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Citing your sources: How community journalists use social media for story content generation

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**Citing your sources:
How community journalists use social media for story content generation**

by

Jared Charles Meisinger

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

Major: Journalism and Mass Communication

Program of Study Committee:
Jan Lauren Boyles, Major Professor
Tracy Lucht
Shawn Dorius

The student author, whose presentation of the scholarship herein was approved by the program of study committee, is solely responsible for the content of this thesis. The Graduate College will ensure this thesis is globally accessible and will not permit alterations after a degree is conferred.

Iowa State University

Ames, Iowa

2018

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ABSTRACT

While newspapers grapple with a transition to a digital world, community journalists continue to utilize the tools at their disposal to produce locally-focused, original content while combating declining readership and shrinking newsrooms. One of those tools is social media. Social media platforms have become seamlessly integrated into the on-the-job, day-to-day newsgathering routines of the community newspaper journalists involved in this study. This practice reflects the culture of newsroom socialization, which instills journalistic values across the organization.

Drawing from 14 in-depth interviews with American journalists at daily community newspapers, this thesis seeks to understand the underlying values of why social media has become an integral part of newsgathering process, and how the practice has become socialized in those newsrooms. This study advances that core journalistic values do not change with the entry of social platforms into daily newswork.

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

As newspapers have grappled with falling advertising revenues (Farhi, 2007) and switching to a digital-based focus, social media continues to become a more integral part of how Americans get their news (Duggan & Smith, 2013). A recent Pew Research Center poll found two-thirds of Americans obtain news from social media, including half of Americans 50 and older (Shearer & Gottfried, 2017). While engaging the internet to obtain news is in no way a new phenomenon (Bentley, 2011; Gillmor, 2004), social media has allowed people to more easily become journalists (Newman, 2009; Antony & Thomas, 2010) by posting their own content. It has also allowed social media users to share and discuss content from traditional media on those platforms (Meraz, 2009; Gil de Zúñiga, Jung & Valenzuela, 2012). Even with these changing dynamics, little research has been conducted on how journalists use social media at the local/hyperlocal level to engage with their audiences.

But how — and more importantly for this study, why — do journalists at community newspapers use social media as a function of newsgathering, whether it is cultivating sources or using it as a jumping off point to generate content? Newsworld is constantly evolving. While journalistic routines and community journalism have been present in mass media research for decades, the introduction of social media provides an opportunity to further examine the role that social media plays in these newsrooms. Research in this area is needed for a few reasons. For one, it is important for the journalism industry to understand how a journalist's self-perception of practitioner routines shapes how that journalist views new technologies such as social media. Editors gain from knowing how their own newsroom culture, along with the journalist's background, influences journalistic values. Journalists gain from being more self-aware about

how these aspects influence their own thinking and on-the-job decision making. The academic community gains by understanding how the largest group of American journalists — community journalists — use relatively new tools to generate content, and how their previous experiences, and their academic and professional education, shape how they view potential tools because of their perceived status as a ‘journalist.’ Additionally, news consumers expect certain standards from journalists, and journalists are aware of this. Taken all together, it is important for these different actors to understand how journalists shape their own views about emerging technologies, and the current literature fails to address this at the local level apart from urban, elite news outlets. This study seeks to fill that gap in literature, examining local, community news journalists and how they view social media as a tool to generate story content.

CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Community News Production and Consumption

When one thinks of newspapers in the United States, it is likely that he or she first imagines a publication like *The New York Times* or *The Wall Street Journal*. Most American journalists work instead for smaller, community newspapers (Weinhold, 2008). Prior scholarship has looked at how community-based newspapers can contribute to building community both offline (Park, 1922; Altschull, 1996; Lauterer, 2006; Carey, 2017) and online (Gilligan, 2011; Lewis, Holton & Coddington, 2014; Meyer & Carey, 2014). Others have looked at how community newspapers foster community involvement among citizens (Stamm, Emig & Hesse, 1997) or the community newspaper's role in local political participation (McLeod, et al., 1996; McLeod & Scheufele, 1999). Still others have researched how community journalists view citizen journalism (Lewis, Kaufhold & Lasorsa, 2009). Most of the literature, to date, is focused on elite newspapers — established outlets like *The New York Times* or *The Washington Post*. While the interest in elite American newspapers is understandable, and the internet has led to an increasingly globalized world, people are becoming more and more interested in what is going on near them. A 2015 Pew Research Center study found, for instance, that nine in 10 residents follow their local news. Subsequently, they are increasingly interested in local news — a trend reflected in consumption habits within the United States and Europe (Paulussen & D'heer, 2013).

People may be moving back toward local news, but research in local media and communities is nothing new. The media has been an important part of community-building efforts for years. Robert Ezra Park (1922) was one of the first to talk about the media and

community. In his work, foreign language newspapers were found to be a catalyst in introducing immigrants to their new homes in the United States (the book focused on Chicago), and media was taking an active role in community-building. Since Park's seminal work, many different options for defining 'community' and 'community journalism' exist, and many have been employed in prior research. A 2008 study examined 108 previous works about community, with 65 that "offered direct or implied definitions of community" (Lowrey, Brozana & Mackay, 2008, p. 280). The researchers found that 30 of them stated flat out that community is tied to geographic location, and 27 of them portrayed the community as 'imagined' outside of proximity — but there was some physical trait that bound them together (Lowrey et al., 2008). Then, there were the 20 studies that were called "interpretive" community, and these were bound by shared symbols rather than geography or physical traits (Lowrey et al., 2008, p. 282).

In searching for a definition of community newspaper, some have defined community newspapers by their circulation. Weinhold (2008) used a circulation cutoff of less than 100,000 to define a community newspaper and said daily community newspapers "employ a majority of American journalists and serve as professional training grounds for young journalists" (p. 479). Others, such as Lauterer (2006), defined 'small' newspapers as those with circulations of less than 50,000 and stated that 97 percent of American newspapers fall into that category. The most succinct definition has described community newspapers as "newspapers serving a defined geographic community, often in a small city or rural setting" (Lewis, Kaufhold & Lasorsa, 2010, p. 5).

There have been a variety of terms used to describe community journalists. When applied to online outlets, these labels often become terms like 'participatory individuals,' 'citizen journalists,' 'bloggers' or 'alternative journalists.' Regardless of the label, there are

commonalities among these groups — such as engaging with content meant for a smaller audience that tends to be homogenous (particularly in their shared values), and their strengths and weaknesses are both tied to their intimate relationship with their community (Carpenter, Nah & Chung, 2015). The shared values aspect of that is key here, too, as the internet has removed the geographic location as a necessary characteristic for a group to be called a community — there are online communities now as well.

Journalists who work for community newspapers are almost exclusively in a shared geographic space with their audience. Technology allows for journalists to sometimes ‘telecommute’ — but it is unlikely a journalist working for a local outlet would be able to do so from a place that is not close in proximity. This is especially true as community newspapers stress local coverage. A recent study found the primary focus of content at community newspapers was local issues (76.4 percent), followed by state (16.5 percent), then national (5.9 percent) (Carpenter et al., 2015). The authors also suggested another dimension that characterizes the relationship between media and ‘shared symbolic meaning,’ which was listening — or seeking out viewpoints in the community (Carpenter et al., 2015). It works reversely as well, because in smaller communities one should “consider local media as not only a means to stay informed, but also as tools individuals use to place others, and themselves, in a community” (Carey, 2017, p. 8). A case study comparison of metro dailies and small-town newspapers covering an environmental disaster actually found the opposite of what the researchers thought: the small-town newspaper did not shy away from the conflict, but instead took a more antagonistic approach because an ‘outsider’ caused the problem — something in line with the idea community newspapers share values with their audience (Harry, 2001).

Another aspect that sets community newspapers apart from their urban counterparts is individualism — something that has always been present in American ideologies, but is even more visible in small towns (Donohue, Olien & Tichenor, 1989). Local, community journalism studies, at heart, are a study of culture. Community journalism outlets reflect this culture, but also create it, and are facilitators of cultural and community engagement (Paulussen & D’heer, 2013). In smaller communities, it is “the development of commonality through partnered interaction and shared social experiences (including experiences mediated by newspapers and other communication outlets)” that “help individuals situate themselves in communities and develop local cultures” (Carey, 2017, p. 9). In this way community newspapers are even more unique than their urban counterparts, as a durable community may not require a newspaper to build that community, but can certainly thrive with one (Mersey, 2009). There are multiple aspects of community journalism’s role in culture that make it a distinctive force in small communities, such as geographic location and community focus. In some more extreme cases, the lack of a local media presence — or lack of interest in that community by the regional media — can be detrimental to a community-building or -sustaining effort. Showcasing an example of this, Farhi (2017) reported on East Palo Alto, California, which has no local media and garners very little interest from media in nearby Palo Alto or San Jose. Attributing the sentiment to the East Palo Alto vice mayor, Farhi (2017) says “a community loses its identity when it doesn’t see or hear news about itself.”

A relatively new phenomenon in mass communication research, the term hyperlocal is something that Metzgar, Kurpius and Rowley (2011) say has been used as a “modifier for ‘media,’ despite the lack of a definition,” adding that it has been described as “a hybrid of civic, community, statewide public affairs, and alternative newspaper movements combined with the

interactive and broadcast abilities accompanying Web 2.0” (p. 774). Others, such as Howley (2009), have said hyperlocal media outlets can either enforce, critique or change the cultural norms put forth by the dominant media such as elite newspapers. Metzgar et al. (2011, p. 774) used five elements to describe hyperlocal media outlets:

1. geographically-based
2. community-oriented
3. original-news-reporting organizations
4. indigeneous to the web
5. intended to fill perceived gaps in coverage of an issue or region

Most researchers agree a defined geographic ‘space’ is necessary, as is a community-oriented approach. Original news reporting serves to differentiate the definition of hyperlocal media from things like blogging, and community news outlets that are hyperlocal and are often serving to fill gaps in coverage of a region or certain issues. The problem with this definition is that hyperlocal media does not need to be indigeneous to the web, nor does it need to have no link to ‘elite’ or ‘legacy’ media. As Paulussen and D’heer (2013) note, community newspapers, often in rural or small-city settings, were quick to create online spaces dedicated to participatory news. These newspapers are both ‘legacy’ news and not indigeneous to the web.

Hyperlocal media outlets, and researchers in the field, acknowledge that much of the recent emerging trends in this area focus on community-oriented content generation that is derived from the community itself, but original content is still expected (Metzgar et al., 2011). With this in mind, it can be posited that community newspaper outlets still strive for original content creation but may also sometimes rely on the community on which it focuses to create at least some of this content. The internet, including social media and the online ‘space’ it provides, is so powerful a tool some had thought it would make the physical geographic space inconsequential. If that were to happen, it would pose a challenge to those physical communities

that were built out of geographic location — which is exactly what community newspapers rely on for their wellbeing. While there are certainly examples of the web forcing community newspapers to shut down, other examples — though purely anecdotal — actually highlight how community newspapers can do the opposite. Mersey (2009) pointed to Hurricane Katrina’s destruction of the Gulf Coast in 2005, afterwards which the *Times-Picayune* of New Orleans, Louisiana used the web to distribute their news editions, posts from reporters and editors, and comments from readers — an example of how a newspaper can serve a geographic community through a medium that was supposed to destroy it, even though that geographic community had been dispersed due to a national disaster. This is an extreme example that includes a natural disaster and an evacuation of a major metro area, but still points to how the web can actually help to maintain a community that was built on geographic proximity. And the value of these local outlets cannot be overstated.

While there has been some renewed focus on community journalism to date, most of the mass communication field saw community journalism research as a field with knowledge and talents devoted to only rural, weekly publications (Hatcher & Reader, 2012). As Lewis et al. (2010) write, community newspapers may be “less attractive” to the researcher because their content is harder to collect and analyze, and their size is a put-off (p. 2). Another difficulty in defining community newspapers is that some of these can exist in major metropolitan areas. One study featured community-oriented media outlets based in San Diego, California, Minneapolis-St. Paul, Minnesota and Chicago, Illinois, the latter which was a nonprofit called ChiTown Daily News and loosely defined as a vehicle to give a voice to some of Chicago’s more disenfranchised or underserved neighborhoods (Metzgar et al., 2011). While these may be newspapers focused

on a small community within a major metro, these are not the kind of rural, community newspapers that are consistently ignored in a majority of literature.

The mood surrounding the American newspaper industry — including community outlets — was overwhelmingly negative during the country’s recession that began in 2008. Even before the recession, U.S. newspapers were struggling to secure advertising revenue and trying to figure out how to maintain a positive revenue model (Picard, 2008). The mid-major dailies were dying, as noted in an article in *The Atlantic* titled *The Print Apocalypse and How to Survive It*, which stated legacy newspapers like *The New York Times* were in massive decline (Thompson, 2016). Newspapers like the *Austin-American Statesman* eventually laid off entire divisions and outsourced printing (Zehr, 2015). It was not all pleasant for small town newspapers either. Many communities saw their local media disappear in the last decade and are now dubbed ‘news deserts’ — communities overlooked or completely ignored by the media — due to consolidation, budget cuts, and the discontinuation of local newspapers and/or closures of other media outlets (Ferrier & Center, 2014; Farhi, 2017). According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2017), the American newspaper industry lost over half of its overall employment from January 2001 to September 2016, and plenty of these were in small towns. Journalists at local newspapers also felt these challenges, with surveys showing more than half of the practitioners surveyed identified shrinking newsrooms, a culture of long, 50-plus-hour weeks, weakening attraction of new journalists and job security as major issues (Ali & Radcliffe, 2017).

However, overlooked during this time of dismay surrounding the newspaper industry during the American Recession, was the return to the emphasis on local news. Even in the early part of the recession when metro dailies were losing subscribers, it was the smaller, community- and local-based newspapers which were actually booming (McMahon, 2009). In more extreme

cases, residents actually rely on local media for their own safety. In August 2005, in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, a nonprofit radio station in Bay St. Louis, Mississippi was one of just four radio stations operating on the Gulf Coast between Mobile, Alabama and New Orleans, Louisiana, as it broadcasted lifesaving information ranging from evacuation procedures to food and water distribution points (Howley, 2009). Other studies have found that in communities like New Orleans — which are relatively large metro areas but have a strong identity — a link to the physical community is still necessary in engaging audiences, even in the digital age we currently live in (Boyles, 2017). Despite these trends, community journalists are very optimistic about the future, for many community newspapers across the United States are not only avoiding downsizing, but actually thriving (Ali & Radcliffe, 2017).

Hyperlocal media may be a relatively new phenomena in journalism studies research, but the journalist at these hyperlocal outlets is still a journalist, and his or her values, ethics and views on journalistic integrity are not disregarded because of the size or scope of the publication. Regardless of whether a journalist is employed by an elite or hyperlocal newspaper, the culture of the newsroom, as well as the journalistic values either taught in school or learned on the job, have a say in how a journalist views a new technology. As stated, community journalism has a historical presence in media research, but since the advent of social media — and its numerous consequences for newswork — community journalism research has failed to address *all* the new technology's impact on local outlets, including how journalists' values regarding social media use become socialized within the newsroom.

Newsroom Socialization

Organization socialization is the process in which an organizational outsider transitions into an organizational insider (Van Maanen & Schein, 1977). Newsroom socialization refers to the culture of the newsroom that offers a journalist an idea of what the appropriate ways of doing newswork in that particular newsroom are (Bantz, 1985). In his landmark study, Breed (1955) argued that conformity by new journalists in newsrooms is not automatic for three reasons: (1) there are “ethical journalistic norms”; (2) reporters likely have “more liberal attitudes” and “could invoke the norms to justify anti-policy writing”; and (3) the looked-down-upon act of a publisher requiring reporters to follow a certain policy that is contrary to their ethics (p. 326). This policy is not explicitly told to the journalist, however, so the journalist establishes his or her own norms of the job based on what they perceive to be the social norms of the newsroom — or by “osmosis” (Breed, 1955, p. 328). Some types of stories are unique here, though, as the campaign or policy story and the assigned story are often handed down by the editor — but it is the beat reporter who often becomes his or her own editor in a way (Breed, 1955).

Among these learned skills — which are practiced in school but never put fully into effect until working in the industry — are how to find a good story, present it and write it, and how to develop a strong sense of values and morals that are entwined with the everyday work of the journalist (Cotter, 2010). Once in the newsroom, “a large body of organizational literature indicates that the work culture becomes a powerful socializing force” (Singer, 2004, p. 4). Furthermore, the newspaper itself provides the journalist with a starting point to base their practices, values and expression of their journalistic roles (Russo, 1998). With this in mind, socialization of a journalist in the newsroom does not only exist to make the journalist feel like he or she is part of the group, but also to direct the journalist to do things in a specific way.

Another aspect of newsroom socialization is how certain things are viewed in relation to newswork — perceptions and acceptance/rejection of these things. There does not necessarily need to be one ‘right’ way to do something, however, but even viewing something as ‘wrong’ or inconsistent with that newsroom’s values fits here (Cotter, 2010). Following the 2016 United States presidential election, a marked concern has emerged about the effect of false stories, dubbed ‘fake news,’ that are circulated on social media (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). Just as Berkowitz, Allen and Beeson (1996) found, editors became jaded. Part of this is the “consolidation of a consensual occupational ideology among journalists” around the world “about who counts as a ‘real’ journalist” (Deuze, 2008, p. 16) — and perhaps what counts as a ‘real’ source or what counts as ‘real’ journalism. Looking at the news industry through a cultural studies lens, Zelizer (2004) wrote that journalists become part of a culture of newswork — including things like symbols, ideologies, rituals, etc. These are not necessarily visible on the surface, “because journalists do not, in most instances, deliberately insert values into the news” (Gans, 1979, p. 40). Deuze (2008) writes that the journalists’ ideology and values can be categorized into five main categories: public service, objectivity, autonomy, immediacy and ethics (p. 16). All of these aspects are at play as a journalist becomes socialized into the newsroom. None of these values are specifically spoken about, nor is there a policy that outlines them. They are taught at university (if a journalist attends journalism school) and become a part of the culture of the newsroom into which the journalist is socialized. Perhaps the most interesting of those five values is the ethics — what is considered valid and legitimate.

As for routines, community newspaper journalists are also in a unique position in other realms of newspaper reporting due to their size and duties. One of these is the labor restraint. Getting the newspaper to print is a daunting task anyway but is even more complicated in rural

newsrooms that staff less than 10 people, as staffers usually have to do more than one job (Donohue et al., 1989). Labor restraints can manifest themselves in anything from reporters printing press releases verbatim because they do not have time to ‘dig’ (Bajkiewicz, Kraus & Hong, 2011) to changing the way they cover local ‘hard’ news like city council meetings (Besley & Roberts, 2010). These restraints also give rise to multi-skilling. Multi-skilling in journalism is essentially what it sounds like: journalists are expected to play an active part in multiple facets of delivering the news. As Avilés and Carvajal (2008) put it, “multi-skilling means each journalist is expected to gather the facts, assemble the content, edit the pictures and sound, and deliver the news via several platforms” (p. 225). In a study of digital television stations in Europe, Garcia Avilés, León, Sanders and Harrison (2004) found that multi-skilling was initially a daunting task for the journalists studied, but is steadily becoming a requirement in the field. In instances where multi-skilling is leaned upon, issues can arise, such as journalists’ inability to dedicate efforts to traditional newsgathering routines, such as verifying sources, for example (Garcia Avilés et al., 2004; Örnebring, 2009).

Of course, ownership plays a role here, too, but it is another one of the ways community newspapers differ from urban publications (Picard & Van Weezel, 2008). In regards to restraints on journalistic practices, one would expect the journalist at a community newspaper to operate at a more face-to-face level, and therefore the organizational restraints would be less noticed (Donohue et al., 1989). However, other studies have found the opposite. Hindman, Ernst and Richardson (2001) found that the more urban, pluralistic newspapers were more likely to use all types of communication technologies available to them than community newspapers, but when statistically adjusting for age, education and organizational structure, the relation between community and urban newspapers in regards to information technology use did not reach

statistically significant levels. The newspaper's use of information technologies for news gathering was not influenced by the editors' education level, resources and the newspaper's organizational structure (Hindman et al., 2001). Still, according to Weinhold (2008) research shows community newspaper journalists have limited input into editorial decisions.

Another interesting facet of newsroom socialization is the transforming landscape of the newsroom itself. Some journalists at metro dailies find themselves joining televised newscasts with a cable news affiliate or teaming up with a local news station for coverage on a big event like an election — and others end up updating web pages in the morning while also writing copy for the following day's paper (Dupagne & Garrison, 2006). This is known as 'convergence.' In its contemporary media setting, 'convergence' "refers to some combination of technologies, products, staffs and geography among the previously distinct provinces of print, television and online media" (Singer, 2004, p. 3) — and presently this is multimedia integration made possible by the internet. Most community journalists are likely not affiliated with local television stations, but print journalists "are being asked not only to change the way they do their work but also to re-examine notions about themselves as a particular type of journalist" (Singer, 2004, p. 2). Technology has always been inherently influential on how journalists do their jobs.

Regardless of exactly what aspect of the newspaper is being examined, new media has likely transformed it in some way — from news production and journalistic practices to institutional organization and patterns (Deuze & Marjoribanks, 2009). While newsrooms introduce new technologies that impact news production and dissemination, they also question established norms and routines (Chadha & Wells, 2016) — including journalists combining what were previously distinct steps in the newsgathering process. Although plenty of professions are finding themselves redefining their role in the sphere of new media, perhaps none has had to

cope with changes and pressures the way journalism has (Lewis, 2012). This new media has been defined in a variety of ways, but one thing that is pretty much constant is that new media is *not* traditional print or television. Rather, it can be summed up as the internet and “its subsequent digital byproducts, including, but not limited to, websites, blogs, podcasts, online video, mobile text messaging, and social networking sites, such as Facebook and Twitter” (Adornato, 2014, p. 5). Most of these outside of mobile text messaging are used by newsrooms to disseminate news in real time, and to facilitate audience-newsroom interaction — though it is also possible for newsrooms to provide services like text updates in emergency situations. As technology changes newsrooms, specific communication technologies can have more of an impact on journalists and news consumers than others, especially related to specific tasks — such as generating story content. The court reporter who used to have to physically check court dockets can now often do so online. The city hall reporter who previously took a jaunt down to the mayor’s office for a quote can now pick up a phone — and now can possibly even reach the mayor on a cell phone rather than go through the government office. In short, technologies such as social media have also transformed the day-to-day practices of the journalist.

Social Media and Journalistic Practice

The media has long been a part of social interaction, with people talking about news with others in the local coffee shop or bar, or even sending newspaper clippings through the post. Even before social media, newspapers provided online spaces for people to discuss articles, namely the comments section on their websites. Whether it is community- and relationship-building between journalist and audience (Farhi, 2009), finding quotes (Broersma & Graham, 2013), or sharing news content (Singer et al., 2011), social media is changing the American

newsroom — as well as newsrooms across the globe. It started in the late 1970s, when two Duke University graduate students created Usenet, which allowed worldwide message postings, but Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) assert that social media as we know it really began in the late 1990s when Open Diary, an early social networking site, was launched. Around that same time, ‘weblog’ and its condensed counterpart ‘blog’ first appeared, and eventually gave rise to social media sites MySpace in 2003 and Facebook in 2004 (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Social media have shifted from perceiving “from user as consumer to user as participant,” more reflective of an ideological shift rather than a technological one (Obar & Wildman, 2015). In short, social media sites allow users to create a profile on the platform to be viewed by others or shared privately, connect with other users, and view and roam throughout their list of acquaintances and those made by their ‘friends’ (Ellison, 2007). The most common of these are Facebook and Twitter but can range from image sharing platform Flickr to mobile messaging app Snapchat. These social media have promoted the construction, distribution and interpretation of media messages and events (Hermida, Fletcher, Korell & Logan, 2012). Social media platforms like Twitter have even been compared to a “news wire service because news workers, eyewitnesses, and citizen journalists can send out messages in real time from any corner of the world when news stories break” (Cozma & Chen, 2013, p. 35).

While audience has always been an important aspect of newspaper — or any kind — of journalism, technology is disrupting the connection, as “technological innovations of digital networked media have a profound impact on how this relationship is organized and socially structured (Loosen & Schmidt, 2012, p. 19). New communication technologies can also make the audience feel more involved, as every “new news feature offers opportunities for reportorial innovation and also for audience empowerment and engagement” (Robinson, 2011, p. 140) —

and this leads to both readers and journalists taking an active role in the production of news content. Stassen (2010) found that “social media facilitates a type of journalism in which the audience is much more involved in the news-creation process, where feedback happens in real-time and users have the opportunity to interact with each other” (p. 128) — something that makes audiences feel more connected with the journalist. Many newspapers and other media outlets now allot sizeable resources to grow their social media presence and connection with their audience, as well as to drive traffic to their websites, and some employ or contract specialists to run their social media accounts (Hong, 2012; Ju, Jeong & Chyi, 2014). But on the other side, when the audience is allowed to be involved, that “user participation has contributed to the overall breadth and diversity of media representation” (Lewis, 2012, p. 18).

The community aspect of online spaces is another aspect of how social media is changing the newsroom. Networked social media platforms like Twitter offer a space for users to gather publicly via a technology that mediates that interaction, and these are spaces where people can discuss or even play a part in the news (Hermida et al., 2012). Journalists can certainly be a part of these spheres, though the extent to which they can be truly impactful is hazy. A study of social media usage in Canada found 37 percent of respondents favored content curated by a trained journalist over user-generated content — that number rises to 58 percent among students — while 44 percent were unsure (Hermida et al., 2012). Similarly, when asked about news organization sourcing from social media platforms, 36 percent valued the practice, 32 percent did not and 32 percent were unsure (Hermida et al., 2012).

To engage with their audiences, some newspapers, such as the *Los Angeles Times*, have actually moved away from online comment sections entirely, shifting instead to connecting online with their readers solely through sites like Facebook (Hille & Bakker, 2014).

Interestingly, Hille and Bakker (2014) found that users posted much less on Facebook pages than on news websites, and the conversations on the websites were livelier than on Facebook. For example, there was less internet ‘trolling’ on Facebook, but also fewer interesting debates, and less activity in general (Hille and Bakker, 2014). Still, it is difficult to gauge exactly how ‘public’ platforms like Facebook are, because the information a user sees is targeted and privately delivered (Maida, 2018), so even if a person follows a newspaper’s page he or she may not see the outlet’s posts unless they routinely ‘like’ those posts or share them, or friends often ‘like’ or share them. In this sense, journalists may find their work on social media is potentially influenced by the values and ideologies that make their way into computational models and algorithms (Fleischmann & Wallace, 2010; Mager, 2012). Algorithms can be based on rules or calculations related to vast amounts of data — and these rules may be directly stated by computer programmers or based on computer learning (or a NeuralNet) (Diakopoulos, 2015). In this way, the information a user sees is ‘filtered’ in some sense.

This is all especially evident with Facebook’s changes announced in early 2018, outlined in a post on the platform by Mark Zuckerberg, chairman and CEO of the social media company. The major change was that users’ news feeds — the posts that show up on the ‘home’ screen when a user logs in — would show more news from that users’ geographic region. First, it is interesting to note that Zuckerberg (2018) calls the millions of people around the world who use Facebook a community, stating that Facebook is meant to be fun but also that the algorithm change was a good thing “across our community.” He then goes on to tout the importance of local news, including mentioning research showing a correlation between local news consumption and civic engagement — “Local news helps build community — both on and offline.” Facebook’s changes are a reaction to Facebook’s role in disseminating information

from outlets that appear to be publishing legitimate journalists but are not, or those that intentionally deceive users.

Recently, there has been a focus on ‘fake news’ and social media, particularly after the 2016 U.S. presidential election. ‘Fake news’ is defined as news stories that are purposefully untrue and could mislead readers (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017) — though distinct from satirical outlets like *The Onion*. ‘Fake news’ is a phenomenon that had previously been studied (Borden & Tew, 2007), as had things like ‘echo chambers’ and ‘filter bubbles’ — where a plethora of news options allows individuals to select an outlet that publishes content in line with what he or she already believes and algorithms amplify this by recommending content a user is likely to agree with (Flaxman, Goel & Rao, 2016; Pariser, 2011). But it is social media platforms that allow information to be shared with no fact-checking or editorial input under the guise of valid news. A recent analysis showed that the most popular ‘fake news’ stories were circulated more than the legitimate news stories from established media sources (Silverman, 2016). Furthermore, ‘fake news’ has the potential to be even more persuasive to the average viewer than a television advertisement (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). Other studies have shown young people (adolescents) prefer opinionated rather than objective news in a format that lends itself to social media (Marchi, 2012). These preferences play into how a community journalist uses social media professionally.

Social Media and Newsroom Routines

On an organizational level, news outlets themselves use social media primarily to market their websites and news content (Canter, 2013). News outlets often tweet (or post on Facebook) a headline that links back to their website (Lasorsa, Lewis & Holton, 2012). One study found that

Twitter was actually more effective in reaching audiences than Facebook because more people followed newspapers on Twitter as opposed to ‘liking’ the media outlets’ Facebook pages (Ju et al., 2014). Newspapers must use the metrics provided to them by social media platforms to make decisions about when and where to allocate resources in regard to social media. The authors of the study argued that Twitter is more focused on reading and posting, while Facebook has many other functions, so Twitter is more of a social media while Facebook is more of a social network (Ju et al., 2014). This study focused on the top 66 American newspapers at the time of the study, so it is unclear exactly how this translates to smaller, community newspapers, however.

Media outlets are already using different tools on social platforms to reach their audiences, such as *The New York Times*’ daily Facebook news quiz (Wilson, 2008). Beyond newsprint, NPR released publicly a guide made in house that presented employees with guidelines on how to use social media — and rather than existing to simply warn journalists about how social media can get them in trouble, NPR’s guide welcomed the potential of social media and its range of tools (Cozma & Chen, 2013). In their study of two ‘quality’ Flemish newspapers, Paulussen and Harder (2014) found that on average about five articles per day in each newspaper referenced at least one of the social media platforms YouTube, Facebook or Twitter — but their findings also showed that no platform had become a major primary source for journalists at those newspapers. Still, their findings “give support to the claim that for many of today’s newspaper journalists monitoring social media platforms has become a part of their daily newsathering routines” (Paulussen & Harder, 2014, p. 549).

The research on routines and norms is mixed, however, as some have found journalists established traditional journalistic norms with the use of social media (Lasorsa et al., 2012) while others found journalists use social media in a way that would likely cause a gatekeeping shift

(Parmlee, 2013) — though these studies were undertaken at elite newspapers and not community outlets. Still, social media platforms like Twitter and their news functions (from dissemination to interconnection among journalists and audience) have become so pervasive some researchers argue they are a form of ‘ambient news’ that evolved into ‘ambient journalism’ — the audience’s relationship to the news is personalized, mobile and democratic (Hermida, 2010). Individual journalists tend to use social media to promote what they are currently working on or to share opinions (Canter, 2013). Social networking sites can also serve as useful tools for journalists to find stories and generate content (Paulussen & Harder, 2014). Most academic studies on social media in the newsroom focus “on the news managers’ perspectives of how new media is transforming the workflow of reporters, without considering the attitudes of actual reporters” (Adornato, 2014, p. 6). Some social media platforms, such as Twitter, have become marked platforms for journalists and news organizations to integrate a variety of reporting functions into (Cozma & Chen, 2013; Parmlee, 2013). This integration has ranged from finding quotes (Broersma & Graham, 2012) to identifying sources and covering fast-evolving news items (Vis, 2013).

Social media could be a useful tool for journalists, as Chadha and Wells (2016) found social media sites like Twitter made it easier for journalists to find and cultivate sources and experts for certain subjects. Even with these ongoing issues and changes, social platforms are still popular among journalists, even at small newspapers, and some are more popular than others. Ali and Radcliffe (2017) found via a survey of journalists and editors at small-town newspapers that Facebook is the most popular social network or platform — for both professional and personal reasons — among community journalists. Furthermore, they found that almost 85 percent of their respondents’ newspapers use live video services like Facebook Live

(Ali & Radcliffe, 2017), though the study looked at what tools were used and not why or how they were chosen. Research addressing why journalists at community newspapers use certain social media tools is necessary to fill this research gap.

There is a breadth of research on social media, newsroom socialization and routines and community newspapers. Social media is changing the way people disseminate and receive news, how journalists locate sources (including the use of things like tweets themselves in the actual content), how news outlets market themselves and promote discussion, and how journalists connect with their audiences. Technology continues to force newsrooms to evolve, including changing the role of the journalist, especially at small news outlets where convergence forces the journalist to assume multiple roles. Alongside this social media phenomenon is a return to local and hyperlocal news by the news consumers, bringing the community journalist to the forefront once more. While all of the aspects have been studied, they have not been studied together, examining the community journalist's use and view of social media as a tool to generate story content. This study seeks to fill that gap with the following research questions:

RQ1: How and to what extent do selected journalists at community newspapers use social media as a tool to find story topics in their day-to-day routines?

RQ2: To what extent do community journalists perceive the usefulness of social media in their day-to-day routines?

CHAPTER 3. METHODS

This research employed the use of in-depth interviews, which is consistent with other studies that have examined the impact of new media on journalists at local outlets (Adornato, 2014; Chadha & Wells, 2016). The chosen method reflects the study's goals, which sought to get an idea of the journalists' experience, knowledge and view of social media as a means to generate content, something in-depth interviews "are particularly well suited" to do (Lindlof & Taylor, 2010, p. 173). Wimmer and Dominick (2013) outline multiple reasons why in-depth interviews are unique: (1) they often use smaller samples (as compared to survey interviews); (2) they provide "detailed background about the reasons respondents give specific answers" — including "elaborate data" in relation to the participants' background, opinions, news values, experiences in the newsroom and generating content through online tools, and other remembrances; (3) they can be tailored to each individual participant, allowing the interviewer to construct additional questions based on participant answers; (4) they allow the interviewer to establish a rapport with the participant (p. 142). While a survey would be cheaper and allow for more respondents, it would not be as effective as the in-depth interview in drawing out a "vivid picture of the participant's perspective on the research topic, to get people to talk about their opinions, feelings and experiences, and gain insight into how people interpret and order the world" (Milena, Dainora & Alin, 2008, p. 1279). These points are particularly critical in finding how community journalists view social media as a tool for everyday practice within the newsroom.

The interviews took place during February and March 2018 and followed a semi-structured protocol to allow for more flexibility on the side of the interviewer. Before starting the

interview, participants were sent an informed consent document via email so they were fully informed of their rights as participants in this research, including their ability to leave the study at any time. The conversations averaged 32 minutes each. The interview’s design allowed the researcher to shape the conversation as it happened, responding “to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to the new ideas on the topic” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 111). While this study largely sought to investigate whether American journalists at community newspapers use social media to find stories and generate their required daily content, it also investigated the participants’ *values* and *beliefs* in relation to such tools entering the realm of daily journalistic routines. While it was important to understand *if* these journalists use social media a content-generating tool, it was also important to — as is the case with many qualitative studies — understand how the journalists “make sense of what has happened ... and how this perspective informs their actions” rather than just trying to discern “precisely what happened or what they did” (Maxwell, 2012, p. 81).

The sampling for this study was purposeful. The researcher used a list from the industry nonprofit Alliance for Audited Media and selected only newspapers from the lowest-sized circulation level to sample from — those with daily circulation of less than 50,000, which is consistent with other definitions of community newspapers (Lauterer, 2006). That left 561 publications. Then, after putting those publications into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet, the researcher used the application to generate a random number for each row (newspaper) — accomplished by highlighting the A column and using the command ‘RAND()’. Subsequently, the rows were reordered to reflect the randomly assigned number. The first 137 newspapers were chosen to contact, skipping over publications that supplement larger papers like the *Chicago*

Tribune and the *Los Angeles Times*, known as urban ‘zoned editions,’ as well as those that are not dailies.

To choose a reporter at each paper to contact, the researcher first researched the publications’ websites for staff directories. If those were located, a staff writer or general assignment reporter was selected rather than a reporter with a specific beat like ‘crime.’ If there were multiple staff writers, the first one listed was chosen. Most of the selected publications have very small newsrooms, and few had more than one general assignment reporter. If a staff directory was not available, the researcher found the newspaper’s Twitter account. Many publications create lists of their newsroom reporters on the social media platform, and additional interview contacts could be found in that fashion. Then, to locate contact information, a general Google search such as “[staff writer’s name] [publication’s name] email” was performed. If this failed, the newspaper was discarded from the study, something that occurred only once. Stratification and researcher control over things like demographics among participants were not considered because representativeness cannot be ensured in qualitative research. Interviews were conducted with study subjects until saturation was reached — or when the researcher was no longer learning new information from the subjects (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) — and this was satisfied after 14 interviews.

Initial information related to the participant’s background is the first thing that was collected. The researcher inquired about educational background, years in the industry, years in current position, years at current newspaper and size of newsroom. These are all important parts of discerning the unique view of that particular participant — something sought after in qualitative studies (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Some of this information is available in Appendix C. After background information was collected, the topics were initially related to what the

participant does during a typical work day and their responsibilities, including how the participant views social media in general, how he or she views it as a tool in their everyday journalistic routines and how they utilize it in this way. Following those inquiries, the researcher asked about the participant's community and the newspaper's relationship to that community, before ending by asking the participant what he or she thinks the future of social media and journalism — from the content creating side — will look like. Asking the participant to describe their typical day, as well as how they view social media, and if they use it to find stories and generate content, was the foundation to understanding the journalists' view of social media as a potential story-generating tool. To find out the motivations for that view, regardless of what that view was, it was important to understand the newsroom culture in relation to social media. To accomplish this, the researcher asked if other journalists in the newsroom use social media. These types of questions were the key to addressing the current gaps in literature, as this thesis sought to determine *why* journalists do or do not use social media as a tool to generate content. A full interview schedule is available in Appendix B.

At this point in the interview, the researcher integrated the laddering technique. To get an idea of a journalist's values and their impact on their actions, "interpretive research methods that uncover the idiosyncratic meaning that values have for the individual" need be employed (Bourne & Jenkins, 2005, p. 410). The laddering technique was developed by Hinkle (1965) originally and outlined in an unpublished dissertation. It has been employed in psychology and consumer-research fields (Wright, 1970; Walker & Olson, 1991). The technique was originally built upon Kelly's (1955) personal construct theory, in which it is posited that individuals see the world through a series of constructs that are modified via experiences. The laddering technique is based on the idea that it is possible for the researcher to gain entry into a person's system of

constructs in order to recognize the basis for their values and the effects on how they see the world (Hinkle, 1965), and was employed to determine these values in this research. The laddering technique was employed mainly in the interview section about community, in which the participant was asked to describe the community he or she covers, about the relationship between the newspaper and that community, about how the community would function without a newspaper, and subsequently what major values the newspaper and community share. The laddering method starts with the participant describing a fairly abstract concept and ultimately describing a very abstract concept: values. But the laddering method helps guide the participant to that point.

The interviews were conducted via telephone. The interviews were recorded and, upon completion, the audio file was saved on the researcher's password-protected laptop. The interview was then transcribed in a Microsoft Word document, which was saved in the same folder as the audio file. In pursuit of redundancy, the transcripts and audio files were also stored on CyBox in addition to the researcher's laptop. CyBox is a secure, password-protected, cloud-based storage system. The researcher and his major professor were the only two given access to the CyBox folder containing these files, and the researcher was the sole person with access to the password-protected laptop. Per IRB approval at ISU, the participants of the study were granted anonymity in the report to avoid ethical problems related to the qualitative survey as "an intensive investigation of a specific phenomenon of interest" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 264). The participants have not been identified in this thesis outside of minor, loosely outlined characteristics like broadly defined location (such as 'Midwest'). As part of the interviewing process, it was important to note that there "is no such thing as 'inadmissible evidence' in trying to understand the issues or situations" being researched in a qualitative study (Maxwell, 2012, p.

87). Because of this, even incidental observations or conversations — those pieces of data that were collected outside of the formal interview process — were recorded, as they could provide even more context than the interview itself (Maxwell, 2012).

Issues with in-depth interviews include the experience of the researcher. Merriam and Tisdell (2015) warn that a skillful interviewer is needed to navigate an unstructured interview. The researcher is a former journalist with two years of experience as a full-time staff writer, who had previously conducted hundreds of interviews. Nevertheless, the less-structured portion of the qualitative research interview can make the interviewer “feel lost in a sea of divergent viewpoints and seemingly unconnected pieces of information” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 111). To avoid this, some established questions were used to obtain that desired specific information. The remaining time was spent in an unstructured format to identify revelations and information that would otherwise not be covered in a structured interview. Furthermore, the researcher needed to be knowledgeable of the possibility that participants could give interview answers that are not completely accurate, in hopes of preserving the notion of journalistic integrity in the face of the researcher (Lindlof & Taylor, 2010; Brennen, 2013). Establishing a dialogue was especially important to combat this issue. The researcher’s experience was primed to combat these concerns with in-depth interviews, and such digressions were largely avoided throughout the process.

In analyzing the data, the researcher integrated grounded theory, which was first introduced as a methodology by Glaser and Strauss (1967). In this type of analysis, the researcher is the primary research instrument in the collection of data and the meaning is derived from the data — in this case the in-depth interviews. The use of grounded theory in this study was employed, as the researcher used the interview transcripts to identify categories after

comparison among the participants' responses. The data was analyzed to determine similarities and differences. These categories were continually refined until relationships or themes emerged, then summarized in the final report (Wimmer & Dominick, 2013). The continual coding process of grounded theory includes three steps: (1) open coding, or "tagging" relevant pieces of data; (2) axial coding, or refining the categories and finding relationships; (3) developing hypotheses (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 229; Corbin & Strauss, 1990).

As themes emerged, they were eventually grouped and given a name, at which time they became categories, with the goal of identifying patterns in the data and arranging them in the building of a theory (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). This continued throughout the research process. Some categories had only a few pieces of data in them initially, while others had more. New classes had to be created for new pieces. During the process, categories were refined, as the researcher developed category outlines — and these rules "help to focus the study and also allow the researcher to start to explore the theoretical dimensions of the emerging category system" (Wimmer & Dominick, 2013, P. 124). Some of the emergent patterns were obvious enough to hold up by themselves, but others were related to other aspects in a variety of ways, and it was the researcher's goal to ascertain these and comprehend why. The study's flexibility in its use of semi-structured, in-depth interviews also lent itself to — and is consistent with — the study's flexibility in its inductive approach.

CHAPTER 4. FINDINGS

This research found that the 14 community journalists involved in this study use social media for a variety of newsgathering functions, including to find story ideas and sources, connect with the community, and solicit ideas. The most common newsgathering tasks completed on social media by these journalists were finding ideas and sources for stories. Additionally, all respondents reported using Facebook and Twitter primarily, with the former being the most common and heavily used. Newsroom policies surrounding social media — particularly on the newsgathering side — were reported as being lax in these newsrooms. These 14 community journalists did not consciously start using social media for newsgathering, nor was it required by newsroom leadership, but the practice was integrated into their daily newsgathering routines and socialized through the newsroom culture.

One finding that was present in a dozen of the interviews was that community journalists involved in this thesis are supported by their newsrooms in their social media use — with some saying they are encouraged to use it, not just on the audience engagement front, such as marketing their stories, but for newsgathering, too. A reporter with two and a half years in the profession said there would be a negative reaction in his newsroom if journalists were not using social media to search out story ideas.

They would get mad at us if we weren't using social media to find stories, because if we weren't we wouldn't be finding as many stories, and we all have story quotas. They want us to do two or three stories a day, and it would be hard to do three stories a day in addition to longer-term stuff. It would be hard to do if we weren't using social media.

Regardless of age or location, all respondents reported heavy use of social media for the job, including on the newsgathering side. While only a couple respondents specifically said something like “I use it heavily” when asked about their social media use, all respondents said it has become an integral part of their jobs. In this case, “heavy use” refers to all respondents reporting that they examine social media every day for potential story ideas, including checking in on different community groups on Facebook or simply scrolling through their news feeds — the home page that shows the user posts from friends and acquaintances after he or she logs in. All 14 respondents surveyed said social media had been an integral part of the job for almost a decade, at minimum. Among the relatively new, ‘younger’ journalists — those with less than 10 years of practice in the field — all described having entered their job with extensive knowledge of and experience using social media. For those who had been employed as a journalist at his or her college newspaper, they already had experience using social media in a variety of ways for journalism work, and the transition to using social media in the professional sphere was natural. One respondent, who had been in the field for four years, said social media was a given in college due to its ease. “Honestly it had been a natural progression [to using social media on the job], one I didn’t really think too much about,” she said. “Everybody was using it on the college campus and it was the most logical way to reach people.” For the two participants who graduated from journalism school at least 25 years prior to this study, they picked up the social media skills on their own and by asking younger journalists in their newsroom questions about how to best use it. They did not report a specific event that led to their adoption of social media professionally, but they reported having ‘a feeling’ that social media use was going to be

important for their jobs. Younger participants also did not report a specific event that led to their adoption of social media as a newsgathering tool.

Journalists whose job duties included producing recurring content such as weekly goings-on in the area found social media to be particularly helpful. While single events that led to the adoption of social media in the newsroom were not reported, some journalists found platforms like Facebook to be an advantageous tool when creating things like an events calendar for the newspaper. One of those younger respondents, who worked as general assignment reporter, realized social media had more potential almost immediately after entering the field professionally. “I was already using social media to do my job, but I didn’t see it as a tool for reporting until I got to my first paper, the one that I freelanced at,” the interviewee said.

In a couple cases, respondents reported that there were journalists in their newsroom who did not use social media regularly for newsgathering tasks — because they did not need to do so in order to regularly produce content. Two respondents mentioned that a few older journalists in their newsrooms favored face-to-face connectivity over social media outreach. However, these interviewees said there still was not any hostility towards their using social media for sourcing stories, but rather that those coworkers were able to produce multiple quality stories a day without using social media — with the respondents speculating that those journalists had been at that newspaper for years and had developed a solid base of personal contacts. In many cases, respondents talked up their coworkers’ social media use, with responses such as “they use it far better than I do.” A couple journalists even boasted of a coworker’s or editor’s ability to ‘Facebook stalk’ or ‘Facebook creep’ — in other words, track down information on somebody they barely know, if at all — on other people’s profiles. The older two respondents, who between them had an average of 32.5 years in the field, both reported having used social media in the job

for five years to a decade. For both, social media was seen as something that was going to be an inevitable part of their jobs. For both, their editors and ownership eventually made social media an expected part of their daily work.

The community journalists involved in this study reported a wide range of use regarding the newspaper's official social media accounts. There was a mix of respondents who actively post to the newspaper's page by logging into the account, those who had administrator access and could post to it through their own accounts and those who did not have access. Regardless of these scenarios, every respondent said their major stories (excluding things like blurbs) get posted to their newspaper's official Facebook page, whether by them, an editor, or a retweet/repost by the official page after they had shared it on their own social media pages. Outside of breaking news, respondents largely reported a focus on driving traffic to the newspaper's website via social media. Most posts that were related to a news story — excluding posts soliciting comments or story ideas, or items like op-eds and weather updates — were expected to have a link and preferably some kind of art to accomplish that.

Few community journalists who participated in this study received formal training in using social platforms through their employer. Those who said their newspaper had any social media policies or procedures also described them as outdated or informal. An established policy would include when, what and how to post on social media, or how to use it to find stories or cultivate sources. As one respondent put it: "We have a social media policy at work but it's outdated and nobody uses it because it would be pointless if we did. I can't even tell you everything that's in it because it's from 2008. It's not relevant." Another participant said a Facebook representative was invited to talk to them about recent algorithm changes, but there was no hands-on training involved. Less than half of the community journalists involved in this

study had attended some sort of training at a conference. Rather, it was something they had decided to attend for their own professional development. None of these conferences were specifically focused on social media but rather had a session or two about it. In the absence of specific dictates, almost all respondents said a common-sense approach was at play in the newsroom regarding social media. Responses included, “Don’t post anything you wouldn’t want your mom to see,” “We can’t be commenting about anything political,” or “It’s not set in stone ... it’s not, like, guidelines.” As one young journalist said: “I think it’s sort of assumed that you can pretty much handle Facebook ... There’s a generational assumption that you have this knowledge. The limited training that we do is more focused on other aspects of journalism rather than social media.”

According to interview subjects, some community newspapers also had accounts on newer social platforms. Additionally, a couple of journalists reported using Reddit for work, but said that use was primarily to find out more about the new community they were supposed to be covering. They said it was useful to quickly get a ‘feel’ for the community they are covering with no prior knowledge about the area. They said at this point, however, they had not developed story ideas or sources, nor used the platform to tout the paper or their own stories. Outside of one respondent who doubled as reporter and photographer, and another who shared social media duties, respondents did not describe using platforms like Instagram in any fashion professionally, and those who did simply posted photos. In those cases, they posted photos to Instagram that were running alongside the story on their websites but did not describe much engagement on the platform.

Younger participants had personal accounts on those platforms, too. But the platforms that were used the most for journalistic work, by far, were Facebook and Twitter, with the former

being the most heavily used. According to one reporter, he and his newsroom use Facebook far more than Twitter because they do not get a lot of engagement on Twitter, in contrast with Facebook. Another respondent stated that the use of Facebook over Twitter was due to the average age of the community newspaper's readership:

A lot of our readers are older. A lot of the school districts have Facebook pages but don't have Twitter pages. A lot of our city mayors, they're older, too, and they still use a lot of Facebook but they don't use much Twitter. So, it's easy to find things going on in the community on Facebook (more) than it is on Twitter, at least in this area ...

Social Media as a Newsgathering Tool for Community Journalists

Numerous advantages for using social media on the newsgathering side of community journalistic work were identified, and primarily centered around finding/contacting hard-to-reach sources, the availability/immediacy of the platforms and the reduction of what one respondent described as "all the things you have to do before you actually write the story." Cost-cutting measures were mentioned by at least one participant as a reason social media has been advantageous for newsgathering in their newsroom, as they do not send reporters to meetings that they know the local TV station will have on Facebook Live. One respondent, who is a breaking news reporter, said the way public officials handle information now is another reason she actively uses social media for her job in the local community:

In addition to making calls, we now [observe] social media to see if there is anything going on with law enforcement sources. A lot of times these agencies now are going and

just posting news releases right on Facebook. I check all those sites to make sure there's not anything, because now they don't even email you anymore, they just put it straight on social media.

Others echoed this sentiment, saying they have taken to social media when something is so newsworthy it has to get out to their readers immediately, but they are unable to get in contact with the relevant officials, for reasons such as it being outside of business hours. In covering a breaking news event in February 2018, shortly after a shooting at a Florida high school that sparked national outrage, a man said threatening things about a teacher at a school in the respondent's coverage area. He said the local high school posted on its Facebook page that there is going to be increased security at the school, including more police, due to some comments made on social media. It was regarding an isolated incident, he said, but they were adding security out of caution. That post was made on a Sunday, when the school is not open. The respondent said that situations like these are not ideal, and those human voices are preferred. Had it not been a Sunday, he would have started with the social media post but added more to the story. He did not have the option of adding a human voice, however, and referred to the timeliness of the story as the reason he ran with it without a human source:

There's a social media post from the actual school that says, 'We're getting more security here and there's going to be more police, and here's why.' So, I ended up writing a story [today] based on that social media post. There were no human voices in it other than that [Facebook] post, but it's one of those things where it has a very short shelf life and it's

something that people are going to want to know, and it's there so I ran with it. Things like that occasionally happen. It's an official ... account so it's not like a rumor.

Official accounts, in fact, were given as examples of how social media can be useful on the newsgathering side. One respondent said, even with a group of sources that are reached out to daily, official sources' social media accounts are still examined.

I will look at all the Facebook pages of my school districts, my cities and my counties daily. At this point in my career, I have a pretty good group of sources, and I'll normally reach out to them, too. But I'll normally double-check [Facebook] just to see what's going on.

But all respondents reported using social media to find potential story ideas from unofficial sources, too. Community journalists involved in this study reported using — whether it be Facebook or Twitter or both — social media as what more than one participant described as a “jumping-off point” for story ideas. The older reporters did not report any major negative differences between traditional journalistic legwork and using social media to get story ideas in the local community. One interviewee said, “Obviously, it [social media] can be much quicker, particularly when we have news from a community that's not close to us. When I first started you'd just get in the car and go.” Another reporter with three decades in the field compared finding story ideas on social media to finding them in a coffee shop, bar or other public gathering place or just with a group of friends.

In many cases, locally-oriented Facebook groups were reported as being a solid source for ideas. Sometimes these were general topic groups and sometimes these were groups dedicated to a specific interest. All participants said they have found story ideas on specialized Facebook groups — groups that all respondents said they regularly check at least a couple times a week. Two of the respondents were staff writers or general assignment reporters who covered a beat such as ‘outdoors’ or ‘environment.’ Both said they were actively involved with Facebook groups related to these beats. One of those reporters, who is a young journalist in the Northeast, said she is not part of any Facebook group specifically related to journalism, but uses interest groups related to the outdoors on the social media platform for ideas, or to get a feel for what people in the area are talking about in relation to that beat. Her involvement in “a lot of hunting groups” is an example. “People are just commenting about stuff and it sparks an interest in my mind of, ‘Oh, people are talking about this, maybe I should do a story on it.’” The respondent provided an example of when a local college’s lumberjack or woodsmen team had won a competition, and people were congratulating the team in that Facebook group. She contacted the person who posted the information, which eventually led to a feature story on the team and competition.

General interest Facebook groups were also helpful, interview subjects said. Another respondent touted Facebook groups dedicated to the goings-on of the area, those groups in which area users post news tidbits, as well as gossip, criticism, conversations or questions. “Group pages are a great source because there’s so many people and so many different viewpoints...,” one participant said. “People will mostly post news-type stuff and I might see something I was unaware of and that sparks my interest for a story.” One respondent said those groups give him and his newspaper an idea of what people in the community are upset about: “We get a lot of

stories from community groups here, as well. We know what people are [ticked] off about and we know that they're going to share it." The same respondent said posts about community happenings can also be valuable: "There are a lot of community Facebook pages that they'll post [on] when something in that community [happens], like a store is opening or a store is closing. It gives you a story right there."

Multiple respondents mentioned the search function on Facebook as a major source for story idea generation. One young journalist said he often searched his city, county or other area place names on Facebook and Twitter, just to see if anything pops up that could be newsworthy. He said after searching his city's name on Facebook, for instance, it will show him recent posts with the city's name in them from his friends, but also anyone whose posts are public. Another respondent, who was responsible for arts and entertainment sections, said other search functions were valuable, too:

I use Facebook's event feature. You can search it. It allows you to pick a date range — a coming week basically — and you can search for events ... I use that a lot. Especially how I came up with the idea to [cover] this [area college club team] because I saw they were doing a fundraiser. I was like, 'Oh, that sounds really cool.' I wouldn't say 50 percent of my stories come from that, or anything like that, but I would say a couple stories a month if I have to quantify it.

Before social media, journalists found stories from news tips and official sources, but also through personal interaction with people in the community, whether that be talking with friends or just overhearing something at a coffee shop and following up on it. When asked about

whether a story found on Facebook is less valuable than one found through personal interaction, a young reporter responded:

That's a tough one. I used to think that it was [less valuable via social media] but as long as the end content is quality work, as long as it gets to an important story, if you found it on Facebook or Twitter ... it doesn't really matter. I have a really good story in the works right now that I found out about on social media, and I don't think anybody else has it and I think it's going to be a really, really big feature story. I found it on social media and I don't know if I would have found it otherwise.

Developing Source Relationships in the Local Community

Some of the younger journalists interviewed reported viewing social media as the most logical first step in developing a source relationship. In these cases, the respondents were not talking about official sources — because in those cases they would make a phone call rather than reach out on social media — but those in the community who could give a human voice to a story. A journalist with 30 years in the industry from the Pacific Northwest said she sees social media, particularly Facebook, as helpful in contacting people: “Since I’m so old it used to be you could always find it in the phone book. Now you often can’t find someone in the phone book, so yeah, reaching people” is a useful aspect of social media. Cultivating sources via social platforms assisted with being able to put a face to a name (as opposed to a phone call). Older journalists also viewed it as being extremely helpful if they were unable to cultivate a source through the traditional channels, such as email, phone calls or face-to-face contact. Some interviewees highlighted the possibility of disinformation or time-wasting. One respondent said a community

journalist can find themselves “looking at their computer all day” instead of developing sources in other ways.

Sometimes, I’ll be honest, it may just be the easiest way to reach people. I’ll go on their Facebook and see that they are very active and reply to messages within an hour or something like that. Then I will reach out to them because I assume most people don’t always have their phone, especially if it’s in the middle of a work day or something like that, so I’ll reach out that way because I think they’re going to be able to see that first as opposed to maybe checking their voicemail. A lot of times if it’s a very urgent story I always try to contact them on multiple platforms, and social media will just be one of those avenues that I have at my disposal.

For many of the young journalists, it was the preferred method in source outreach. One respondent said of connecting with sources on social media:

It’s pretty much my go-to. Honestly, when I have no other options, that’s when I make the phone calls. Usually social media is my first go-to, whether it’s getting information or reaching out to somebody or just creeping on something. Social media is my go-to. I don’t know when that changed, but it’s a pretty helpful go-to.

Another reporter, also younger and relatively new to the journalism profession, echoed that sentiment:

I use social media pretty [heavily]. Like, if I don't already have a starting place, if I don't already have someone in mind, I don't have a phone number or way to get to them, I will usually turn to social media ... It's pretty easy to contact people through that or find a post about it and see who posted it and contact them and get ahold of people through that — which is kind of unraveling that chain of who is involved and finding out who I need to talk to.

A journalist with 35 years in the field said of social media and sources:

[It] brings everyone together in one spot. I do a lot of crime reporting so if it's a major case sometimes — if there's an officer involved or a shooting or something like that — you can also have professionals commenting, not just witnesses or the victim's family. It's like a one-stop shop. You can see people from all different segments in that one marketplace, whereas in the past you'd have to be calling different people or going to different locations.

Deaths from causes ranging from homicides to natural causes were brought up more than once by participants as examples for when they used social media to contact potential sources for quotes. As one reporter related:

I did a story — it was sometime last year — but it was about a local person in the community who had died and we were kind of doing a story to memorialize him. I didn't really know anyone who knew him, and I didn't know how to find anyone who knew him

to get quotes about him. So, what I did is went to his Facebook page or I searched his name and found people who were posting about him and just kind of sent a bunch of messages to those people, saying, ‘Sorry for your loss. I’m doing a story about so-and-so and wondering if you would be willing to say a few kind words about him and tell me what you remember about him the most.’ I think I sent probably between like six and 10 messages out and I think I got probably three or four responses, so it was effective.

In aggregating source content, journalists often merge social media content and their respective legacy news products. In these cases, reporters take information directly from official sources’ accounts or embed a tweet directly into their news stories. In some cases, the reporters or their editors would retweet the content from the official account right away, then follow up with a full story. “Twitter is better for watching agency news, like they tweet something as soon as it happens,” one respondent who had been in the field for 30 years said. Mentioning a car accident, for example, she said, “We could repost it to Facebook and retweet and that way readers would hopefully appreciate knowing they can’t go to [nearby major metro] right now.”

Very few journalists reported embedding tweets into stories regularly. Reasons for this were related to the community journalists’ view of Facebook as more valuable than Twitter. Some said they will quote social media posts from official sources or use them for background information. But those at papers owned by large, chain media companies that encourage them to share news with sister newspapers in the area online were more likely to embed tweets in stories. Those companies own multiple newspaper outlets in the area, and online content is shared between those outlets. In these cases, the online-only story may feature an embedded tweet — stories that never appeared in the print newspaper.

Cultivating Community

Community engagement — such as feedback from the audience and conversations between the journalist and readers — was a common theme for social media use, again primarily through Facebook. Social channels give the community journalist “another avenue to connect with our readership. People can read the stories on social media, comment, share, all that stuff.” In some cases, the employer was urging journalists to use the platform in this way:

They’re encouraging us to start commenting more as ourselves and not the [newspaper’s] page. It’s something we’ve had to do in the last couple weeks, and that’s to try to create some more interaction between the reporters and our commenters. Sometimes it’s good, sometimes it’s bad. This week I had found some people were kind of bashing a headline we’d written. I went in and sort of explained and thanked people for their input, and I was getting positive feedback.

Soliciting story ideas from readers through social media — writing a Facebook post asking readers what they want the paper to report on, for example — was mentioned as an advantage of social media for the community journalist, particularly for those journalists whose beat includes something like features writing. Soliciting story ideas and comments, however, was not a common theme for community journalists working hard news beats — such as crime. Those working in features, however, said they have solicited content from audiences in the past. With ‘soft’ news items for which a human voice was sought (those for which the journalist could not quickly identify a relevant interview subject), social media was a viable avenue to establish

that contact. One journalist said social media is extremely helpful to find a human voice for these stories:

We have solicited [content] as a company and individually if we're working on something — like if it's a Memorial Day piece or something, and we're trying to find soldiers, or if we're trying to find someone who has had the flu, those kinds of things — we've just put out direct story solicitations without story links to folks. Then, of course, I've used it as a breaking news reporter when I post something about a fatal crash or something, then someone is writing in the comment, 'Oh, I was right behind that wreck and it was awful.'

Possible inaccuracy on social media — hearsay and the 'snowballing' effect of rumors in the local community — was a common concern among respondents. Every participant stressed that fact-checking must be done before truly pursuing a story based on social media posts. Yet they also identified disinformation as a problem. A journalist with four years of experience in the field referred to a rumor that was circulating that a police officer was shot, when in fact it an incident where a man was tased after he "got a little out of hand."

Originally it was all over social media like, 'Oh my God, someone got shot. A cop got shot.' It was blown out of proportion because there was hearsay and they were listening to the scanner and preliminary reports are not something to base your opinion off of. So, sometimes I think it can be a little bit inaccurate, it can make your job too easy, not the old days of calling up the cops directly and saying, 'Hey, what's going on?' Not that we

would post a story because of Facebook, but I think it's more accurate to go directly to the source ...

Another issue mentioned in relation to social media and journalistic values was the 'feeling' of getting a story on social media. Most respondents did not express a negative view of social media as story content generation, but some were still at least wary of it.

I think with social media, (you) have to do more fact-checking, almost. You really can't believe everything online. You can't believe everything you hear in the grocery store, either, but it kind of has that feeling of having to do more fact-checking.

Another major disadvantage of social media for source cultivation included criticism from readers — or even often nonreaders. Reporters related that the sometimes-instant negative feedback from the audience can be directed at the journalist publicly. "It's a love-hate relationship," one interviewee said. "They love the coverage unless you write something they disagree with, then they're more than happy to start blasting away." Another respondent said, "I feel like every newspaper runs into its fair share of people who don't like it or people who have a vendetta against us in one way or another." And another interviewee with the most time spent in the journalism field of all interviewees in the study said social media does not necessarily negatively affect newsgathering, but said that criticism can have a negative impact:

I'm not sure [it is] hindering, but it can be uncomfortable at times, just because everybody is a critic. Everybody in this climate has such a negative opinion of the media

that it's so easy for them to lash out at us ... I think it's very difficult if you don't have very thick skin to tune that out and keep going and do what we need to do.

A journalist with much less experience made a similar point, illustrating some advantages, but also stressing that it potentially makes journalists less personal.

My boss has been here a long time and she has talked about the way she'd go out and hunt for stories. I think it has made it easier for us but has also made us a little lazier. Several years ago, I would have had to drive [to a county 25 miles away] every day to see what's going on, or I would have to call everybody's landline, but today everything that I really need to know is right there. So, I think it has made it easier for journalists today, but it has made us less personal. I don't think we see our sources face-to-face as much as we did in the past. So, there has been good and bad to using the social media.

Still, almost every respondent reported a deep connection between the newspaper and the community. While some were quick to point out that this should not necessarily replace face-to-face contact and traditional beat reporting, they said that social platforms like Facebook have the potential to make readers feel like they are more connected with the newspaper. When asked how the community would function without a newspaper, each journalist expressed what they perceived as being a deep-seated emptiness related to community and staying informed. While some speculated that active citizens in the community would fill in the dearth of community news, they all said the newspaper is a vital part of the community — and those aspects ranged from reporting the achievements of school-aged children whose parents want to see them in the

local paper to holding elected officials accountable to calling attention to needs in the community. One respondent said the community response to a need spotlighted by the newspaper is usually strong.

A big role of what we do is kind of see people and highlight both the good and the bad of what's going on in the area. I think that's important ... We'll run stories every once in a while about kids with a disease or make people aware of some kind of need in the community, and it's really amazing how many people will read those stories then head over to meet with them, be calling us or reaching out about the story to find out ways that they can help.

Community journalists working for locally- or family-owned newspapers — or even regional newspaper chains — had a much better standing with the community than those owned by large media companies. (Standing refers to support from the community, whether that is through buying the newspaper or simply the treatment the journalist receives from the community). When asked if social media makes it easier or more difficult to build a sense of community, one respondent said:

For the most part it makes it easier because, like I mentioned earlier, it gives us a more direct avenue to connect with our readership. People can read stories on social media, comment, share, all that stuff — and they can connect with the individual writer.

Particularly those employed by privately- or locally-owned entities touted their newspaper's visibility and role in the community, citing things such as community events that the newspaper is not necessarily covering but being actively involved in, such as fundraisers. One respondent mentioned her publisher's commitment to staying active in local organizations and events as a boon for her newspaper's relationship with the community. A couple of participants in the study worked for newspapers who were recently acquired — one by a large media company from a private owner, and one by a private owner from a large media company. Their experiences were the opposite. The newspaper that was purchased from a large media company reemphasized a commitment to the community, and the respondent said the newspaper is certainly “repairing” that relationship. The other said there has been a huge backlash due to staff reductions and other shake-ups since the newspaper's acquisition by a large company.

As for future community building, every reporter involved in this study speculated that the future intersections of social media and newsgathering — among all journalists — was only going to become more intense. As one young journalist said about major metro dailies currently: “When I was growing up they would never write stories off of Facebook posts, but now that's half the stuff on my [Facebook news] feed.” Each respondent's reasoning for that sentiment revolved around the ubiquity of social media and the importance of reporting what people are talking about. One reporter pointed to that ubiquity:

I think it's only going to become more important. Social media is not going away, and it will become a more embedded part in people's lives. It's becoming a more embedded part of the newsgathering process, and we're only going to be getting more skilled and more accustomed to it.

CHAPTER 5. DISCUSSION

This thesis investigated how 14 community journalists at American newspapers use social media in the newsgathering process of covering local news. The findings suggest social media allows the respondents another avenue through which to complete the daily routines of newsgathering — such as finding story ideas, finding sources and contacting sources. Neither traditional journalistic values, such as what is a quality story and how to go about forming it, nor traditional newsgathering techniques like face-to-face interviews with official sources, should be substituted by social media, according to respondents. Participants did, however, say social media is another tool to complete newsgathering tasks. This thesis also investigated how community journalists integrated social media into their daily newswork. Using social media for newsgathering was a process that became integrated and socialized through the newsroom culture. Social media also became integrated into how community journalists involved in this study connect with and listen to their readership.

Newsroom Socialization

Journalists establish norms and values in the newsroom through the process of socialization in which an outsider transitions into an insider. Included in this process, for journalists, is the socialization of their values — such as what constitutes a good story, and how to find, source and write the story. Further examining these intrinsic themes, the interpretive technique of laddering can “uncover the idiosyncratic meaning that values have for the individual” (Bourne & Jenkins, 2005, p. 410). In the context of the newsroom, individuals such as journalists see the world through a series of constructs that are modified via experiences. For

this study, we can apply laddering by beginning with an abstract concept — the shared values between the newspaper and community. On an individual level, this research illustrates that community journalists in this study view social media as a tool for newsgathering and audience engagement — whether that be finding story ideas, connecting with their community, engaging with other users in conversation, identifying sources or monitoring local Facebook groups. On both the individual and organizational levels, community newspapers post their content to social media pages and expect community journalists to do the same, as well as solicit content and engage in community-building by listening to their readers on social media. More broadly, the research points to social media's worth for journalistic work among community journalists and newspapers, but not in a way that will soon cause major shifts in what qualifies as a quality story, how to identify a good source, or the importance of connecting with the audience. This is important because there is no prior research in this area regarding community journalists. But more importantly, this thesis shows that community journalists integrate social media into their daily newswork without losing their core idea of what it means to be a journalist.

Beyond shared values, these routines manifest through newswork, which refers to finding and cultivating sources, finding story ideas and determining what is newsworthy. The culture of the newsroom is not explicitly spelled out for the journalist, and the journalist establishes his or her norms based on their perceptions of the social norms of the newsroom. Prior, scholarly work had not fully identified how social media can be used as a routine within community newsrooms.

Every respondent in this study reported that they use social media for newsgathering. Specifics of social media use for newsgathering among respondents included identifying sources, soliciting comments for stories and story ideas through posts on their personal Facebook pages as well as the official newspaper account, finding story ideas on Facebook group pages, and

locating stories by simply browsing their own news feeds. All of these uses could have been accomplished before the advent of social media. But respondents in this study said social media makes them easier. It is the immediacy of social media, they said, that helps to complete newswork. Rather than soliciting story ideas in the printed paper and waiting for readers to respond, journalists can make posts on their Facebook pages. And rather than waiting on news tips, journalists can see what people are talking about in the community through social media platforms.

Respondents said use of social media is encouraged in their newsrooms, regardless of whether that encouragement is explicit in written policy. Most of the respondents reported that their respective newsrooms do not, in fact, have stated policies. Rather, reporters are encouraged to use ‘common sense’ when posting on social platforms — avoiding posting anything overtly political or inflammatory. These policies do not apply to newsgathering. Respondents said nobody in their newsrooms tells them how they should or should not be using social media on the newsgathering side. Rather, reporters on their own have adopted these new practices, which have become institutionalized.

For this study’s respondents, social media is viewed as having the same value as traditional sources of news tips — such as a tip from a government official to an email from a concerned citizen or overhearing a conversation in public and picking up a news tip to finding those potential stories that arise from social interaction with friends or other acquaintances. Interviewees said the only major difference between social media newsgathering and traditional newsgathering is the ease of social media’s use. This data shows that, for these community journalists, social media is a centralized part of day-to-day practices in the newsroom. It has not completely replaced all previous newsgathering practices, as respondents said they would rather

call official sources directly (as opposed to reaching out on social media) and stressed the importance of getting to know sources in a face-to-face context rather than from behind a computer. But they said social media makes newsgathering practices easier. Community journalists who participated in this study leverage social media's ease of use and immediacy to supplement their traditional newsgathering practices, like finding sources and story ideas. Furthermore, they used the same language to describe social media that would be expected for traditional newsgathering tools, in some cases comparing social media to a fax machine or email.

Still, when asked about differences between traditional journalistic legwork and using social media to find story ideas, most participants said they had never thought about it before. It had become a natural part of their day-to-day work, even though a conscious decision surrounding the value of such was never made. Again, this is because it has become a socialized part of their newsgathering practices, deeply integrated into daily newsroom routines. For community journalists, social media is not supplanting traditional forms of newsgathering, but complementing them. Respondents stressed that they still need to know how to identify a good story and write it, identify a good source and cultivate it. They said social media has not replaced any of the values that are needed to be a good journalist, including identifying newsworthiness, ethical considerations and how to write a quality story. This research is valuable for academics and practitioners because it shows that — faced with shrinking newsrooms, a culture of long hours and ebbing job security — community journalists have turned to social media as a way to help them gather news in a timely fashion, while still maintaining traditional news values like quality and ethical newswork.

Platforms

Community journalists reported using Facebook and Twitter by far the most in their newsgathering work, with the former having the strongest impact on day-to-day newswork. Previous scholarship on metropolitan newspapers has found that Twitter is more effective at reaching audiences than Facebook on the organizational level — those official newspaper accounts that are used to market news content and reach audiences (Ju et al., 2014). Community journalists do seem to agree that Twitter has value for community journalists covering fast-evolving news items. Respondents reported using Twitter to cover and disseminate things like a car accident that stalls morning traffic. On the newsgathering side, respondents said official government outlets will post updates to Twitter before contacting the newspaper — if they contact the newspaper at all.

As this thesis focused on small, community newspapers, it is clear from this research's findings that community journalists do not see Twitter as being more effective at engaging their audiences than Facebook. Community journalists involved in this study did not report heavy use of Reddit, Instagram, Snapchat or other social platforms either. Multiple respondents, whether specifically asked or through the course of the interview, reported Facebook as being the more viable platform for their professional work as journalists due to the average age of their readers. They said that, at community newspapers, the average age of their readership — and the average age of those engaged with the newspaper on social media — is older than that of major metro newspapers. Older generations are more likely to have been on Facebook for at least a couple years, they said, and are more likely to engage on that than Twitter. In addition, they said there was more engagement on Facebook in general, as they had noted more 'shares' and comments on Facebook than Twitter, in regard to their content. The respondents in this study said they

strive to be engaged with their community, including through social media. And because that engagement is seen on Facebook at a higher rate than Twitter, they see the former as more capable for their newswork.

The community journalists involved in this study said relationships with the audience on social media are similar to the relationship the newspaper has with the community: sometimes strained, but overall positive. They said readers have always criticized their newspaper. The same can be said for online relationships. These community journalists are also active in local community Facebook groups, whether that be posting and taking part in conversations or actively referring to what people are saying on the page throughout each week. There is no prior scholarship on how community or metro journalists use and engage in these Facebook groups. With community journalists' emphasis on building on and engaging with the local community, it can be posited that they would take a more active role on local community Facebook groups than their major metro counterparts, but this is an area that could do well by more research.

Newsgathering Practices

For the 14 participants in this study, social media is seen as another tool in their toolbox — another way for them to implement those newsgathering practices. Social media has not supplanted those other processes of newsgathering but supplemented them. Prior research has pointed to convergence — the “combination of technologies, products, staffs and geography among the previously distinct provinces of print, television and online media” (Singer, 2004, p. 3) — as changing journalists' day-to-day routines, including social media. Most of the scholarship in this area is at major metro dailies. The respondents involved in this thesis, however, did not report convergence being a major factor in their social media use, or

particularly present in their newsrooms at all. They were not finding themselves producing content for their respective newspapers then subsequently teaming up with a local television outlet for a broadcast.

This study illustrates that monitoring social media — the perusing of their news feeds, local community groups, and social media posts from officials and prominent people in the community — has become part of the journalist’s daily routine. Participants consistently used phrases like ‘Facebook stalk’ and ‘Facebook creep’ to describe how they use the social platform to find stories and sources. The practice includes monitoring social media in general, as well as actively seeking out Facebook groups, or searching keywords and the name of their respective cities or counties. In short, checking social media for story ideas has become a daily routine for the community journalist. This ‘Facebook stalking’ was particularly important for the community journalists in this study because they cannot rely on the same sources for story ideas that journalists in major metros can. Respondents said a journalist at a newspaper like the *Chicago Tribune* receives tips from the public or concerned officials and whistleblowers. While this still happens occasionally, respondents said they need to take a more active role in seeking out their own content — something they all said they are required to do. Many even had weekly quotas for stories, and those who did not were still expected to produce content consistently. Furthermore, respondents said this content is, for the large part, supposed to be local content, and news content must be pertinent to their respective audiences. It is because of this focus on local content that is pertinent to the community that community journalists must be aware of ‘the pulse’ of the community. Facebook is another tool to do that — and respondents said it makes it easier due to the connectivity through things like local community Facebook groups and their ability to immediately see what people are saying about the news content they produce.

In addition to seeking out ideas for stories, the community journalists involved in this research reported not only finding sources on social media, but contacting them through social networks, too. Participants in this thesis said that, along with finding potential news stories, finding sources is the most valuable aspect of social media for journalistic work at the community newspaper. For some of the younger journalists, contacting those identified sources through social media platforms before trying other methods such as a phone call or email is common practice. They said this is because, particularly if they found the source on social media anyway, it is simpler to send a direct message on that platform rather than searching for an email address or phone number, which adds an additional step. Respondents did caution, however, that this practice could potentially lead to a weaker connection with a source that they would be going back to on a regular basis for future stories, like an elected official. In these cases, they preferred to make a phone call.

In addition to these individual practices, this study's respondents reported that their newspapers use social media on the organizational level in very similar ways. On the organizational level, prior research has shown that newspapers use social media to market themselves, writing tweets and Facebook posts that include a link to a story and drive traffic to the newspaper's website, and imploring journalists to do the same. The same was reported to be true of the 14 journalists who took part in this study. All respondents said their respective community newspapers actively and heavily use social media to market their content by posting stories with photos and links to drive traffic to the newspapers' websites. While most of the respondents reported loose policies surrounding social media use, all were encouraged to include photos and links in social media posts that could be retweeted or reposted through the newspaper's official account. Additionally, even if the journalist did not report marketing their

own content through their own social media accounts, they said their editor or social media specialist consistently performed the practice through the newspaper's official account.

Again, these newsgathering practices, and community journalists' approach to social media and newsgathering, were neither conscious decisions nor imposed by newsroom leadership. They were integrated into the daily newsgathering routines of the community journalist naturally. On a broader level, this research shows that community journalists approach new technologies like social media in a way that aids in making their jobs easier under pressures like weekly quotas and shrinking newsrooms, as long as they do not detract from the quality of the newswork or the end product: the story.

This research's findings show that community journalists use social media for a variety of newsgathering purposes, and on the organizational level, newspapers use it to market their content through social media posts. They also use it to connect with the community through things like local community Facebook groups, an important facet of keeping tabs on what the community is talking about. That community-building aspect is an important part of community journalism, and social media can aid in this as well.

Community

Shared values — what the community and newspaper think is important and what should be reported on — have been a prominent aspect of the relationship between community newspapers and their communities, outlined in Robert Ezra Park's seminal work (1922). As described, a focus on local content is prominent among community outlets and community journalists. That is consistent with this study's findings. But another aspect that characterizes the relationship between a community newspaper and shared values with the community is listening

(Carpenter et al., 2015). Community journalists involved in this study use social media to ‘listen’ to their communities by regularly checking their news feeds, posts from elected officials and prominent persons in the community, and local community groups on platforms like Facebook. On the flip side, in smaller communities like the ones community journalists serve, local media not only functions as a means for the community to stay informed, but as a device to place themselves and others in the community.

That connection to the audience is important, respondents said, because social media allows them another avenue in which to make that connection happen. These community journalists said they have explicitly asked for comments for a story they are working on via Facebook. They also said they have monitored comments on their own stories and other posts from the newspaper’s official account. They said this practice gives them an idea of what the community is talking about, what issues matter to them the most and what is ‘going on’ in the community in general — another form of listening to the community. Community journalists see their relationship with their audience as positive. This was particularly clear when asked about how their communities would function without a newspaper. They said some other form of journalism would have to take its place, because their communities want someone to listen to them. The local newspaper strives to do that; they want to have a conversation with the community. A common theme for social media use was community engagement through feedback from the audience and conversations between journalists and readers on social media. Another theme in terms of conversing with or listening to the audience was soliciting story ideas or comments via social media. Again, they do not see social media as the only avenue for community engagement and building or strengthening that relationship with the community, but as another tool through which to accomplish this.

Respondents repeatedly stated that their respective communities would be woefully underserved without a local newspaper. Participants pointed to everything from the community newspaper's commitment to highlighting the achievements of local youth to holding local government officials accountable as facets of the local media that would be sorely missed by the public. Many respondents speculated that some other form of locally-focused media would have to fill the void — whether that be another official media outlet or something scraped together by active community leaders. However, social media was not cited as a concern regarding the potential loss of a newspaper in a community. Respondents said it could have the opposite effect by making the newspaper and its journalists visible in the community and seen actively listening to the community.

This study's respondents who work for locally- or family-owned newspapers reported strong, positive relationships with their communities. Not every respondent who worked for a large media chain reported a strained relationship with the community, but the few who did report a potential ebbing of a relationship with the community did work for those chains. Actually, there were few respondents, in total, in this study who reported strained relationships with the community. Most participants said something along the lines of a 'love-hate' relationship when describing the community and the newspaper. But all of those interview subjects said that is just a part of the journalism profession. Social media plays a role here, too, as respondents reported sometimes harsh treatment from commenters regarding their stories, headlines or accompanying photos. Respondents also reported, however, positive support for stories that uncovered corruption or featured feats from locals, especially youth. They subsequently went on to describe a positive relationship with the community, for the most part. The few participants who reported an uneasy relationship with the community were employed at

outlets recently purchased by large media chains. All respondents reported shrinking newsrooms and fewer resources as issues facing community newspapers, but those recently purchased by large media companies said they are now finding themselves repairing the relationship with the community due to staff shake-ups and an ebbing focus on taking an active role in the community.

Social media's role in breaking down that relationship with the community, or rebuilding it, was apparent here, too. One respondent who reported a diminishing relationship between his newspaper and the community said one of the major reasons was his new company's — a large, chain media company — lack of social media use. He said the community was already unhappy with the purchase of the local newspaper, and the new company's decision to take a step back from social media use was making it worse because the newspaper was no longer as visible in the community. This ties into the concept that social media can supplement community engagement and 'listening' on the part of a community newspaper. Another respondent who reported an already faded relationship with the community said her newsroom is using social media to actively repair the relationship by asking readers what they want to hear about and making the newspaper a more visible component of social media in the community —again consistent with that social media engagement.

Limitations

Some of the major limitations of this study were related to the researcher's time and financial constraints. The interviews were conducted via telephone over a couple-months period. Because of this, the researcher was unable to perform any direct observation of the participants' roles in the newsroom or the day-to-day tasks they perform. This is problematic because the

respondent may have omitted or forgotten to mention daily tasks they complete that could have been noted during observation. Furthermore, nonverbal cues that could be picked up on in a face-to-face interview — or even a computer-mediated ‘face-to-face’ interview on a video chat platform like Skype — were not collected.

Another major drawback of this study is the response rate. The researcher sent emails throughout the months of February and March 2018 to recruit community journalists for the study. In total, 137 of those recruitment emails were sent, and 14 of those community journalists contacted participated in the study. That is a success response rate of 10.2 percent. The age of the participants was also skewed young, with 11 of the 14 respondents reporting being in the field for less than a decade. However, this should not be too surprising, as community journalism outlets are often a stepping stone for young journalists’ careers.

The in-depth interview provides an additional issue because it is not generalizable. While this study has shown that the 14 community journalists involved view social media as a viable option for finding stories, finding and contacting sources, and favor Facebook over Twitter for those tasks, one cannot say that is the case for every community journalist in the United States today. However, this drawback provides a substantial opportunity for future research.

Considerations for Future Research

This research could be reexamined using a mixed methods approach, which would allow for some findings to be generalizable, while still investigating the underlying values of *why* the community journalist decides to use a social media platform on the newsgathering side of journalistic routines. A survey could be sent to hundreds of community journalists around the country, inquiring about their social media uses — both personally and professionally — as well

which platforms are better suited for certain tasks. Some base value questions could also be asked employing techniques such as a Likert scale. A much larger sample would be gained from implementing these techniques. In addition, a content analysis of the stories community journalists produce using social media could be conducted to quantify the patterns of sourcing and whether community journalists cite material from social media directly, which could significantly build on this thesis.

That quantitative research could also subsequently be supplemented by direct observation, a tool of qualitative research. Direct observation would allow the researcher to investigate more thoroughly the daily routines of the participant, including how they use social media, but especially exactly how often, something this thesis lacks because participants could not specifically say precisely how often they are on social media during the newsgathering process every day. However, a major barrier to direct observation could be obtaining access, as a journalist may not wish to be monitored, or an editor potentially could not want a researcher in his or her newsroom. Furthermore, the participant could change their behavior under observation of the researcher, even subconsciously.

Journalists were not specifically asked about their respective newspapers' use of metrics to decide when and where to allocate resources in this study. In the case of the 14 respondents, it did not appear any were actively monitoring metrics, but most mentioned their editors' attention to them. How and why community newspapers and their editors and reporters use metrics to decide what to cover and when could also produce interesting findings in the future.

CHAPTER 6. CONCLUSION

This research investigated how community journalists at 14 newspapers throughout the United States use social media in the newsgathering process. Social media allows the respondents another tool in which to complete the daily routines of newsgathering — finding story ideas, finding sources and contacting sources. These community journalists said social media has not, and should not, replace traditional journalistic values, such as what is a quality story and how to go about forming it, or traditional newsgathering techniques like face-to-face interviews with official sources. Participants did, however, say social media gives them another avenue to complete these tasks, and its immediacy and potential to help them pinpoint what the community is concerned about gives them a jumping-off point to pursue ideas for possible news content.

This thesis also investigated how journalists integrated social media into their daily newswork, which was a natural process and not one required by newsroom leadership on the newsgathering side. Respondents did not report their newsrooms having social media policies on the newsgathering side — if at all. Using social media for newsgathering was a process that became integrated and socialized through the newsroom culture. Social media also became integrated into how community journalists connected with and listened to their readership, whether it be by reading feedback on their own posts or perusing local community Facebook groups to see what people are saying.

All respondents noted that social media has neither replaced their journalistic values nor many of their routines but supplemented them. However, all respondents noted that social media will likely only become more ubiquitous in the daily lives of Americans, as well as the life of the

American journalist. Social media practices change fluidly, and this could affect the community journalist and his or her newspaper. It would not be outlandish to imagine social media as being the primary source for news among Americans — perhaps not only audiences seeing a social media post and following it to a newspaper’s website, but social media being the primary content provider itself. Regardless, the community journalists in this study said they personally strongly hold their journalistic integrity and values. They said even with social media’s pervasiveness they believe future journalists will make those values and that integrity a focal point of their professions in journalism.

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APPENDIX A. IRB EXEMPTION

IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY
OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

Institutional Review Board
Office for Responsible Research
Vice President for Research
2420 Lincoln Way, Suite 202
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Date: 11/21/2017

To: Jared Meisinger
103 Peach Ln
Ames, IA 50010

CC: Dr. Jan Lauren Boyles
113 Hamilton Hall
Tracy Lucht
111 Hamilton Hall

From: Office for Responsible Research

Title: Citing Your Sources: How Community Journalists Use Social Media for Story Content Generation

IRB ID: 17-564

Study Review Date: 11/21/2017

The project referenced above has been declared exempt from the requirements of the human subject protections regulations as described in 45 CFR 46.101(b) because it meets the following federal requirements for exemption:

- (2) Research involving the use of educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey or interview procedures with adults or observation of public behavior where
 - Information obtained is recorded in such a manner that human subjects cannot be identified directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects; or
 - Any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research could not reasonably place the subject at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to their financial standing, employability, or reputation.

The determination of exemption means that:

- **You do not need to submit an application for annual continuing review.**
- **You must carry out the research as described in the IRB application.** Review by IRB staff is required prior to implementing modifications that may change the exempt status of the research. In general, review is required for any modifications to the research procedures (e.g., method of data collection, nature or scope of information to be collected, changes in confidentiality measures, etc.), modifications that result in the inclusion of participants from vulnerable populations, and/or any change that may increase the risk or discomfort to participants. Changes to key personnel must also be approved. The purpose of review is to determine if the project still meets the federal criteria for exemption.

Non-exempt research is subject to many regulatory requirements that must be addressed prior to implementation of the study. Conducting non-exempt research without IRB review and approval may constitute non-compliance with federal regulations and/or academic misconduct according to ISU policy.

Detailed information about requirements for submission of modifications can be found on the Exempt Study Modification Form. A Personnel Change Form may be submitted when the only modification involves changes in study staff. If it is determined that exemption is no longer warranted, then an Application for Approval of Research Involving Humans Form will need to be submitted and approved before proceeding with data collection.

Please note that you must submit all research involving human participants for review. **Only the IRB or designees may make the determination of exemption**, even if you conduct a study in the future that is exactly like this study.

Please be aware that **approval from other entities may also be needed**. For example, access to data from private records (e.g. student, medical, or employment records, etc.) that are protected by FERPA, HIPAA, or other confidentiality policies requires permission from the holders of those records. Similarly, for research conducted in institutions other than ISU (e.g., schools, other colleges or universities, medical facilities, companies, etc.), investigators must obtain permission from the institution(s) as required by their policies. **An IRB determination of exemption in no way implies or guarantees that permission from these other entities will be granted.**

APPENDIX B. INTERVIEW GUIDE

Interview Guide

Informed consent? Do you have any questions?

Background information:

Collect following information —

Gender (for researcher):

Title of current position:

Years in position:

Years in field:

Education (what, where and when):

Career path:

Size of newsroom:

Region (for researcher):

Interview information:

Could you walk me through a typical day in your job?

Do you use social media for your job?

For about how long have you been using social media in your job?

Why did you start using social media in your job?

What specific platforms do you use? What kinds of tasks do you complete with each platform? Why is one better suited for a certain task than another?

Do you post using the newspaper's account? Or do you have a separate account to use? Do you have a private one for friends/family and one for professional purposes? If so, why is it important to segment these uses?

Did you receive any training or attend any conferences related to social platforms? If so, describe.

Does your newsroom have any established policies and procedures around posting on social platforms?

If you are working on a story, generally when and how do you engage social platforms in the process?

How do you develop sources/story ideas through social platforms? On what instances do you rely upon crowdsourced information?

Do you see any major differences between traditional journalistic 'legwork' and using social media to get ideas for stories?

What advantages come from using social media? What can it help you accomplish that was difficult before its advent?

What are some disadvantages? How does social media hinder, if at all, the newsgathering process?

Do other journalists in your newsroom use social media for work?

If yes, how do coworkers use it?

Have they ever encouraged you or another journalist to use it for work? Or discouraged?

How do your supervisors/editors view social media?

How would you change social platforms for newsgathering, if at all?

How would you describe the community that you cover?

How would you describe online community that your publication serves?

Describe the relationship between your newspaper and your community.

How would your community function without a newspaper?

What values are shared between the newspaper and the community?

What's the future of using social platforms in the newsgathering process?

Is there anything that I haven't asked you about that you feel is relevant?

APPENDIX C. PARTICIPANT INFORMATION

TITLE	YEARS IN FIELD	SEX	REGION
Features writer	2 years	Female	South
Reporter	5 years	Female	Midwest
Reporter	30 years	Female	Northwest
General assignment reporter	4 years	Female	Northeast
General assignment reporter	4 years	Male	East
Features reporter	6 years	Female	Northwest
Breaking news reporter	35 years	Female	Southeast
Reporter	7 years	Female	Northeast
Reporter	2.5 years	Male	East
Reporter	1 year	Female	Northeast
General assignment reporter	3 years	Female	Northeast
Reporter	6 years	Female	Southeast
Reporter	6 years	Female	Midwest
Reporter	2 years	Female	South