? Online and print package? Online only

### 2. Community/Internet Access

- a. Do you think it is important for reporters/newspaper staff to live in the communities they report on?
- a. (age dependent) do you remember when this community got internet access? How long ago was that?
- b. What is internet access like here? Is it fast or slow?
- c. What is your relationship with the internet provider company?
  - i. Did you have a choice of providers or is there only one for the area?
  - ii. What has customer service experience been like for you?
- d. What do you use the internet most for in your personal life? How often would you say you use it?

- i. Do you experience internet speed delays often?
  - ii. Have you personally experienced a situation in which you need internet access to complete a task, whether personal or professional, and are not able to due to slow connection speeds or lack of connection?
- e. How much web access is there in the locality and how does that affect their digital strategy?

### 3. Industry Questions

- a. When did this publication develop an online edition/website?
- b. How do you decide which stories go online and which stories go in print?
- c. What steps has your publication taken towards making online content more accessible for readers?
  - i. Do you have data on the internet usage practices of your community? For instance what percentage have home internet access?
  - ii. Do you use social media to share online content and, if so, how?
- d. What obligations do publishers/editors have to their readers?
  - i. What does accessibility mean to you?
    - 1. Do papers have a duty to make their work accessible?

## Appendix B: Revised Interview Protocol

### 1. Warm Up

- a. How long have you worked in the industry?
- b. How long have you worked for your current publication?
- c. Do you live in the community and, if so, for how long?
- d. What is the circulation for your publication?
- e. Tell me about your publications subscription options.
  - i. Fee? Online and print package? Online only
  - ii. Do you have more readers online or print subscriptions?
- f. When did this publication develop an online edition/website?
  - i. How do you decide which stories go online and which stories go in print?
- g. How do you figure out what your audience likes?
  - i. (if answer points to paper utilizing analytics) How much traffic do you get to your online stories?

### 2. Community/Internet Access

- a. (age dependent) do you remember when this community got internet access? How long ago was that?
- b. What is internet access like here? Is it fast or slow?
- c. What is your relationship with the internet provider company?
  - i. Did you have a choice of providers or is there only one for the area?
  - ii. What has customer service experience been like for you?
- d. What do you use the internet most for in your personal life? How often would you say you use it?
  - i. Do you experience internet speed delays often?
- e. How much web access is there in the locality and how does that affect their digital strategy?
  - i. Do you have data on the internet usage practices of your community? For instance what percentage have home internet access?
  - ii. Do you use social media to share online content and, if so, how?

### 3. Industry Questions

- a. What responsibilities do publishers/editors have to their readers?
  - i. What does accessibility mean to you?
  - ii. Do papers have a duty to make their work accessible?
- b. What steps has your publication taken towards making online content more accessible for readers?

### **Appendix C: WECHO Interview Protocol**

1. Walk me through the decision making process behind the Dem Gaz's shift to digital only with a Sunday print as well as the distribution of iPads.
2. I have read about the tech support workshops and training you provided as part of the roll out of the iPads.
  - a. How did those trainings go and what was the initial response/feedback from subscribers?
3. Have you received feedback about the iPads?
  - a. How have people adjusted to them?
4. Do you have data on the percentage of Dem Gaz subscribers that have home internet?
5. Has the shift towards digital content production changed how the Dem Gaz utilizes social media?
6. What does accessibility mean to you?
7. Do papers have a duty to make their work accessible?
8. What steps has your publication taken towards making online content more accessible for readers?

**Appendix D: Interviewees**

Jay Horton	WEHCO President
Britt Talent	Publisher, <i>Cleveland County Herald</i>
Andrew Bagley	co-publisher, <i>Helena World</i>
Ellen Kreth	owner, <i>Madison County Record</i>
Lori Freeze	Editor, <i>Stone County Leader</i>
Tommy Goodwin	Owner, <i>Lafayette County Press</i>
Scott Loftis	Publisher, <i>Carroll County News</i>
Tom White	Publisher, <i>Advance Monticellonian</i>

## Appendix E: Interview Transcripts

### Britt Talent Interview

Madi Stephens 0:00

Let's get this started. So, I know Ashley's told you a little bit about this project. But I just wanted to reiterate that I'm, I'm doing interviews with staffs of newspapers serving rural populations here in Arkansas, just trying to talk about how a lack of Internet access affects digital news consumption. So I'm really trying to get at questions of how rural newsrooms are balancing this industry, right push to produce digital content, while also ensuring that that content can be accessed by their readership who maybe experienced internet insecurity. So sort of just along that line, just a few questions to start with, how long have you worked in the news industry?

Britt Talent 0:42

As far as 18 years old, so that's going to be about 42 years been in the business?

MS 0:49

How long have you worked for your current publication?

BT 0:53

Own the cut the newspaper bought in 2000? In 2002?

MS 0:56

And does that mean that you live you live? Do you live in the community?

BT 1:03

As a matter of fact, I live here but before I worked here I worked hours at Pine Bluff Commercial. I worked here for 18 years, I started off as a as a beat reporter, and it became regional editor then with regional editor, I made a great transition regional editor to advertising very often, that was those animals that I had opportunity to get the paper here. And I've been here since 2002. So I do live in the community, I live outside of Rison. And I am one of those folks who has issues with internet service outside of town. So I experienced firsthand, a lot of people that are in the same situation, which is about what by the way, most of the people in this county have very limited access now. Just to kind of explain the lay of the land. And you'll probably see this talk some other folks too. A lot of us try our best, especially people like myself who need to work from home on occasion. We we've gone out in for myself, I have a DSL line to my house. And on a good day, I'll get one meg. And what I did, I went ahead and also bought a hotspot and it depends on the signal. But I can get a bit better with it yet, but you're limited. And you don't want to use all your data in so you work with the constraints as as an employee working outside of the county, but as for someone who's going to be a subscriber, a consumer digital product of visual newspaper is gonna be really, really limited. We actually keep that consciously in our minds, we put things together understanding that a lot of people outside of our immediate area talk about Rison is going to struggle to be able to handle anything that's for instance video related anything's got a lot of graphics and will take a long time to download all those issues like so a lot of our subscribers do though they ask them do you know E-Harold

addition, we have a digital edition of the the paper, was to get on their cell phone, which is a little bit of much faster connection speed and what they get at home.

MS 3:30

And I was gonna ask you more specific questions about sort of your digital landscape later. But now that you brought it up, so when you are making your sort of online edition, you said that you would say a majority of your readers of the digital edition do so on their phones has that impacted the way that you've sort of designed the layout, do you do more of a,

BT 3:47

you believe it or not yes it does, to some degree now the digital edition we had, it is just simply the pages we send our printer converted over. Now the platform we get we do we are conscious and make sure they can do it, you know, on a mobile device. And that has been helpful to us he knows well the fact that we don't have to this rate design per se, to like add going back to our website, we do the same thing and it makes sure it has a good transition over the mobile understanding that you know it's going to be snuggled like it is on our screen here and always on with a desktop computer 24 inch screen or whatever might be but understand is going to listen to like a handheld device, whether it's a tablet, or whether it would be a you know, a phone, whatever it might be. So we got to get you know, that's what we always got to consider and look at that thing going forward. Now. We are conscious will replace ads, because when you're scrolling up and down, we will make sure they can see it so we we actually make sure we'll actually test it to make sure that the ad will see that Word the placement of it is on a mobile device. A mobile device will actually take priority over our desktop stuff and make sure that the mobile because that's what most people see anyway, when it comes to place on website, it it, it takes where we place it in on the desktop.

MS 5:20

Okay. And backing up a little bit. What's the circulation for your publication?

BT

Were about 1600.

MS

And is that just strictly your print? Or is that print and digital subscriptions?

BT 5:31

Besides printing and everything? Well, matter of fact, we probably have about I can't, the guy usually helps me, that's the guy he keeps up with my digital product. We're about 400 that get our E Herald edition right now. And I would say we probably have about 50 that are E Herald only we're seeing that we're good. And on that note, even though being in a rural area, We are seeing more people transition just to E herald.

MS 6:00

But the overwhelming numbers is still print only?

BT 6:04

Oh, yes, it's still, it's typically you know print, we're in a rural area. A lot of people are older, and they like the paper product. I can tell you this, when the Arkansas democratic gazette transitioned over to that all digital platform, All of a sudden, we started getting calls from our subscribers wanting to know when we are going to do that. Well first of all I don't have a million dollars to invest in that software, but I say we do have a product like that. I will give the Democrat Gazette credit because they've actually opened the door. Once I guess they got familiar with it once they got over the fear of using electronic device, they like it. That's one good thing about it you can make that print as large as you want to.

So we've actually seen a much more a greater acceptance of the digital product versus the traditional print product once the Democrat Gazette launched their digital platform.

MS 7:11

That's interesting.

BT 7:13

Yeah, it was very actually I was expecting that. And they actually embraced it. They were not rebelling against it whatsoever. They actually asked you for requesting it. I consider it a positive.

MS 7:26

Absolutely. So are a lot of would you say a lot of your subscribers also subscribe to the DEM gas.

BT 7:33

Fairly, we have quite a few that do crossover to both of them. Because they'll mention to me, you know, we got this Democrat because it's that Ipad thing when are you going to do that. So I explain to them we don't quite have that much but we have something that is still very much like that. And so you know, the Democrat Gazette, they have that platform they use is just over the top really fast. But we had to play with static beta, you could do some stuff with it. I use a company. It's called Direction. They're up in St. Louis. And they're the ones that put my digital copy together and do a good job with it.

MS 8:09

So tell me a little bit more about your subscription options, what packages sort of do you offer, and the fees is

BT 8:17

a principal subscription automatically get the E Herald, the digital copy. And then we started we make it a deliberate push to do more digital copies. Because then when you have a digital copy, you don't have to run the print press you don't have to put it in the mail. And that's it be honest with you, this whole digital thing is triggered by the mail. And the mail is pathetic. I mean, that's our other than employment, that's your largest expense for the newspaper. You know, I just wrote a check yesterday is 230 bucks. For a little small paper like me you multiply that by 52 weeks. That's a lot of money. And so what you're seeing is, is that we could produce our paper on digital scale, and distributed digitally, that's gonna save us money in printing number and number two on postage. So that's what we're trying to do. We've actually offered some packages,

or not packages, or discounts on our Eherald subscription, just to perhaps get some folks to join out. We're trying to grow that number. Number one we're trying to grow with our existing print customer to get them to transition to it. And number two, we're trying to grow digital only as well. So we're trying to get our readership to to jump on board the digital edition and I have found once people try it they like it. But going back to you're not sitting at home, pulling up on your internet because the internet will it will do it, but it's a little bit slower. And If it's slow people aren't willing to do it. But But the bottom line is that thanks to the street and cell signals in this region, we're able to deliver on this on the smartphone device and, and that's where most are doing it anyway. You're younger than I am you probably live to do transactions on your phone.

MS 10:24

No, absolutely.

BT 10:26

As I get older I know I have to have a phone but it's not like I am like oh I can't wait to get on my phone to look through everything. I use a phone as a phone, that's what I use it for, but some of the older folks like to just like me, but the younger folks are utilizing their smartphone to the houses and things like that. And so, you know, we're trying to get ourselves in that and the guy that helps me, he's younger hes in his early 30s. And he gets that. And so we're trying to combine my philosophy with his philosophy and come up with something that works. We are very conscious going back when I told you earlier, we're conscious now of anything, we do something with our website, which translates over to the mobile device. It takes a priority over the desktop, the web version.

MS 11:16

And speaking of your website, I noticed it doesn't seem like you have any sort of paywalls blocking. Seeing stories on the website

BT 11:22

No we don't and let me tell you why that is. In this part of the state, don't ask me why we're in Southeast Arkansas, and this is not you know, we're not in Northwest Arkansas. Okay. It comes with booming economies. But guess where the very first digital community news sites started? Right here. I have one in Drew County, my neighbor, which is matter of fact two of my neighbors in the South. Drew counties has one or two, their neighbor Bradley County has one. Okay. And so what I've done, I basically that's my defense is to get my newspaper and I have a condensed version of the newspaper stories on there at the same time when the builds in traffic with that. We also do try make sure our, our website as light as possible so people out in the rural areas will be able to open it up. And so it's more defensive than it is offensive. Talking about it. We're also trying to look at the transition, we'll do more digital stuff too.

MS 12:38

That's great. No, I think I'm just taking sort of a glance over your website. It's I mean, I think it's great. I think it's really easy to sort of navigate and read and

BT 12:48

Believe me I feel it a lot of times but we did it in house we're not a cookie cutter. We don't use one of the subscription services he's ever used. You see one you see all you know, but we've actually found a WordPress site and we developed it and want to put our own touches on it. And so what you see is actually done in house a little different in that aspect because a lot of these small papers will go you know, town news and the other companies big companies that provide these websites they do that but I always look if I could do it in house and get the look of looking for literally do it in houses saves me a lot of money to do it anyway.

MS 13:30

Sure. So sort of speaking about your website and your E edition. Do you do you all utilize any sort of analytics to monitor your traffic to online stories

BT 13:40

are our lakes is getting on our jetpack with our website and look at plus we do have a calendar on who looks at what transition over the other aspect of our business is our Facebook page. We don't have Instagram page or Twitter anything I have I do have a Facebook page and that also gives us a good indication of feedback on the story sometimes I'm very shocked at what stories gain more traffic. Now what I think is important is not what the public thinks is important sometimes and there's stories that just blow up and was not seeing it coming from anywhere and then sometimes we I feel like people with with really get excited about a story they don't get excited about it at all. I mean it's crazy and that does give me a better judge and I always look at the numbers that are on their Facebook page because you can see interact you can see you know comments from people and not allow comments on my website. And the reason I do that is because a very very small community and everybody knows everybody and Digg is personal sometimes you want to talk about so I said I'm not gonna be part of that paper and Facebook page, they can have a free for all if they want to. So But I do try to, you know, keep those things in the Facebook page gives us a good barometer. What stories getting most traffic bugs getting the most interaction. And we can just go buy some things off of that. As far as, I guess you call it. We research.

MS 15:22

What kinds of stories get the most traffic and engagement usually

BT 15:26

is crazy. Sometimes the thing you really think I can't remember so the ones who get big response from that are really really big. Oh, give you an example. We had a bear come into town here recently he was running around we have there in a region you'll think of south Arkansas there but there's it came to the town and stuff like that takes off this explodes. Yeah, I have a story about you know, acid for military excretion schools, which is a cost people money and it gets so so you're talking about, we had in the early days of COVID, we have a community health officer here to his a doctor is Dr. Mark Atwood, and even very, very proactive as far as getting information out and we were his platform for that. Whenever he first arrives, we had by way implant the whole story we give her by free access to it, we had that once we posted on Facebook, a link to our website, it had over 175,000

MS

Wow.

BT

And that's a lot from a small paper. Like, that's all Yeah, you know, those type things got a lot of traction, especially early on with it, nobody knew anything about it, you know, do you know how dangerous is going to be and all this stuff and people apprehensive you know, about possibly contracts and and so we've had anything from there and, and again, his stories that, you know, being a trained journalist, you know, just covering you know, county government, local government school boards with these things are important people need to know about it don't translate to the general public. They aren't always on the same page as we are. Turn that around to I've also found that the same stories are received differently in different communities. I have two school districts I cover Woodlawn. And, rather than from what is gets so so traffic in, in rather than I'm actually double on the same top story about Woodlawn from Woodlawn is kind of crazy that works out like Yeah, so I don't think it's necessary to paint with a broad stroke that this type story gives this counter reaction I think it goes down to the individual communities and just how engage those people are within that community as well. So it's kind of a Enigma it's not cut draft play at the year and I didn't look at it you know from time to time and now you have a website we have a counter thing called jetpacks portal as part of the a WordPress you can kind of track not only you get to see you know, how many hits you're getting the jealousy to see where they're coming from what platforms are using, you know, we get a lot of people from you know, cross assays that used to live here that access the paper and and all that kind of good stuff. So there's quite a bit out there man back like I got on the phone I should kind of look at some of these merit back I forgot to post over the Kansas City Council had to postpone their meeting so I didn't do that. But it's kind of just looking through here at some of the things I'm looking at. You know, I got a story here about play mechanics good to stay on the five day school week. That's where we got quite a bit of attraction what was school board pretty lengthy meeting or discussion of Bob meal increase? And they're discussing the other business that was routine business like you know where they're gonna go for a week or five a week? Well, the village would you call them some money out of their pocket or pass it to get as much traffic as they school we'd say is the same school district stories or week apart? So you've seen stuff like Janek come from our Facebook page. And it just is really really crazy. House all over the place and things again, without that would be you know, will read or will receive or very hot topics are necessary like Yes.

MS 19:52

No, I understand. We can look at the analytics all day but sometimes what audiences want to read there's really no way to predict it right

BT 19:59

now It's not that I can tell you this much, generally speaking, is not what we think is not what we say usually is going to be some is kind of unusual, something it's, you know, a little bit unique, some of his kind of personal interests of the thing flashed up last year, something like that, that seems to get more traction sometimes. And the routine news that we think, you know, it is important, obviously, they do know that but Iraq, would you call the I was in here, visiting was one of our candidates running for county judge. And we were talking about, you know, the the

general populace in those who go vote elections. They go in there without knowing who the candidate czar. And he was talking about one candidate said he didn't want to find period was and he said was in the papers, why don't get the paper? He said, Well, yeah, that'd be the other with a file. You know, things like yet. So, you know, we tried here to here, we try to do a real good job in this. And when it comes to things like that, I want to, to me, this is me, this is my philosophy. I prefer that the newspaper, do as much as you can to inform as many people as possible, even those who don't necessary, put the bcmc in the Bama, not paper, still BDCs paper still one with the informed that's reasonable to do some things, you know, website, or we do some things on Facebook, to try to inform them as possible. We want that to weigh that 100 175,000 piece. That was a public service for us when the entire COVID store them as a paper free on a website. And so you know, those things we try and it is what's one of the positive about as you can get information out quickly.

MS 22:02

That's true. Yeah. I'd like to shift gears a little bit to talk about what Internet access is sort of generally like there in Rison. Do you remember when you first got home internet?

BT 22:14

Just repeat that again?

MS 22:15

Do you remember when you first got home internet?

BT 22:18

Yes, it did not go up and we're a step above that. Barely. And down here the ALB As always, this is going to be labeling for us here. A good day with my office is about 15. Okay, okay. That's a good day. I think these US standards 25 To be considered high speed DSL. Okay, so a little bit below that when you get outside of Rison proper with the equipment and course when it comes to internet, signal string, it depends on how close you are in these candidates and these other devices that actually generate the get the signal and the further you wave this signal in the you know how many people tap it in that signal determines how much of street you got now at home. At the end of the day, the road live about four and a half miles out of town. And I live on unpaved road, three quarter miles off of the secondary highway. And atomic is to me. On good days. I'll have one day. Wow. Okay, so that's what we're looking at right there. Now, the company here locally. If you're gonna find Yes, some, some some communities make a different demand. Everybody holds our local provider or small companies. company owes us right now. It's called arco. They're based in Missouri. Just north the Arkansas, Missouri line and get the name of Seneca, Missouri, to kind of the words of a bit unveil and dealt with this area down there. And they own and we're the largest property they have is leaving Kelly telephone company in so you can imagine the resources they have. The family owns of like yeah, so they don't run talking big companies. And we're stuck with what we can, you know, get out in the end. We have where we were awarded a grant to get fiber optic here which will give us Windows install would give us one gig capabilities which is unheard of. Now, one of the aspects most people never talk about as a better business. But I'm I'm a little different animal because I own the paper editor and publisher and ad guy and everything else too. One of the big things about internet access in small communities is it limits what businesses can come Would that make you

here example radix ordinay was the old pharmacy been there for 7080 years, when he found out he cannot do scripting anymore by telephone, he had to do them online and digitally, he got into business. So guess what we were without a pharmacy for about five, six years. In finally someone came over here and got it after the high speed. So DSL is available here that you can actually do the business. So it really limits your local economy as well. You know, if you're moving here tomorrow, you know, I give example, my own business, when I get ready to send my newspaper over to Monticello reprinted, and I can't do anything else with the paper, I can't do anything on my own computer. I mean, I gotta wait for it. If I want to grab a check to pay for my postage on that week's newspaper, now, we'll do QuickBooks Online. While I sit here and wait, it might take me five to 10 minutes to check. Just because the internet's that slow. So it really limits you on the business aspect. You know what to think about getting it out to the readers, but also just the back it stymies the potential for business develop in these small communities as well. You have a business that needs has been, which is a pharmacy, you know, they had to do everything digitally now. And so therefore, they're limited, where they can go, they don't have that infrastructure in place, they can't do it. So we're really looking forward, we might get this high speed internet, which is only going to be though in town is not going to impact those folks outside of town. It's just gonna be in Rison problem in case of providence in two communities we have in Cleveland County that are incorporated.

MS 26:54

Have they given you all a timeline when that installation should be,

BT 26:58

of course, under the stories? Yeah, and they were awarded the grant. And they run now getting the preliminary engineering work done. And hopefully within a year, we'll start seeing it actually going into the ground. So we start getting it. And then one other problem we have with our internet again, we are the person who is buying this from another provider. It is not unusual to lose our internet service here, four or five times a year, sometimes for over a day. Okay, sometimes for two hours, sometimes for an afternoon. Just across town, we're talking about nuts, zero is cut off, and they may be a god, this digging a ditch in Dallas, Texas, he is alive. They were not often rise in Arkansas, this happened. But there's a bridge and over the Watchtower river outside of Arkadelphia. Somebody did something somewhere. And guess what we'll also our internet service in Rison. And so is disrupted. It's slow. It's frustrating. So I kind of paint a picture for you What is life in small tail if you're probably not the only person in this boat, because, you know, like you're looking at small towns that have limited area to study doing. But it is a huge issue. And it's not just with readership is also with the ability for these communities to thrive as far as new business are concerned because you got to have.

MS 28:38

Absolutely. So when did your publication develop your E edition and your website?

BT 28:46

I would say you know, trying to think I'll tell my head. A really I get serious about it probably about six or seven years ago. We wanted to make sure I had a bit of a defensive mechanism to make sure we came in here and open up a community website MySpace community news site has gone down. Recall that newspapers are not a newspaper but you aren't talking about it would

be keeping any news side that would be in competition with me. And let me tell you, David successful competitive guy get my newspaper print in Monticello. They're the very first victims of this guy there. I mean, anytime anybody wanted something, they made sure they were on that model so alive versus the newspaper website.

MS 29:40

So was it sort of like a blog?

BT 29:43

Yeah, what else he said is, he was a minister, I believe it when the churches went around this gas camera out and started making filming things and putting on MonoSol lab and next thing you know, blew up In all the traffic and if I could do it, you know, that'd be journalism training. And that's what's that's what's crazy about it is that you're suspect you're susceptible to anyone wanting to do it.

MS

If you said that's not something you've personally experienced that would rise

BT

but I made sure the perspective I live in the county right now, allegedly our population is now it's 76. Okay, we're primarily close to eight.

But still we don't have a real, real real deal. Rely on our county. Okay, to get a good grasp over looking at here. Retail base years old, our primary target. However, I do have one of the better demographics as far as disposable income, things like that. You know, a lot of people here own their own businesses, they have chicken farms that are over huge investments, their teachers they may work in one of the big plants or something pretty good money. And so our demographics years fortunately economic scale is a little bit more lucrative and it would typically be in some of the other surrounding counties. So therefore it is attractive market value, make sure that you stay on top of that, the source of everything.

MS

So I know that your E edition is just sort of a PDF version of your print edition. But as far as what stories go in print versus go on your website. And they all go on your website.

BT

Okay. condensed version of our of our front page stories on there. It might be like it might be a baby, born on a good day might be afford the paper, sometimes, maybe a third week and clearly, we're talking Nathan core, it's just this guy and I like do the editing for that. Scott worked for me. He was full snippets from there and got together the story, but for the rest of it now as far as things inside we do not give example but we don't we have a page called other days. Is very very popular is the former publisher easy curious, traditional and and he still does. He's been doing for the last 20 years. What he does he goes back and happened to teach we ate bad years ago. And paragraphs that kind of summarize stories you know, we actually utilize them. Very, very popular about paper often in competitions, you know, journal companies, these companies is

always brassiere photography. We love that. People love your logo as well. So we do not put that anywhere. This is basically only on the presentation can be your condition. So there are things we did keep. Why is that? A great product or?

MS

Alright, now sort of since we've been talking about this for a while, my my big picture question is what sort of specific steps or strategies have you implemented towards making your online content more accessible?

BT

Well, if for some things, we've done it it had done poorly continues. This is simply because show you how we do. Print the paper, get it printed. As we get through it all production side. The next thing we do is you will take those stories are going on to the website. It'll publish those on the Facebook page. So if you use it for our Facebook page communicating, you'll find it you'll see a little snippet there about what the story is on the website and you click on the website. So it's the front door and that way people know where to get the website update as well. We only do it once a week and the big happens when we're together on the website. The website is still secondary to the paper and trying to make it worse people to pay for if you follow the talking about teaching that were opposed to that inside repoint download the free copies based want to fade away, go away eventually. For small papers. It won't be as quick as this for the big papers. Just the nature of the base class clientele and things like that. But the visually transition out that so more and more emphasis on what's happening digitally, you know, generate revenue for the worst thing that we can do digitally you can't do in the newspaper. So I really make that transition. So on that aspect. What I'm doing is I'm actually becoming much more digitally focused. And other equation was where we do and to create more access is basically what we're doing right now, which is actually the front door for a social media platform which leads to our digital website and not necessarily description base. That's political, the paywall you're talking about, but like and to be honest, I've actually talked about this make the website its own animal that's got the URL in it, but it's got stuff that the URL doesn't have. And it's his own animal as well and it was his own almost his own business. And so I'm willing to try to staff and myself what other we do that between reporting and covering stories. If your phone calls back in the office, reply me You know, I work with our commercial viewer, the sixth largest newspaper in Arkansas all I had one thing I got to do as a reporter I was ever director and I did talk about what the I was modeling. I used to work at a county government and did business for a while, but over the years a small town you will want it was all these type of work and things that are actually just taking care of the office. And so you got to pick your fights and try strategize and fit into base you can still have a product is worthy out there.

Madi Stephens

Sure, um, I think I should have asked this earlier, but do you have I'm not sure if you have the exact data but do you have any kind of guess or estimate of what percentage of sort of your community has home internet access?

BT

No, be I don't have the exact numbers on that. But that stories on it we are one the least connected. Families connected doesn't mean they don't have access at home. What can I say is

the poorest quality Okay, so we go look at that everyone had this way we were the with the bottom of a steak but at the bottom. So it kind of gives you that good idea where we're at on the big, big big issue. We talked about what we do have it and when it's not there, you know it goes away constantly because to backhaul to 100 miles it's so it's always an issue but we don't have this. I don't have numbers per se, but I can say we duly ranked with the bottom.

Madi Stephens

Now I have a couple sort of like I said big picture questions. I hope you'll bear with me for a minute we'll ask you some some philosophical things. Such as like what responsibility do you think publishers have to their readers generally?

BT

Repeat the last point.

Madi Stephens

What responsibility do publishers of newspapers have to their audience to their community?

BT

Very much so it's more for myself. This is this reasoning keep the paper frankly, because these paper when I bought it 20 years ago. I'm a fraction of public records back. I made it a fraction was that the reason I went to papers that they deploy, it's raising community and there he is and community legitimacy. Okay, when that goes away, what's left? It's a free for all. So number one, I think is responsibility as a publisher, in the lab, even the newspaper with the point that it's no longer financially feasible to run it. I still want to have another business that will support me but I can still do. So to me, it's very, very critical that a community has a newspaper that's really in a nice shape. To me, it's first and foremost that we do all we can to make sure it has newspaper now I'm a different animal. I am although we're all always tell people in New York so pre association meetings. Second check my corporate board, Bilbo Bilbo about that that's what's nice about being here. I can basically go further than overtly on paper, that you talk to some other peers who are working for corporate papers. It's different as they cut the cord and there's not another revenue. But to me personally, we got to make carry on somehow, some way.

Madi Stephens

And sort of in that it did and it was great. Thank you. Um, what does accessibility mean to you?

BT

Accessibility in what context?

Madi Stephens

I'd say in the context of news consumption

BT

to me when it comes to accessibility, I would say with all the core aspects of the way a local community works. I was planning to go to the King City Council meeting not Caitlyn. Less 400 people, but isn't these type of results really be they're going to happen? Most likely, okay. But they need to be there in the community, and plus, give people an idea what's going on. You need

to you need to have coverage. Every This is My pockets are accessible. Every meeting is somehow covered so they know what's going on in their local communities with the City Council with the county government, school board. Those are the three big ones and small communities that they need to have covered that is the bare minimum. In addition to that, they support you cover sports, because this point community from historical aspects especially those to me, are the least accessible. Sure.

BT 12:24

So it's fast what successful What about accessible, accessible, accessible

so about as far as acceptable from a visual perspective, what I have now and minimal Okay,

at least what have now is the combination that was that was married providing a good product for the advertiser. We're about just going to a handful people with

7000 or 8000. I tell how we need to have something that bridges to your advertising and to me with the way it is right now, I would say probably be like a balance when it gets below that, number one, are you really really effective audience. Advertisers have enough subscribers to sustain the business so they need to be able to match accounting situation would be acceptable.

### Andrew Bagley Interview

Madi Stephens 0:05

Okay, I know that Ashley's told you a little bit about what I'm doing and what this project is, but I sort of just wanted to reiterate that I am doing interviews with the staff and publishers of newspapers that serve rural communities here in Arkansas, and I'm talking to them through about how lack of Internet access might affect how readership, access your digital content. So I'm really trying to get questions of how you sort of your publication is producing this digital content while also balancing this idea of ensuring that your readership has access.

Andrew Bagley 0:44

Well, there's not much I can do, to connect at the mercy of the site, things that the customers are when it comes to broadband Internet access when we have one provider that actually get to run a fiber optic line to the office, and that's it. And they would charge me 500 a month for fiber service. So that leaves me with the cable company suddenlink or at&t DSL to choose from that we can afford. And if I can't afford it, at my home or at my business, there's a ton of people that will not be able to afford it. And then they'll be forced to eat and get the SAL a lot of people are using their phones as their for their internet service.

MS 1:41

Let's back up just a little bit if you don't mind. How long have you worked in the news industry?

AB 1:46

Well, that's an interesting story. Other than you know, I was a stringer for many years writing sports stories on the case. Partner and put the deal together to buy this paper in nine days with in

house media and asked them to close and so we are saved close to announce the video on September the ninth of 2019 that we were purchasing the editorial assets and had to get a paper out by September the 18th. We had planned to hire the existing gatehouse editor. He decided to stay with gatehouse and I looked up and I had a full time job. Okay, wow.

MS 2:37

You hear about newspapers, wearing a lot of hats but that's quite the transition.

AB 2:43

It has been a it's been a wild ride.

MS 2:48

So do you live in Helena? Yes, you do. Okay, great. And what is the circulation for your paper?

AB 2:58

We are averaging well last year. In calendar year 2021. We average 932 a week.

MS 3:06

And is that just your print or is that also your online subscribers?

AB 3:10

We have about 36 that are online. Our subscription price comes with both okay.

MS 3:20

So tell me a little bit more about your subscription packages. So you do a print and an online only but it also comes with both start just run down

AB 3:28

out of the print edition. That's how they get it down. We have some that just don't want to print. We have some that's driving print edition but don't take advantage of their online access of the brilliant one over because just frustrated trying to deal but if you subscribe for any like the time of great six to 12 months that you get access to both if you want it the only product we have that is exclusively electronic is we have some people that want to just really wants to and so we have what we call a weekly access pass to the website for today. Okay and then that's kind of the equivalent of the rack sale to retail outlets.

MS 4:19

Okay, so tell me a little bit more about your website. So is this are all the stories behind a paywall or? Yes,

AB 4:28

yes, we put everything behind the paywall. We just, you know, I'll be honest with you, I think Walter Hussman, it's The Democrat Gazette, is right. We don't need to give it away our content. You know that if you don't want to pay for the news, eventually you got to pay for not having Sure. So we've decided if you want our stuff, then you gotta you gotta fight for it. And you

know, people talk about like Google and Facebook and they're not reliable. You just get a bunch of friends.

MS 5:04

When did y'all develop an online edition and a website?

AB 5:08

Shortly as soon as we got a print edition up and running. We started working on building a website, I think by sometime in October of 19. We had a basic website. And I mean, we're quite proud of what we've done. We won an award from website last year. You know, it has taken off and we've got a ton of people to try to access it, not by scripts. So that's given us a lot of email address. You know, we've sent works breaking news.

MS 5:47

So prior to when you all bought the paper when it was still owned by sort of the parent company, there was not a website for it.

AB 5:54

There was a website, but it followed the gatehouse to all their websites.

MS 6:01

Okay. I understand and was there also any addition

AB 6:05

so there was not any additional

MS 6:07

Okay, that's something that y'all just did. That's something that y'all implemented when you bought the paper.

AB 6:14

Yes, we it took a while but we we put a PDF up on the print edition every week. Okay.

MS 6:23

So I want to talk a little bit more about your audience. So how do you determine which stories your audiences will be interested in?

AB 6:32

Well, what we have found, of course, that for our audience, the driving force is hoping they won't local content about what's happening in this community. We do put some IP stuff on the website, but the bulk of what we do is locally driven and of course, all that goes goes to the web as a subset of that local stuff. You know, we've gotten a lot of positive reactions about our sports coverage. And then what the numbers show the sales is that our audience has an appetite for

gremlins. It's unfortunate but if you have a violent crime across the top there's a spike in sightings.

MS 7:27

Yeah, absolutely. Do you all use any kind of Analytics to track your online audiences or viewership or trends?

AB 7:35

I have an independent contractor who was an intern for us this past summer that is working on analyzing data from the website. This give me some idea you're dealing with a very small organization here. I'm not drawing a salary from from from Peter. We have two paid full time employees once in bookkeeping, and one is in the editorial side, doing the graphic design as well. And then I have three independent contractors to the right and more than handle social media. Okay.

MS 8:19

And now if you don't mind, I'd like to go a little bit more to just general questions about internet and what that's like where you are. So do you remember the first time that you got internet access in your home?

AB 8:33

Yeah, I was still married to my first wife and it was dial up.

MS 8:37

Gotcha. And when when around when was that?

AB 8:43

That would have been 2001.

MS 8:46

And when did you switch to so at&t Is your current provider. When did you switch to them?

AB 8:52

Oh, I'm going back and forth between the cable and at&t Depending on where I lived. When we moved into my current wife and I moved into this house in 2010 to work for it MCs we've been on we got on at&t Internet, when she was forced into retirement from them. Which was suddenlink because it is a bit fast.

MS 9:22

Okay, so you do have an option?

AB 9:26

Yes, we have choices like cable company and. And I TMT I've got at&t here at the office. I'm real close. To what I call the center of operations. Still I get a pretty good signal, but neither one

are like fiber. Okay, but I TMT just is just charging us to these rural communities that knows to get access to five.

MS 9:56

Now, are there plans in place? I've talked to a few other newspapers and they've said that with sort of the federal grants coming in, they have plans to get fiber in their towns pretty soon. Are there plans like that in Helena?

AB 10:09

They are in the very earliest stages and planning I'm sure that we'll be able to vote together because some of the early estimates to bring fiber to the Hope City would require \$2.8 million. And you would be you know, if somebody brought in a reasonably priced fiber provider, at&t and suddenly you're not going like that so I'm not so sure that they're going to just go away.

MS 10:47

So you said you're sort of in the center close to the center of operation so your speeds are okay, but generally speaking for the community, how would you characterize the internet speed?

AB 10:57

Sure. Okay. And if we ever get into doing more video, loads of programming like that from our office, to DSL is not going to be sufficient.

MS 11:16

So what would you say that you use the internet the most for in your personal life?

AB 11:19

In my personal life,

MS 11:22

outside of paper,

AB 11:26

everything I check my email, you know, my other job I I'm checking stuff for that. Looking at news articles that I'm just reading you know, it's it's with me all the time. Unfortunately, now I missed the days when we left the phone in the car because you something all the time. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, it's just non stop.

MS 11:59

Now you might not have this data. So an estimate is is perfectly fine. But do you have an idea of how much of your town in sort of your general audience has access to internet and high speed internet?

AB 12:14

Of course that would, first of all depend on how you want to find access and has to be sure that's fair. within the city limits, I think everybody is there willing to write a check for can't get access to DSL okay.

MS 12:30

Is everybody right in the check for it? Is that something that everyone in the job,

AB 12:33

okay? No, because we are we have a large population that is in poverty. But they are making choices between food and medicine in many cases, and are unable to have Wi Fi to house and so consequently they're resorting to the data packages that are coming on their phone, which used up very quick if you watch one TV show on your phone, your data packages is done. So there is a huge connectivity gap. Between those of reasonable financial means and those that are in poverty. So it's not really access, although I'm sure the government would say most of our people have access. Then we'll get into what is high speed cable companies as their high speed. Well, they're faster than the DSA. But they're not fine.

MS 13:37

That's fair. So keeping in mind that a large percentage sort of of your readership if they are able to access your digital content they're doing so on their phone has that shaped your digital strategy in any way?

AB 13:50

That is something I have talked with our independent contractor about the mobile appearance of the website. And it's something we're constantly working on and tweaking, you know, none of us are experts in this and I can't afford so we're kind of hard and on the fly.

MS 14:13

So let's talk about your social media a little bit. What platforms do y'all utilize and how do you use them?

AB 14:20

We are utilizing Facebook Twitter and Instagram. Gotcha. And we're basically utilize to put phasers out of the stories that we've posted to try to get people to go to the websites. We do occasionally give away a story for free. All of our posts typically have a picture associated. But that's the bulk of what we're doing. If there's a bright convinced thing like we had a bank robbery, I gotta pay to the scene and you know, put something up before that area. We'll have more details. Into website when we get back.

MS 15:03

Okay, great. So now let's get back to the idea of the website. So of your platforms, you've got your your print package, and then you have your E edition, which is just a PDF of the print of what you produce the brand. And then you have your website. How do you decide which stories do all of the stories that appear in print? Are they all on your website?

AB 15:25

Most of the stories that appear in print our there are some things that we have been printed that we don't have a separate way of entering the comics bikes, crossword puzzles, those are are a print three

set of binders. There's a lot of stuff that goes on the web though this is not in print.

A week and of course most of it is nice, loose or tight. But we are updating several days a week between papers.

MS 16:04

Now would you say when you are putting the paper together and you have a story, are you going to hold it on the website until it goes out? And print or do you put things on the website first? Or does it just depend?

AB 16:17

That's on a case by case basis. And of course some of it is how quickly I can get it written because I'm doing a lot of the writing. In addition but like last night to have an emergency. I will probably hold that for Brent. No way and see. And of course the E edition posts on Tuesday and we start posting notice those stories, sometimes teams. But when I have the regular suit board meeting on the second Monday after my addition for the week is already gone. And if they do something extremely important or extremely stupid, then we might go ahead and put it on the website. The same way would be like if we're in that same time period in the week, and there's a big murder case. We might go ahead and put it on the website. So it's a case by case calm. Sometimes we do it sometimes we don't.

MS 17:29

But generally speaking, if it's like a breaking news situation, you would put it on the website before

AB 17:34

at least at least something.

MS 17:37

Okay. Now I hope you'll bear with me for a second. I've got a couple philosophical questions. For you. So as what sort of responsibilities do you think newspapers have to their audience?

AB 17:50

We have a responsibility to make sure that we keep them as informed about what is going on as possible. If if the government leaders are acted inappropriately, if deals are going down and don't pass the smell test, the public should know about that, whether whether they get mad at us about it or not. And sometimes in order to raise awareness of issues we've had to push the envelope and I've gotten into hot water caused a subscribe button and I'll get into time. We have a very bad Animal Control crop in this community that has been several years long running. Our city is not contributed anything to Animal Control, which is the local humane society is shut down because its director just recently was arrested on over 200 counts of felony animal cruelty. Apparently hoarding animals out there. So we have no animal control. And they're there. They're several packs of dolphins that you can see as you ride around the neighborhood. And one of them was here around the pipe and they went running around the building one day and that was don't get picked. Well, most of them can run in but two of them stopped in the alley to engage in rather

passionate business while third wants and that was the picture. And so then the city council, around the same time refuses the mayor's request for Animal Control funding initiatives but we ran the pitch with the headline on it out of control. You would not believe the response was some thought it was a good thing because we got people talking other stuff that I was the Smart Traveler like Larry Flynt. But I think it was our responsibility because the problem has gotten so bad the city continues to ignore it to spark debate. And so we also think we have responsibility since to quote Les Brown, the like posters, Washington Post, we write the first rough draft face of this community, and so we have a responsibility to try to tell them even the sob stories by birth naps are important. baby showers are important weddings, and engagements, and honor rolls and all those things and I think a community based paper has responsibility to publish those and put them out there for posterity. So the only thing we're still charging for things like that is an obituary and we cut the couple's when we took over from adults.

MS 20:57

So when we're talking about things like responsibility, what responsibility do you think newspapers have to ensure that their work is accessible to audiences?

AB 21:07

Well, we need to try to make it affordable. We can't do it for free. advertising models no longer work for you to essentially giveaway to subgroups. So but we do make try to make it as affordable as possible. Okay, we need to try to be in as many retail outlets as possible so people don't have to go searching for it. We do need to have online only options for somebody can sit at home and never get out. If they want to read it over we also have to be profitable. Because if we can't make money, we can't put reporters in the field and we can't be the ones leaving.

MS 21:53

Now I know that you've said your actions on the front of specifically making digital content accessible, or sort of hindered by your Wi Fi options in the community and that is largely out of your hands. But for the scope of sort of what I'm focusing on, have there been steps that you have taken specifically in an effort to make your online and digital content more accessible?

AB 22:15

What started to make it more user friendly? Okay, those that access the website were sadly tried to. For instance, we we we still have bound volumes of microphone back to 1985 I don't know what happened the rest of them. There are some microfilm copies going back to 1914. So we've started trying to scan things we have at the office and they go into an archive that subscribers can get to on the website and we've been trying to make that more user friendly. Where you can find a certain addition without having to take and we have mastered that. But that's one way we're trying to make it work since we're trying to we just did a redesign of the website in the hopes that it's more now for the for somebody in their 70s Like my mother but that is not texting where we're just a little bit of searching that I can figure out where to find things. So I think we have responsibility to do is to try to come up with a way that's not overly complex. For the for the non tech savvy person to try to access.

Ellen Kreth Interview

MS 0:04

Okay. So I know Ashley's told you a little bit, but what for my project, I am doing interviews with staff of newspapers who are serving rural communities here in Arkansas, and talking about how a lack of Internet access might affect digital news consumption. So really, I'm trying to get at questions of how rural newsrooms are balancing this push to produce digital content with while still ensuring access for the readership who are sort of experiencing internet insecurity. So just to start off, how long have you worked in the industry?

Ellen Kreth 0:38

So I've owned the newspaper going on 21 years, it was in my family. But before that, I worked at the Arkansas Democrat Gazette. And I got out of, lets see, College and got married in 1990. So how long is that? I took a brief hiatus to go to law school, so many years. Yeah.

MS 0:58

And you've been with the Madison County record, you said it was in your family. So for around that long?

EK 1:03

20 years, at least? Yes. And as I owned it sit for 20 years, but it's been in my family a lot longer.

MS 1:09

And you don't live in Madison County? Of course,

EK 1:11

I don't. I go back and forth. But I have a home there. Okay. Yeah. So when I go, I say, and my mom pretty much splits her time in between little rock and there. And

MS 1:20

so she's there. Is your family from there? Or?

EK

Yes,

EK 1:25

yes, we're from Madison County. And so we just moved down here when I was young, but they still have a family home up there. And both my grandparents were up there. So I mean, Madison county in the summers, that's where I was all the time.

MS 1:38

Now, what is the circulation for the Madison County Record

EK 1:42

so about 4000. But what's interesting is we also count, you know, are digital subscribers. And we have to do a postal report each year to kind of verify our circulation. And each year, we're impressed with the growth of the digital subscriber. And we also have a newsletter. Now they're

not subscriptions, but we do send out newsletters each week. And we have 1000s of people who receive our newsletter. So, you know, format for a rural county. We're okay with the digital subscriptions, they can be better, but we're okay with them.

MS 2:15

What's the breakdown between print and digital subscription? So of that? 4000? How many are digital only?

EK 2:20

what I think we can double count the way we do it? But I would say we probably have 300 Digital subscribers. That's right now, I wouldn't say I'm breaking. I mean, we when I say 4000 is our circulation, we print 4000 papers a week. Sometimes we sell 3500 Sometimes we sell 23. You know, the icestorm? Probably too. But it's interesting. You know, I think in Tom's past, the ice storm would have totally freaked me out. Because we how do we get the newspaper out? How do we get it to our readers? We didn't flinch on that this time, because we can do everything from home, even though our staff live in these rural communities. And their internet isn't great. But it's improved enough that they can work from home. But still, that print product needs to go out? Absolutely. So it wasn't like, you know, no one read our paper this week. We know they read it. We know they got weight. They saw it online. But will we capitalize on that monetarily? No, we need to sell the papers.

MS 3:31

So run through your subscription package options for me really quick. So do you do a separate digital only or what is your subscriptions look like? Just all of those things.

EK 3:40

So we really do a very historical in County, out of county, and out of state subscription rate. If you are a subscriber you get E edition access. Got it. So if you want to subscribe, and then you get the the printed paper. Also, if any of your subscriber you get the E edition, but you can get a discount on the E edition only. So say I mean, I think we discounted maybe \$5. But not not a lot, because the whole theory, I would say years ago, we probably would have said we'll give it to you for half price. But I think as the industry has evolved, we've learned that it's not really the subscriptions that pay well, it is it is more and more subscriptions that pay our labor, you know, like in other words, it cost us so much to turn the lights on and have someone write a story, no matter if someone's buying it an E edition or a subscription and getting the paper out of it. I mean, our our expenses are still there. So we learned it's not really smart to discount it because we're giving you a product that someone has worked on. They've written a story they're not we're not just giving you a paper I don't know That makes sense. But we're selling our work product instead of paper.

MS 5:03

Absolutely. No, no, absolutely. And can we talk a little bit about your website when it? When did you develop the Online Edition and also your website?

EK 5:12

You know, we were really early into the website. And I'll tell you why. First of all was younger then. But also, when we inherited the paper, it was very antiquated. And so we really came in and said, We're going to bring this up today, I mean, up to date with employee benefits, and you know, the whole thing, the whole suite, but our computers couldn't handle, they were so antiquated that computers couldn't handle logging on the web. So we started with brand new computers. Well, we had these computers that really were capable of doing so much. Because when we upgraded, we bought top of the line computers for our employees. So it really was an impetus to say, let's get out there. And we did. We got out there fast. And we were I mean, we had a web presence for a while, which is kind of unusual, because I don't think the county really cared that much. If we had a web presence. I had someone tell me, I guess it's been a year ago about our website, that's a nice public service you provide? Oh, it's just like, wow, I mean, you know, look, the bottom line is we do provide a public service, but for monetary gain, I mean, we're a business. And so you know, I think they look at it, sometimes it's more of a public service our website than any, then, hey, let's log on and pay for that. Let's support them, that we were out there early. I don't know that we've kept up as much as we could have and should have. But we're also a very small staff, you know, we're not large. I logged on to the New York Times every hour, subscribe to the Democratic is that every day, and I also subscribed to The New York Times. And so every morning, I'll hit the local news out of the Democrat Gazette, I'll look at their front page, I really don't read their, their national stories, because I read them in the New York Times. So I hit that go through that real quick, go to the Arkansas section. But then I logged on to the New York Times this morning, and they have this video, opinion piece. It's a video opinion piece. And it's today, and it is president, former President Obama, with some other well known civil rights leaders talking about when the civil rights movement began. And they were saying it began with the shooting death of Trayvon Martin. But what was interesting was, it was an opinion, piece of video opinion piece. We don't have those capabilities. You know, a lot of people are doing podcasts, I listened to the daily, the new york times a day, like every day, I love that podcast, I don't have the capabilities of doing it at my short staffed. So I think we jumped in, when everyone else jumped in. And I was really proud of us. But we lag now maybe we're lagging, because we're in a rural community, with the small town paper with not a lot of employees. So that's why we lag. It's disappointing. But also I get comments on Facebook all the time, you know, aren't the New York Times I'm like, No, but we want to be. So we know we tempted best. But now we left

EK 8:19

when you jumped in fast around just to guesstimate of what year that was

MS 8:26

90 Thought

EK 8:27

for the website and the addition

EK 8:29

or of the E edition came probably in 2000. I'm guessing, because don't have a vivid recollection of it. But let me just say we're a trickle down effect. Okay. So when these large publications went

on the web we followed. So when these large publications went to the E edition, we follow so not far behind, when you will see a larger publication start there you edition.

MS 8:57

Okay. Now, the E edition. Is it just a PDF copy of what your paper looks like? It is? And what about how do you decide which stories go in the paper and what stories go online?

EK 9:08

Well, almost all of our, almost all of our content is online. Okay, so we worked through, we cannot manage our website by ourselves. We don't have the technical capabilities. And if I could hire an IT person, and they could come in and do a bang up job, but I'm not making enough money to do that on our website. So it's cost prohibitive. But there are these publication sites out there. We used one called one up, and they just were so to E publishing. So that company is really good about providing platforms for us. And so we load our edition and we load our news and but we're hard paywall so you want to look at the obituaries. They're free. You want to look at school lunch menus, they're free, anything that you can access somewhere else on the web, we're not going to pay all that because it doesn't make sense. Things that we produce. So filings are going on right now the Madison County Clerk's Office list to file every day. We do a story on it. So even though and we pay wallets hard paywall, because we have the candidates history, they mean interview with the candidate, you know, their family, so it's just not their name, address and phone number which you can access on the web. We give you more, and we put it behind a paywall. And that's kind of how we decide and to access

MS 10:34

those stories that are behind the paywall. Is that included with your print and print and digital subscription? Or is that a separate fee?

EK 10:42

No. Okay, it's all included. Gotcha. And so you can log on to read my A edition. And that story, same thing isn't there's no difference. So we don't make it different monetarily.

MS 10:53

So when you are thinking about like, sort of a timeline for publishing stories, how often a week do you print? Once a week, once a week? So will you hold stories for the website until they go into print? Or will you put them up on the website first?

EK 11:04

You know, that's an interesting question. And we've been kind of dealing with that a little bit. Right now we hold them all goes up at once. I want to start putting it up As the stories come in, I really think we need to be flowing a lot. But interestingly enough, the employees resist, and I don't think that they resist because they have some nefarious thoughts about it, I think that they're very used to what they do. And so it's hard to break the routine, what I would like to do is have a story up, maybe I'm not going to promote it. So in other words, I'm not on a Friday, I'm not pushing a story that I'm not going to publish until Wednesday, I'm not going to do that. But it might be on the web, you know, and then just don't promote it on Facebook. Now I will throw out breaking news stories. So this week, again, filings and the weather, we did wrote updates, we

put it behind the web, and we went ahead and put it up there, the filings, we went ahead and put a story up every day, because that's a very fluid situation. And we know everyone's talking about it, and we don't want to be left out. So we put that up there everyday. And we did keep it all behind the paywall. But I would say that's unusual. You know, maybe we had a breaking news story, we might put two paragraphs up that say check our you know, full product, when it's printed in the paper, but kind of a tease.

MS 12:28

And so let's switch gears a little bit and talk about audience interest. So how do you figure out what kinds of stories your audience likes to read?

EK 12:36

You know, I struggle with this a little bit. So we put some stories up on Facebook. And obviously, we get feedback. But the interesting thing is those people are not always our subscribers. So then you kind of have to say, how do you reach your subscribers? One of my favorite parts of a newspaper is a letter to the editor. And when I'm getting letters to the editor on reaching people, I love letter to the editor and not always in so happy to get them. Really, it's a small town. So they'll come out on a Wednesday and pick up the paper and a lot of them will pick it up and stare at it. And then they'll kind of oh, well, it's so I can gauge their interest and what they're looking at what they're talking about to our staff that's sitting around at a coffee shop here and what people are talking about, that's how we figure out you know how to reach our readers. But at the same time, we're not one that goes on and says now Arkansas business, he's a dynamic interview. I don't know if he's not rule, but he's a dynamic interviewer because he does things so differently. Like, and he'll talk about it in these press meetings. He'll have big storyboards up and they're caught. I mean, they're real time who's clicking on what? We don't have the capability to do that. So we almost have stayed to this very old mantra of we just print the news, but that's it, we just print the news. So we're not saying oh, they want to hear about a murder. But I do know our readers love crime. So you know, we can print it? No, not really, because the readers want to hear it. If there's a chrome story, we'll put it on front page, you know, but that's the way we we gauge. We've never even done like a little session where they give us our feedback, you know how they you can put people behind the closed glass where you can't see what they're saying. They can't see you listening. We have never even done that. But as long as our subscriptions are holding up, we're you know, we're okay.

MS 14:36

Do you all utilize any kind of analytics to monitor your online traffic?

EK 14:40

There are analytics built into our webpage. We will definitely look at those hits and where they came from. And we can even tell you what story like if you were a subscriber, I can tell when you logged on. And so we can get those metrics for

MS 14:56

And are they useful for y'all do you kind of make decisions based around them or

EK 14:59

We don't we do not make decisions, but they are useful there. Well, let me just say this. They're interesting, but they don't change the way our news is driven.

MS 15:09

Okay. Okay. I'd like to talk now just a little bit more about strictly Internet access in Madison. Okay. So this question it kind of referring specifically to your time when you were in Madison County or your family there, you remember when you in that community got home internet access?

EK 15:28

Well, I know that a few years ago they got Okay, help me think of the word. It's not digital access. But you know, it's an upgrade. Really put the little tower in the yard? What's the name of that satellite? It's what satellite? Now?

MS 15:44

It's not dial up. It's the one is it? The one up from dial up?

EK 15:47

No, it's even one up from that. Okay. It's not.

MS 15:51

And it's not the fiber cables. It is? Oh, that's what we're talking about. Okay, so they got that a couple years ago?

EK 15:57

Yes. Okay. And then we got it a couple of years ago at the newspaper too. So they're slowly installing it. Now, let me tell you a little bit. Madison County is different as far as wireless. There's a telephone company there called the Madison County telephone company. And they own all of those underground. lines that so they don't have the you can get wire service like to make a phone call, you know, Alltel varizen. But as far as home digital internet access, it is really a little antiquated, because again, it's a small town, Mom and Pop provider. And people are very frustrated with them sometimes. And they're old school. So but they they are, you know, fiber optics, they are installing that and so slowly but surely, in town that they have installed that. So we have that. And we have that. I can't tell you what the highest speed internet is at the building. But we do have the highest speed for that county. And you know, I wouldn't say that it's super slow. I wouldn't say we complain a lot. But probably if you put it next to somebody in New York who has at high speed, you probably be like, Okay, we're way behind. But it does what we need to do right now. Does that make sense?

MS 17:16

Absolutely. So in the center of town where you are your internet, we've kind of characterize it as it is sufficient and fairly fast. What about just the general talk of the town? How do they characterize their internet?

EK 17:27

Okay? It will, it's a very spread out town, it's one of just to put into some context, it has the largest capacity for buses for a school district in the state. In other words, the buses in that county travel more miles than any other bus system, that should tell you how rural that county is, far it stretches out. So it's not good in those outer parts. Now, the Madison County telephone company was a recipient for a grant in which they are going to go into the county and upgrade service. And that was part of build not build button better. But the rescue plan, they got pretty large grant and it was even written up in the paper. It's one of the largest grants in the state. So that will change and there are small incremental changes. But I would say we probably out of internet in the state we like, definitely, I'm sure in those very rural counties, they lag a lot. In fact, there are times when people will say, Hey, I'm going home, and I don't even have good phone access. They have landlines because they can't even get good phone reception, much less, you know, internet service. Yeah, I will say this, I can tell you looking at our website, we have the most traffic at 8am, noon, and five. And I think it's because 8am They get to work and do have access. They're on their lunch break, and they want to check it right before they go home.

MS 18:56

Gotcha. Now, as far as you and your personal life, how often do you use the internet? And what do you use it for?

EK 19:03

All day, every day really for business? I don't I don't stream movies. I'm not that technologically savvy. I would say I use it for work all the time that I work from home. So and you know, we're constantly emailing each other. You know, everything. All of our stories are on a particular server. We are constantly on the internet all day every day. Well

MS 19:29

and I mean, you commute from Little Rock to Madison County. So as far as comparison between your home internet in your little rock home and in your Madison County home, how do those compare?

EK 19:39

The Madison County record versus my home here in Little Rock? I'd say they're the same. Okay. But at my home in Pennsville their little rock is definitely faster.

MS 19:50

Gotcha. Okay, and is that because it's just farther out of town? Do you think it's a just a like a geography thing? Or it's the same internet theoretically?

EK 19:58

Yeah, I do. think that the download accesses a lot slower. Maybe that is geography but it's very hard to download. Although, we do have a smart TV in our home in Huntsville, you know, and we did watch whenever COVID was really bad. We watched the sports, basketball teams on the internet, you know, live streams that was brand new, really, for that county, instead of go into a game, they could watch it remotely, so that and they didn't have internet access was good enough to be able to do that.

MS 20:32

And now as far as web access for the population of the town, do you have an idea? It doesn't have to be exact data of what percentage of the population has home internet access?

EK 20:43

You know, I have no idea this would be such a rough guess I would say in Huntsville proper, if you will, everyone. Okay, everyone. But when you get out into those rural counties, I would say 50% would be a good guess.

MS 20:59

And even of those of those 50% even have to consider issues of quality. How fast is that?

EK 21:06

It's not, okay. So, quality.

MS 21:09

So operating with that knowledge, how has that affected your digital strategy, when it comes to the newspaper,

EK 21:14

we still rely on that print product, okay. And I went to a seminar how Gosh, it's been years ago, with APA, it was Penny Abernathy, she's the one you probably have read her reports, she, she's the UNC professor who writes a lot about digital access in newspapers. But her advice at the time was you need to trim 6% off of expenses for monetary and put 6% on top of try to gain 6% from your internet. And as good as it sounds, in theory, it's been hard for us to do. So what was the question I got?

MS 21:54

How has it affected your digital strategy?

EK 21:56

Just generally, but yeah, so. But right now, I will tell you this. So I pay, you know, a certain amount per month for our internet provider. And I would say we probably pay 350 per month for someone to host us. For years, we didn't even break even on that free accuracy by that service. Just recently, with the view ads that we're selling, we are breaking even and doing better. So I can tell you that. I think if you didn't take into account that people can subscribe online classifieds online, just looking only at our internet and having ads on it. We just recently now making money on ads compared to what we're paying for them to host it. But we can't be without one. You know, we can't our credibility isn't. I do think there's, I think we sell more papers, because we have an internet site, because we're promoting that on Facebook and other social media platforms. So I think people will buy our paper also think we look more credible, because we can throw a story out on Facebook, and it will get so much response that we look credible. So I think there's some intrinsic values and probably aren't financial. But just recently, we've started to make money on the internet. And we'll at least slowly but surely will increase

MS 23:27

it. And that's a great transition into the next thing I want to talk about, which is your social media usage. So which platforms do you use and how you use them?

EK 23:36

We use Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. No one in Madison County cares. One thing about Instagram, nobody hears about Twitter, it is all Facebook every day all day. And we will promote a story probably once or twice a day from our from our, you know web page and what's in our paper. So will like do an athlete of the week. We promote that we have this huge school board scandal right now we'll promote that the county is in need of a jail will promote that. So if we have those big stories then and each Wednesday night, the staff chooses I don't choose they choose. I mean, I could it's just I delegate that to them. But every Wednesday night, they'll lay up their front page, and they'll number 123435. And those are like their top stories. And they'll promote those on Facebook throughout the week. Until that next Wednesday publication comes out. And as soon as the edition goes online at 9am we promote that story on Facebook, the main story and so we get we get a lot of feedback, a lot of feedback. So, but a lot of people aren't read the story. It's hilarious. We you'll love this. We had this mother daughter duo who hid her boyfriend in this house and the cops knew he was there. And they wouldn't let him enter into the house. But they called dad for the not the dad. But the, the, the male that was living in the house. And they say, Can we search your house? And he went home? He goes, Yeah, sure go on in searches. So he went in and found the guy arrested him rest of the girl, then deal. Well, we promote that. Now, most people, some people, just they're like, we hate you, Madison County record for saying bad things about our neighbors. And then the next comment is from the same person sometimes? What's the story even about? So they're not reading it? They're just hitting that headline. But still, but still, we're getting some traffic, and they will go to them. Some of them will buy subscription and read it.

MS 25:46

So would you say you kind of use your social media, first and foremost, to have to promote for your subscriptions?

EK 25:55

That's it. Yeah, we promote our product. But that's it. Great. Yeah.

MS 26:02

Okay, now for sort of the final bit, I have a couple big picture philosophical questions I always warn everybody about. So what responsibilities do publishers and editors have to their audience?

EK 26:15

Well, that's kind of changed. I think over the years, at first, I think we had, and I still do believe this, I do believe we are a public service business, we do have a, we have to provide our public with information that is important to them. I think that 20 years ago, that would have been the mantra, and I would have ended our conversation right there, I have a duty to cover the news and get them and get it out. Now, I'm going to say that's changed a little bit, I have a duty to provide my readers and subscribers with information that's important to them, not the general public as a whole, because I have to be paid for my work in order to continue it. And so when we did a lot of the COVID stuff, we put that out there for free, and then we pay Walden just like the democratic

as it did. And I had people that were irate and said, No, you owe us this information. No, I don't the Arkansas Department of Health does. And, you know, maybe your hospital does, if it's paid for by the state funds. But not me. I do not owe you that public service. But I will provide that to you, if you are our reader in our subscriber. So I've really tried to tailor who I'm market to based upon if they subscribe or not. And a lot of times, we'll get people on the internet who will say on our Facebook, I hate the record, I don't subscribe to them. And then they'll ask us a message on Facebook. Like when is early voting? I don't answer that question. But if it's a subscriber, I probably would I probably take the time. So I'm not trying to ignore them. But my, my time is limited. And so I've began to really provide a service to my readers and subscribers, because that's the way I'm going to thing business.

MS 28:12

Now, sort of switching gears, what is accessibility mean to you in the context of news publisher?

EK 28:21

Well, I do think I've tailored to my market up there, as far as I know, they want the print product, and we throw it out there and we mail it home, we still invest in drivers a big expense for us on Wednesday, is getting that newspaper throughout the county. And that's one thing we did when we inherited it, we used to have people who would come into the newspaper, pick their papers up, maybe a small town gas station would come in and buy 40 papers, and you know, pay us, we might give them a little discount for buying that they would go sell them for you know, \$1 each, maybe they pay us 80. And they sell them for \$1. But now we literally have drivers that we three or four drivers a week will span that county and different routes and get those newspapers to boxes. And know. So the Democrat Gazette is only on a Sunday publication schedule. So that has helped us because their subscription is so they charge about 450 a year for subscription. We charge about 40. So our people in our county are poor. There they are in the ones that don't have that broadband access. A lot of it is because they're poor, and they don't have the money for it. And so we still expend a lot of revenue getting that county that newspaper out. So we make that accessible. We make our print product accessible, and we're still investing a lot of money in doing that. But we also have that EA edition and I think that will grow toward it. And then you know as far as accessibility you have to pay for for it, you just do if you want our content, you have to pay for it. And so accessibility is if you pay for it, we'll do whatever we can to get it to you.

MS 0:05

Now finally one hadn't taken, it seems like you would really prioritize making sure your product is accessible. But focusing on sort of just your online content, have you taken any steps to making that more accessible for your subscribers?

EK

We throw out a newsletter all the time. And we'll say that we always promote on Facebook. But as far as what we can do, we just can put that out there for them. But that's about all we have no control of the internet access. Now, I do know there was some kind of an I don't know if it was just in Madison County, but when all of this went online, I think maybe the Madison County telephone gave somebody like, you could have access to the hotspot or maybe take half an hour maybe your house for dollars if you could show people you didn't have the money for it. The

funny thing is, have you those people know that because they the way they promoted it was online, like to be online, so you don't need it. You know? So that's why the print product is still important. But we I mean, we will meet their needs as far as getting access online. I don't think we do a real good job with video, or podcasts or things of that sort. And I don't know maybe you can answer this from other people that you've talked to, I don't know of a lot of publishers that are doing video and podcasts now know the democratic podcast and know how well received it is. So I don't know that. They even made that leap. And the reason we did that is they're the leaders in the industry. As far as being a white paper and having the manpower to do those things. These rural counties still have manpower. And even if we did have a lot of money, it's really hard to find a woman that technical skill because broadband isn't that accessible. I guarantee you if I put an ad on a paper tomorrow, anybody know how to do a podcast come in and I'll pay you \$100 a week to do it. Don't get anyone they can do a professional quality podcast in that little County. So forgot what your question was.

### Lori Freeze Interview

Madi Stephens 0:07

How long have you worked in the news industry?

Lori Freeze 0:10

35 years. Two summers during college.

MS 0:15

How long have you been with the with your current location?

LF 0:19

That amount of time? I'm in my first job.

MS 0:23

It's amazing. Do you live in Mountain View?

LF 0:29

About six miles away now? I grew up in the county.

MS 0:34

And so what is the circulations for your publication?

LF 0:39

Right now about 3800. We peaked a few years back about closer to 5000. The postal delivery challenges we've lost a lot of out of state subscribers and we haven't been able to convert them to digital. Like we thought we would and we're still working on that.

MS 0:59

So when you say 13 1300 Is that digital and print subscriptions or

LF 1:06

The total number.

MS 1:14

So how do you figure out what kind of stories your audience likes to read? You're interested?

LF 1:22

Just overall, because we offer the same content. Our online readers get.

MS 1:30

Oh, goodness, I can't hear you anymore. It seems like you're a little bit frozen

LF 1:51

Should we try a telephone or I hear

LF 1:53

you now can you Could you hear it better? Yes.

LF 1:57

Well, it's it's kind of most gauging okay.

MS 2:01

Maybe we can try and keep going. And then if, if this sort of keeps happening we can switch a little bit that will be better. Okay, well,

LF 2:08

we'll see. Like I said, our, our online readers see this the replica PDF replica of our pages, so they're seeing the same content. And we use our website as well. Just teasers you know, this is what's in the paper. We don't offer a lot of entire content without a subscription.

MS 2:31

So just generally speaking, how do you sort of go about selecting online stories?

LF 2:40

Just from experience we kind of know what our readers like. We do a lot of historical features when we can get them. This week. We've got feature on a man who grew up here and now is back as a retiree and just kind of his experience as a young boy downtown Mountain View and what it was like so that's always fun. Of course, we cover all the government meetings, school board meetings, things like that. Just features and Bar News and we try to mix it up in high school sports. Doing a lot of that right now with basketball season, coming into tournaments and all that.

MS 3:23

Do you utilize any sort of analytics to monitor your online traffic?

LF 3:28

We don't, we've gotten. We did and then we got a new website provider. And we somehow lost analytics at the switchover. So I'm trying to get that back again, but I'm not sure how it will reflect all we always get from that before was, you know how many people really are going to our E edition. Because once I get on there, I guess it all

LF 4:05

gets injured last year again.

LF 4:16

structured in a way where you know we post the stories in this topic in the network to look to see who's going there. We just don't have it's it's just a kind of a just a broad stroke of what's in our hyper so.

MS 4:31

So when you were using this Analytics, you wouldn't say they were particularly more insightful.

LF 4:37

No only to see what our web traffic was, which as a new, you know, kind of new to the game. As we were it was interesting to see how many people are actually utilizing it, how many visitors you know, that that moment have a subscription or just coming to the site from, we could tell that they were coming from the chamber of commerce site link to us or whether they're coming straight to us. So that was a little bit useful. But we weren't really educated enough to know, you know, what we need to be looking for what we need to be doing to get those valuable information because we could have

MS 5:16

so you sort of mentioned it earlier, but just to clarify, you could say you have more readers in print and online.

LF 5:25

As you Yes, definitely.

MS 5:27

So your subscription breakdown, you have more sort of receiving a physical paper than just the digital only.

LF 5:33

Yes, we mail out more than 2000. Now I wasn't and then we have another 1400 or so that I use RX. So we have 50 plus well, not not quite 50 racks in Mountain View and around the county and a few locations of vendors that sell our paper. So that's another 1300 and then online only the people that have signed up to only read it online. It's another almost 150 And then part of our circulation that we do count as RV separate education. We still do that program and we do a couple 100 papers go to our schools to be used in classrooms. So we're counting another 200 to get into our 3700 over 3700 circulation total.

MS 6:25

So we've been talking about it but I want to just really break down all of your subscription package options.

LF 6:36

Well for print publication, we offer people you know, they can get a full year half your free month or trial subscription. And that automatically comes with an online they can register for online access. If they want it. So for for the print subscription, they can get out. If they're out of state or somewhere if they don't, or they just don't want the physical paper. They can do a local subscription right and get online access only we won't mail them one for the same lock rate no matter where they are. So that's the same as or you know, or \$25 right that we give to local areas subscribers, you can get online access only no matter where you are for that same right where you can buy it from a news ran for 75 cents.

MS 7:33

Thank you. So sort of moving to a little bit of a bigger picture question and you have worked at this paper for a while you've lived in this community for a while. So do you think it's important for reporters, newspaper staff members to live in the communities that they report on?

LF 7:49

It is I can't. And I have tried to imagine because we've had a few papers that aren't too far away from us over the years, you know, either they lose, almost lose their paper or they lose their editor or something, you know 20 years ago or 25 years ago, we've had a couple of times where our publisher was encouraged maybe to buy this paper 30 miles away or something. I can't imagine stepping into that town not knowing really what's what in Toronto

MS 8:28

goodness oh shoot again I don't know if you can hear me but I cannot

MS 8:38

hear you the videos frozen but I can hear you. Okay, last one again. Coming back.

LF 8:46

I can hear you now.

LF 8:47

Okay. I don't know the last thing that I was saying. I can't imagine going to another town covering any kind of government I could. I could probably do a feature on someone you know, sit down with them. And get to know them just like I do. People in my community that I don't already know. But as far as giving what I would consider full coverage to town government is going to go back and do that. So we've always had that we've right now. We've got a reporter who's a full time staffer who just moved here recently. And that's you know, it's a challenge for him. That since he does live here is dedicated to you know, learning the ropes and getting to know people and immersing himself in the community and he has done that. So now you go over your labor peace of mind more comfortable. But there were times when we like oh no, you know, that's not how this works or that's not but they mad or whatever. You know, there was

times when he could tell. He just needed our kind of oversight to make sure that we were given the right picture.

MS 10:01

And how about from sort of a readers or an audience perspective? How what do you think? How do you think that dynamic changes or shifts when you're a member of the community versus if you're not?

LF 10:14

Toward looking at the paper or

MS 10:16

so it for instance, and newspapers probably staffed by people who are working remotely or who don't live in the community? How do you shift the audience perspective of that?

LF 10:28

Gotcha. Gotcha. I wanted to make sure I understood that correctly, because my boss has direct experience with that. He was publisher for chain early on in his career, and he moved around from newspaper to newspaper. And he felt like as long as he lived in the community it will get to know him and be fun with it. And that was the case when he was publisher of a town 50 miles north of us. So then he lived in that town when he took 20 bought our paper from Mountain views. 50 miles so for a while, he still lived in Mountain Home, but he was publisher and in charge of our paper in Mountain View. And that was not received really well. He was that guy who bought our paper. That mountain hound guy who bought our paper and it took him three years breeders are so to kind of get moved from the place and become part of the community and in reality, and you said

MS 0:05 (Transitioned to phone call because of loss of zoom connection)

Very good aware where we were talking

LF 0:11

refers to the immediate difference when he moved to the computers and rather than commuting from in I don't think that that helps our new staff member that was immediately writing the weekly column so people can get to know him because he did get a lot of, you know, some background and stories from similar experience, you know, because he came from a small town or Northeast Arkansas. And, you know, the country stores when people gathered in the hardware store was someplace where his dead on you know, stuff like that. So, he has every week since he's been here. And people he said him so you know, and so that got to Mount Auburn, our county governments and it kind of out of his way to make sure people get out.

MS 1:15

That sounds like a great report I'd like to shift gears a little bit and talk more specifically about just internet access, generally view so do you remember when you first got home internet?

LF

Yes.

MS

When was that? I was just sort of guesstimate

LF

Oh 98

MS

Can you tell me a little bit about what it's like just sort of the general consensus are your experiences in this fast, slow, reliable

LF 2:05

I have always been fairly pleased with what we've been able to get out here. Just because I recognize that not every small town had but we did. But I have a son who is what is he Six years out of college and when he went to college, the internet that Russell campus is just lightening that again, you know, so spoiled to that sort of kind of home which he did. And have to suffer through the internet that we've got now is hard for him so he struggle with that. So it kind of depends on what people have experienced other than what's here. But to me, that given us really good and improved it as I could which have been major improvements. But the general consensus of people in Mountain View would be that our internet sucks, honestly. And even I don't know even what speeds to tell you but you know, everybody's going to streaming TV now or wanting to and to get the speed you need for about that a few ago people out in the county to barely get the minimum state required so that a show would play. But for whatever, you know, some but now in the last few years it's the kids had been having to be home and trying to do school. In the federal money's been heavily involved in cyber improvements. It's a drastically improved in our county. But still there's outages and weird little things like we've just experienced that make someone trying to run a business from their own really frustrating or whatever it is.

MS 4:02

Producing newspaper writing, or writing in anyway?

MS 0:01 (phone call on another date, previous call failed due to wifi loss from snowstorm)

All right now I think I know where we left off last time we were talking about some of your Wednesday knew that's what I don't know they do. They always have to test. Agents have just given a few seconds. I worked downtown so it's right there. I just want to make sure that the recording will be able to pick up our conversation so I'm just gonna let it run. That's fine. Okay. Should we ever in a few seconds they always last longer when you take something during the meeting (weekly tornado siren test)

MS 1:01

I've worked for the Department of Health, so. Okay. All right.

MS

Let's try again. So I know that we were talking about your personal internet usage. I last time in your experience with how the internet is in your town and how it's slow. It's something that you

talked about, and I think we addressed this, but I want to just make sure that I asked this one question. When did your publication develop an online edition and a website?

LF 1:32

Oh wow I have to Think about that. We had been long enough now that it's hard to remember when

LF 1:45

we've had several iterations of it started with a one zero cost except for a hosting fee something that we were doing on our own with the help of our IT company to help with our computers. So we had to set one up for it was this little drop in plugins to do this? very rudimentary and but it goes by and all we've ever had was like a teaser website. This is what our content is like. This is how to do a subscription. This is how to contact whoever you need to contact. We've never put all of our content out there. It's I honestly don't know.

MS 2:36

That's okay. If you want to get back with you, that's fine. That's perfectly fine. And just to remind me, you weren't the addition of your paper. It's just a PDF of what the print looks like. Correct. And you told me so that's the case only some of your stories will go up as teasers on the website. How do you decide which stories go on the website versus which go in for it?

LF 3:03

I wouldn't put anything on the website that's that I think is a key, you know, to get somebody to pick up the paper. I'm going to put something like a softer news piece or, I mean now if it's something that's critical for someone's safety, but something about you know, a road being blocked or you know, just something that I think it's important for people to know I'm gonna put it, put it out there. But, like, this week, we had our filings for office to see who's running for office and ended yesterday. So we went to press on the night. And the following period closes at noon on Tuesday, so we were unable to get the complete list and I'm not going to go on my website of that all my posts something. But but you know, that's going to that story will be available to everybody and there's no reason for him to look for the paper next week to get the whole list. So that's a quandary for us weeklies with this, you know, we can go out there within 24 hours just like anybody else, but surely if we want to maintain the value of our product, so it is a struggle.

LF 4:19

So because it's just a teaser, there's not any kind of pay well paywall on your website.

LF 4:24

Not other than just to get to the vision data. Yeah, we're thinking about putting other things behind the paywall, like some video content or something that we haven't yet but I was trying to I will we put some opinion columns. We have a weekly columnist and I do anytime we have an editorial or it's visible to anyone on our website, and might have done a feature story or two, that maybe it was submitted by someone in the community has written a feature for us and she wants us to make it on our website so she could share it in her circle in her organization or whatever it

was. So I had done that before some feature stories have gone out very little but we actually put it out there.

MS 5:24

Absolutely. So I know that we've talked a little bit about your struggles personally with internet access. That's something that that has been a challenge for you and for your readership. So do you have some sort of estimate on the internet access of your community like a person idea of a percentage of how many people have access to

LF 5:44

I've tried to get that knowing that this was coming up. I contacted our telephone company as our main provider. And I thought that they would give me this rough estimate and they shot up the Learn to a big boy and she got back to me and said, You know, it's really impossible for us to come up with a percentage because we're not the only provider. And you know, there's a fringe on the south part of our county that's a whole you know, Electric Co Op comes up we were with Entergy but an Electric Co Op serves the southern I don't know how many people in southern part of the county and then there's people with satellite internet and there's people with this and that and she really just kind of, you know, I knew I wasn't gonna get an answer. I tried. I said, you know, even if I could get just a percentage of residential Yelp comm has customers also have internet that would be helpful to me and then ever.

MS 6:42

Oh, no, well, I didn't really appreciate

LF 6:45

it's, it's, I have no way of knowing. And it seems like the figure that we used to use was 75% of households had Internet access. That that was before the big push and students doing school at home and a lot of other people the internet during that time I'm out. But when it first started they were providing those public Wi Fi spots were at their substations or whatever they call them. That was public Wi Fi hotspots for you to go park in their little you know, just enough space to get off the road and access the internet if you needed that to do schoolwork or it was mainly for students. So they were happy to do that. So that tells me and they put a lot of votes on that school and virtual right when that happened. So that tells me that a big percentage of our rural residents did not have internet access at that time. Now, there's been all the federal money come down and grants have been fibers going everywhere. My son is furious because the lying areas have better internet speeds than he does here in town. And that just makes him furious.

MS 8:08

So operating with that knowledge, how has that affected sort of your decision making process when it comes to producing your digital content?

LF 8:17

Well, that's another reason I decided to go push for the E newsletter. That we're doing. Because I knew that you know more and more people would have the option to get that and that might be another way to reach. We're not doing a different version for nonsubscribers we haven't really pushed it all out but right now it's just another teaser you know this sets in later this week and a

reminder to the online only subscribers to log in and look because we've had people tell us what we forget. They forget to look at the paper because it doesn't come to us. We have to remember to go look for it. So like we should do that. And it's only been I think I've sent five of them this week would be six. This week hasn't gone out yet. I'm not sure it was crazy. I remember trying it was we're trying to get a special section out to let's especially our visitors guide we do twice a year visitors guide and it's time for the spring one. So I just really don't have a good feel for the percentage but I'm not hearing from what the schools are sending Chromebooks home with every kid. And I never hear about kids saying they don't they can't do their schoolwork because they don't have access somehow somehow. So but it's

MS 9:52

I mean even if they do have access and all this back to the question of quality that we've talked about earlier, so having access isn't the only issue right?

LF 10:00

Yeah, I guess. Yes, speeds vary a lot. And you can get different packages within you know, you could pay more to have your speed. But at least for tears if you're wanting to do streaming and are getting maniac to notch it up. So I was talking about feel for what it is

MS 10:26

so to make sure I'm understanding what you're saying as far as the questions have access. One thing that you really prioritize is directing people back to your print product. That's sort of your main strategy.

LF 10:39

Yeah, that's still you know, we've never ...years years ago, they were telling us, you know, digital first kind of print first versus trying to get your website, your website will pay for itself but never for us. Yeah, whatever.

MS 10:56

Why do you think that is?

LF 10:59

Well, one is we never committed to it. We didn't you know, the companies offered to come in and do the original the initial sales push to get people introduced to it, you know that they can get the spiel. They know how to talk to customers about this. But we knew for one thing, we didn't want strangers come into our town and try to sell our product that just didn't sit well with us and number two, our customers aren't that sophisticated. It doesn't matter if someone can explain it well or not. If the guy down, farmers Co Op, you know, either gets it or he doesn't. And we didn't want someone making them feel pressured, making them feel like they don't know what's going on. We just wanted to do it on our own pace. And we're just now getting to the point of now that we've done it a new website as it's been a little over a year now that we're still trying to get this new website and figure out what we can do with it. We're gonna start renting some of our ROP advertising on there. As like a value added. I can get it on the website. And our classified ads are going to convert. Somehow I'm not we're supposed to be having a training session on how that

will work. So it might be that our classified section really is the first thing to be both licensing full content. I'm not sure.

MS 12:30

And why? Why have you decided to do that with classified first?

LF 12:35

Well, it's, it seems like it's gonna be well, not the easiest. It's a complicated system. They don't where we can integrate the calls we get in on the telephone, we can put them in the website, and then people can put their own ad input. You know, they have to say whether they're a subscriber or not, or whatever is that's a little complicated, but then at the end of the, you know, deadline, we can both we'll all be together and we can we can download it to put in our current product that it will also be on the website. It's just it just seemed like a logical thing today or classifieds, this classifieds are popular. We have a big section or as a lot of people classified you look at it in one or two word ads, a big house ad and a few display ads, and that's all like that. But years ago, my boss like the job. They meant to do free classifieds for subscribers. So a classified doesn't cost you anything up to 30 marks. If you're a subscriber, as long as it's not a business. You have to you know, be doing a yard sale or selling a car or giveaway at all. Whatever

MS 13:48

it is. It's free because business I'm sorry, because businesses should be at they should be buying ads Correct?

LF 13:55

Yeah. Yeah, yeah. Any any type of service and like mechanics or anything that's a pipe but we have our pages across fonts. So it's huge. And that's one thing that's kind of our bread and butter a lot. But having an option for people to input their own like an easy for them to do that. Maybe paying a little bit to add a picture to it. We're just we're feeling that out. Right now.

MS 14:24

Now I can't remember if we talked about it last time, but I also want to ask you about your social media usage. What if you? What do you use it for? How do you do share online content?

LF 14:38

Every our policy is the same no matter what what we're using. We do Facebook, but it's what people back to the newspaper. This is what's in the paper. We do. We've encountered times when you know there's a wreck and the roads closed and we've tried to tell people about that. Or the roads. Something's inaccessible because of something. We've tried to tell people and there was a lockdown at the school last year. We went on with that we try to share things from like right now as state tournament time for basketball. We've been in regional and state tournaments. So if I see something from the school district page I might share it I've shared a lot of their things about this sort of ad or what's going on with the school whether whether or not this is weather delays. I'm sure a lot from mostly the school. If the police department in town or the sheriff's department in the county, post something a lot of times I'll share that. But it's always other than the shares. I think it's pointing pointing people to the paper as

MS 15:48

well. Those shares are providing a lot of really valuable information as well. So do you sort of view your social media platforms as another way to provide the ball of information? In a way that's free, I mean, anyone who has sobriety comm could find it. So you know there's

LF 16:06

a lot of a lot of people that are using Facebook and on our page that aren't subscribers, even though we routinely demonstrate that we've got the information they want to know. They're still not actively or even seeking out that information. If it doesn't come to them. Well, we didn't know and it's frustrating. I don't know if you're our community has a lot of stuff coming days you need to know pages. You know what community samples. So we go on there and we see people talking about issues so that lets us know what's on people's mind and what concerns they have it's also a bunch of bunch of silly stuff. But we see people on there talking about an issue that's been in the paper or past five weeks and something big is going on, and there'll be so many people on Well, how was I supposed to know? Or I just didn't know and I wish somebody would put that information out there so we could you know, I was like and usually somebody would I don't think get on there and just preach you know, you need to read the paper, because luckily someone's usually already done it, but point out but it was in the paper you know that was should I you know, sometimes I have commented that if you want to come out the office will give you a such and such issue and such and such issue that spelled out all these things about this big issue whether it was a bond issue or whatever's going on in the city, water and sewer there's always something going on there. We tried to pass attach the bill to jail. We ran continuing coverage about that. And people were still like, you know, I don't know why they want to do this. I wish somebody would Explain that. Explain it. You're just not. It's frustrating, really frustrating. Social media is the best thing and the worst thing about life I've heard that for sure. Yeah. reveals a lot about her. It really does.

MS 18:20

Now, if you'll bear with me, I'd like to finish up by asking some sort of broader philosophical questions. So what responsibilities do you think publishers and editors have to their readers?

LF 18:36

I don't think that's changed through the years. It all was still under responsibility to be fair and accurate. Fair oscillate, and these days that's, you know, become harder to even find areas, you know, do you print both sides? We like to think of it as all sides. There's more than two viewpoints a lot of times, but do you print a viewpoint that is based on factually inaccurate information, just because it is a viewpoint that's out there? Without, you know, how do you objectively present that information without saying, Well, this is BS, but here's what's something that's difficult. But the overall philosophy or a new sound, sometimes we don't. And we're more traditional than a lot of newspapers are we still don't charge for our obituaries because it seems we don't have someone pay us to run some content and disguise it as a story. We don't do that. If it's a paid overtime. It's in a block and it's clearly and

LF 19:56

we don't mix the two. And a lot of publishers are kind of hard to tell what's what when you look at a publication.

MS 20:09

So in terms of that responsibility, what is access and accessibility mean to you?

LF 20:19

What do you mean, trying to be

MS 20:21

sure what responsibility to newspapers have to make their work accessible to readers? But before that, what does accessibility mean to you in this context?

LF 20:31

Oh, well accessible. I don't see asking someone to pay me 70 cents to read. An entire week's worth of content is outrageous. So to me that's accessible even though it's we require someone to pay \$25 a year to get a newspaper in your mailbox every week that tells you what you need to know about me that's accessible to me. I don't feel like we have to be free to be accessible. That's where you want me to go or not?

MS 21:12

No, absolutely. And as far as making your digital content accessible.

LF 21:18

How do you feel about that? There's not much more we can do there. Everybody's done. Virtually everybody's got a smartphone. At least you can get the paper doesn't look the same. The website doesn't display the same on all the phones. Of course. Phones are the worst but you know, iPads. The Democrat Gazette I guess it's having pretty good luck with their iPads initiative. It displays really well on there. I don't know I just feel like I don't feel like accessibility is an issue. Do we have a responsibility? Is that what you're asking about how we feel? Sure. I think I think like, you know, having our aviation available as a replica of our paper is probably the best we can do. Sure.

Scott Loftis Interview

Madi Stephens 0:01

Okay, so I know Ashley has told you a little bit about what I'm doing. But just to reiterate, I am conducting interviews with the staff of newspapers serving rural populations here in Arkansas to talk about how a lack of Internet access affects digital news consumption. So I'm really trying to get at questions of how rural newsrooms are balancing this push to produce digital content while also ensuring that their readership experiencing internet insecurity can get ahold of that content. So just to start out, how long have you worked in the industry

Scott Loftis 0:38

for 33 years,

MS 0:39

and how long have you been with your current publication?

SL 0:45

So about seven and a half years,

MS 0:47

where were you before?

SL 0:49

I was actually the managing editor of the Daily Paper in Pine Bluff

MS 0:53

Okay. Now, do you live in the community where your current publications located?

SL 1:00

Yes. And

MS 1:04

what is the circulation for your paper?

SL 1:07

roughly 1500.

MS 1:11

So that's how many of you print or is that your print subscribers?

SL 1:16

This print subscribers we probably about 3000

MS 1:20

Gotcha. And so for 1500 is print subscribers. Is it print and digital or is that just your print only?

SL 1:28

That will be the print only we have a few digital subscribers. It's not really heavy, because we don't have a paywall at this point, although it's probably coming. So to be honest, I feel like a lot of people go online and read our base without subscribing.

MS 1:48

I want to ask you a couple questions. Oh, go ahead.

SL 1:54

That was my phone. I'm sorry.

MS 1:56

I was just gonna ask you a couple questions about your website a little bit later. But for right now, can you explain your decision why you don't have a paywall on your website?

SL 2:05

There was actually a corporate decision. I am a supporter of paywalls because I think they protect a print product. I think, you know, posting everything that we do for free online. You can easily get on Facebook. We're teaching people that there's no need to go and actually buy newspaper or pay for an online subscription because it's all right here.

MS 2:32

Okay, so let's go back to your subscription options really quick. What are the different options that y'all offer?

SL 2:39

We have a print subscription that comes with an online subscription. And then we also offer online only subscriptions. I don't have the numbers on that one, but it's very small,

MS 2:51

very small, less than 100.

SL 2:54

Probably so.

MS 2:57

And now your digital subscription is that a subscription to the website or is that an E edition?

SL 3:05

issue? And do you have to have a subscription to access the E edition. You can read all of the stories separately.

MS 3:14

And as the E edition is the PDF of what your print looks like. Yes, just wanted to make sure Perfect, okay. And so you would say just firmly you have more readers on print than you do online. We have more readers. Okay, they're just not subscribers. Okay, gotcha. And you said y'all are thinking about having a wall soon. You think that's coming?

SL 3:40

Yes. We've just been somewhere actually realized earlier this week to a new company. Sherry road media you probably heard we had a zoom call yesterday with their CEO.

MS 3:58

Okay, so when did y'all develop an online edition and a website?

SL 4:05

Oh, gosh, I it was before I got here. So it's been, you know, at least eight years.

MS 0:04 (recording restarted)

Testing, testing, okay. Okay. Now, do all of the stories that go in front, do they all go on your website?

SL 0:14

Yes. Okay. We also have some stories that go only on the website. Because in the front of issue, we're limited by whatever space we have. And so oftentimes we'll get stories that you know, they're not the major stories, but they're things that are important to the community. We'll put those online

MS 0:36

so how do you make those decisions? Just you said based on what's important to community are

SL 0:42

Just a case by case basis, for instance, this week, we had some press releases about events that are coming in late March or early April. Rather than try to rush and get those in the print edition. This week, we made the decision okay, we can hold those in front of issue for print for later but lets go ahead and put them online.

MS 1:09

Okay, now how do you do you utilize any sort of Analytics to track the traffic to your website?

SL 1:18

We, or our content management system has a really good system for tracking that we can go and look and see which stores have been the most read. You need to embrace it down by category we can learn we have got a running joke today, because we had two or three industry writing columns. And it's always okay, whose columns getting the most views? Yeah, it's really interesting. People will tell you that they don't want a lot of crime news but those stories are far and away the most read on the website.

MS 1:53

I've heard that a couple times through this process. Seems like that's the general consensus.

SL 1:59

Absolutely.

MS 1:59

So is this the primary way y'all determine what kind of stories your audience likes?

SL 2:06

We take it into consideration. You know, I have said many times, I don't want to turn me into the crime because all we're doing is crime stories. But at the same time, we have to recognize, hey, this is what people are eating. So it's kind of a balancing activism, some stories that are important, but your average rater may not understand that it's important. For instance, you know, a water rating increase and what sounds pretty mundane, but that affects everybody's pocketbook, such an important story.

MS 2:40

Now, I'd like to switch gears if you don't mind to ask you if you internet specific question. So do you remember when home internet access for the first time?

SL 2:50

Gosh, probably gosh, we traveled we have home internet access around the year 2000. Listen to the computer, my voice. Yeah.

MS 3:10

And how would you sort of characterize access at least in Carroll counties fast? Is it slowed? You hear a lot of complaints do you experience a lot of a lot of issues with it?

SL 3:22

I don't have a lot of issues with it. However, we've got a lot of people that are in very rural remote. That's a major problem in our county people don't have the access, especially outside of work for the population is the fourth one parts of the county do not. And if they're having to use a lot of satellite, it's very expensive

MS 3:53

and so when you were choosing your internet provider, did you have a choice of several companies or is there just one for the area?

SL 4:01

No, we had a choice.

MS 4:02

How many how many options?

SL 4:05

Probably three or four?

MS 4:08

Is there one that's sort of dominant in the community that

SL 4:14

probably two or three to share it. But again, going back to the outside of town, the forefoot parts of the county don't have any options. At all.

MS 4:26

And so, oh, go ahead. So at least for your experience with your internet provider personally, do you have the same home internet provider that the Office uses by any chance?

SL 4:40

No, we don't. anymore.

MS 4:43

Okay. What is the sort of the customer service experience been like for you? Dealing with the internet provider that you have?

SL 4:52

It's been great but the ones at the office not so much.

MS 4:59

Can you tell me a little bit about that?

SL 5:02

It's just we have Cox at the office. We have outages sometimes it's really difficult to get a hearing on the phone if you need customer service. From the home experience with Cox who's really expensive. safety issues. Frequent outages and poor customer service, so that's why I switched.

MS 5:29

So do you have any data on how much web access the locality has?

SL 5:37

I probably could get my hands on that. That's been a big topic. There's a big question mark County, improve accessibility. So let me see if I can get that for you.

MS 5:48

Okay, that'd be great if you don't mind, but do you have an estimate just now like what do you think?

SL 5:54

Oh, I would say it's probably somewhere between 40 and 60%.

MS 6:00

Have it? Yes. Okay. But then there's the question of how good is it right?

SL 6:06

Right, right.

MS 6:10

So keeping that in mind, how has that sort of shaped your digital strategy because a newspaper

SL 6:19

really, emotional factors. And I'll say this to you. I think a lot of people. When you talk about internet access, I think immediately in my home computer, so many people may say use their smartphone. And I think people actually are able to access the internet through their smartphones a lot of times for more easily than they are to actually have a desktop computer. So I think a lot and I think the stats back Yep. And get the stats and a lot of people that look at our website, are doing it on your phone.

MS 6:56

Has that has that knowledge shaped how y'all do things at all?

SL 7:02

Here we try to sort of format the website so that it carries over a better on a mobile device platform as opposed to a desktop services, training, like how the website works and how it pops up on a mobile phone. We try to take that into consideration.

MS 7:22

Okay, that makes sense. So I'd like to switch gears a little bit and talk about your social media usage. What how do you use social media if you do to share online content? And just a just a little bit about that?

SL 7:35

We use primarily Facebook. We do a specialty publication in Eureka Springs. It's not really a newspaper. That publication has an Instagram page. It's not as active probably now as he used to be. But that's our biggest thing is Facebook lead. What we do is we post on our Facebook page back to this story to try to drive traffic to the website.

MS 8:01

So you would say your primary goal for your social media usage is to drive traffic back to the website.

SL

Absolutely.

MS

And so the website or say like a subscription to your to your paper to I guess we

SL 8:16

will for now the website as we move into the paywall. I'm already bracing for the questions of why are you giving me a link just for that I had to pay in order to read and the answer is well, subscribers can read this story with one of my available to them he bought to subscribe, here's how you do it. So let's kind of go to a change because the title

MS 8:44

so just a couple bigger picture questions to kind of wrap it up. What responsibilities do you think publishers of newspapers have to their readers?

SL 8:55

I think our responsibility in this I need more than just the internet but we have a responsibility to tell them what's going on in their community and to do it in an accurate, objective, fair manner.

MS 9:13

So within that context of responsibility, how does accessibility factor into that? Do you have a duty to make the work of paper accessible?

SL 9:25

I think I think we do have a responsibility to try to make it as accessible as we can. In that obviously we're where a full profit business and so we have to try to be that in a way that's financially feasible for us to do it. I don't know that we have a responsibility to give away our content because there's a cost with producing. So there's kind of a balancing act that we have to keep in mind there.

MS 10:02

So keeping that in mind, what steps sort of if any, has your publication taken towards making specifically your online content more accessible to readers?

SL 10:15

Question I don't know that. We've taken any real stance on the fact that right now it's all out there for free. That was sort of the the mindset and the previous ownership. Now they will have available from a financial perspective. I think you've got to have one because I believe most folks have been around the industry believe that the internet has been really a detriment to newspapers because people have come to expect that.

MS 10:54

Okay, interesting. Can you tell me a little bit more about that?

SL 10:57

Well, I just think it's, you know, why should I subscribe to a paper or why should I put 75 cents in the box or go to the newspaper rack to buy paper when I can punch it up on my cell phone, they read everything for free. It's like if I could go to McDonald's buy hamburger, or I could punch a button on my computer and they bring the burger for free. Well, which one are you gonna do

MS 11:23

Yeah, well, thank you. I appreciate that. Those were the end of my questions today. But is there anything else you'd like to talk about anything you think I missed?

SL 11:32

I can't think of anything other stuff, but it's gonna be interesting. I hope you'll when you get your work done, I hope you'll send me a copy of what you produce from it. Oh, absolutely. Great. Great. All right. Thank you very much. I appreciate it.

MS 11:52

Thank you. You have a safe drive today. Okay, and if you have any questions, you have my email, my cell phone numbers included in that as well. Feel free to reach out really?

SL 11:59

Absolutely and if you think of anything else you need the taxpayer to give me

Tom White Interview

Madi Stephens 0:01

Okay. All right. So I know that Ashley has talked to you a little bit about this. But just to reiterate, I'm doing interviews with the staff of newspapers serving a rural populations here in Arkansas to talk about how lack of Internet access affects news consumption. So specifically, I'm just trying to get at questions of how rural newsrooms are balancing this push to produce digital content and also ensuring accessibility for their audiences who may not have access to high levels, high speeds and home internet. I know that you said that you don't have a lot of familiarity with the website. But I think that that context is really helpful. But I'd like to start How long have you worked in the newspaper industry?

Tom White 0:48

Fifty years

MS 0:50

and how long have you worked for your current publication?

TW 0:54

Twenty three years

MS 0:56

do you live in Monticello? Okay, and for how long have you lived there?

TW 1:03

23 years,

MS 1:03

okay. And so can you tell me a little bit about the circulation for your publication?

TW 1:09

The circulation is about 2500 right now.

MS 1:13

And is that just your print edition or is that your digital subscribers as well?

TW 1:17

That's just the print. I don't have digital only subscribers.

MS 1:22

Okay. Well, can you tell me a little bit about the publication options? Do you have an E edition

TW 1:27

We do have an E edition. It is currently not behind the paywall. We don't put it up until usually it's about five days after publication.

MS 1:38

Okay, so how do you access the edition on our website? And did you have any edition is just a PDF version of what your paper looks like.

TW 1:48

That is correct.

MS 1:49

And then you also have a website with your stories.

TW 1:52

That's correct.

MS 1:53

And as far as your website are all of those stories also not behind a paywall?

TW 1:58

That's correct.

MS 1:59

Okay. Do you have any sort of data on how many of your print subscribers are using or viewing the edition?

TW

I do not.

MS

Okay. Or what about your website?

TW

No.

MS

Okay. When did you develop an online edition or website?

TW 2:22

I was afraid you were gonna ask that that's really don't remember exactly. It's in around 2005 would be my guess.

MS 2:35

that's great. A guess is fine. And so I guess my question kind of going off script a little bit here is if you say you don't have a digital only subscriber, what made you decide to have a website or an E edition?

TW 2:56

Just felt like that was something I needed to move towards. I had a competitor who was doing a news website. But he was not very aggressive and around that time it was after I had started my

website, but around that time and sold to someone who was pretty aggressive probably become the dominant news, online news in this area. And so that is the reason I'm not behind the paywall because I had a competitor who was not behind the paywall

MS 3:43

So do you ever think about moving your content behind a paywall? Or is that are you happy with how you're running it

TW 3:50

We plan to move into a paywall.

MS 3:53

Do you have any kind of timeline for that?

TW 3:57

Probably within a year.

MS 3:58

Okay. Can you talk to me a little bit about that decision?

TW 4:04

I think that's the yard or print circulation declining, because we're not behind a paywall like we get it free is a little bit more dated to have just filled with what we're providing. My competitors are not a professional journalist from my view and doesn't play by the same rules as we do. But I think we provide a professional news product that is worthy of being behind a paywall, even if his is not

MS 4:41

sure. So your decision to create the sort of online presence though because your competitor did is that also because you notice that that was something that your audience that your town wanted that there was this desire for online news?

TW

Absolutely. Yes.

MS

And you still in that still exists people. Do you think people prefer to get their news online or do you think they prefer paper where you are?

TW 5:05

It may have a lot to do with the age demographics. But I think there's definitely a desire for the print product in hand. But also think there's a desire for the quick online, read it on your phone. And I'm assuming this I don't have any data for it, but I'm assuming it has. A lot of it is linked to the age group.

MS 5:36

Do You know, what sort of the average age of your readership is?

TW 5:40

I do not.

MS 5:44

Let's go back to sort of logistics one more time. So how do you do all of the if the print edition or the edition is just a PDF of the print edition? Do all of those stories go up on the website?

TW 5:57

Not all but most

MS 5:58

How do you make those decisions?

TW 6:03

Just individually based on the stories, what was a story about something that's, you know, are getting ready to happen or has happened you know, are announcing an event you know that we might not put it up if it's going to be the day that Paper comes out. But it just depends on when we're here so it might go up before it's in the brand publication edition. That's the case. If it's something that's our staff is generated. That's I won't say breaking news but very real hyperlocal we would probably not put it up until after the papers out.

MS 6:51

But you don't necessarily hold all of the stories until they come out in print and then put it on the website. It's sort of a case by case basis.

TW 6:58

That is absolutely correct.

MS 7:00

I guess another way of phrasing it the way that some people that I have talked to about this had said they either put their more important stories on the website or they hold those for print and sort of the terms of that what would you say

TW 7:17

if it's something that's breaking news, and I think the public needs to know now it definitely go website. But it's it can be important but not be breaking and not be something they need to know right now. Then hold it until after to print.

MS 7:32

Okay, thank you. So how do you figure out what kinds of stories your audience likes to read?

TW 7:42

is probably some feedback. But it's also just from my mind my experience over the long term.

MS 7:52

Can you say feedback do you mean in person or do you have some sort of like do you receive online feedback or email feedback?

TW 7:59

Email was received some feedback from our Facebook posts, Facebook page, things like that. And so we still receive some letters. Just a balance of all this not necessarily from comments on the website.

MS 8:24

Do you find comments on the website useful?

TW 8:28

At times, at times I find them hard to regulate or

MS 8:41

sometimes they can just be a lot of people talking.

TW 8:44

Yeah, sometimes it's you know, people are emboldened by using their screen name and being anonymous to say things that they shouldn't or wouldn't say otherwise.

MS 8:55

And so just just to clarify, you don't sort of measure how much traffic comes to your website.

TW 9:02

It is measured, it's not something that I'm currently looking at. That is because we have been in the process of converting our website to another company, which is it's getting ready to watch within the next few days is it's up now but it's a test site. So I really haven't been too concerned because it's all getting ready to change.

MS 9:25

Well tell me a little bit about that. Why did you decide to go with another sort of company to run your website?

TW 9:30

What we had a few years ago we went with a scaled down version by the head less is bells and whistles. Simplified would be a better way to say it. And we're a small group of about 11 newspapers spread out around the country and that we would try to all get to the same provider. So we worked on things together it would be easier to help each other so we're gradually converting all to create a circle. Okay, and say I should be converted just in the next few days probably.

MS10:17

I'd like to talk to you just a little bit about general internet access in Monticello. So do you remember when you first got home internet access?

TW 10:26

Oh, no, I don't.

MS

Okay.

MS 10:29

Can you tell me sort of just generally what Internet access is like where you live but also where you work? Is it fast? Is it slow? There are a lot of delays, outages,

TW 10:40

I would say it's on the slow side. Both home and work. The speed I mean I've been paying for I think, I believe 18 and we're about what we're getting is a little bit slower than that but not much and at home I believe I'm about 10 or 12

MS 11:10

Does that ever bother you? Do you ever have sort of issues with your internet speed?

TW 11:15

Oh yeah it effects our work ability to work because we do so much online now for accounting and billing. You know, stored in the cloud? Yes, we've watched the spinning wheel a little bit more we'd like

MS 11:28

to so as the base. Go ahead.

TW 11:31

We have trouble with a type of streaming service wants to buffer.

MS 11:37

So would you say that your largest issue has been sort of the speed of it or outages

TW 11:44

are about speed, not outages.

MS 11:47

So that's not something that happens to you frequently. Okay, can you tell me a little bit about your relationship with your internet provider? Did you have a choice of several or is there just one for the area?

TW 11:58

Now there's several choices Well, at least at least two or three. There might be more I haven't really researched it. Last time I looked at it was several years ago and it was what I had was as fast as I could get this location. And that was five years ago probably.

MS 12:22

Do you have the same home internet as the office does? So is it the same company for both?

TW 12:27

It's the same company but it's a different level of service because it's not available at my home. Okay,

MS 12:33

and is that because you live farther outside? of town?

TW 12:36

I guess it is, but I mean, I'm still in the city limits but it's it's further away from their, their office where everything feeds in it's at&t and I'm about my office is about exactly one block away from theaters. witching hours, I believe.

MS 13:00

So do you have any kind of idea how, just like a guesstimate of a percentage of how many people in the area, have home internet access

TW 13:11

I do not. Okay.

MS 13:13

Do you? Do you hear general complaints? Is there a general theme or pattern that you can guess to determine how people in your town how they feel about the internet? Do they they always complain that it's slow or that it's fast?

TW 13:24

I hear the most I hear a lot of complaints and it's too slow, especially in outlying areas that are having to use other methods of connecting to the internet rather than having a service like at&t or local cable TV company.

MS 13:43

Do you know what other kind of methods they're using?

TW 13:45

I don't and I don't have to speak intelligently about it.

TW 13:49

So, that knowledge, I believe that they're using some type of cellular hotspots.

MS 13:57

So that knowledge that people especially people who aren't necessarily in the town center, struggle with internet and are mostly using their phones has that affected your approach to your E edition or your website in any way?

TW 14:13

It's, it's probably slowed down to be less aggressive to move that direction.

MS 14:18

Okay, can you tell me a little bit more about that?

TW 14:22

Oh, no. There hasn't been the I haven't felt the sort of first to to really make that the focus of my business.

MS 14:33

Okay. So you still felt your priority is still the print product?

Unknown Speaker 14:37

Absolutely. That's where we pay the bills. For

MS 14:43

so the sort of industry wide push that a lot of people are talking about mostly in the context of national news, right of everything is going online. That's just simply not something that you're experiencing in Monticello?

TW

No,

MS

but you do think that the readership does want a form of online news

TW

Absolutely.

MS

Okay. So it's about having both. A great, thank you. Um, I'd love to talk a little bit about your social media usage. So what platforms do you use and kind of how do you use them?

TW 15:13

Well, that's where I really rely on so my younger stand. Thank you. I felt personally use Facebook at all. I say that I do have. I do have an account. I've never posted anything to myself. I don't know how to how to use it, or how to utilize it. But so my younger staff will will utilize Facebook to try to push traffic to our website by posting links, brief stories with a link to the website. So we try to utilize just to push traffic to other things, unless it's something that just just get ready to happen today or so there are instances I think something might just go on Facebook, but they're very

TW 16:08

okay to like breaking news. Alert would go up on Facebook. Yeah. Do you see that?

MS

So you say that the your main goal with social media is to push traffic towards the website. Do you see that changing when you have your website behind a paywall?

TW 16:25

I don't think so.

MS 16:26

Okay. Your goal will still be to just drive traffic to it.

TW 16:30

I will have there will be things available. I think everybody does this. Even people who are behind the paywall, there'll be there'll be some content

Unknown Speaker 16:45

and I guess I should have clarified this earlier. So when you say you're putting a paywall up Does that mean you're going to shift to having an option for a digital only subscription?

TW

Yes, okay.

MS

So and that will that include access to the website in the E edition? Yes.

MS

Okay, but just not the print paper. delivered?

TW 17:05

I haven't decided for sure. Yeah. Honestly, I would like to deliver the print paper. I also don't want to cannibalize that at all. If I can help it. So,

TW 17:21

been on home how we structure the advertising sales, both online and in print. And that's something I'm gonna be meeting about later this month. With my staff and we're gonna make some decisions then which have not been until we get this new website up and running and see what we can do with it for a month or so. Then we're gonna make those decisions on how we're going to structure the the paywall and the ad sales of both online and in print.

MS 17:54

Sure. So just understanding where your where your head is at now. You're considering having an option that is just print only, and then having an option that is the digital package and print but not just a digital only.

TW 18:08

Yes, that's what I'm waiting for.

MS 18:10

Because of your priority attempt to because you want to prioritize the product right?

MS 18:17

thank you. Now, I hope you'll bear with me I have a couple of bigger picture sort of philosophical questions, if you don't mind. So what responsibilities do newspaper publishers and editors have towards their readers

TW 18:38

meant to provide unbiased news I guess.

MS 18:50

and how does access play into that? Access? Like accessibility?

TW 19:02

I haven't thought of that. I don't know.

MS 19:06

Do you think that newspapers have a duty to make their work accessible to everybody or just some people or

TW 19:14

I think it needs to be available to everybody. Okay.

MS 19:20

And what do you think is the difference between available and accessible?

TW 19:25

Well accessible I would say has I look at that like and having internet access? I don't think it's our responsibility to make sure they have internet access. But I think your needs to be available to them either They can buy it at the convenience store or subscribe to me that's available. Okay, is something that we're providing them that well, you know, if it was digital only as well, I guess what I'm thinking then. I can't I can't give them access and they don't have internet access. So I will be thinking about that route. But that's, that's what I

MS 20:13

that makes a lot of sense. So the last question that I've been asking people is what steps is republication taken towards making your online content more accessible, but I'm not really sure that applies. In your instance because I think you're kind of talking about how your biggest issue your biggest your biggest strategy towards making news accessible is through your prep product. Although I would say right now your online content is incredibly accessible because it's because you're not charging for it.

TW  
Yes.

MS  
Is there anything else you wanted to talk about regarding sort of your online content specifically?

TW 20:51  
No, okay. Thank you anything.

MS 20:53  
Okay. Was there anything that I didn't ask you that you wanted to touch on or emphasize?

TW 20:57  
No, but you might be thinking about a lot of things that need to be thinking about.

### Tommy Goodwin

Madi Stephens 0:00  
All right, can you hear me? Sure. Okay, great. Well, let's just start out how long have you worked in the newspaper industry?

Tommy Goodwin 0:11  
My wife and I founded this newspaper in August of 1997.

MS 0:16  
Okay. And was that the first paper that you worked out? Or?

TG 0:22  
Yes, neither one of us had any newspaper experience or journalism, training or experience of any kind.

MS 0:29  
And what made you decide to buy the paper then

TG 0:33  
Well, it's, there's a story behind it. Well, I had a print shop here, offset printing, invoices, envelopes, business card, you know, etc. Just small offset printing business. I met my wife Lucy online in the chat room in 1996. And we met, dated, eventually married in June of 97. And she got to know the people here and people are doing business with and our local newspaper which had been here about 100 years had lost interest in local news. It they pretty much stuck with AP stories and you know, wire service. Nothing about what was happening locally and that was not what they were used to and not what the people like in an local little paper. The County Election Commissioner, the local banker, the county judge, just a whole series of different people were constantly only man you get a print shop, it won't print a newspaper. actually different than putting ink on paper for some business cards and doing a newspaper ad or Viber. And, and but

my new wife heard that time after time after time, people asked me to start a newspaper. Well, I was still going on with my printing business. And one evening when I got home, my wife was sitting there, crocheting and something extra quiet, quieter than I was. And I said what was wrong? She said, Well, I've heard people laugh, don't we started and where you think when we met she was going to Marshall textures Community College, for creative for creative writing. She wanted to write French speakers. So she was for me with writing, not reporting. So we talked about it a little bit and I said, Well, okay, I know everybody in the county. I know the leaders and shakers I put in contact with them and you see what you can come up with. Then I got with the publisher of the hope star and he went through with me how the layout process you know what to get in the pre press and everything and actually gave us some layout treats and this and the other to get started with. She spent about a month putting that first eight page paper together because we know she didn't know what to do and I just introduced her to this county judge to this conservation district Chairman, this Election Commissioner and field just talk with him and he would write down what she found out and try to put a focus to it. And she got that first paper put together after about it took a full week to put together our first weekly paper. It should have been world are we going to do this every week. And well, we'll just say that go. Well, we had a paid subscription before we printed that first type. People wanted to pay for that badly that they heard we were trying to you know start one everything. They started coming in the door and plunking down money and saying let's get going and it never we never looked back.

MS 4:32

All these years later.

TG 4:35

We do 100 And something year old papers now gone. We totally replaced them ended up buying it but only for their archives. I getting \$5,000 for it just to just to get their archives cuz they were going out and they told me you know that we can't compete with you. There's nothing in it for us where we're going. So I'll combine 1000s for the paper just to get dark ABS which were later destroyed hurricane that was bad that the building here collapse window. back for sure. Rita came up through here. The Kanika had lent me a building downtown store on the end up put it in it the whole route collapsed and the whole building flooded. Not shocking. Allow all those archives but that's 105 year old.

MS 5:39

I'm so sorry to hear that. That's just awful. Yeah.

TG 5:41

It was terrible. Democrat Gazette came down and did a story on the archives. We went through the building and they saw some of the 1910 newspapers and as I note in the democratic, big story on how I saved the archives, and then less than a year that happened in destroyed a mile before I got a chance to try to reproduce, you know, or anything. But anyway, that's pretty much our story. We've just kept going and plugging away weekly.

MS 6:21

So what's your circulation now?

TG 6:24

Right now it's right at 1,000.

MS 6:26

how can you tell me

TG 6:29

at one time it had gotten almost 1500 Oh, when was that? Social media started? I think in 2005, we were about 1600. And our county is very, very small. There's not that many people here right now our total county population is like 6300. And so there wasn't a big local market anyway. Right. Right now about half of our paid subscriptions are in the county and half of them are out of state. People who used to live here you know when everything and getting but anyway, that that was the peak was about 2005 and then just slowly and surely it it has fallen off ever since. We're between 900 and about fairly quickly.

MS 7:35

Well tell me a little bit about your subscription options. So do you do you do a print obviously and then do you do an online subscription or some kind of E edition?

TG 7:44

No, we I tried that myself. I didn't take. We weren't big enough didn't have the money to you know, hire or pay for one of the services? It does. It's so outdated, you know, just trying to make a password protected. folder on my website. Put the PDFs or the pages in it. And that just didn't go over.

MS 8:07

When was that?

TG 8:09

When was that? I don't remember exactly been probably between 2005 2007 somewhere right in there. Okay, so after that we just decided no we're going to do what we can with wood products. And if it ever comes to the point where we just we go broke, then we'll find something else because we're going to just stay with it stay on paper until we can't anymore.

MS 8:42

He said that you have a lot of out of state subscribers do you deliver papers you mail papers to them?

TG 8:48

Mail? Yeah, we do it. There's probably a couple of dozen here in the county but in business, you know business owners and employees and businesses and in the courthouse. That I hand deliver each week but everything else was mailed or sold on the stand.

MS 9:05

Okay, so I know that y'all do have a website. I've looked at it and it says that you put up weather and breaking news but there's not really anything up right now. Can you just tell me a little bit about what you use your website for.

TG 9:17

We use it to transfer the papers to the paper the premises. When we first the first 10 years, from 97 until about 2007 or 2010 It was a very very active we had a forum. I would put the headline and main picture of our front page stories on it. And we had a counter on it but it even just started dropping off dropping off and it finally got to the point to where it would like I'm doing all this worked for so I just pretty much made it a contact information as far as public is concerned. And then I use the web hosting space that I've got to FTP all the pages of the paper up to it. And that's where whoever is printing goes and downloads our pages for printing. And that's pretty much all I use that for anymore.

MS 10:21

Why do you think that is? Why do you think it just didn't that it sort of dropped off like that?

TG 10:26

Well, web web pages don't get looked at like they used to they with the social media and news services for phones. The media has changed to mean today's generation. They they're not gonna sit down at a computer anyway if they do see a website, it's going to be on their phone and minutes just not very often they go to website you have these little apps that bring up news headlines or something like that. If the paradigm has changed.

MS 11:07

to clarify So you think that local news websites are they can't compete with the national news website that have like phone apps?

TG 11:18

Right? Yeah, that's interesting. So we have we are a niche operation in that we are local news. We don't do wire service or AP or anything other than what is happening here in the county. And that is the one thing that does keep it going. They can't get there certain things we do own paper that nobody else does.

MS 11:50

So how do you figure out what kinds of stories your audience likes?

TG 11:58

Well, you know, the old adage, if it bleeds it leads, is they want to see the regs they want to see the fires. If there's controversy and government whether it be City Council or the county court court for anytime are always interested in controversy and crime. You know, their bank robbery or you know, whatever murder it's just a matter of learning and over the years, you know, we could watch which paper sold and which ones did. We have a limited pool to draw from what to write about because we're so small, and there's no real business here. There's nothing spectacular happening here. anymore. So what we do is good just from past experience over the last 25 years we've been doing the paper and okay well you know, you know always so when there was a big

fire on okay it always show when there was a wreck. It always so when they were controvert we sold out one paper in 25. It was one paper that we sold out and had to do a second print. What was our sheriff was indicted for federal land fraud.

MS 13:30

Oh wow.

TG 13:32

He owned a farm that itself into County about Lake or something and it had federal crop insurance on it and claimed a crop while showing it within the federal government pulled out their federal aid emitters and he had never planted the crop. But yet he claimed on the federal crop insurance that he lost that crop and they indicted him for fraud and he had to step down from chair. Well, the paper that had that story in it. We had to do a second printing. And that's the only time that has happened in 25 years. Wow.

MS 14:17

Well, it seems like you are very in tune to what your audience likes to read. But how much does that guide your decision on what to write? What to print?

TG 14:25

Well, we pretty much have a routine we go to all city a well, I say wait two years. Three years ago my wife had a stroke and it physically she's pretty much fine. But it took away her cognitive think the cognitive thinking part of her brain was affected. She was the one who wrote everything. She went everywhere she pressed play, saw the people and they were all familiar with her but then after the stroke. [Before] I sat here at the office and answered the phones. And she went out there and put together stories. And so when she had a stroke in 2019 I had to do it. I had to take it over and do it all so what I did, I just said okay, what would Lucy do? And I just I go to all city council meetings in the county. I go quorum court meeting, I go to the Chamber of Commerce meeting. I go to the Fair Board meeting. I just do all the meetings and I'm on the county's fire page system. If there's a fire it rings on my phone and tells where it's at. And I jump in the car and I run to the fire and different policemen if they're doing a thing or making a big drug bust condition, calm and I get the car and I run and it just pretty much a routine of what what has worked over the last excuse me two seconds that can't come down to the phone. But it's more or less just a routine. Do all the maintenance go to the fires go to the police activity. And write about what I find.

MS 16:28

Absolutely, if it works, why change it?

TG 16:33

To do it anymore. Yeah, we know there's we know there's an end to it. We know that and if we're really sad about it, but we're going to hold on just as long as we can.

MS 16:50

So what do you think is gonna cause the end of it?

TG 16:57

Well, young people do not subscribe to newspapers. Every now and then. They may pick one up if they say something because really catches their attention sitting on a shelf in a grocery store. But as far as regularly read newspaper, the younger, two generations pretty much don't do and that's what it'll be just total lack of interest in newspaper will eventually get it down to a point to where we won't sustain itself.

MS 17:35

So you mean print newspapers generally not just your newspaper. Excuse me, I said So you mean that there will be an end to print newspapers in general?

TG 17:46

I don't I don't, not necessarily in but I'm in as a way of living for me and her.

MS 17:54

I see. I understand.

TG 17:56

I can't see newspapers going away totally anytime. So matter of fact, from everything I'm reading and hearing other people talk that there's somewhat of a resurgence right now. A disillusion left with some of the social media or phone contact type things become the norm anymore, that there is a certain level of dissolution but creeping in and giving sort of a resurgence to newspaper so it's not like it's imminent, but eventually it will drop to a level where the wife and I wouldn't be able to sustain it as a way of life.

MS 18:45

And do you think generally it'll get to the point where newspaper publishers like yourself just won't be able to make a profit off of it anymore?

TG 18:52

Yeah, yeah, that's exactly what I was saying.

MS 18:59

I'd love to change topics just a little bit here and talk to you about Internet access where you are. Do you remember when you first got home internet access and when that was?

TG 19:12

Well, it was just when it really came here. It was just about the time we started the paper. The late 90s is when internet moved into our area but I had always been like CompuServe and the you know, they'll be a go pay as you access online services that eventually gave way to the internet. I was always in the know. I was a little ahead of the curve here. I had a computer from the time they invented it. Always had the biggest baddest computer in the county everybody came to me about advice about computers and everything. So when the I'm trying to remember the name, I can't remember his name. It was a little off while company came in and they asked me would I be the local contact for him so I had started this niche at the other end. I came here to

subscribe to it and I started went to their home and installed it on their computers and everything. And that was start that was starting up just about the same time we were starting.

MS 20:33

Oh wow. You're the perfect person to talk to about this then. So what were people saying like what was the general sort of complaint or consensus what were people thinking when when you were installing, sorting?

TG 20:46

There were two different was businesses heard about new business connection opportunities. And individuals. Were looking for Chandra, you just to reach out and find other people to talk to. They had best what they saw the Internet has was a chat room and the fact that I had to send my wife in a chat night in 96 out I was about the only one that had true internet connection down here and everybody from kids and this that and the other I know that would hang around my office and look over my shoulder never learning. Let one of you get on it. That's what it was was getting in touch with people out yonder.

MS 21:49

So tell me a little bit about it now.

TG 21:51

We're very rural here. Not a whole lot of community activity for kids are different the other that it was a reach out to find other people

MS 22:05

to tell me a little bit about what Internet access is like now is slow. Is it fast? Is it reliable?

TG 22:15

Sure. You know depends on where you live, how the lines are in that area. Just this past year. We had a company erect a Wi Fi tower. That's gonna change the internet access around here a lot in the same company is also installing fiber optic, which we've never had before. If I would just been DSL it was originally dial up that more going up into the hills trail. And that's that's all there was here. And there's only one switching station in the north end of the county down here stamps and if you live more than three miles from that switching station. It didn't work. So it was very spotty just depending on where you live, where whether you would get a good connection or not.

MS 23:12

So Do you have a choice of internet providers in stamps or is there just one? No,

TG 23:17

no. Well, we will now with this new company that built the tower and that is installing the fiber optic. They're different, but always before that. Well, let's say it's all over at&t phone line. It was originally a third party who put routers in down here. They rented a building downtown and put in routers to supply the dial up internet. But then after that went by the wayside. The DSL that came in was at&t. And that's the only choices up until now.

MS 23:56

Do you think a lot of people will switch?

TG 24:01

Certain number will Yes. Me. I've got a 25 year history with an email address, newspaper. I won't change because I don't I don't want to have to go through the hassle of teaching it buddy. New Email address. You can't you can't port over your email address to a new company. Like you can't you know there's lots of instances when you get a new phone service. You can keep your own you know have your own number. But that's not possible with email addresses. Like irises LC press it SBC global dotnet at&t owns SBC global dotnet. extension. So if you've got an internet and they won't let them they won't let you let somebody else use it. Oh, I

MS 24:50

see. So your email address is tied to your internet service?

TG

Oh, yeah.

MS

Yeah. Okay. Gotcha. Now, what about for you What do you use the internet most for in your personal life?

TG 25:07

Well, I do Facebook. And just swapping ideas with this that and the other when I have friends I went to college with in distance states and everything we keep in touch with Facebook. More than we do telephone or anything else. And then I try to keep up with what's going on where and everything but just social ads and news. That's pretty much

MS 25:41

how much would you say and just a guess is fine. Can Do you have an estimate of how much of your county has home internet access?

TG 25:54

I had to put a guesstimate on it. I'd say probably about 60%.

MS 26:01

And now you said that so when we talked about previously when your website when it just kind of didn't work out for y'all. You said that you thought it was mostly due to social media. Do you think that a lack of Internet access had anything to do with it?

TG 26:20

we're ready to say know its own phone whether or not everybody has phone service and they can access internet via the phone. But there but but as far as having when I gave that estimate that was for like home internet service, probably about 60%. There's a cell tower on every corner

now. So by way of the phone, you know, it's not many people who actually couldn't get on the internet with their phone.

MS 26:57

Okay. I understand. So you don't necessarily think that your webs that lack of traffic to your website had anything to do with lack of internet

TG 27:08

you really don't look back the same time that you know, that was happening. The phones were becoming more and more prevalent. And the phone was what we shall take it away. Not necessarily lack of being able to get to it.

MS 27:29

Gotcha. Okay, gotcha. I understand. So now, since we're talking about social media I'd like to talk about your Facebook page. I saw that you mostly if not only share obituaries on your newspapers, Facebook.

TG 27:43

didn't want it to be news or advertising. Going back to the paper product approach. obituaries were time sensitive, and us being a weekly, most of the time, it was services were held. You see. So I took advantage of the Facebook presence to just put timely obituaries so that they would know about it ahead of time in case of somebody they knew or would be interested in going to a service. Okay. That's the only reason I did that. It wasn't to promote myself or to give away to put out news or to put advertising owned or anything like that. It was just a service to try to make a more timely distribution of the obituary information.

MS 28:42

Gotcha. So if it's about sort of timely news, would you ever consider putting breaking any kind of breaking news on Facebook?

TG 28:50

Every now and then I do.

TG 28:54

there's only there's only been like, five or six times and a half is like election results. When there's a highly contested big election that most everybody was interested in the courthouse on election night and certainly results thrown out but a breaking news struck you know this happened or something like that. But it's not very often

MS 29:25

I understand. So obituaries, that's your priority for Facebook for you want to direct back to the print product.

TG 29:32

Right if they want to find out what else is going on in the county buy the paper.

MS 29:39

All right, well, just to wrap up, I've got a couple of big picture kind of theoretical questions. So I hope you'll bear with me through those. What responsibilities do newspapers have to their readers?

TG 29:53

Truth. Truth. That's the thing that I find the biggest difference between social media or phone app or whatever news distribution is they have zero accountability. I find so many times that it's unbelievable.

TG

The one thing that I feel makes the newspaper different from the social media and electronic distribution is accountability. I'm here in my office right now in downtown stouts. If I wrote something wrong about something that happened to somebody or somebody that was mentioned in a meeting or whatever, if I would wrong, take a walk in my office and get my face and say look here, this is not correct. And later verified or verified that they're correct that I was wrong, and I will correct. The last time you saw social media or electronic distribution service to a correct

MS

so you think like online news platforms, they there's not the same pressure, there's not the same level of accountability.

TG

That Exactly. Bottom line is the difference in accountability or lack thereof. In truth in truthful reporting,

MS

that's really interesting. How does accessibility of the product factor into the question of responsibility?

TG

Accountability? You mean a paper or of me?

MS

Whichever one so what I guess let's start what is accessibility mean to you in the context of newspapers? What makes a paper accessible and does it have to be

TG

well accessible is in making sure technical standards are what? Sorry, I'm not I'm not getting this quick.

MS

Yeah, that's okay. Yeah. So what do you think a paper needs that needs to be easy for the audience to get ahold of?

TG 2:07

Yeah, I have it added many places. Some places that you know, don't sell very many and some that sell out. But I make sure that it just many places in every corner of the county, at least, we have one or two that's outside the county. But make it accessible to purchase to just about anybody that wants.

MS

The final question I've been asking people is what steps your publication has taken towards making their online content accessible for readers? That doesn't really apply to you?

TG 2:53

Right? Because like I said, we did try at that one time, just homemade Online presence is just we've never had it. To make money you spend money, you have to spend money to make money and we just have never had it to put into professional online presence. So I tried like a I told you I tried it myself. And just the only way I knew to do it just didn't appeals to anybody, and just didn't work. So we pretty much decided to just stay with the paper product until it wouldn't sell anymore.

MS 3:40

I understand. So that was all the questions I had today. Was there anything else that you think I missed or you wanted to mention?

TG 3:48

No, I'm just glad to touch on the accountability pain because I have given that talk before the Girl Scout leader had made do a talk to the girl scouts one time about nude papers and that was my main point that we believe in and adhere to accountability and truth. And show them instances of where they couldn't trust what they were seeing on that phone. And that was not hard to do. It's very easy to come up with is just where you can pull something up and that's what I would do. I pulled out my phone my happy you know that one? How do you know that's true, too? How will you find out whether or not it's true? And if it's not what you're going to do about and that was that was the way I did my presentation to the Girl Scouts at one time and they really were interested in it. They had never thought of it that way. It was nothing they had ever thought about accountability. And well, why isn't it true? It's on the phone. Would they let it be on the phone or on the side or whatever it was? Would you know it wouldn't be on there if it was a good year? It would Yeah, and showed him and showed him that yeah, it's rare and it's not true. But that had never entered their mind before that it might not be true because they were able to pull it up so it had to be true. And I just found it very interesting that their mindset was well hey, you can pull it up. So it must be true.

MS 5:34

I think it's an excellent point. I think it's one of the responsibilities as sort of of newspapers and of the press to sort of uphold that standard

TG 5:42

for it and more and more. That standard is going by the wayside. And it's it's sad for the industry and it's sad for the country. In my in my view.

MS 5:57

Do you think it's because of this push to produce more digital content that that standard is going away?

TG 6:04

Push to what now?

MS 6:05

So perhaps this is a leading question. You'll have to forgive me but

TG 6:09

I'm sure I'm getting a little older. My hearing is not what it used to be. So just lose train there.

MS 6:19

You're more than fine. So there's sort of this and this is I'm noticing this is more true of national news publications. But there's this trend pushing towards creating more digital things than print news for various financial reasons. So do you think that has anything to do with this sort of degradation of the standard of accountability?

TG

Well could because it's easier to get lost in the digital world than it is. You know, in the print.

Jay Horton, WEHCO President

Madi Stephens 0:01

All right, well, I know that Ashley has told you a little bit about what I'm doing maybe but just to give you a better idea. The point of my master's research is I'm doing interviews with staff of newspapers serving rural populations here in Arkansas, talk about how a lack of Internet access affects digital news consumption. So specifically, I'm really trying to get at questions of how rural newspapers are balancing sort of this push to produce digital content with ensuring accessibility for their readership experiencing internet insecurity. And the point of it really I was focusing on newspapers that serve primarily rural populations, which is why I didn't originally reach out to the demigods. However, through the process of interviewing people, there was not a single newspaper that didn't mention didn't practice that as sort of inspiration or the push behind their digital strategy. So I just love to talk to you a little bit more about that today is kind of just jumping right in can you sort of just walk me through the decision making process behind the Democrats shift to digital only with the Sunday print and the distributions of the iPads?

Jay Horton 1:04

Sure, you know, it's really it's sort of when you when you when you look at the various strategies across newspapers, we know that advertising has shifted so the so the so the top line, the revenue structures have been breaking down and used to be 80% advertising 20% circulation revenue, that's what supported newspapers for a long period of time. And so it's that decline in advertising revenue, the shift to digital and advertising was happening long before the news content, necessarily was that you know, it's it's, I think it's clear to everybody under the sun, that digital is

just a more efficient means of relaying information. Right? You know, in a printing press these days, you know, depending on what kind of circulation, how many, how much color, you want to use everything else, you know, that could be anywhere from 50 to \$80 million. And then you're producing the news and you've got a deadline, say at 1011 o'clock at night, so that you can produce news and people are going to read at seven eight in the morning. Well, what about that entire news cycle that happens between the moment you stop putting news onto the pages and then actually get customers hands with digital collapses that you know, to minutes as opposed to hours? And so when you look at that efficiency, and you don't have the paper and ink cost and delivery expense, all the gas carriers all that stuff you take you look at that, it's just clear that digital is superior to print in terms of efficiency and delivering news. It's faster, it's cheaper, and in some ways, it's in other ways. It's better to write you'd get video you've got other multimedia, you've got access to all these links to all these places to go. So if anybody like to argue that digital isn't better than print, you know, then they just be frankly arguing for nostalgia. You know, and, and there's there is an argument for that and I and I am one of those people on a Sunday morning. I rather not touching myself for a little while. I would like to get up into the screen to print newspaper and relax and you know, not not necessarily be on the go. And what we found that you know, and moving to digital and we knew it so we so we knew eventually everybody's going to digital, right? We're either going to digital or you're going to not exist. Or you're going to change your structure so significantly, that it's that it's maybe not even worth it to publish a newspaper because when you've got all those expenses around all those things that we talked about, well where else are you going to cut expense to be able to actually, you know, be profitable, not losing money? Well, the only places you go at that point are our journalists, right. So our decision was simple. Do we do we cut distribution costs, or do we cut journalists? Well, we're going to cut distribution costs. And so that's what we did and turn to the Arkansas Democrat Gazette from unprofitable newspaper to approximately one point by making the change and you know, the the thinking around going to a digital edition as opposed to a website that might be curious for you to know well you know, when you look at the consumption habits between the two pieces, it's it's pretty obvious to the average visitor to a website might see somewhere between two and three page news and it might last about two minutes. An average visit to the digital edition will last 27 minutes. They will go through an entire sitting of that. So what's the value of them in to a consumer, right that engagement time is clearly shows that you know if you can get people into an e edition, it's a better experience. They spend more time and they find more value in it. You know, so that was what drove our you know, was like okay, we're gonna push them to digital, but always we can keep the format the same, and we can keep it so that they understand we see this and so that's what also that drew drove our decision. Well, the best experience is not to say on a mobile phone or frankly on a laptop, it's read it on a tablet. So we're believers in that. And so after a couple of different experiments in terms of trying to get readers to adopt that log, getting their own tablets. It didn't work, so we decided to get purchase iPads for subscribers who made the conversion with us that they can use for as long as they want to be a subscriber and they can use it for anything else they want. They can use it for email and browse the websites and other apps on it do whatever they want with it. But if they see Sir description they do, return it to us. That's gone very well. You know, for the past couple of years, our subscriber

levels really, so we continue to put more efforts into seeing that becoming a growth engine for us in the future. But it's it's was kind of nice to be able to turn the corner and move to acquisition in a different state. Not different physical state, but a different state of mind or the digital front. So it's been it's been a big change. And a lot of folks are looking at us and they just say, well, we don't have all that you all have and Yeah, you've got private ownership. You've got no debt, you've got a lot of other things, you know, we can't necessarily afford to give all of our customers iPads. Well, the final thing I'll tell you about that is the when we analyze the value of the customer base, there's a there's a metric it's called CLV or customer lifetime value. And when you look at the customer lifetime value, in other words, the amount of churn drives a higher or lower customer lifetime value. And the on any given month, we would only lose less than 1% of customers who have arrived time whereas an average digital customers want to subscribe to the website and primarily uses the website. They turn at a five to 6% per month. So the difference in that metric means that there's three times the customer lifetime value in an iPad subscriber the not which is provides a 3x return on the cost of an iPad. So so the math is there. So it really just kind of comes down to if people want to invest or not invest in the business, if they can afford to invest in the business. So but that going back to your question, your initial question, what you're looking at is, you know, does people's Internet access affect their ability to do this? Well, absolutely, it does. But the way our e edition to work to the application is that it will download and then you can read it even if you're offline. So what we've done with with people who may not have a broadband connection to their house, they usually have a cell phone. And so we we actually went household to household for our subscribers, we've taught people how to hotspot through their cell phone, download the additional the tablet and still be able to read it and do all that from that from that space as well as use it on their phone. And so that's that's how we managed around that a little bit. We do have a small slew of of users that word anymore we have a small number of, you know, probably about 40 or 50 iPads out there there actually sell your iPads that people can use to connect up to that that was an experiment. We tried to just see if that made a difference for folks and it wasn't any different than people hotspotting really interesting. It would do it that way. So we haven't continued that. As, as you may or may not know wait till also as a cable company, which is you know, most cable companies these days are really internet service providers at the same time. So we do have in the places where we have a cable company, we do a bundle deal. We get a subscription, you get your internet access, and all that kind of bundled into one one thing, and that's got good response. So I've just talked a lot there. So hopefully that gives you an answer to your question.

MS 9:28

It was a great answer. I appreciate it. I was looking through my list of questions. I said, Well, those are the first three. So I specifically in reference to those sort of community trainings, I remember reading about that being as part of your plan for the implementation and the distribution of the iPads. So that sort of go to going door to door. What sorts of conversations were being had what were people saying what was the immediate reaction?

JH 9:50

Well the immediate reaction was appreciation for the level of service. We had a lot of people who were walked into this with like, I'm not gonna like this. It's really you know, it's, it's, it's gonna you know, I love my newspaper. I don't want to give up my printed newspaper. And this was the first experience they have to kind of really see and understand how this was going to

work for them. And so, people were very appreciative of that time. And we, you know, our team did a great job of training the associates and they were just really helpful. They sit down, it's been, you know, as long as needed to, to kind of show people how it worked, how they can, you know, pinch and zoom and be able to blow up the tags and be able to see the photos, click on photo galleries, watch a video, do all these things and all these other enhancements we have in those additions. And, you know, that was hugely important to the effort would not have gone as well nearly as well if we had just mailed people iPad and said figure it out. Today, even to the point where there's there dozens of cases, you know, where despite our explanations, you know, people come in, they get their iPad, they get to train and be like, Okay, this is great. I got it and go home. And call us back to this was great. When I were there at the conference center like walking through it, I got home it doesn't work. Well, so not only did we have that we had people drive to their house and make sure that they knew how to actually get it connected to Wi Fi and they had their that might have been set up by a child or cousin, the next door neighbor or something like that. They didn't really know how to use it. And so we dealt with all those cases and just help people, frankly, get online. And so that was you know, an extra part of the service and probably under appreciated people think about the cost of the iPad. Well, that was a significant expense to But wouldn't it work like one or the other just wouldn't have done took both?

MS 11:53

Yeah, absolutely. I remember helping my dad set a piston gas iPad when he got his. I'm familiar with that process. I didn't want to ask if in any way this shift towards digital content affected the demonizes social media strategy at all. Do you utilize Facebook in a different way now?

JH 12:12

Not so much. You know, during the conversion, and for a period after you know, we and we've been we continue to be a little bit shy about social media frankly. You know, we and we appreciate the people who use it and it's such an important part in a lot of people's lives. And we do want to make sure we get you know, breaking local news out there and then refreshing that we're letting people know what's going on and trying to bring them back to our website. But ultimately, it hasn't really had a huge adjustment for us and our position has been that you know, we want to be a destination or website or application. We want to be a destination. We're not we're not necessarily looking to have Facebook or Google be that destination for is.

MS 13:07

Absolutely. I'd like to go back just really quickly to you said that anyone who is not sort of accepting this push towards digital is operating in sort of nostalgia In my experience with a few newspapers that I've talked with who do lack sort of a digital space for their content. Their main reasoning was just simply a lack of the capital and the infrastructure to even get started. They said something like to make money you have to have money and we simply just don't have the money to be able to create this website that would that would be necessary. So what would your response be to that?

JH 13:39

Well, what I would say that, you know, we have they have to find a way, right, and there's, you know, you're gonna have to pay a press person, or you're gonna have to pay a developer you

know, there's the money is there. If they're already producing that content somehow, what they're saying is we don't have the money to do both. And, and so, so they have to figure out a way to go from one to the other or they have to take a different approach with their news. In terms of not that may not resemble a newspaper anymore, it might resemble more of a monthly magazine or something like that, but you know, has a different position in the ecosystem.

MS 14:39

So if you say that they might not have the money to do both, would you advocate that they just make the switch to digital as well. You think that everyone's going?

JH 14:48

I would say that again, if they're, if they're, if they're looking to be if they're looking to break news, right, if they're looking to be a news source for their community and maybe not just a place for more magazine style of analysis and understanding, you're going to need to have a plan on how to transition to digital. And, you know, similar to us, if they don't have the money, how do you how do you? How do you figure out how to Okay, what's your transition point, if you're more than a weekly? Can you can you go to being a weekly print, and take those expense savings and hire a developer to help you put a WordPress site up? You know, or if your weekly maybe you think about going to twice weekly or monthly in print, and then figuring out how to get into and invest in having a digital presence. You know, there there are fairly inexpensive ways to at least start having a digital presence and getting out there. The problem at that point is well, the financial infrastructure the money we do make is coming from print. So how do we how do we transition that and in that way? Well, again, it's that's that's the most difficult part of it. You know, that's, that's something we're still working on to, frankly, because there's large parts of our business still dependent on that print revenue. We were able to shift a lot of the advertising dollars from the weekend to Sunday. And our legals are obits, all of that stuff or inserts all his Sunday. So we're able to preserve as much of those revenue streams as possible, but still be able to save that money to continue to invest in our digital presence.

MS 16:40

Absolutely. So the final three questions I've posed to all the newspapers that I've talked to, beginning with and they're sort of the bigger picture questions, what does accessibility regarding news content mean to you?

JH 16:55

Is a great question. So, you know, accessibility is the news you need and you can find it you can get to it no matter in a sense, who you are right? If that evolves to where you where you are, what, what what your access capabilities are, internet or not, also includes any potential challenges you have either was sight or hearing, or other challenges you might face in that way. So you want to make sure that you have accessibility across that spectrum as well. And you know that at all that it's also about relevance, right? So if it's accessible, but you don't get it until a week later, or two weeks later, and the relevance is gone. Is that really accessible? You know, so I think that's an interesting question.

MS

Do newspapers have a duty to make that work accessible?

JH 18:05

So newspapers are being the fifth of state right? That's, that's it's part of our mission. To make it accessible. So that can equate to duty right, and that's a that's a that's a that's a but it's also it's, it's different than what the duty might be.

JH 18:31

To you know, United States Marine, or, you know, there's a structure you know, to be a journalist, you have to have a passion and a desire to be a journalist.

JH 18:50

But at the same time, it's a business we're not taxpayer funded. Right. So it's, it's our mission, not necessarily our duty, and but we have to be able to survive, to be able to complete it. And so we can't necessarily from a business standpoint, it may cost too much to make it accessible to everybody, based on our capabilities, so how do we make it accessible to the most people that we can? That's really what we're trying to do.

MS 19:27

Absolutely. A great segue to my final question, what steps have your publication taken towards making your online or digital content more accessible to your readers?

JH 19:40

So in some ways, this this will go back to what I was saying earlier, the difference between a sort of a taxpayer funded entity that as opposed to a business because some might say, because we have, you know, a fairly tight subscription wall on our website, we're limiting accessibility to some of our news because you have to be a subscriber to read many stories. You know, but before there was the internet, you had to either buy a copy of the papers and you had to get it from a friend or something for it to be accessible. So I would say you know, with what we're dealing between the application website, having print, and we have single copy, I think we're more accessible today. And all the ways that we do it than we've ever been history of newspapers. So, so I would cite all of those things that we look for every medium we can to put news down and including, you know, in some ways, which may not always be in our business interest on social media. Because again, we know that people are there. We want people to, to, to get notified about, you know, breaking news and information that is pertinent to their lives and the quality of their lives. So we publish it more places more often than ever in the history of newspapers today.

MS 21:08

Well, thank you so much. Those are all the questions that I had today. Was there anything else that you wanted to add or say that you think I didn't touch on?

JH 21:19

Know I appreciate very much your, your focus here and the question that you're trying to answer. And so I'll say not necessarily related to questions that I've been pleased with state of Arkansas as well as the federal government, really pushing and pushing more dollars into trying to get broadband internet across rural areas. I think it's a very important initiative and I think it'll make

things easier for everybody. But that effort is yet another reason, kind of going back to our earlier discussion. Why? Why rural newspapers need to figure out their digital strategy. As these broadband pathways continue to expand, all the government money is flowing into that that's happening. So there will be broadband, you know, across the state. Almost the entire state within years. So what's your strategy? What are you doing? How are you going to make sure that you're, you're, you're relevant and accessible in that day? And so tough questions for many. Not everybody feels they can do what we can do. Obviously, not everybody can. You know, but we're willing to share our experience and talk about what we do and how we did it with anybody and we've we've had conversations around the industry and there are a number of newspapers who are doing experiments with our same model across the country. Not as many people went all in on it. Nobody at this point has gone is all in this as we have. You know, that's a that's a credit to the Hussman family and the folks who really want to see newspapers persisted for The Next Generation and beyond. So thank you for your interest in journalism.

**Professional Component  
Weekly Field Notes**

**Update 1/24 – 1/28**

**1. Summarize your work this week for the professional component of your project.**

The first half of the week was getting familiar with the department's platforms and previous content. I created a schedule for social content through February to share graphics and videos that have already been created by both the internal communications team and the ad agencies the department contracts with for commercial spots. In addition to updating the schedule, daily projects include creating graphics for COVID as well as other programs. While the vaccination campaign is the department's current priority, we also work with other programs such as heart health and tobacco awareness. This week I created graphics for at-home test distribution centers, an isolation/quarantine calculator, the start of heart health month and Valentine's day content.

**2. Summarize your work for the research component of your project.**

This week I focused on adjusting to my new job so I did not make as much progress on scheduling interviews for my research. I met with the Arkansas Press Association director, Ashley Wimberley, again to touch base about sourcing for interviews. We agreed to focus on editors and publishers of rural newsrooms as they have more access to the demographic information I am interested in. Wimberley also had the idea of potentially talking to someone in the circulation department of a newspaper to really hone in on the demographic information and business decisions that go into subscription options. She is finalizing the list of interview subjects this week. While I had hoped to have made more progress in scheduling interviews by this point, I am reassured that she will have already made contact with everyone on the list so I know they will be receptive to participating in this research.

**3. Summarize any challenges you faced this week related to the professional and/or research component of the project.**

I am adjusting to the change of pace associated with going from wearing many hats in a bustling news room to being able to focus on only one facet of the communication process. Rather than prioritizing efficiency in completing tasks quickly, I am able to spend more time on one project which requires more attention to detail.

**Update 1/31 – 2/4**

**1. Summarize your work this week for the professional component of your project.**

The hectic nature of the first week has slowed down and I am getting into a rhythm. My goal is to post on every platform at least once a day, in addition to sharing the daily COVID data graphic. I also try to have the next week's content made and

approved the week prior. So this week I focused on turning the graphics already made for the website into formats better suited for Instagram stories. The snowstorm that hit the area sent everyone home for Thursday and Friday, so my work was lighter and I mostly shared updates on which local health units were closed due to inclement weather.

**2. Summarize your work for the research component of your project.**

I worked with Wimberley to finalize the first seven names of interview subjects for the project, and they are as follows:

Stone County Leader, Mountain View  
Lori Freeze, Editor

The Helena World  
Andrew Bagley, Co-Publisher

The Advance Monticellonian  
Tom White, President/Publisher

Northwest Arkansas Democrat-Gazette  
Rusty Turner, Editor

The Madison County Record  
Ellen Kreth, Publisher

The Saline Courier  
Kelly Freudensprung, Publisher

Carroll County News, Berryville  
Scott Loftis, Publisher

I will spend this next week reaching out to them to explain a bit more about my project and set up times for interviews in the coming weeks.

**3. Summarize any challenges you faced this week related to the professional and/or research component of the project.**

None this week – I am establishing a working routine and excited to be moving forward with the interview portion of my project.

**Update 2/7 – 2/11**

**1. Summarize your work this week for the professional component of your project.**

Much of the same as last week – my days are mostly spent making graphics and planning the social media calendar for the month. I am focusing on diversifying our content to not

just post about COVID; for instance, it is heart health month so I am creating a series of graphics on tips for improved cardiovascular health. I expect the pace to pick up in March when I am responsible for making more of the content rather than just scheduling previously made graphics.

**2. Summarize your work for the research component of your project.**

I have two interviews scheduled so far: Scott Loftis, publisher of Carroll County News in Berryville, AR., at 2 p.m. on Wednesday, Feb. 16, and Lori Freeze, editor at Stone County Leader in Mountain View, AR., at noon on Wednesday, Feb. 23. I have also heard back from Britt Talent, publisher of the Cleveland County Herald, and Andrew Bagley, co-publisher of the Helena World. Both are available in the next two weeks as well and we are nailing down the exact time and date.

**3. Summarize any challenges you faced this week related to the professional and/or research component of the project.**

I still feel good about the progress I am making on both the professional and research components of my project. Britt Talent responded to my initial email and said “By the way, you are tackling a topic that is at the forefront for the survival of small towns and rural America.” Her feedback was reassuring and I am really looking forward to beginning the interview process.

**Update 2/14 – 2/18**

**1. Summarize your work this week for the professional component of your project.**

Continuing to follow the social schedule I made at the beginning of the month incorporating a mix of graphics and video content. Friday was the first day I had to make a graphic on the spot about a national formula recall. It was a nice change of pace and a reminder of how to balance short term and long term deadlines. Next week I will start working on planning social content for March.

**2. Summarize your work for the research component of your project.**

There have been changes to the interview schedule as people have canceled and rescheduled so below are the interviews I currently have scheduled:

Wednesday, February 23: Lori Freeze, Editor at Stone County Leader  
 Thursday, February 24: Britt Talent, Editor at Cleveland County Herald  
 Friday, February 25: Andrew Bagley, Publisher at Helena World  
 Thursday, March 3: Scott Loftis, Publisher at Carroll County Paper

I have also emailed and am waiting to hear back from Tom White, publisher of The Advance Monticellonian; Ellen Kreth, publisher of The Madison County Record; and Tommy Goodwin, Publisher of the Lafayette County Press.

**3. Summarize any challenges you faced this week related to the professional and/or research component of the project.**

I wouldn't say any challenges thus far, just anxious to begin interviews as March is fast approaching. The next week and a half are packed with rescheduled interviews but I know I will feel better getting through them and making such substantial progress.

**Update 2/21 – 2/25**

**1. Summarize your work this week for the professional component of your project.**

Began planning social content for March. I also had the opportunity to help record the latest PSA with the state's Secretary of Health which was a great experience working on a more technical project.

**2. Summarize your work for the research component of your project.**

Last week was a big week. I feel like I finally made a lot of progress on my project. I had three interviews with Britt Talent (Editor at Cleveland County Herald), Andrew Bagley (Publisher of Helena World), and Ellen Kreth (Publisher of Madison County Record). They all brought an interesting and different opinion to the topic of their responsibility in ensuring digital access. All had substantially higher print subscription rates than digital (for example, most had print circulations in the thousands with digital only subscribers only in the double digits). In summary, Talent's main digital strategy is making sure their website and E-edition is mobile friendly rather than just desktop because, because while much of his readership can't rely on adequate home internet, their cell phone data packages make up the majority of their internet capability. Bagley emphasized the news industry's hands are tied because it is up to the wireless companies to ensure access and that newspapers need to retain their function as a business and cannot give away news for free. Kreth fell in the middle of the other two, acknowledging the practical need to prioritize paying subscribers with her continued efforts to ensure that their print product is as accessible as possible. In other words, her solution to issues of digital access is continuing to have widely distributed print product.

Additionally, I revised my interview protocol slightly in preparation for these interviews, including taking out a few questions, reordering the remaining ones, and tweaking the language slightly. I attached my revised interview protocol but here is a summary of the changes:

- moved the questions about subscription options and when the website was developed up to directly after circulation

- Took the question about the importance of newspaper staff living in the community out because I think it takes away from the central topic of access — when I was doing the first interview and going through the questions that one seemed to come out of nowhere and was abrupt.
- Took out the long questions about personally experiencing a situation in which they were hindered professionally or personally by slow internet because often it is talked about when I ask about internet speeds so this felt redundant
- I moved the questions about internet usage practices and social media up to the middle section after how much web access is there in the locality and how that affects digital strategy.
- Moved the questions about responsibility and access to before the one about what steps your publication has taken towards making online content more accessible because I think it sets it up better that way.
- And instead of “obligation” I say “responsibility” in the question about duty to provide access

All three interviews have been recorded and transcribed. I have two more interviews this week with Lori Freeze (Editor of the Stone County Leader) and Scott Loftis (Publisher of the Carroll County News).

**3. Summarize any challenges you faced this week related to the professional and/or research component of the project.**

Something I hadn't considered going into these interviews was the role internet access would play in conducting them. For example, my interview with Lori Freeze was first scheduled for 2 p.m. on Wednesday, February 23<sup>rd</sup>. The state was hit with a wintery mix that was particularly bad for the north, including Mountain View. After an attempted zoom call that cut out after 15 minutes, we decided to move to a phone interview. Within five minutes on the phone, the call failed. Freeze texted that unfortunately she lost wifi due to the winter weather and the increased traffic resulting from people working from home. Additionally, her home is in a “dead spot” for calling so she depends on wireless to have phone calls. The interview was rescheduled for the following Wednesday, March 2<sup>nd</sup>. While this was an unfortunate delay, it was further evidence of the widespread nature of internet insecurity and its effects.

**Update 2/28 – 3/4**

**1. Summarize your work this week for the professional component of your project.**

Planning out March social content. The focus of this week was trying out a new scheduling platform -- we have been using Buffer to schedule posts but recently discovered that Canva premium, which we already pay for to design our graphics, also allows us to directly post to our social platforms. I scheduled exclusively using Canva this week and will report back to my supervisor once I determine which works better.

**2. Summarize your work for the research component of your project.**

This week I interviewed Lori Freeze (Editor of the Stone County Leader) and Scott Loftis (Publisher of the Carroll County News). Lori Freeze has a more traditional outlook similar to some of the previous interviews: their priority is to maintain the value of the print product and in order to do that most of their online content is behind a paywall. She said that while they have experienced the push to go digital first and put everything on their website, that was simply never an option for them as it would not be beneficial or accessible to their readers. She also shared an interesting anecdote about how their data showed 75% of their audience had home internet but that was prior to the pandemic and during the pandemic many more got internet access because of public hotspot locations provided by the school district. My initial thought is this wouldn't really impact digital news access because having to drive to a school parking lot to read the newspaper online would be incredibly impractical. However, the image she described of students crowding the parking lot in order to complete school work because they didn't have wifi at home is a startling one. Lori said she thought it really showed how big of a problem internet access poses to their community.

In comparison to the interviews I have conducted so far, Scott Loftis's description of the Carroll County newspaper is one of the more digitally savvy news sources. They have been known to put a story on the website first rather than holding it for print and all stories go online but don't always appear in the print edition. They use a content management system that collects analytics on online traffic. They do not currently have a paywall but Scott said that is likely coming soon and he supports that decision. Scott said one aspect of their digital strategy is ensuring their website and e-edition are mobile friendly, similar to what Britt Talent of the Cleveland County Herald said.

**3. Summarize any challenges you faced this week related to the professional and/or research component of the project.**

None this week -- I expect to have more questions as I begin analyzing the interviews, which I am hoping to start next week. It is exciting to see some common themes and strategies beginning to emerge from the interviews -- such as the importance of formatting the website for mobile consumption because more people have smart phone data packages than reliable high speed home internet.

**Update 3/7 – 3/11**

**1. Summarize your work this week for the professional component of your project.**

This was a slow week as we are in mid-march and content is mostly set. We are slowly transitioning back some non-covid content which is a nice change of pace -- Friday was the 25th anniversary of the Breast Cancer Act which started a program to provide free screenings to women and I worked with that specific department to create a social post marking the occasion. I have also gotten into the practice of retweeting and

sharing more content from CDC and other state agency pages in an attempt to increase our activity past just our daily posts.

**2. Summarize your work for the research component of your project.**

As I explained in our earlier email correspondence, I have decided to try to get in touch with someone from the Democrat Gazette, the largest paper in the state. Their decision to move to a digital only subscription and distribute ipads greatly influenced the digital strategies of the papers I have talked to thus far. I emailed Ashley and she is talking to her contacts to set something up with someone there. I also interviewed Tom White with the Advance Monticellionian. He was very upfront about the fact that their paper does not prioritize digital content and their focus is the print product. Right now all of their content is on the website and there is no paywall. However, they are looking to change their subscription model soon and, in addition to instituting a pay wall, they are going to offer a print only subscription and a print and digital subscription but not a digital only subscription. I asked him to tell me a little more about their thought process regarding that decision and he said their main source of revenue is their print product and they don't want to do anything to take away from those subscriptions.

I have noticed a pattern in almost all of the answers to my question about digital content -- it always goes back to the print newspaper. The most common answer to how they are ensuring access to their digital content has been by going back to the print product. This is something I am going to think more about as I begin writing up my findings on these interviews -- I still think my question is a valid one but it may have underestimated the role of the print paper for rural news organizations.

I am talking with Tommy Goodwin of the Lafayette County Press on Tuesday.

**3. Summarize any challenges you faced this week related to the professional and/or research component of the project.**

My initial plan was to interview 8-10 people for this project but I feel like I am reaching a point of saturation now as I am starting to hear the same answers repeatedly going on interview seven. I still hope to speak with someone from the Dem Gaz because that will be a different perspective, but if I am not able to in time, would seven interviews be sufficient? I feel I have enough content to address my research question. I am just clarifying that eight was not a hard minimum.

**Update 3/14 – 3/18**

**1. Summarize your work this week for the professional component of your project.**

Other programs within the health department have started reaching out to work on campaigns and coordinate social content. Working on content that is not COVID related is a nice change and it gives me more to do as far as differentiating content. For instance, after we shared the graphic for the Breast Cancer Act anniversary, we were contacted by

the BreastCare program to link to their Facebook page to direct some of our traffic to them. While I manage the official department wide Facebook page, many of the individual programs have much smaller pages specifically for their work. It is important to work together whenever possible to create a cohesive digital strategy across all department organizations.

**2. Summarize your work for the research component of your project.**

This week was a bit slower in terms of working on the research component of my project because I did not have any interviews scheduled. I did touch base with Ashley about finding someone at the Dem Gaz to speak with and I also went over my interview transcripts to start making notes on themes and patterns that are coming up.

**3. Summarize any challenges you faced this week related to the professional and/or research component of the project.**

None this week!

**Update 3/21 – 3/25**

**1. Summarize your work this week for the professional component of your project.**

Building off of what I have mentioned in previous weeks, my focus has turned to creating more non-COVID content, which requires a bit more creativity and leg work. For instance, this week I posted about a new Local Health Unit opening in Jefferson county, first day of spring, mosquito and tick season guidance, a tuberculosis testimonial, and tornado safety. Other than sharing the weekly COVID data update, this was my first week of no COVID social posts. I am starting to see what this job will look like in the long term when we are no longer in a pandemic and it is great to be able to picture that.

**3. Summarize your work for the research component of your project.**

This week I interviewed Tommy Goodwin, owner of the Lafayette County Press newspaper. Like Tom from the Advanced Monticellionan, he was upfront that they have very little in terms of digital strategy. However, in light of my growing realization of the prevalence of the print product for rural papers, I was still very interested in his perspective. This may have been the most surprising interview I have had thus far. Prior to buying the newspaper, Tommy acted as teh liaison between the internet company and the town when home internet connections were first installed, so he had a lot to say about internet conditions in Stamps, AR. He reiterated a point many have made that while a significant portion still lack home internet access, the majority of their online activity is done on cell phones through data plans. Further, the Lafayette County Press had a website in early 2000s, but they have since ceased using it because there simply was not a demand for it in their community. They have no digital subscription options, only a print paper, which they mail to over half of their subscribers that live out of state. I think the most interesting point of the interview was when he talked about why he thinks digital

news has been a detriment to accountability in reporting. Here is a quote from the interview: “The one thing that I feel makes the newspaper different from the social media and electronic distribution is accountability. I'm here in my office right now in downtown stouts. If I wrote something wrong about something that happened to somebody or somebody that was mentioned in a meeting or whatever, if I was wrong, they would walk in my office and get my face and say look here, this is not correct. When was the last time you saw social media or electronic distribution service issue a correction? So if you think like online news platforms, they there's not the same pressure, there's not the same level of accountability.” In my research, I have never encountered someone who has positioned digital media in that way. Another aspect he touched on was that many newspapers lack the resources to really make digital media in any kind of effective way. “You have to spend money to make money and we just dont have the money,” he said, in reference to a website.

I have an interview scheduled with Jay Horton, president of WEHCO media which is the company that owns the Dem Gaz, to discuss the decision making process behind their digital strategy. I recognize that interview is cutting it close as my goal is to get you a draft of my report by April 1st; however, because I am mostly using it for context to frame the discussion from the other interviews, I think I can do the bulk of hte writing prior to interviewing Jay and add that information after.

**3. Summarize any challenges you faced this week related to the professional and/or research component of the project.**

I am ready to start writing my project report based on the interviews I have collected. The central themes I have gathered from these interviews is the way that data packages for smart phones have made up for a lack of home internet, and newspapers with a digital presence shape their content layout based on that. Additionally, the reality that rural news organizations are not experiencing the same pressure to move away from the print product and simply could not financially afford to transition to more digital content.

Based on the amount of content I am looking to convey and the length of previous professional project reports I have seen, I am looking to write between 12-15 pages. Does that sound appropriate to you? Also, I have seen people include either transcripts or notes from interviews in the appendix section, which would you prefer? I have both.

**Update 3/28 – 4/1**

**1. Summarize your work this week for the professional component of your project.**

This week was more of the same regarding content planning but one interesting activity we had this week was the required media and crisis communication training. We learned about how to interact with the media in crisis situations. They brought in a retired TV reporter to hold mock radio interviews about COVID guidelines. It was particularly interesting for me to be on the other side of it coming from the newspaper world.

**2. Summarize your work for the research component of your project.**

Attached is a draft of my project analysis. I also made a checklist (see below) of all of the sections needed for the final project report.

Project Analysis

- Introduction
- literature review
- changes from proposal
- findings
- Discussion
- Limitations/potential future studies

Appendix

- Revised interview protocol
- WEHCO interview questions
- interview transcripts
- weekly updates
- supervisor letter
- self evaluation
- proposal

I did not include the literature review in the draft of the analysis I sent you because it hasn't changed since being approved with my proposal but it will go in between the introduction and changes from the proposal section for the final report. I also notified my supervisor of the letter from her and she will have that for me to include by the end of the week.

**3. Summarize any challenges you faced this week related to the professional and/or research component of the project.**

One of the most challenging parts of writing this analysis was narrowing down the topics and anecdotes I wanted to include from the interviews. Initially, I pulled 13 pages of quotes from 75 pages of interview transcripts. From those 13 pages, I had to narrow it down even further to my handful of topics/sections. There were just so many stories and quotes I found so interesting and it is hard to look back at them all and feel like I am not leaving so much out. I suppose this is a fairly common struggle for researchers and why there is a further research section at the end of the paper.

## Supervisor Evaluation



# Arkansas Department of Health

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4815 West Markham Street • Little Rock, Arkansas 72205-3867 • Telephone (501) 661-2000  
Governor Asa Hutchinson  
José R. Romero, MD, Secretary of Health

To Whom It May Concern,

Madison Stephens has worked with the Arkansas Department of Health (ADH) Office of Health Communications to assist with our social media coordination. In her time spent with our team, Madison has demonstrated a strong understanding of communication strategies and a proactive approach to content development. As the lead agency in the state throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, the ADH following on social platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter grew significantly.

Madison has developed content relative to all three platforms, taking into consideration the audience we are trying to reach, the type of message most relevant to each platform, as well as understanding and utilizing our agency's voice and tone in line with our branding standards. In addition to her work ensuring our social media accounts are active and engaging, Madison also assisted with public information duties like drafting and editing press releases and coordinating interviews with local reporters and agency spokespeople.

The Office of Health Communications would strongly recommend Madison to any team or organization looking for someone adept in communications and public relations.

Thank you,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Katie White".

Katie White  
Deputy Director of Health Communications  
Arkansas Department of Health  
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### **Self-Evaluation**

During my time working as the social media coordinator for the Arkansas Department of Health, I have learned how to communicate in a new way. My journalism training taught me how to convey information to readers in the most clear and concise way possible. Social media writing takes those skills and decreases the word count even further. I have gone from sharing news in 500 words to 280 characters. This shift has taught me to consider the value and function of every word used. Additionally, this position has introduced me to the world of graphic design, as part of my job has been to create the visual elements of social posts as well. I have learned the value of creating graphics that don't just catch users eyes as they scroll, but tell a story on their own. I have also learned how to tailor content to reach a specific audience based on analytics for each social platform. For instance, the wording used in a Facebook post is intended to reach our older demographics often in more rural parts of the state, whereas our younger audiences are on Twitter and watching Instagram stories. I have found more similarities between social media content creation and journalism than I initially expected, and I am excited to take the combination of skills I have learned from both industries into my career journey.