



January 2016

# How Media Ownership Affects Community Journalism: A Case Study Of The Grand Forks Herald

Angela Sue Cary

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HOW MEDIA OWNERSHIP AFFECTS COMMUNITY JOURNALISM:  
A CASE STUDY OF THE GRAND FORKS HERALD

by

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Bachelor of Arts, University of North Dakota, 1990

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty

of the

University of North Dakota

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Arts

Grand Forks, North Dakota

August  
2016

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This thesis, submitted by Angela Sue Cary in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts from the University of North Dakota has been read by the Faculty Advisory Committee under whom the work has been done and is hereby approved.

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## ABSTRACT

Local print newspapers have experienced many fiscal challenges over the past decade resulting in the downsizing of personnel and the consolidation of other resources. This restructuring ultimately affects its readers who may not receive the level of local information they need to further the ideals of civic engagement and democracy within their community. This study examines the relationship between media ownership and the amount of local news found within one newspaper serving a mid-size Midwestern city. This research was conducted through comparisons of the number of articles, column inches, and local reporter data in the newspaper's two primary news sections over a ten-year period. The results show how the number of local news articles has decreased overall due to a considerable drop in the number of pages per edition, yet the percentage of local news has risen as fewer national and international stories appeared by the close of the decade.



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to express my sincere appreciation to the members of my advisory committee and to the students and faculty in the Communication Program for their guidance during my time as a graduate student at the University of North Dakota.

This thesis paper is dedicated to my incredibly supportive husband Mike Cary,  
my loving parents Allen and Mavis Coen,  
and my scholarly brother Ross Coen  
who all believed in my decision to go to graduate school.

This paper is also dedicated to all of my wonderful Public Speaking students  
who remind me each day why this was one of my best decisions ever.



## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Local newspapers are catalysts for bringing the citizens of a community together. However, newspapers nationwide have experienced major challenges over the past decade which has affected their abilities to provide citizens with community information or encourage civic engagement amongst their readership. Previous research has shown that several factors are partly to blame for these challenges, including plunging advertising revenues, circulation shortfalls, staff cutbacks and the consolidation of resources (Perdue, 2010; Waldman, 2011; Reinardy, 2010). These issues, in turn, have been blamed on corporate greed and the newspaper's antiquated business model based on advertising sales and circulation which has had difficulty adjusting to the times (Nielsen, 2015; Johnson et al., 2014; Nyhan, 2014; Waldman, 2011). This combination of struggles has led Pew Research's 2016 State of the Media report to claim, "2015 was perhaps the worst year for newspapers since the Great Recession (2008) and its aftermath," (Barthel, 2016).

Following the national economic crunch eight years ago, newspapers have endured "prolonged effects, due to changes in both advertiser and consumer behaviors and other negative trends," (Stevenson, 2009). Newspapers nationwide have experienced a steep decline in broadsheet advertising with a drop in ad revenues totaling nearly 50 percent over the past decade. Evidence indicates that advertisers have either ceased their print advertising

or moved their media dollars elsewhere (Mitchell and Masta, 2015; NAA, 2011; Waldman, 2011). Despite the increased traffic on online newspaper sites, digital advertising has not generated enough revenue to make up for the losses in circulation or advertising revenue as the industry had anticipated (Nielsen, 2015; NAA, 2011). While the industry's online advertising revenue grew by a billion dollars from 2005 to 2010, print advertising was down by a remarkable \$26.4 billion (2011). "Print dollars were being replaced by digital dimes," mourned those in the print newspaper industry (Waldman, 2011, p. 39).

Nationwide circulation numbers for both weekday and Sunday print editions have also continued their steady decline. Over the past year, circulation has fallen by another seven percent (weekdays) and four percent (Sundays) across the country (Barthel, 2016). All of these industry challenges and changes ultimately affect the local media user – often in a negative way.

For readers of the *Grand Forks Herald*, a daily newspaper with a weekday circulation of 31,500 published in Grand Forks, North Dakota, these challenges recently hit close to home. In May 2016, the newspaper announced the layoffs of four newsroom employees, including two staff writers, and also reassigned a member of the news management team to a writing position (*Grand Forks Herald*, 2016). Publisher Korrie Wenzel, who joined the *Herald's* news staff in 2014, noted that this move was necessary to move forward in a contemporary news environment. "Unfortunately, these things happen," said Wenzel. "But we're in a changing industry and we have to react accordingly. We need to right-size our staff according to trends," (*Grand Forks Herald*, 2016).

This is not the first time the Herald has “right-sized” its roster due to economic pressures. The newspaper’s full-time staff dropped to 152 employees after a previous round of layoffs in 2009, and these latest reductions have now trimmed the staff to approximately 120 full-time employees (*Minot Daily News*, 2009; *Grand Forks Herald*, 2016). Long-time employees were offered buyouts earlier in the year as a way to voluntarily reduce the company’s workforce, yet not enough veteran workers accepted the offers before the layoffs began (Walker, 2016). According to employee interviews, company management explained that these reductions were part of the company’s efforts to “move away from traditional print delivery in favor of more digital distribution,” (Walker, 2016).

Wenzel has previously acknowledged the *Grand Forks Herald’s* need to confront its print version’s financial challenges while he watches its online readership grow (Hageman, 2014). In an article announcing his new position at the *Herald’s* helm, Wenzel stated, “We have a great traditional base of readers and we’re always going to serve them. But we have to start thinking of ways of attracting a new generation of readers,” (2014).

Despite the many changes and challenges, *Herald* editor Steve Wegner stands firm in his claim that the newspaper’s mission is to cover local news. “Our approach is to be local,” he said in a February 2016 interview. “We do not include national and international,” (Kadelbach and Radtke, 2016). He added that his newsroom’s aim is to write 10 to 15 local stories for each edition. However, as this paper will reveal, the Grand Forks Herald’s definition of “local” differs from the definition used within the study of true community journalism.

## **Community Background: Grand Forks, North Dakota**

Since the city of Grand Forks plays a major role in this study, a proper introduction of the community is necessary. Grand Forks, North Dakota is the state's third largest city, located just two hours from the Canadian border in the northeastern corner of the state. The latest local figures estimate the city's population to be 58,277 residents (Grand Forks Public Information Center, 2016a). The city's racial diversity is changing, yet according to the most recent United States Census numbers regarding race from 2010, nearly 90 percent Grand Forks residents are Caucasian with nearly ten percent reporting a different or mixed racial background (United States Census Bureau, 2016). Grand Forks residents claim a 93 percent high school graduation rate, and 35 percent have earned an advanced degree (Grand Forks Public Information Center, 2016a).

Grand Forks is proud to be home to North Dakota's largest higher education institution, the University of North Dakota, with an enrollment of approximately 15,000 students (University of North Dakota, 2016). In addition to the university, which is the city's largest employer, Grand Forks is also known for its agricultural-based economy. Farms and ag-related businesses and manufacturers are prevalent throughout the city and region. Grand Forks also boasts strengths in its healthcare, retail and hospitality industries. In a city which serves as a regional shopping hub and hosts a traditionally high number of Canadian visitors each year, retail trade and leisure/hospitality workers make up nearly 32% of the Grand Forks metropolitan statistical area workforce (Grand Forks County/Polk County), according to April 2016 statistics (Grand Forks Region Economic Development Corporation, 2016).

Like residents in all cities, those living in Grand Forks have identified a unique set of strengths and challenges in their community. Grand Forks was one of 26 select cities to take part in the Knight Foundation’s “Soul of the Community” study in 2010. The purpose behind the Grand Forks study was to explore the specific reasons why residents felt an emotional attachment to their community (Knight Foundation, 2010). During the study, respondents identified three main factors which best connected them to the city: (1) social offerings (community events and gathering places); (2) openness (the ability to welcome others); and (3) aesthetics (the area’s physical beauty and green spaces) (2010).

Those taking part in the study acknowledged the city’s many parks, playgrounds, and trails as a collective community strength. The community is enhanced by a 2200-acre stretch of recreational land called the Grand Forks Greenway which features bicycle paths and water recreation facilities along the Red River of the North, the natural border between North Dakota and Minnesota (Grand Forks Greenway, 2011). In terms of social offerings, Grand Forks continues to be proactive in bringing community events, concerts, and sporting events to several area entertainment venues. In 2015, the city established the Mayor’s Vibrancy Initiative to promote the development of arts and events, particularly in the city’s downtown business district (Grand Forks Public Information office, 2016b). Downtown is also home to a central Town Square where a number of community organizations host activities each year to celebrate the region’s four distinct seasons.

The overall connectedness of the community, according to the Knight Foundation study, also appears to be strong. The study praised Grand Forks for reporting the second-highest level of community attachment among the 26 communities involved in the project,



second only to Bradenton, Florida (Knight Foundation, 2010). Not surprisingly, older residents with higher income levels reported being the most connected to the city. Citizens from 18-34 years of age reported being the least attached to Grand Forks, despite the larger number of younger adults connected to the university community (2010).

Aside from the city's overall level of connectivity, residents of Grand Forks also identify a number of community challenges. A lack of affordable housing and fewer professional career opportunities are two challenges that face younger residents and young families who may feel a lack of attachment from Grand Forks. The tight housing market in the city creates an issue for new homebuyers who find it difficult to afford the price of a "starter home" in a city where the median home value is \$172,600, but the median household income is just \$43,436 (Grand Forks Public Information Center, 2016a). The city has also struggled with retaining younger residents after graduation, reflective of the Knight Foundation study. Wages and salaries in Grand Forks are also slightly lower than the national average. In May 2015, the average hourly wage in Grand Forks County was just over \$20 per hour while the national average was just over \$23 per hour (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015).

In this mid-size Midwestern city, residents also acknowledge the presence of social issues like homelessness and domestic abuse in the community. Caretakers for these issues are often coordinated through local non-profit organizations (e.g. Northlands Rescue Mission, Community Violence Intervention Center). One of Grand Forks' most vocal issues over the past several years has been its change in ethnic diversity. Beginning in 2008, the number of foreign refugees, often called New Americans, resettling in Grand Forks grew

from 10 to 95 annually, according to the city's Global Friends Coalition, a local advocacy group dedicated to helping the new residents acclimate into the community (Global Friends Coalition, 2016). Regional social service agencies assist with the New Americans placement and resettlement, and Grand Forks has welcomed 90 to 100 New Americans to the city in each of the past five years, most hailing from Bhutan, Somalia and Iraq (Amundson and Yeung, 2016). With this addition, many have publicly questioned the funding and motives of the efforts to bring New Americans to the community, however, this has not necessarily curbed the efforts to do so. Aside from public sentiment about this issue, the Knight Foundation report found "resident caring" to be higher in Grand Forks than in any of the other 25 cities studied (Knight Foundation, 2010). With its achievements and struggles, most residents would likely agree that Grand Forks remains a vibrant city filled with stories yet to be told.

Telling those stories is the responsibility of several local media outlets, including the *Grand Forks Herald*. For the size of the city, Grand Forks is served by a very limited number of traditional news sources. The city is home to only one local television news station, WDAZ-TV, an ABC network affiliate which presents two locally-produced newscasts each weekday. WDAZ and its sister station WDAY Television of Fargo are both owned by Forum Communications, the same company which owns the *Grand Forks Herald*. Regional news is received from the market's four other television affiliates, all located 80 miles south in Fargo, North Dakota. KVLV-TV (NBC), KXJB-TV (CBS) and KVRR (Fox) each cover news in a wide range of the tri-state area (North Dakota, Minnesota, and to a lesser extent, South Dakota.) The city's sole news/talk radio station is KNOX 1310 AM, providing a mix of local

call-in shows and syndicated programming throughout the day. Each media outlet fortifies its news, weather, and sports coverage through its website and uses social media to foster a connection with its users.

It should be added that Grand Forks' city government has also taken measures to share important city information through traditional and new media sources. The city televises the proceedings of its City Council meetings twice per month via a local cable television channel, and updates residents through its website and social media sources. Grand Forks communication has also seen an increase in local forums and "listening sessions" sponsored by local organizations seeking public input on the many city projects (e.g. new library location strategies, downtown events planning) which have been added to the community's agenda.

My personal interest in this project stems from two sources. The first is my status as a long-time Grand Forks resident and local media user. I have lived in the city for the past 30 years, serving as a *Grand Forks Herald* print subscriber, local television news viewer, and occasional talk radio listener during most of my residency here. Over the years it's been apparent that the *Grand Forks Herald* has changed. Speaking with other residents, I heard this same echo. Are we receiving the same amount of local news as we have in the past?

My other interest in this project stems from my own 16-year employment history with Forum Communications in Grand Forks. I began working as an advertising copywriter and commercial producer at Forum-owned WDAZ Television in 1994, serving as the division's Creative Services Director during most of my tenure. Like the *Grand Forks Herald* staff

members mentioned in this paper, I also experienced the effects of downsizing when our division cut six full-time positions in 2010. Downsizing was commonplace for traditional media sources during this time period. In 2009 alone, newspapers experienced a 40 percent reduction in newsroom personnel nationwide (Reinardy, 2010).

### ***Grand Forks Herald and Forum Communications Company***

The *Grand Forks Herald* is the subject of the case study used later in this paper, and its challenges will be documented further in the upcoming pages. A brief newspaper history is essential as it explains how the *Herald's* ownership has changed over the past century and beyond.

The *Grand Forks Herald* was established by its first publisher George Winship in 1879, although it was not the city's first newspaper (Hagerty, 2013a). This honor went to Winship's fellow publisher and friendly rival, George Walsh who established *The Plaindealer* before the *Herald* had printed its first issue (Hagerty, 2011). The two newspapers competed for readers before *The Plaindealer* ceased operations in 1905. By 1911, Winship and his stockholders had sold the *Grand Forks Herald* to the Bacon Syndicate and he retired to California. For a brief period of time, Jeremiah Bacon published two newspapers per day – the *Herald* in the morning and the *Grand Forks Times* in the evening. Eventually the *Times* name was eliminated and the *Herald* was published twice per day until its shift to an evening edition, then finally to the morning edition which remains today (Hagerty, 2011). In her regular *Grand Forks Herald* column titled “That Reminds Me”,

veteran journalist Marilyn Hagerty recalled the final days of the Winship era with a hint of foreshadowing about the *Herald's* future:

Winship had achieved his goals 100 years ago: the competing *Plaindealer* newspaper had closed down. But the *Grand Forks Times* had presented a new challenge. And the Bacon group hired two of North Dakota's greatest journalists to head it up. They were Norman Black and H.D. "Happy" Paulson, who later moved on to Fargo where they were credited with making *The Fargo Forum* the state's preeminent newspaper (Hagerty, 2011).

In 1929, the *Grand Forks Herald* was sold to a predecessor of the publishing powerhouse later known as Knight-Ridder, Inc. It remained part of the Knight-Ridder nationwide family of newspapers for 77 years. In 2006, the *Grand Forks Herald* became part of the Forum Communications Company's regional media empire, based out of Fargo. Forum Communications purchased the newspaper from Knight-Ridder shortly before the company was absorbed by Sacramento-based McClatchy Company. McClatchy also relinquished the *Duluth News Tribune* in Duluth, Minnesota as part of the purchase (Nowatzki and Swenson, 2006).

The sale of the *Grand Forks Herald* to Forum Communications was first met with trepidation from its employees, according to former *Herald* publisher Mike Jacobs. "There's been some anxiety in Grand Forks about the big sister up river taking over and diminishing us," Jacobs said (Nowatzki and Swenson, 2006). He said he tried to quell these fears by

noting that downsizing had not occurred in other communities where recently-acquired Forum newspapers were located. William “Bill” Marcil, Sr., company president at the time of the *Herald* purchase, agreed stating there were no plans to cut staff following the acquisition. “They’re well-run newspapers,” Marcil said. “We don’t expect any changes, no changes in personnel whatsoever,” (2006).

Forum Communications has been privately owned by Fargo’s Marcil and the aforementioned Norman Black families since 1917 (Springer, 2010). Bill Marcil, Sr. married Jane Black Marcil in 1960, and then succeeded his father-in-law Norman D. Black, Jr. as CEO and publisher of Fargo’s major newspaper, *The Forum*, in 1969. Marcil, Sr. became the fourth-generation family member to serve in the company’s highest leadership capacity. After a 41-year career, he relinquished the role of publisher to his son, Bill Marcil, Jr. who took over the daily operations in 2010. Marcil, Jr. has also served as the company’s CEO since 2013 (2010).

The reach of Forum Communications has flourished during the Marcils’ tenure. The company’s current media holdings now include 56 separate brands. These include 35 broadsheet and tabloid/shopper newspaper divisions, eight niche publications and websites (e.g. AgWeek, Prairie Business, and Apartments HQ), four broadcast television stations with two additional broadcast production entities, four commercial printing divisions, one radio station, one regional news wire service, and one platform for blog contributors. All of these divisions are overseen by the company’s Fargo headquarters.

With such a wide reach, Forum Communications Company has established itself as the predominant media voice in the upper Midwest. For Grand Forks' residents, Forum's ownership of two traditional media outlets, the *Grand Forks Herald* and WDAZ Television, means that readers and viewers receive their news from just one company governed by the same policies and principles. The danger in this lack of media diversity is that readers and viewers are not exposed to a wide variety of community viewpoints. When a community depends on a singular media voice it may also mean that city issues go unseen or unreported, or minority groups may not be properly represented or portrayed. As Forum Communications exerts its power through its two local media sources, the informational needs of the Grand Forks community may not be accurately recognized.

In her book *Who Owns the Press?*, author Mary Jane Pardue (2010) conducted eight case studies involving family-owned newspaper companies. In her findings, she presented both the positive and negative aspects of the family newspaper-ownership model. She wrote that the strengths of family newspapers include streamlined operations, independent decision-making abilities, and more control over daily decisions, like advertising rates and staff sizes. She also noted that family newspapers traditionally include stronger and more loyal readership with "closer ties to their communities and readers who feel a sense of ownership and trust in their hometown newspaper," (2010, p. 20). When a local family is in charge, like the Marcil family, Pardue's research showed that readers often felt a stronger sense of connection to their newspaper (2010).

Conversely, Pardue also shared the downfalls of family media ownership, including a lack of corporate backing, limited resources, limited support services, poor succession

planning, and most notably for this study, issues stemming from company diversifications.

“While family owned newspaper publishers have always needed to be wise in business, today they must be even smarter, savvier, and more willing to take risks,” wrote Pardue. “Many are expanding their businesses, offering new products, and embracing new technology,” (Pardue, 2010, p. 24).

One of these “new products” offered by Forum Communication is its regional news agency, Forum News Service, which was originated in 2012 and began operating in 2013. The news division described its mission in this website tagline:

Forum News Service is the premier news wire service covering the Upper Midwest, stretching from the oilfields of western North Dakota to the plains of South Dakota and to the shores of eastern Minnesota. (*Grand Forks Herald* website, 2016)

When it was first conceived, Forum News Service (originally labelled Upper Midwest News Service) sought to compete with the Associated Press (AP) on a regional level. Said former *Herald* publisher and then-Forum News Service manager, Mike Jacobs, “We have a product that is more complete, thicker on the ground, in the region we’re more interested in. We’re going to test it,” (Brauer, 2012). According to its website, Forum News Service gathers most of its content from “the award-winning newspapers, websites, and TV stations owned by Forum Communications [Company],” then repackages and distributes the information for a cost to other regional media outlets (Forum Communications, 2016). This consolidation has



also created an internal portal for regional stories that can be easily accessed and republished by other newspapers owned by its parent company.

The visibility of Forum News Service is apparent to readers of the *Grand Forks Herald*. Articles reprinted from the *Bemidji Pioneer*, *Dickinson Press*, *Duluth News Tribune* and other Forum newspapers regularly appear in the *Herald's* pages, often tagged with a Forum News Service byline. In addition, the news agency also partners with non-Forum newspapers to provide political news from two state capital cities (Bismarck, North Dakota and St. Paul, Minnesota), and other strongholds for regional news, like Williston, North Dakota; Billings, Montana; and St. Cloud, Minnesota (Forum News Service, 2016).

The same issues surrounding media diversity may also extend to the communities which use Forum News Service. As Forum Communications' footprints step further into the region with the distribution of Forum News Service stories, fewer local voices may be seen between the pages of local newspapers.

### **Newspaper industry challenges**

As Forum Communications' growth is reflected through its desire to offer regional news to a wider base, the reduction in local *Grand Forks Herald* newsroom jobs is very concerning. At its most basic level, the loss of any local journalist who covers city news instantly reduces a citizen's access to information about their community. Also, as the upcoming literature review reveals, the need for strong civic engagement opportunities powered by the information residents receive in their local newspaper are paramount to a community's success. Pardue wrote that a family-owned newspaper should be more duty-

bound to its community due to its closer relationship with the citizens it serves. “Family-owned newspapers can better fulfill the public’s needs and those of a democracy because they are fundamentally different operationally and philosophically from those that are publicly owned,” (2010, p. 155.)

However, the regional family-owned company’s recent decision to release six *Herald* employees reflects how cost-saving measures taken by local newspapers may often leave readers feeling less informed about their communities. Previous case studies show how the impacts of those measures have presented themselves in different ways. Four will be discussed in detail here.

The first fiscal measure is the reduction of newspaper pages or in extreme cases, the elimination of a newspaper’s print edition altogether. In New Orleans, residents lamented the 2012 downfall of their daily printed newspaper, the *Times-Picayune*, to a newer, web-based model (Thier, 2012). Aside from their apprehensions of losing their newspaper’s print version, readers also expressed grave concerns about the “digital divide”, the notion that poorer residents who lacked accessible technology would become estranged from the New Orleans’ community due to their limited understanding of local news (Their, 2012; Straubhaar, LaRose and Davenport, 2016, p. 14). In David Thier’s *New York Times* article about the *Times-Picayune* media shift, he addressed this division: “Others are worried that an increasingly digital news landscape will leave the large number of city residents who do not have regular Internet access in the cold,” (Thier, 2012).

During a time when print media continues to falter, this concern is relevant for any newspaper company considering whether or not to keep its local print edition. Forum Communications has expressed strong aspirations to further develop its online resources. In a promotional video for the North Dakota Newspaper Association, Forum Communications' president Bill Marcil, Jr. appeared to advocate for online newspapers. "The role of newspapers today hasn't changed that much with technology," he stated. "I see our role as transforming and connecting communities," (Newton Marketing and Research, 2014). While his company may feel that a shift to digital content distribution is more worthy of its investments, the move away from print would likely present great challenges to those readers whose information options are more limited. Audience accessibility and usability among readers who may not be "tech-savvy" (e.g. elderly residents, New American immigrants) would likely create a sense of disconnect from their community.

In the case of the *Grand Forks Herald*, the newspaper was not in danger of elimination. However, following its sale to Forum Communications the number of pages that comprised the print edition was systematically reduced over the course of the decade. Naturally, this also limited the amount of space available for news stories. Reinardy (2010) posited that since economic losses are easy to measure, page reductions are a viable way for managers to maintain profitability. The impending *Herald* case study here will suggest how page reductions as a cost-saving measure have affected the level of local Grand Forks city news in the community.

Another common casualty of these cost-saving measures is the loss of experienced reporters who know enough about the community to uncover its hidden stories. When

Portland-based newspaper, *The Oregonian*, cut its staff and print circulation in 2013, longtime editor Jack Hart noted how the resignations, buyouts, and layoffs had weakened the paper's content. "It's still a big, highly-skilled, powerful newsroom," Hart said. "But I don't think anybody at the paper would argue that there hasn't been a loss of reporting power," (Mesh, 2013). These losses have extended to watchdog journalism, a crucial breed of reporting, which has also fallen victim to recent cutbacks. The *San Diego Union-Tribune* newspaper closed its Washington, D.C. bureau in 2008 "just two years after its reporters had won a Pulitzer Prize for stories that put a member of Congress behind bars," (Waldman, 2011, p. 40). New Orleans' *Times-Picayune* readers also feared their online-only newspaper wouldn't feature the same level of investigative journalism they'd come to expect in the print edition (Their, 2012).

Like most newspapers, the *Grand Forks Herald* has also experienced these same losses through resignations, downsizing, or attrition. Experienced journalists have a grasp of the inner-workings of the city are replaced with younger, less experienced reporters who may lack the journalistic know-how or the professional networking skills of their veteran predecessors. Three longtime *Herald* staffers chose to retire shortly before new publisher Korrie Wenzel came on board. Wenzel noted, "It is unfortunate to lose that experience and knowledge," (Hageman, 2014). What news beats have been sacrificed by the exit of these veteran reporters? Unbeknownst to their readership, the stories that haven't yet appeared in the *Grand Forks Herald* may be as significant as the ones that have already been printed.

A 2004 *Newspaper Research Journal* special issue titled "Good Journalism, Good Business" observed how employment instability affects not only the newspaper, but the

community at large: “These cuts subtly reduce the quality and breadth of the paper. That in turn alienates readers, which then adds further pressure on circulation and advertising, which in turn leads to further cuts in costs, and the cycle spirals on,” (Reinardy, 2010, p. 6). In a smaller city like Grand Forks where local residents feel a familiar kinship with local newspaper reporters, it’s an observable fact that the *Herald’s* cutbacks have been damaging to the public perception of the newspaper.

The third effect, and perhaps the most important point in this study, concerns how the absence of a strong local print culture directly impacts participation in the democratic process of a local community. According to figures presented in the North Dakota Newspaper Association’s 2014 readership survey, 80 percent of adults in the state read at least one local newspaper each week, and nearly 60 percent of respondents cited newspapers as their primary source for information about the state’s political candidates and ballot measures (Newton Marketing and Research, 2014.) When newspapers lessen their local coverage, these decisions can have lasting repercussions for individual voters and groups as large as the locale electorate. When the *Cincinnati Post* ceased its operations in 2007, “electoral competition and voter turnout declined in areas of Kentucky where the *Post* was the leading paper,” (Nyhan, 2014). Another study regarding the long-term effects of “dead newspapers” noted that residents in both Seattle and Denver reported a noticeable drop in acts of civic engagement, (e.g. contacting a public official, serving as an officer for a community organization) when the *Rocky Mountain News* and *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* closed in their respective cities, leaving each community with just one daily newspaper choice (Shaker, 2014).

Finally, while the effects of downsizing a newspaper's physical resources are clear, another question to be considered is how these media cutbacks affect the voices of the readers themselves. Like many newspapers a decade ago, the *Grand Forks Herald* followed the trend of creating online discussion forums designed to elicit reader responses about local content. The topics, while sometimes trivial, were promoted within the newspaper's primary news sections during the *Herald's* first years of Forum ownership. When Grand Forks' Carmike Theater lowered its ticket prices in 2008 due to heavy competition from a new theater across the river in East Grand Forks, *Herald* asked readers to weigh in. The newspaper sidebar read, "Join in the discussion about Carmike Cinema's new lower ticket prices in Grand Forks on Schuster's web blog," (*Grand Forks Herald*, February 5, 2008). Another sidebar in the November 1, 2011 edition asked readers, "How was your Halloween? Share your trick-or-treat stories at *GrandForksHerald.com*," (*Grand Forks Herald*, November 1, 2011). While these discussion topics didn't concern city government or public policy, they offered the community-minded reader an opportunity to take part in the dialogue.

Some traditional opportunities for public comment are still available. The *Grand Forks Herald* continues to publish its "Letters to the Editor" section in its print editions, and Forum Communications hosts a platform for regional bloggers called "Area Voices". However, the company no longer allows the public to post direct responses about its stories to its websites. It isn't clear when Forum Communications chose to rescind its online forums, and this topic isn't revisited further in this paper. However, the company's decision to

eliminate this method of feedback offers another example of how the company suppressed, rather than encouraged, feedback from local voices.

Today social media gives its users the opportunity to participate in any discussion, a fact Forum Communications management may argue in its defense for eliminating its online forums, but using third-party websites serves as a barrier for those who choose not to become members. *Herald* readers may post their comments to the newspaper's Facebook or Twitter pages, but this requires the user to create individual accounts for each social media site to express their opinion. Interestingly enough, the Herald's most recent layoffs were attributed to its decisions to aggressively pursue its "digital distribution", bourn from the cultural trend to access newspaper news via digital sources rather than broadsheet form. With the promise of a more pronounced online presence in its future, one may wonder what type of digital feedback mechanism, if any, will be put into place for the residents of Grand Forks.

These four cost-saving practices demonstrate how downsizing personnel, reducing newspaper space, limiting public feedback or even eliminating entire newspapers has become commonplace with newspaper companies over the past decade. Some may challenge this notion with the familiar claim that print newspapers represent a dying industry. However, the demise of one local medium, particularly a city's newspaper, does not necessarily strengthen the other local news outlets in the same market. In fact, research suggests that weakening the local newspaper may weaken the entire market's media culture as a result. One comprehensive study of traditional and new media sources conducted by Pew Research in three mid-sized U.S. cities (Sioux City, IA; Denver, CO; Macon, GA) found that "civically engaged residents are more connected with their local news and are drawn to a more diverse

set of news sources than are residents who are less civically engaged,” (Pew Research, 2015a). This suggests that citizens see their local media sources to be interconnected. Just one weak link may affect the entire media chain for a city’s readers, listeners, and viewers.

### **Research Questions**

While Forum Communications hopes to expand its brands through the acquisition of new properties and the creation of new divisions these moves will both help and hurt its readership. Forum News Service may provide more stories to a wider audience, but as the *Grand Forks Herald* becomes smaller there are fewer local stories between its pages. My concerns about the future of local media in Grand Forks lead to these three important research questions:

- RQ1: How has the creation of Forum News Service affected the overall news coverage in the *Grand Forks Herald* from 2013 - 2015?**
- RQ2: Has there been a decline in local news coverage since Forum Communications purchased the *Grand Forks Herald* in 2006?**
- RQ3: If local news coverage has been affected, can this be attributed directly to media ownership?**

The answers to these three questions will help to resolve an even greater quandary, “How local is our local newspaper?” As the following literature review reveals, the significance of local news to a community is far more important than one might think.



## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### What is a community?

Any meaningful study about the importance of journalism within a community begins with a basic question, “What *is* a community?” While the definitions will vary between scholars, journalists, and citizens, it is first necessary to explore the notions behind two distinct categories of communities: “territorial communities” which focus on geographic, tangible, people-to-land relationships (e.g. cities, nations), and “institutional communities” (also labeled “transgeographic”) which feature intangible person-to-person relationships, racial or ethnic identities, common social or political goals, or other shared experiences, (e.g. German descendants, football season ticket holders, online discussion groups) (Effrat, 1974, Brown, 2004). The range of communities is vast and varied. In her study of different forms of communities, Marcia Pelly Effrat (1974) noted that some communities offer a range of institutional functions without any territorial traits (e.g. society), while other territorial communities contain definite boundaries, but often few institutional functions, (e.g. neighborhoods).

For residents who rely on local media to capture their city’s triumphs and challenges, responsible news reporting helps to address their concerns about each category by “explaining complicated events, issues, and processes in clear language,” (Downie and

Schudson, 2009). For example, “Will the upcoming holiday affect my normal recycling day?” (territorial) or “How can my family help those affected by the storm?” (institutional). Trusting a reliable news source, namely a local newspaper, to supply the information residents need to take action is essential for a community to thrive (Taylor, Lee & Davie, 2000; Ali, 2005). This is the foundation behind community journalism.

Ultimately, this literature review – and related research - seeks to understand how a community can best be served by its local newspaper, and how staving localism negatively affects its readership and the community at large. This begins by first synthesizing the definitions of a community; reviewing the history and key concepts surrounding community journalism; explaining the urgency of maintaining media localism; and lastly, looking critically at how local newspapers may hinder the cause of community journalism.

Examining the scholarship of both geographic and institutional communities extends far beyond the communication field. In one of the best-known attempts to define the term “community” sociologist George Hillery, Jr. analyzed 94 proposed definitions of the word (Hillery, Jr., 1955). His analysis uncovered one common thread: each description included interactions between people. In a follow-up study, Hillery defined villages using what he called “those qualities common to most definitions of a community: a social group inhabiting a common territory and having one or more additional common ties,” (Hillery, Jr., 1959, p. 237). Territorialists would agree that communities are based on “the grounding in a particular place of an interdependent population,” (Efrat, as quoted in Stamm, 1985, p. 15), or “organized systems coextensive with a settlement pattern,” (Taylor, Lee et al., 2000, p. 177). At its most basic level, Keith Stamm (1985) summarizes that “most researchers agree that a

community can be a place with boundaries that distinguishes it from other places,” (1985, p. 18).

Institutional communities, those conceived through shared connections rather than similar locale, are at the essence of Benedict Anderson’s (1983) study of “imagined communities,” (Anderson, 2006). In part, this is the determination that a community’s identity is envisioned and disseminated by institutions like mass media which help a citizen learn about his or her community’s norms (2006). Author Bill Reader (2006) noted that while journalists also “imagine” their communities in their process of news-making, this is easier for writers who serve smaller locales. Because larger newspapers are forced to cover a wider geographic range, Kim and Ball-Rokeach surmised that “big-city journalism” is less focused on the personal side of community and has often “failed to play the role of community storyteller” for the metropolitan areas they serve (Kim and Ball-Rokeach, 2006, p. 282). This complexity makes larger imagined communities more difficult to truly identify than smaller imagined communities.

Scholars like James Coleman and Robert Putnam advanced the idea of imagined communities with their introduction of “social capital” which highlights the investment made when community members work together to solve an issue, or in Putnam’s words, these are “features of social organizations such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit.” He added, “Working together is easier in a community blessed with a substantial stock of social capital,” (Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 1993). Integrating these ideas of social capital, Lewis Friedland (2001) wrote of a “communicatively integrated community,” one where local media sources facilitate dialogue

about essential civic issues, thus encouraging residents to take positive steps towards forming a stronger community (2001, p. 360).

Other narrowed “community” definitions suggest a mixture of territorial and institutional traits within the same studies. Patrick and Wickizer (1995) used simple categorical brands: community as place (geographical); community as social and political responsibility (institutional); and community as social interaction (institutional). Kang and Kwak (2003) suggested political divisions to differentiate communities: functional regions (flows of commerce) and administrative regions (legal or governmental boundaries) which are both institutional; and formal regions (geographic boundaries connected to points of interest) which are territorial in nature.

In a more people-centric study, MacQueen et al. (2001) aimed to gain a better understanding of community through the eyes of those facing a critical medical diagnosis. Five notions developed as a result. The most popular definition was a territorial one: *locus*, or a physical location or place with people (e.g. cityscapes or coffee houses), cited by 77 percent of respondents. The four remaining meanings were more institutional: shared perspectives or common interests (58 percent); joint action or activities, (e.g. neighbors helping neighbors) (50 percent); social ties and relationships (50 percent); and diversity (e.g. age, race, income, behavior) (24 percent) (MacQueen et al., 2001).

Still other studies have narrowed their focus further to show how an individual defines their personal relationship with their own community. Psychologist Seymour Sarason (1977) first introduced the idea of an individual’s psychological sense of community (PSOC) as “the perception of similarity with others, an acknowledged interdependence with others

[...] the feeling that one is a part of a larger, dependable and stable structure,” (p. 157).

McMillan and Chavis’ (1986) conducted a follow-up study of PSOC which proposed that a person’s inclusion in their community could be measured by four institutional dimensions: membership, influence, integration/ fulfillment of needs, and a shared emotional connection.

However, during the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, the institutional concept appeared to shift when scholars noticed the gradual withdrawal of citizens from social institutions, like subscription-based news media and service clubs (Putnam, 2004). While one study lamented the shift from sociable, interpersonal communities to “individualized, fragmented personal communities,” (Wellman, Quan-Hasse, Witte & Hampton, 2001, p. 455), another scholar accepted this detachment as a journalists’ challenge: “They are creating their own worlds and their own communities,” Thomas Terry wrote. “And therein is the challenge and the future for community journalism [...] no matter how or where they are delivered or formed,” (Terry, 2011, p. 80).

Not surprisingly, digital technology and new media have affected these traditional forms of community, impacting the public’s news gleaning habits and contributing to its fragmentation (Pew Research, 2015a). However, while the internet has made us members of a society without boundaries, geography still appears to be essential in defining our news’ interests (Paulussen and D’heer, 2013). Geographical communities, it’s been suggested, offer residents a stronger sense of community than online ones do (Mersey, 2009).

Lastly, a vital issue that impacts both geographic and institutional communities is power. Residents expect local media to provide detailed information about a community’s power structure (e.g. city government proceedings, economic interests), but also to offer a

voice to members of marginalized groups (e.g. disabled residents, homeless persons, those with mental illness) (Paulussen and d’Heer, 2013; Buck, Toro & Ramos, 2004; Thornicroft et al., 2013). According to Mosco (1998), “The very act of forming a community is an act of exclusion, as some are within and some are left out, and community media can help draw these distinctions,” (Mosco as quoted in Lowrey, Brozana & Mackay, 2008, p. 277). Other studies indicate that citizens “expect local journalism to emphasize solutions as well as problems,” (Nielsen, 2015, p. 10; Heider, McCombs & Poindexter, 2005). Whether local newspapers accept the challenge to find these “distinctions” and “solutions” is what we seek to learn.

This study’s original research will explore the media effects behind both territorial and institutional communities. Using one method, I will assess the level of geographic localism found in the *Grand Forks Herald* over a ten-year span. Using a different approach, I will also examine the source and length of each story to uncover the newspaper’s overarching level of localism and its gaps in local coverage. After all, what history has shown us after decades of research, an everlasting range of meanings, and a myriad of media-drawn distinctions is that Hillery’s revelations still hold true: communities are about people first.

### **The roots of community journalism**

While community journalism may bring to mind idyllic visions of a young newspaper carrier flinging the latest edition of hometown news to the front porch, or a new mother saving a treasured birth announcement in her new scrapbook, the term is certainly broader, more complex, and better-researched than it first appears to be. In his book *Community*

*Journalism: The Personal Approach* (2000), author Jock Lauterer offered the following descriptive narrative of local print media:

A community newspaper is a forum for parents to learn about the local schools, for residents to consider proposals for change, for church and civic groups to announce their doings, for neighbors to share happy times and sorrows (Lautner, 2000).

Author Bill Reader's definition is a bit more succinct, describing community journalism as the "specific practice of gathering, packaging, and distributing news in predominantly small, distinct geographic markets with an emphasis on local news and information about community life," (Reader, 2012, p. 3). Naturally, the parameters of a newspaper in a "small, distinct geographic market" may fluctuate depending on the author. Lauterer's definition includes daily newspapers with circulations up to 50,000, which works well for this particular study (2000).

It's been argued that all news stories fit into the mold of community journalism because each story is community-based in some way, and all communities are intertwined across America (Burd, 1979). However, true community journalism is simply not this one-sided. Rather it includes a reactionary element which encourages readers to make progress with the information they've been given. The following paragraphs detail the beginnings of "community journalism" and how scholars have expanded upon this idea to explain how print media can enhance a community.

The ideas behind community journalism were conceived by scholars who either predated or studied the philosophies of the Chicago school beginning over a century ago. While the term “community journalism” wasn’t coined until years later, thinkers like John Dewey, Robert Park and Morris Janowitz recognized and fortified the connection between the news media, democracy, and civic engagement. Dewey drew awareness to the participatory needs of communication, believing real actions trumped simple listening. His vision for a “conversational society” involved a free press that encouraged discussions with its readers about social issues, reasoning that constructive thought is based on genuine communication, rather than authority (Anderson, Dardenne and Killenberg, 1994, p. 22).

It was Kenneth Bylerly who first advanced the phrase “community journalism” in the early 1960’s while he was a professor at University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill. He was assigned to teach a course titled “Country Weekly Newspaper Production,” but he didn’t feel the name was inclusive enough of smaller suburban newspapers, or even smaller papers published on a daily basis (Terry, 2011). He wanted the course to reflect the current print media terrain, and the term “community journalism” was born. Bylerly later wrote a text titled *Community Journalism*, described as a “comprehensive mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century- guide to newspaper publishing in small towns, suburbs, and distinct neighborhoods in large cities,” (Reader, 2012, p. 5).

Similar concepts have incorporated elements of both territorial and institutional communities: “rural or regional journalism” which is “conducted beyond the major metropolitan fringes,” (Richards, 2012, p. 628); “public journalism” which “sought to make journalists and citizens partners in driving the news agenda,” (Rosenberry and St. John, 2010,



p. 4); and even “small j’ journalism” where print has “played an integral role in the livelihood of its community and citizens have reciprocated with a heightened level of connectedness and allegiance,” (Smith, R., 2008, p. 107).

In his writings about communication and culture, Park noted that communication creates a consensus among individual members of a social group which gives them the character of “a cultural unit,” (Park as quoted in Berleson and Janowitz, 1950, p. 165). Park’s earliest studies focused on the impact of the foreign-language newspapers for the waves of European immigrants entering the United States. While Park didn’t specify community journalism in these writings, he recognized the double-sided impact of these papers: they welcomed new citizens to American by offering them the tools for a smooth adaptation into their new society, and they also helped them retain cultural sentiments from their homeland (Lowrey et al., 2008). He wrote, “News is a kind of information that men use in making adjustments to a new environment, in changing old habits, and in forming new opinions,” (Park, 1922, p. 9). The popularity and affordability of the Penny Press also promoted the ideals of localism and democracy by making newspapers more accessible to a wider swath of local readers (Straubhaar, LaRose & Davenport, 2016). Park noted that people are united by language and traditions, rather than political allegiance, and these commonalities tend to keep similar people in close proximity with each other, forming a community (Park, 1922).

Morris Janowitz further acknowledged the community benefits of a local newspaper. He saw the natural connection between individuals who were invested in their communities and their need to find information through local print media (Stamm, 1985). When writing of Janowitz’s findings, author Keith Stamm called newspapers “a facilitating mechanism”

between the press and the community (Stamm, 1985, p. 5). Conversely, Janowitz (1952) also recognized the press' ability to bolster its readership observing that "the maintenance of community consensus by the community press is built on the emphasis of common values rather than on the solution of conflicting values," (Janowitz as quoted in Lowrey et al., p. 283). While Janowitz's idea of a congenial press may appear to be more prevalent in more homogenous, less diverse communities, his statement about emphasizing "common values" over "conflicting values" is forever challenged when a newspaper incites public debate or uses investigative journalism practices.

The connections between local media and its users have been echoed in numerous studies since Janowitz. All suggest how community journalism fulfills different needs within a community (Lowrey et al., 2008). Geographic needs are met when journalists show a commitment to covering specific regions or populations or when they integrate themselves within a community because they co-exist in the same geographical space as their readers (Kim and Ball-Rokeach, 2006; Meyer and Carey, 2014). Institutional needs, like the idea that local media serves as the "social glue for a community" are met when local journalists understand and appreciate a community's values (Nielsen, 2015).

Returning to history, Jack Rosenberry and Burton St. John (2010) describe the practical push for a public journalism movement in the late 1980's in their text, *Public Journalism 2.0*. It began when former Knight-Ridder CEO James Batten issued a challenge to his newspapers to expand community journalism beyond the op-ed page: "We can identify key issues and boldly assert them as never before in lively, readable formats," Batten claimed, (1989, as quoted in Rosenberry and St. John, p. 3). With those words, his

newspapers embraced Dewey's wish for an evolution in news reporting and began concerted efforts to bring more "citizen-engaged coverage" to cities like Charlotte, North Carolina, Spokane, Washington, and Wichita, Kansas. Batten had no way of knowing how these "lively, readable formats" would flourish in the form of online newspapers and they were only a few short years away.

With its scholarly origins dating back to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, it's obvious that community journalism involves more than a simple classification system for small-market news stories. Instead, it has established itself as a concept that recognizes the mutual efforts between citizens and communities, powered by local journalists who join the two through shared understanding (Ball-Rokeach and Kim, 2006). Community journalism benefits the local newspaper reader who lives in a city with a strong print media presence as research suggests that newspapers (more than their broadcast counterparts) help to further the ideals of democracy through quality reporting and storytelling (DeLaurrell, Mullen, Rothenbuhler & Ryu, 1996; Atkin, Jeffres, Lee & Neuendorf, 2007).

The concept of community journalism also greatly benefits the community itself. Robert Putnam's statements that newspaper readers are "more rooted in their communities" because "newspaper readership remains a mark of substantial civic engagement," are both emblematic of the powerful relationship between journalism, democracy, and community (Putnam, 2000, p. 218). These connections will be investigated further in this next section concerning the need to save localism through community newspapers.

## **What is the urgency behind maintaining media localism?**

Both statistical and empirical research suggests that the most valued content contained within a newspaper's pages is about its local citizenry. Quality print media offers a public forum for readers to debate and deliberate, and a guide for their participation in a democratic process (Ihlebaek and Krumsvik, 2015; Meyer and Carey, 2014). As the Lowrey et al. study suggests, "Scholars should discuss the degree to which a news organization practices community journalism rather than whether an organization practices community journalism," (Lowrey et al., 2008, p. 276).

Rasmus Nielsen (2015) has suggested that existing empirical research studies about local journalism fit into three categories: (1) accountability and information, (2) civic and political engagement, and (3) community integration. By slightly modifying these three categories to use as benchmarks, I will identify several studies that recognize the key values behind newspaper localism.

### **The value of receiving quality local information**

The love of localism has been felt in towns and cities, large and small. Like the previously-cited NDNA survey which indicated 80 percent of North Dakota adults read a local newspaper at least once per week, a 2013 National Newspaper Association study of newspaper readers in smaller locales discovered that "community newspapers continued to be highly valuable to communities" because they were seen as informative (94 percent); enjoyed by family members (80 percent); a valuable reference for local news and information (78 percent); and a source for entertainment (72 percent) (NDNA, 2014; NNA, 2013).

Likewise, returning to Pew Research's 2015 survey of residents in three metro areas (Sioux

City, Iowa; Denver, Colorado; and Macon, Georgia), their study found that local news was important in the daily lives of respondents across all three regions. Nearly nine-in-ten residents stated they followed local news closely, and half claimed to follow local news “very closely” indicating their broad and deep thirst for community knowledge (Pew Research, 2015a).

With downsizing issues plaguing newsrooms nationwide, how have local newspapers adjusted to these setbacks while attempting to publish the same quality product their readers have come to expect? As the introductory chapter stated, more than 40 percent of daily newspapers cut personnel in 2009, and newsroom staffers have suffered a 25 percent reduction nationwide (Reinardy, 2010; Waldman, 2011). In his study of newspaper layoff “survivors,” Scott Reinardy (2010) found that employees who were left in the wake of downsizing were subject to heavier workloads, added responsibilities, and felt mixed emotions (anxiety, remorse, guilt, and anger), including a “diminished dedication and enjoyment among journalists and their work,” (2010, p. 15). Regarding the quality of news reporting following a round of layoffs, Reinardy wrote,

Several journalists said their newspaper has lowered standards, paying less attention to details, using fewer sources and accepting stories that would be considered “low-hanging fruit” in the past. Depth reporting and writing, enterprise stories and investigating journalism have fallen to the wayside for a greater number of journalists in this study (Reinardy, 2010, pg. 14).

With fewer local reporters, the tendency to cite press releases from wire reports, or verbatim from governmental sources and interest groups, rather than breaking down the information or

relating the significance of the material back to the local community, was commonly reported as a frequent and acceptable newspaper practice (Pew Research, 2015b; Waldman, 2011).

Personnel cutbacks also left local newsrooms with fewer journalists to cover expanding geographic areas, resulting in difficult editorial decisions about which events took precedence (Reinardy, 2010; Waldman, 2011). Waldman’s studies of local papers nationwide also revealed another disturbing trend: “Many cutbacks have occurred on beats that had enormous civic impact but lacked sexy, marketable stories,” he wrote, adding that more newspapers included “fewer portions of ‘broccoli journalism’ (i.e. stories that might be both unpopular but good for you),” (2011, p. 44).

If community journalism leads to higher levels of social engagement, community problem-solving, and a better-educated electorate, it’s reasonable to question how reducing the quality of local news content through sub-par articles, missed coverage, and the use of one-dimensional wire service reports truly serves those who claim to be “very close” to their local news.

### **The value of advancing the principles of democracy and civic engagement**

Previous and current research cites a strong correlation between newspaper readership and demonstrations of civic engagement, like volunteering or registering to vote. According to authors Ted Smith and Robert Lichter from their book, *What People Want from the Press* (1997), over six in ten Americans (63 percent) felt that the news media helps to advance the principles of democracy. A more recent Nielsen study commissioned by newspaper advocacy group, Newspaper Association of America, confirmed that “local newspapers show

considerable reach among registered voters” by connecting with 64 percent of voters via daily, Sunday, or online newspapers each week (NAA, 2016, p. 6).

Aside from the clear benefits readers receive when they obtain information from their local newspaper, research has also been conducted to see how readers themselves contribute to a community’s vitality by sharing the knowledge they’ve gained from local media.

Authors Paek, Yoon, and Shah (2005) used three factors to measure citizens’ levels of community integration during their analysis: newspaper readership, social interactions, and home ownership. Their results confirmed that newspapers directly and indirectly added to social engagement, writing “the more vibrant the local print culture, the greater the likelihood that socially active people will learn about and discuss local issues even if they did not directly encounter them in the news,” (2005, p. 597).

Pew Research supports these findings, confirming that nearly two-thirds of residents in each of their three metro case studies spoke with others about local news several times per week or more (Pew Research, 2015a). The authors in the Paek study also cited several examples of prior research where newspaper readership was shown to be a common indicator of “civic participation, community integration, and community ties,” (2005, p. 589).

Although local newspapers are often seen as the cornerstone of territorial communities, technology has tightened the ties that bind community journalism to institutional communities as well. According to data from the Newspaper Association of America, over 90 percent of women and men ages 25 to 44 who were online in August 2015 engaged with digital newspaper content (NAA, 2015). With new online tools for engagement, the public sphere has shifted from geographic to more institutional, yet the

democratic focus remains the same: “Citizens must have the opportunity to deliberate in public to discuss and formulate issues and problems that are important to them,” (Friedland, 2001, p. 359). Newspapers which host online discussion forums bring journalists and readers closer together by offering their audience a means to respond to their content without gatekeepers, and offer fewer obstacles than other traditional methods of feedback, like “Letters to the Editor” (Carey and Meyer, 2014; Reader, 2012).

Yet, while news organizations claim to seek the benefits of audience engagement, they appear to be reluctant to welcome readers into the news-making process (Coddington, Holton and Lewis, 2013). One poll calculated that only 36 percent of local journalists reported having a positive view of citizens’ posts on their organizations’ websites (Rosenstiel, 2009). Even fewer said they take the time to read the comments and submissions they receive.

In their study of journalists’ attitudes towards online discussion forums and the role the writers could play in fostering online communities, Hans Meyer and Michael Carey (2014) revealed that the more comments a newspaper received on a daily basis the more negatively journalists perceived their audiences. The authors suggested that “journalists need to be involved in online comment forums to build virtual communities and achieve the ideals of community journalism,” (p. 213). With the uncertainty of the outdated newspaper business model, the importance of engaging digital readers by ensuring they’re actively involved with online content may be one of the most vital investments a newspaper can make (Fallows, 2012).



However, the Meyer and Carey study suggests there is some hesitancy on the part of journalists to get involved due to the volume of negative public commentary: “Attitudes such as these could put a damper on creating the sense of virtual community this study suggests is required for a community newspaper website to serve as a forum for public criticism and compromise,” (2014, p. 223). Forging a better sense of community involves more than simply eliminating offensive posts, as their research contends (2014). This evidence suggests that journalists must be actively involved in two crucial aspects of their newspaper’s online discussion forum: actively moderating posts, and respecting the wishes of their posters to comment anonymously in order to make a bigger impact (2014).

Coddington, Holton, and Lewis have coined the term “reciprocal journalism” to suggest two ways journalists can help build their online communities: first, by acknowledging the input and contributions of their audiences, and next, by establishing spaces where audience members “can reciprocate with each other”, thereby contributing to the public discourse (Coddington, Holton and Lewis, 2013, p. 237). This reciprocity is demonstrated when a journalist responds to a reader’s email, or a reader re-Tweets a local newspaper story (2013). The authors conclude that the benefits shared between journalists and their audiences can “deepen collective trust, social capital, and overall connectedness,” which supports Lewis Friedland’s mandate for open discussions about community issues (2013, p. 230). This is seemingly a win-win for both the newspaper and its readership.

### **The value of newspapers as a community cornerstone**

Lee and Taylor wrote that residents of smaller communities “tend to support their local institutions, including media outlets, perceiving those local media to be fairer than the

external media in the news coverage of community conflicts,” (Taylor et al., 2000). The advantage of newspaper localism is three-fold: as the newspaper embeds itself as a reliable community resource, readers come to depend on the newspaper to gain local knowledge. This partnership, in turn, directly strengthens the community as the economic needs of the newspaper and the cultural needs of its readers are satisfied (Coddington, Holton and Lewis, 2013). Media trustworthiness, according to the literature, is a key factor in this triad. The newspapers, their readers, and the community all appear to have much to gain from their mutual reciprocity.

Local newspapers have traditionally enjoyed esteemed perceptions as community builders (Richards, 2012), and have been idealized as “the hub of the town” where, as one author asserted, “the newspaper publisher is something of a celebrity,” (Gronewold, 1999, pp.1 and 3), while the newspaper editor is often seen as a “mythical, albeit anachronistic hero of American democracy,” (Claussen and Shafer, 1997, p. 3).

This newspaper-as-community-leader perception may lead to what Kanniss (1991) called “cheer-leading boosterism” or the media’s tendency to “display excessive enthusiasm for their local community while underplaying or ignoring its faults,” (Kanniss quoted by Richards, 2012, p. 629). Whether or not these are conscious editorial decisions, this type of media framing can highlight or exclude elements of a problematic civic issue in a news story, allowing it to be swept under the community’s rug (Taylor et al., 2000). As boosterism infiltrates a newsroom, it is the readers who may suffer most:

Factors such as strong social connections between editors and community leaders, and high numbers of individuals and institutions that are stakeholders in particular issues, decrease the likelihood that conflict and controversy will ever be covered,” (Lowrey *et al.*, 2008, p. 286.)

However, it should be noted that previous research has shown that media in larger communities are more likely to cover community conflicts (Taylor *et al.*, 2000). Further, economic diversity within a community indicates a stronger likelihood that newspapers will report on unfavorable conditions like ethnic diversity, gender issues, and community conflict (Lowrey *et al.*, 2008).

In their writings, Claussen and Shafer (1997) added that the lofty status of newspaper management is often countered by the “low salaries and poor working conditions” of the journalists who work on the front lines (1997, p. 3). Newsroom staffers also reported feeling pressure to become friendly with local business and civic leaders, and intimidation from advertisers looking to influence news content (Richards, 2012). Such influences may be status-builders for the newspaper, but perhaps not for its readership when important community issues go unreported, or as the saying goes, “the watchdog didn’t bark,” (Nielsen, p. 9).

The leadership role of the local newspaper within a community can be either empowering or limiting depending on the circumstance and the people who are affected by its actions (Lowrey *et al.*, 2008; Richards, 2012). If the goal of community journalism is to

empower its residents, it's fair to conclude that rallying a community involves a fair mix of promoting its strengths while standing up to its power structure.

### **Literature Review Summary**

The main thrust of the literature about community journalism supports the contention that an engaged citizenry creates a stronger democratic community. Newspapers are essential for helping residents learn about their geographic and institutional areas, and residents often respond by taking action as a byproduct of their exposure to local newspapers and other media. While newspapers have struggled as the industry has ebbed and flowed, these core values behind community journalism have remained constant.

Readers want to believe and support their local print media, recognizing its value as an informational resource, a tool for democracy and community engagement, and as a community leader. However, issues behind the well-documented downturn of the newspaper industry continue to challenge community journalism practices. To thrive in this new era of readership, the literature suggests that newspapers should be open to new forms of audience engagement, they need to balance boosterism with deeper reporting of community issues, and they should continue to work within their means to publish a quality product for their readers. With so many citizens indicating a strong interest in local news, readers expect these actions to be taken to further their community.

As newspaper editors ask the essential question, "What do our readers want and need to know about our community," previous literature suggests that local news is at the heart of the answer. While local readers may find portions of the local information they want between

their local pages, the upcoming Methods and Results sections show how local news in the *Grand Forks Herald* has fared over the past decade. How are the needs of the local *Herald* readers weighed against the actual news coverage included in each print edition? The following research attempts to shed new light on questions related to this topic.

Whether community engagement begins within the confines of a morning newsroom meeting, or whether interested citizens engage based on the media information they receive, it's clear that the newspaper, its citizens and their community all need to be equally involved in the process. Only through mutual and congenial participation will local journalism begin to strengthen its community.

### CHAPTER III

#### RESEARCH METHOD

The research design for this project featured a case study of the *Grand Forks Herald*, the largest newspaper in Grand Forks (ND) County and one of 33 newspapers owned by its parent company, Forum Communications, (Forum Communications, 2016). The *Herald* serves as the county's official newspaper and the newspaper of record for the Grand Forks public school district, (*Grand Forks Herald*, 2014).

Using a content analysis approach, this study examined the amount and level of Grand Forks city news coverage found within the *Herald's* pages over a ten-year span, from 2006 to 2015. For the purposes of this research, "city news" was defined as those articles written by *Grand Forks Herald* journalists about people and events occurring within the city limits of Grand Forks. Using this definition, neighboring East Grand Forks (MN) news was not considered to be "city" for this study because it comprises a separate community which is served by its own weekly newspaper, *The Exponent*.

The aim of this content analysis was to provide a decade-long overview of the newspaper's trends from its first year of Forum Communications ownership in 2006 through its more current operations in 2015. After identifying and comparing the data, two areas of interest emerged from this analysis: the geographic focus of each article, and the professional affiliation of the journalist or source who wrote each story. The data was then dissected by

measuring the total number of articles and total column inches in several categories based on these two dependent variables.

Another goal of this research was to show how the newspaper's use of other news agencies, commonly known as wire services, affected the amount of local news content found in the *Grand Forks Herald*, and whether this supported the assertion that Forum Communications refocused its mission after the creation of its own newswire service, Forum News Service, in 2013. Uncovering the relationships between the newspaper's total numbers of pages, the total number of articles, and the total column inches proved to be a key part of the analysis.

### **Research Data Set 1: Geographic Levels**

For the purpose of categorizing each news article based on its location, five distinct levels of news coverage were created. These levels were based on their geographic positions relevant to Grand Forks, North Dakota. For this study, Grand Forks was considered to be the local epicenter with each of the other four levels covering a larger geographic area away from the city.

Each of the *Grand Forks Herald* newspaper articles was first coded using a reverse Likert-type scale, from those articles featuring a local *Herald* writer and city content which were labeled starting at Level 1 (Category: Grand Forks City Article), to the international stories which featured no local writer nor local ties to the city of Grand Forks and were considered to be Level 5 (Category: International Article). These are the five geographic categories used to measure the level of localism in the newspaper's coverage:

### **Level 1: Grand Forks City Articles**

This category includes any article written by a Grand Forks Herald journalist about a person or event **within the Grand Forks city limits**.

### **Level 2: County Articles**

This category includes any article written about a person or event **within Grand Forks County or Polk County**, but outside of the Grand Forks city limits.

### **Level 3: Regional Articles**

This category includes any article written about a person or event outside of Grand Forks County or Polk County, but **within the four-state region where Forum Communications owns its newspapers: North Dakota, South Dakota, Minnesota, and Wisconsin**.

### **Level 4: National Articles**

This category includes any article written in **any U.S. state other than North Dakota, South Dakota, Minnesota, and Wisconsin**.

### **Level 5: International Articles**

This category includes any article written in **any country other than the United States**.

The total number of articles in each of the five levels was tabulated and averaged for this portion of the research. Unlike the following research data set, column inches were not considered for this part of the study.

### **Research Data Set 2: Source Origins**

After each story was assigned to one of the geographic levels, the article was further categorized by its source, specifically whether the journalist worked for the *Grand Forks Herald* or a regional or national news agency. Similar to the geographic categories, the stories considered to be the most “local” were labeled Source 1, meaning they were written by a *Grand Forks Herald* journalist about a person or event taking place within the city limits (Category: *Grand Forks Herald* Journalist – Grand Forks article). The stories found to be the least “local” were those created by one of the *Herald’s* news wire sources, (e.g. Associated



Press, Reuters) about a topic that did not include direct ties to the Grand Forks community and labeled Source 4 (Category: Other Wire Service article).

The following four categories were established based on the source of the story and the proximity of the journalist or wire service to Grand Forks. As a way to strengthen the data, these categories were measured by total column inches rather than by the number of articles seen in the geographic data set:

**Source 1: GFH Journalist – GF Article (GFH-GF):**

This category includes any article written by a Grand Forks Herald journalist about a person or event located **within the Grand Forks city limits**.

**Source 2: GFH Journalist – Non-GF Article (GFH-NoGF):**

This category includes any article written by a Grand Forks Herald journalist about a person or event located **outside of the Grand Forks city limits**.

**Source 3: Forum News Service Article (FNS):**

This category includes **any story attributed to Forum News Service since 2013**.

**Source 4: Other Wire Service Article (OWS):**

This category includes **any national or international non-FNS wire story** (e.g. AP, Reuters, Chicago Tribune).

The need for the two more specialized categories (Source 2 & 3) may require further explanation. Source 2 (*Grand Forks Herald* – Non-Grand Forks Article) was created because *Grand Forks Herald* journalists often cover county or regional events located outside the Grand Forks city limits. Therefore, it was determined these stories should be identified in a separate category.

Source 3 (Forum News Service Articles) was created to include stories attributed to writers who have contributed articles to Forum News Service since its inception in 2013. The origins of Forum News Service articles (FNS) include the four-state region where Forum

Communications owns its newspapers: North Dakota, South Dakota, Minnesota, and Wisconsin. This category was created due to its importance in the overall study about Forum Communications and its ownership effects.

All of the newspaper data for this study was gathered via microfilm technology from four editions of the *Grand Forks Herald* per year - one edition per quarter. The selected newspapers were from the first Tuesday of each month during the second month of each quarter: February, May, August, and November. Previous media study methods have suggested that using constructed sampling techniques, like selecting a particular month, date or another specified time frame to examine, are more effective than random sampling due to the “cyclic nature of media content” and the day-to-day variance in the amount of advertising or news content, (Lacy, Riffe, Stoddard, Martin & Chang, 2001, p. 837).

Tuesday’s editions were intentionally and strategically chosen because they were thought to include more local political news. This is due in part to the Grand Forks government news cycle. Grand Forks City Council meetings take place on the first and third Monday evenings of each month. The Grand Forks Park District board of directors meets on the first Tuesday of the month, while the Grand Forks County Commission board meets on the first and third Tuesdays of each month. The Tuesday newspapers would presumably include a recap or a preview of these government meetings. The long-standing notions that a newspaper can invigorate a sense of citizenship in its readers, often beginning with the actions taken by local government, also factored into the decision to choose Tuesday’s *Herald* editions over the other days of the week.

Since newspaper reports of the North Dakota and Minnesota state legislatures also factor into this study's analysis, their timetables will be shared here. North Dakota's legislature meets on a biennial basis (odd-numbered years only) while the Minnesota legislature meets every year. Despite Forum Communication's reach to South Dakota and Wisconsin, the legislative news for these two states does not typically appear in the *Grand Forks Herald*.

All of the articles scrutinized for this study were contained within the two primary sections of the *Grand Forks Herald*: the front-page section (A section) which contains hard news articles and the opinion/editorial page; and the second section (B section) which is best-known for its local obituaries, but also includes news stories. While the *Herald's* other feature sections (e.g. "Accent on the Family") were also reviewed, these articles were not included in the overall calculations due to the inconsistency of the sections' names and content over the ten-year examination period. This study also focused strictly on news articles written by professional journalists, so several portions of the newspaper were not analyzed for their level of local content, including the "Sports" section, "Letters to the Editor", syndicated features (e.g. "Ask Amy" advice column), display advertising, classified advertising, or newspaper photographs of any kind.

After reviewing the two primary sections in each of the *Grand Forks Herald's* four quarterly editions (February, May, August and November), the data was analyzed, coded and recorded on the *Grand Forks Herald* tabulation worksheet (Appendix A). This rubric included six independent variables: (1) article title, (2) city of origin, (3) number of column inches, (4) local writer or news agency, (5) news topic categorization (e.g. agriculture,

business, crime, local or state government, feature, public safety, etc.), and (6) geographic level (local, county, regional, national or international). The number of articles and column inches from each edition were totaled and averaged to identify any trends during the ten-year period of examination. The four quarterly editions were each grouped into ten yearly units of measurement which were used throughout the study.

There are two tabulation columns which require additional explanation. The first is the “News Topic Code” column. Based on the subject matter of the story, each article was coded using one of 20 different categories (Appendix B). Then the news topic code and city of origin were used together to determine the local relevance of the story to *Grand Forks Herald* readers. For example, an article about a bill passed by the North Dakota state legislature would arguably impact Grand Forks residents in a more meaningful way than a sentencing of a man following a court case in Duluth, Minnesota (*Grand Forks Herald*, 11/5/13).

While the ideals behind community journalism center on local coverage, it’s important to recognize the implications of an article written from afar about a broad-reaching topic like state government. This type of article allows local readers to witness democracy in action when they read how their state government’s actions affect their own lives. It also demonstrates how non-local news can directly impact the Grand Forks community. When the *Grand Forks Herald* brings the Bismarck legislative proceedings into a Grand Forks resident’s living room through the newspaper, this conjures Benedict Anderson’s concept of “imagined communities,” the idea that media helps to create institutional boundaries like

those which tie residents to the state of North Dakota. The implications of imagined communities will be discussed further in the final chapter.

The other column which requires explanation is the “*Grand Forks Herald* Local Coverage Rating” column. Each story was also given a “local rating” based on its news level (Grand Forks City news = 1; County news = 2; Regional news = 3; National news = 4; International news = 5.) These local rating results were achieved by totaling the geographic level numbers for the all of the articles within the year, then dividing this combined “level” number by the annual number of articles for the year. If the *Grand Forks Herald’s* goal was to publish a completely local paper, it would strive to achieve an overall rating of 1.00. This would indicate that all of the newspaper stories included Grand Forks city content.

Two types of results were examined consistently across both data sets during the ten-year period. First, the results from the two categories featuring local Grand Forks news, the Grand Forks City category (GF City) and Grand Forks Herald-Grand Forks article (GFH-GF) category, were often compared with the remaining non-local news categories. Also, the similarities and differences recorded during the three-year Forum News Service era (2013 through 2015) were contrasted with the results from the seven years prior to Forum News Service.

All of the results from both data sets helped to establish a number of interesting correlations within the research. For example, how did the changing number of newspaper pages impact the number and percentage of local Grand Forks articles within the *Grand Forks Herald*? Did the number of national and international stories (all from Other Wire

Service sources) decrease after the creation of Forum News Service? And perhaps, most importantly, did Forum News Service help to drive the number of Grand Forks city news stories higher or lower by the close of the decade? These answers will be addressed during the research findings and summary.

**CHAPTER IV**  
**RESEARCH RESULTS**  
**Research Findings**

The results for each of the two categorical sets are illustrated in two separate tables. Table 1 shows the total number of news articles from each of the five geographic levels, while Table 2 shows the total number of column inches and the source behind each article. This cross-analysis allowed for the larger number of brief, single-column news items, while also accounting for a smaller number of articles each exceeding 20 columns or more. This combination of data results attempted to offer a more accurate portrayal of the *Grand Forks Herald's* total news content.

The first set of findings is based strictly on the total number of stories in each of the five geographic categories. To introduce these results, we will first preview the overall number of broadsheet pages and the aggregate article totals from 2006 through 2015.

**Geographic Level Results (Data Set 1)**

**Newspaper Broadsheet Page Totals**

Table 1 shows a pattern of steady decline in the total number of broadsheet pages found within the *Grand Forks Herald's* two primary news sections from the beginning to the end of the decade. The total for the two sections peaked at 50 pages (12.5 average pages)

during 2006, the first year of study. However, during the first full year of Forum Communications' ownership (2007) this page total dropped slightly. Following a brief 2008 rebound, this downward trend continued through the last eight years of the study, ending with a low of 37 pages (9.25 average pages) in 2015. Over the ten-year period, the pages in the Grand Forks Herald's two primary news sections decreased by 13 pages (26 percent.)

The yearly difference in the number of pages has proven to be very significant. As the total number of pages has declined, the total number of articles has also declined from the study's start to finish. However, despite the lower number of pages, the number of Grand Forks City articles and Regional articles has risen each year since the creation of Forum News Service in 2013. The specific figures for each level will be presented in the sections following the discussion of aggregate article totals.

### **Aggregate Newspaper Article Totals**

The distinct difference between the total of *Grand Forks Herald* articles from the first five years of examination (2006 through 2010) through the final five years of examination (2011 through 2015) is clearly evident in Table 1. During the first five years, 837 total articles were published in the *Herald's* two primary sections, peaking with a total of 184 articles in 2010. Following this peak, the total number of stories declined 25 percent during the latter part of the decade, reaching only 628 stories from 2011 through 2015. The most drastic story decrease also occurred during this time period with a 45 percent drop in articles from 184 stories (2010) to 101 stories (2015). The newspaper's shrinking number of pages or increased article sizes certainly contributed this diminished amount of news content.



In addition to the data collected about the Grand Forks Herald's news pages and overall number of articles, each of the five geographical levels (city, county, region, national, and international) has its own unique set of characteristics and evolutions. The statistics for each level will be examined further in the following sections.

**Table 1.** News Article Totals - *Grand Forks Herald* City News Articles & Non-City Articles (County, Region, National & International)

Year	Total A/B Section Pages	Avg. A/B Section Pages	Total # Articles	Total GF City	Total County	Total Region	Total Nat'l.	Total Int'l.	GF City Article %	County-Region-Nat'l. & Int'l. %
2006	50	12.5	167	41 (25%)	7 (4%)	63 (38%)	47 (28%)	9 (5%)	41 (25%)	126 (75%)
2007	48	12	155	46 (30%)	5 (3%)	54 (35%)	35 (23%)	15 (10%)	46 (30%)	109 (70%)
2008	50	12.5	163	41 (25%)	6 (4%)	67 (41%)	40 (25%)	9 (6%)	41 (25%)	122 (75%)
2009	45	11.25	168	41 (24%)	6 (4%)	64 (38%)	41 (24%)	16 (10%)	41 (24%)	127 (76%)
2010	43	10.75	184	49 (27%)	5 (3%)	90 (49%)	29 (16%)	11 (6%)	49 (27%)	135 (73%)
2011	43	10.75	155	27 (17%)	7 (5%)	75 (49%)	33 (21%)	13 (8%)	27 (17%)	128 (83%)
2012	43	10.75	138	30 (22%)	3 (2%)	70 (51%)	26 (19%)	9 (7%)	30 (22%)	108 (78%)
2013 (FNS)	40	10	123	30 (24%)	5 (4%)	41 (33%)	29 (24%)	18 (15%)	30 (24%)	93 (76%)
2014 (FNS)	36	9	111	39 (35%)	8 (7%)	44 (40%)	11 (10%)	9 (8%)	39 (35%)	72 (65%)
2015 (FNS)	37	9.25	101	42 (42%)	5 (5%)	45 (45%)	5 (5%)	4 (4%)	42 (42%)	59 (58%)

**Yellow** = Highest Column Total    **Blue** = Lowest Column Total    **Gray** = Forum News Service Era

## Level 1: Grand Forks City Articles

This category (Grand Forks City) was developed to present the number of *Grand Forks Herald* stories written about the city of Grand Forks. During the first five years of examination (2006 through 2010), the number of Grand Forks city articles averaged 43.6 stories per edition. This number dipped to 33.6 Grand Forks City articles per edition during the last half of the decade (2011-2015). A comparison between the first three years (2006 through 2009) and the last three years which included Forum News Service (2013 through 2015) showed a 30% overall decrease in the number of Grand Forks City articles published during this time frame.

However, the percentage of Grand Forks city news found in the *Grand Forks Herald* over the past decade tells a different story. While the yearly number of Grand Forks City stories and physical size of the paper fluctuated and decreased over the research period, the percentage of space devoted to City articles in the *Grand Forks Herald* actually increased during this time frame. During the first five years (2006 through 2010), City articles comprised just 24 to 30 percent of the two primary sections, falling to a low of 17 percent in 2011. This percentage turned around and grew steadily during the next four years, including three years of the Forum News Service era where the number of city articles has also rebounded to show a steady increase since 2013. Grand Forks City stories reached their highest rate at 42 percent (42 stories) in 2015. With fewer pages to fill, this data actually suggests that editorial decisions were made to strengthen the number and percentage of Grand Forks City stories over the past three years.

Despite the recent uptick of city news published in the *Grand Forks Herald* it should be noted that 58 percent of the newspaper's articles still featured people, events, and communities outside the city of Grand Forks during the period of examination. Grand Forks City news averaged only 38.6 percent of the total news content included in the two primary sections of the newspaper.

Yet the gap between Grand Forks city news and non-city news has grown closer in recent years. The number of *Herald* non-Grand Forks articles tabulated from the other four categories (County, Regional, National and International) has dropped to 58 percent (2015) from its peak of 83 percent (2011), reducing the widest margin of city versus non-city coverage over the past decade. The "local rating" level also fell from 2.59 to 2.28 between 2006 and 2015. This negative .31 drop indicates the sway towards more localized stories.

## **Level 2: Grand Forks County and Polk County Articles**

With a population of nearly 71,000 residents, Grand Forks is the third largest city in North Dakota and serves as the Grand Forks County seat (U.S. Census, 2015). Its border city, East Grand Forks, lies directly across the river in Polk County, Minnesota. While the *Grand Forks Herald* is the largest newspaper published in either county, it does not serve East Grand Forks in any official capacity. Yet, as a way to track this level of coverage, Grand Forks County and Polk County were grouped into this separate category (County) due to their close proximity to the city of Grand Forks and its newspaper.

Regardless of the city's proximity to each county, however, the number of articles included in the Grand Forks/Polk County category tracked consistently lower than any of the

other categories in the study. The total of *Grand Forks Herald* articles written about the people or events outside of Grand Forks in both counties ranged from just 3 percent (2012) to 8 percent (2014). Yet the number of published articles remained consistent throughout the decade. During the first five years of examination, 29 GF/Polk County articles were printed, just one greater than the number of GF/Polk County stories published in the remaining five years (28 articles.)

Perhaps the most interesting twist to come from the County data was its connection to the Local category during the last two years of the study. *Grand Forks Herald* editor Steve Wegner, who joined the staff in mid-2013, noted that his aim for each *Herald* edition is to include 10-15 local stories. However, the Local totals didn't indicate this trend. However, if the Local and County category totals are added together in years 2014 and 2015, the average number of "local" articles in both years is 11.75 which meets Wegner's threshold. The notion behind what constitutes "local news" will be explored further in the analysis chapter.

### **Level 3: Regional Articles (ND, SD, MN, WI)**

In addition to the *Grand Forks Herald*, Forum Communications owns 32 other newspapers in North Dakota and the surrounding states of Minnesota, South Dakota and Wisconsin, (Forum Communications, 2016). This category (Regional) was established to investigate the level of regional news from this four-state area where Forum Communications newspapers are published. Not all of the stories in this category were from Forum Communications' newspapers, but most showed some affiliation to the parent company.

Gauging the number of articles in the Regional category proved to be especially important after the innovation of Forum News Service in 2013. Which level of *Grand Forks Herald* news would be most affected most by the creation of this regional news agency? Would the number of Regional level stories, many provided by Forum News Service, overtake the number of Grand Forks City level stories in the *Grand Forks Herald*? Would the Regional level articles outweigh the other wire service stories, signaling a more regional slant by Forum Communications through the reduction of national or international news? The answers to these questions will be suggested through statistics in the Regional, National and International sections to follow.

The Regional category proved to have the largest total number of articles during the ten-year period. During the first five years of the decade, the number of Regional stories totaled 338 with an average of nearly 68 stories per edition. This number diminished to 275 articles during the latter half of the decade, with an average of 55 stories per edition.

Another distinction of this category was its highly-fluctuating numbers from year to year. The number of Regional articles peaked at 90 (2010), then took a dramatic 55 percent drop to 41 articles just three years later (2013). Unlike the number of Grand Forks City news articles which dropped to their lowest point in 2011 before steadily rising again, the number of Regional level stories spiked during the middle of the decade (2010) then decreased in each of the following four years. While the numbers and percentages of Regional stories during the Forum News Service era are consistently lower than the totals at the beginning of the decade, both have also shown steady gains, climbing back to 45 stories (45 percent) in 2015.

It should be noted that the dip in Regional level stories did not necessarily trigger an increase in the number of Grand Forks City level stories in the *Grand Forks Herald*.

However, the gap between the number of Grand Forks City articles and Regional articles did narrow from 30 percent during the first three years of the decade to just 15 percent in 2015.

While this may be one effect of the newspaper's smaller size, it may be also be an early indicator of editorial decisions and attempts made to localize the *Grand Forks Herald's* overall news content.

#### **Level 4: National Articles (U.S. states other than ND, SD, MN and WI)**

This category (National) revealed the most startling decrease in the number of articles published about people, events or communities in the United States during the decade of examination. National news in the *Grand Forks Herald* peaked with 47 articles in 2006, falling steadily to just five stories amongst the four papers recorded in 2015.

In addition to the lower number of stories in the National category, the percentage of *Grand Forks Herald* space devoted to national news also decreased substantially from the beginning to the end of the decade. In 2006, 28 percent of the *Herald's* primary news sections were encompassed by national news, compared to just five percent in 2015. This trend was fueled in part by the shrinking amount of news space available in the smaller *Herald* editions, and an increase in the percentages of Grand Forks City and Regional level news found within the newspapers. Unlike the Regional level percentages which spiked in 2010, the National level didn't show this same jump in the middle of the decade. Conversely,

the percentage of National level news sank to just 16 percent in 2010, the lowest of the seven years prior to the Forum News Service era (2013 through 2015).

The comparison between Regional and National level story numbers signals its own trends. After the *Grand Forks Herald* published 29 national stories in 2013, this number dropped 83 percent to a low of five stories in 2015. Conversely, the number of regional articles increased from 41 stories to 45 stories during this same time period. While these four additional stories didn't mark a sizable increase in regional news during this time frame, it did foreshadow a turn from less national news to more regional news found within the *Grand Forks Herald's* pages.

#### **Level 5: International News**

The *Grand Forks Herald* published fewer international articles at the end of the decade, but the total number of stories in this category (International) also tallied fewer than most of the categories in the study. Most articles were shorter in length and appeared to serve more as “fillers” within the *Herald's* pages than substantive news stories. Only the County level showed consistently lower numbers of news articles.

There were no significant patterns of International level coverage throughout the decade. The most notable evidence to be gleaned from the International category was its relationship to the National category during the Forum News Service era (2013 through 2015). Like its national counterpart, the number of International level stories fell steeply (78 percent) during this three-year period. The highest total (18 articles) and lowest total (4

articles) of international articles were both recorded during the FNS era, indicating the inconsistency of international coverage during the ten-year period of study.

### **Comparisons between Grand Forks City and Non-City Categories**

The overall data suggests that while the *Grand Forks Herald's* page totals and article numbers have declined over the past ten years, the number of local Grand Forks City news articles has rebounded and continues to rise, slightly exceeding its previous total at the beginning of the decade.

Nonetheless, the Grand Forks City news level still continues to be outpaced by the other four non-City news levels. Most of the examination years showed approximately a 3-to-1 differential in the number of articles published in the four non-Grand Forks City categories (County, Regional, National and International) compared to those in the Grand Forks City category. However, this margin tightened throughout the decade. In 2006, there was an 85-story spread between the number of Grand Forks City articles (41) and non-City articles (126). By 2015, this difference had narrowed to just 17 stories. The most recent totals indicate a decided decrease in the number of *Grand Forks Herald* stories published about communities outside of Grand Forks at the end of the decade.

### **Column Inch and Source Origin Results (Data Set 2)**

The second set of results combined the number of column inches in each article with the origin of its source (e.g. Herald staff reporter, regional or national wire service). A column inch is defined as a unit of newspaper space that measures one column wide by one



inch high. Due to the variance in column widths, the number of column inches may vary per newspaper page.

These column-inch findings are worthy of attention because they look more closely at the journalist who wrote the story, rather than where the story was written. Based on previous research about the importance of a strong print media culture within a community, one could reason that a local Grand Forks story written by a *Grand Forks Herald* journalist who has community ties might be more likely to impact its residents than an international story supplied by the Associated Press. The examination of this data set begins with a closer look at the newspaper's total column inches, followed by an overview of the number of local *Grand Forks Herald* reporters and bylines during the decade, and finally, a breakdown of the four possible sources of origin. (Table 2.)

### **Comprehensive Column Inch Totals**

Table 2 clearly shows the rising and falling waves of total column inches throughout the decade. There is a 46 percent difference between the highest column-inch total (1507) in 2006 and the lowest column-inch total (836) in 2014. During this same year 56 fewer articles were published across the *Grand Forks Herald's* four quarterly editions, and the average number of *Herald* newspaper pages had decreased by 3.25 pages per edition. The correlation between these three variables – the number of pages, number of articles, and total column inches - suggests that the average length of the news articles themselves decreased as the newspaper's size diminished and fewer articles were printed. Using one example, the average number of column inches per story equaled 10.76 in the *Herald's* August 1, 2006 edition compared to 9.35 column inches per story in the August 5, 2014 edition.

**Table 2.** Column-Inch Totals - *Grand Forks Herald* City Articles (GFH-GF) & Non-City Articles (GFH-NoGF – FNS – OWS)

Year	Total A/B Section Pages	Total # Articles	Total Column Inches	Total GFH-GF Col. Inch	Total GFH-NoGF Col. Inch	Total FNS Col. In.	Total OWS Col. Inch	GFH-GF Col. Inch %	GFH-NoGF + OWS + FNS Col. Inch %
2006	50	167	1507	370 (25%)	224 (15%)	---	913 (61%)	370 (25%)	1137 (75%)
2007	48	155	1311	394 (30%)	292 (22%)	---	625 (48%)	394 (30%)	917 (70%)
2008	50	163	949	287 (30%)	106 (11%)	---	556 (59%)	287 (30%)	662 (70%)
2009	45	168	939	313 (33%)	126 (13%)	---	500 (53%)	313 (33%)	626 (67%)
2010	43	184	1015	255 (25%)	234 (23%)	---	526 (52%)	255 (25%)	760 (75%)
2011	43	155	1145	272 (24%)	208 (18%)	---	665 (58%)	272 (24%)	873 (76%)
2012	43	138	886	232 (26%)	117 (13%)	---	537 (61%)	232 (26%)	654 (74%)
2013 (FNS)	40	123	927	252 (27%)	83 (9%)	207 (22%)	385 (42%)	252 (27%)	675 (73%)
2014 (FNS)	36	111	836	306 (37%)	130 (16%)	224 (27%)	176 (21%)	306 (37%)	530 (63%)
2015 (FNS)	37	101	955	373 (39%)	76 (8%)	309 (32%)	197 (21%)	373 (39%)	582 (61%)

**Yellow** = Highest Column Total    **Blue** = Lowest Column Total    **Gray** = Forum News Service Era

Regarding the difference between the total column inches recorded before and after the origination of Forum News Service (2013), the column inches during the FNS era were three of the lowest figures recorded during the decade. Again, the question of local impact is raised. How did the lower number of available column inches affect which stories were

published in the *Grand Forks Herald*? Was Grand Forks city news, regional news, or national/international news most visible in the newspaper's pages? The following sections examine each of the four source categories in greater detail.

### ***Grand Forks Herald* Journalists and Local Bylines Totals**

Another variable used to gauge the level of localism in the *Grand Forks Herald* was a tally of the number of journalists whose names appeared in the bylines of the newspaper. (Table 3.) Each individual journalist was counted as one source, no matter how many articles they penned in a newspaper edition. The number of journalists counted in each of the four quarterly editions was totaled and averaged to gain a sense of how many reporters contributed to each edition.

One notable fact about the number of reporters is that the statistics proved to more compelling with the addition of shorter articles attributed to a non-specified news source known only as "Herald Staff Report" (HSR). These stories were written by someone in the *Herald's* news department, though they didn't warrant a byline. While the number of *Herald* journalists fluctuated only slightly throughout the decade, the number of *Herald* byline and HSR stories experienced a definite decline. During the first five years of study, 325 Byline/HSR stories were recorded (2006 through 2010) before dropping nearly 29 percent to 232 in the last half of the decade (2011 through 2015).

**Table 3.** Comparison between Article Totals, Column Inch Totals & *Grand Forks Herald* Local Writer Data

Year	Total A/B Section Pages	Avg. A/B Section Pages	Total # Articles	Total Column Inches	Average Local Writers	Total # Local Byline & HSR	Local Byline & HSR %	GF City Article %	County-Region-Nat'l. & Int'l. %
2006	50	12.5	167	1507	6.25	67	16.75	41 (25%)	126 (75%)
2007	48	12	155	1311	9	76	19	46 (30%)	109 (70%)
2008	50	12.5	163	949	8.25	58	14.50	41 (25%)	122 (75%)
2009	45	11.25	168	939	7.75	52	13	41 (24%)	127 (76%)
2010	43	10.75	184	1015	8	72	18	49 (27%)	135 (73%)
2011	43	10.75	155	1145	6.75	51	12.75	27 (17%)	128 (83%)
2012	43	10.75	138	886	6.75	43	10.75	30 (22%)	108 (78%)
2013 (FNS)	40	10	123	927	6.25	38	9.5	30 (24%)	93 (76%)
2014 (FNS)	36	9	111	836	8.25	53	13.25	39 (35%)	72 (65%)
2015 (FNS)	37	9.25	101	955	7	47	11.75	42 (42%)	59 (58%)

**Yellow** = Highest Column Total    **Blue** = Lowest Column Total    **Gray** = Forum News Service Era

Still, the yearly average number of *Grand Forks Herald* reporters working on each edition didn't decrease at the same rate despite the lower page totals and numbers of articles published. Although the company didn't publicly reveal its reasons for letting particular staff members go, this discrepancy may have been one factor which contributed to the recent

newsroom layoffs at the newspaper in 2016. The following section examines both *Grand Forks Herald* journalists and news agency sources, and the stories they cover.

### **Grand Forks Herald Journalist – Grand Forks Article (GFH-GF) Category**

The results from this first source category (GFH-GF) were determined by calculating the number of column inches written by *Grand Forks Herald* staff writers about a person or event occurring in Grand Forks. These articles were either identified by a specific journalist's byline or Herald Staff Report.

The GFH-GF source category may have arguably been the most important category in both of the data sets because it tapped both of the ideal elements for a community journalism story: a Grand Forks author and a local subject. Perhaps not surprisingly, the figures in this category often mirrored the results of the Grand Forks City article category from the geographic data set.

Similar to the results revealed in the Grand Forks City article category, the total number of GFH-GF column inches did not truly illustrate the change between the first and final years of the examination period. While 370 inches were devoted to articles written by *Grand Forks Herald* journalists about Grand Forks topics in 2006, this figure dipped in the middle of the decade, and then only increased to 373 inches in 2015.

Rather, it was the difference in column-inch percentages that uncovered the real story. As the number of *Herald* pages decreased, the percentage of GFH-GF column inches increased. Local GFH-GF inches comprised 25 percent of the four newspapers in 2006 which averaged 12.5 pages apiece. By 2015, GFH-GF inches had increased to 39 percent across the

four newspapers averaging 9.25 pages apiece suggesting that more space was being filled by Grand Forks-related news written by Grand Forks Herald writers.

The GFH-GF column inches also showed steady gains during the first three years of Forum News Service. After dropping from a high of 370 inches (2006) to a low of 272 inches (2011), the column inches rose consecutively from 252 to 306 (2013 through 2014), then peaking at 373 in 2015. These results also mirrored the trends found in the Grand Forks City article category.

#### **Grand Forks Herald Journalist – Non-Grand Forks Article (GFH-NoGF) Category**

This second category (GFH-NoGF) included those stories written by a *Grand Forks Herald* staff writer about a person, event or community located outside the city limits of Grand Forks, North Dakota. As the largest newspaper in the northern Red River Valley region (which includes northeastern North Dakota and northwestern Minnesota), it was evident that *Herald* journalists covered more regional news during the first years of the decade. In 2007, the number of GFH-NoGF column inches peaked at 292 column inches, making up 22 percent of the Grand Forks Herald's coverage. Still, according to the data, the total number of GFH-NoGF column inches was fewer than any of the other four source categories.

Although the numbers and percentages of GFH-NoGF column inches remained in flux during the first seven years of study, the greatest change occurred after the creation of Forum News Service in 2013. During this year the number of GFH-NoGF total column inches fell below the 100-inch mark to 83 column inches for the first time during the study.

The inches dipped even further to 76 column inches in 2015, meaning the amount of area news covered by *Grand Forks Herald* reporters comprised only eight percent of the newspaper's coverage. The implications of this change are seen by comparing the GFH-NoGF data to the Forum News Service data. Simultaneously the number of Forum News Service column inches rose considerably after its creation in 2013. The first year of FNS coverage started with 207 column inches (2013), advanced to 224 column inches (2014), then hit a high of 309 column inches (2015).

These results suggest that *Grand Forks Herald* journalists continued to cover news outside of Grand Forks, but to a lesser degree than they had before. Instead, the regional news once covered by local reporters in the northern Red River Valley (northeastern North Dakota and northwestern Minnesota) had been exchanged for regional news occurring in the communities where Forum Communications had a newspaper presence. These stories were gathered and distributed by Forum News Service.

### **Forum News Service (FNS) Category**

Forum News Service (FNS) relies on newspaper articles and broadcast transcripts supplied by the journalists of its 33 newspapers within the four-state region of North Dakota, South Dakota, Minnesota and Wisconsin, (Forum Communications, 2016). Conceivably, any of the stories written by a Forum Communications-based journalist could be repackaged as a FNS story for other newspapers. In the *Grand Forks Herald* this was strongly evidenced by the growing number of feature stories published from cities in outlying areas like Dickinson

and Williston (ND), and Alexandria, Bemidji, Brainerd and Duluth (MN). The newspapers in all of these cities are owned by Forum Communications.

To examine how Forum News Service affected the *Grand Forks Herald's* overall news content it was necessary to cross-analyze the data between the FNS variable and the Regional article variable from the previous geographic data set. The results were quite compelling. The research revealed that a smaller number of non-Grand Forks articles were taking up more column inches within the *Herald's* pages.

The results were evidenced by the dramatic plunge in the number of Regional articles, down nearly 30 percent from 63 articles to 45 articles by the end of the decade. Again, this decline was countered by a tremendous increase in FNS column inches during its first three years of service. The sharp rise in FNS column inches from 207 (2013) to 309 (2015) demonstrated how the *Grand Forks Herald's* smaller-page editions were experiencing an increase in larger column-inch feature stories from Forum News Service.

However, the FNS category was still outpaced by the local Grand Forks Source 1 category (GFH-GF) during its three-year comparison. Although the total number of FNS column inches overtook those in the other two outlying categories (GFH-NoGF and OWS), it fell short of overtaking the category devoted to Grand Forks news coverage by local journalists. In 2015, GFH-GF column inches totaled 373 while FNS topped at 309 column inches. Still, the column inches for these locally-written Grand Forks news stories made up just 39% of the total column inches in the *Grand Forks Herald's* 2015 sampling edition,



outnumbered by the 61% of news column inches gathered from regional, national and international sources.

### **Other Wire Service (OWS) Category**

Throughout the decade, the *Grand Forks Herald* relied on news agencies, also known as wire services, like Reuters and Associated Press to supply the majority of its national and international news. National articles were also gleaned from other larger metropolitan newspapers, like *Chicago Tribune*, *Dallas Morning News*, and *Miami Herald*. After the development of Forum News Service, the number of Associated Press stories dropped significantly. By 2014, articles from the widely-used news agency rarely appeared in the *Grand Forks Herald*, leaving New York-based Reuters as the main source of the newspaper's national and international news.

The Other Wire Service (OWS) category was established to include the column inches for any article published by a news agency other than Forum News Service. Compared to the other three column-inch categories, OWS sources showed the largest drop (79 percent) throughout the decade, falling from 913 column inches in 2006 to just 197 column inches in 2015. During Forum Communications' first year of ownership (2006), OWS stories comprised 61 percent of the total column inches in the newspaper sample. During the last two years of the study, the OWS percentage had plummeted to 21 percent. Both the GFH-GF and FNS categories fared better. GFH-GF column inches made up 39 percent of the newspaper in 2015, while FNS column inches totaled 32 percent.

The similarities between the OWS category and the National category from the other data set also deserve mention. Both OWS and National categories started the decade with higher numbers of news articles and column-inch percentages, yet both also showed a sizable decline by the end of the examination period. The International category which included exclusively OWS articles didn't start as strong, yet ended the decade with fewer stories (4 total) and fewer column inches (197 total). The comprehensive research for all news agency categories suggests the *Grand Forks Herald* opted to include more local and regional articles over national and international coverage by the end of the decade.

Despite the push for newspaper localism, it is naïve to undervalue the inclusion of national or international stories within local media sources like the *Grand Forks Herald*. Readers learn about their nation and world through a variety of mediums, including stories framed through a local view. When Al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden was killed on May 2, 2011, the Herald's May 3<sup>rd</sup> edition included eight stories comprising 114 column inches about his death and its implications. Ideally, outside stories like these will include a local angle which reiterates the relevance of the news to the reader. Of the eight stories printed on May 3<sup>rd</sup>, two included a local focus: Lisa Gulya's story titled "Teaching about bin Laden's Death" and Tom Denis' editorial about the raid itself.

Conversely, locally-written stories about local topics may be richer and more meaningful if readers can recognize their wider implications to the world at large. Depending on the subject matter and timing, most would agree that both breeds of articles serve a purpose within the local newspaper.

### **Comparisons between GFH-GF and Other Categories (GFH-NoGF – FNS - OWS)**

These results were very similar to those from the previous geographic data set. Most of the examination years showed nearly a 3:1 differential in column inches published within the three non-Grand Forks categories (GFH-NoGF, FNS, OWS) compared to the *Grand Forks Herald* Journalist – Grand Forks Article category (GFH-GF). Like the other data set, these margins also narrowed considerably after the creation of Forum News Service. During the final two years of study the ratio of GFH-GF column inches tightened to nearly 3:2. Grand Forks stories topped the 39 percentage mark across the 2015 samples.

While the percentage of column inches dedicated to Grand Forks stories written by *Grand Forks Herald* journalists increased throughout the decade, local news still remained in the minority. Despite its climb, 61 percent of the *Herald's* total news column inches were still devoted to people and events outside of the city in 2015. However, in addition to the column totals, the relevance of the non-local content needs to be considered in the study's overall analysis. This is included in the upcoming chapter.

## CHAPTER V

### ANALYSIS & DISCUSSION

This study aimed to add to the literature concerning media company ownership and its impact on community journalism. Few, if any, case studies have been conducted to show how a newspaper's purchase by a regional company has affected the level of local news content found within a city's newspaper. This boardroom-versus-newsroom comparison between corporate and editorial decisions is very timely. With the declining number of U.S. media conglomerates coupled with the increasing number of media buyouts, reorganizations, and consolidations, a local newspaper's ability to uphold the democratic values of a community may be challenged by new corporate policies or other disruptions to its service. Studies like this will continue to be relevant as societal and technological factors affect how newspaper readers get and receive their information in the years to come.

However, this particular study suggests that a shift in media ownership was not the sole cause of the content changes made within the pages of the *Grand Forks Herald*. Rather the Forum Communications' purchase was merely one of several correlated factors which contributed to the transformation of the newspaper. For example, one early indicator of the *Herald's* changing content may have been a change in leadership at the top of the newspaper's management chain. Since Korrie Wenzel began his duties as *Herald* publisher in April 2014, the average number of local articles and total column-inch percentages has

increased in every edition relative to the newspaper's overall content. This evidence suggests that Wenzel's influence may have been one factor which led to an uptick in the local content found within the newspaper. Several other factors and the impacts each one had on the *Grand Forks Herald's* readership will be considered and summarized within this chapter.

This summary truly begins by synthesizing the two data sets used during the study. From an analysis of 1465 articles and 10,470 column inches in the *Grand Forks Herald* between 2006 - 2015, these six proposals are presented: (1) The total number of Grand Forks Herald pages published in its two primary news sections has decreased from the beginning to the end of the decade; (2) As a result of this decline in the number of pages, the overall number of stories and the total column inches also decreased during the period of study; (3) Despite decreases in page numbers, article numbers, and column inches, the percentage of the newspaper space dedicated to Grand Forks city articles and regional articles showed increases during this time frame while the percentage of national and international stories decreased during this same period; (4) The creation of Forum News Service did not negatively impact the number of Grand Forks city articles in the *Grand Forks Herald* since the total of Grand Forks city articles and column inches actually increased during the first three years of Forum News Service; (5) The creation of Forum News Service negatively impacted the number of national and international stories supplied by other wire services during its first three years of service; and (6) The margin separating Grand Forks city news from non-city news has narrowed, but articles about people and locations outside of Grand Forks are still more prevalent in the *Grand Forks Herald*.

These proposals help to answer the three research questions posed in the introduction about the relationships between the *Grand Forks Herald's* local coverage, the newspaper's overall coverage and the creation of Forum News Service.

**RQ1: How has the creation of Forum News Service affected the overall news coverage in the *Grand Forks Herald* from 2013 through 2015?**

The evidence suggests that the development of Forum News Service has affected the number of national and international news stories in the *Grand Forks Herald* far more than it has impacted the level of local news. The column inches at the start of the decade which once contained a plethora of national and international wire stories have given way to a more even mix of Grand Forks city news and regional news from North Dakota, South Dakota, Minnesota, and Wisconsin.

Perhaps one reason that Forum News Service did not have a dramatic impact on the local news published during this time frame was because Forum Communications had already established a tradition of printing stories from other regional newspapers in the *Grand Forks Herald*. The difference starting in 2013 was that these articles were tagged with a "Forum News Service" byline instead of attributing each regional story to its separate newspaper. This uniform listing has helped to build the power of the Forum News Service brand. When the company sells a Forum News Service article it also extends Forum Communications' voice to other readers throughout the region. The benefits and detriments of Forum's powerful regional voice will be explored later in the chapter.

While the Forum News Service era may not have affected the number of local stories over the past three years, the relevance of the information presented in the FNS stories is

certainly a debatable issue. The past three years have seen an increase in the number of non-local Crime and non-local Business category stories compared to the previous seven years of the study.

It should also be noted that regional news should not be mistaken for local news. The lower numbers and percentages of Grand Forks city articles relative to the total news content clearly suggest that local stories comprise significantly less newspaper space than their non-city counterparts in both data sets.

**RQ2: Has there been a decline in local news coverage since Forum Communications purchased the *Grand Forks Herald* in 2006?**

This answer will begin by offering a brief overview of the numeric indicators behind this question. It will expand to reveal some other extenuating factors which may have affected the newspaper's local coverage since the Forum Communications' purchase.

Based strictly on the numbers, it appears that the page reductions in the *Grand Forks Herald's* primary news sections have contributed more to the overall decrease in local content than any other factor, including the addition of Forum News Service. The newspaper has been reduced by an astonishing 13 pages over the past decade. While the actual numbers of Grand Forks city stories and column inches have both increased during the first three years of the Forum News Service era, the aggregate totals of articles and column inches during this same three-year span were considerably lower than during the first three years of Forum Communications ownership (2006 through 2008). This signals that the amount of local content has increased relative to the size of the newspaper. Yet the decrease in available news

space has limited the number of stories of any kind from being published in the *Grand Forks Herald*.

Numbers aside, there are other factors which suggest differences in the actual and perceived notions of localism in Grand Forks' only daily paper. The first involves the perception of what is "local". Each day *Grand Forks Herald's* news editors make decisions about the amount of local news to include between the *Herald's* pages. These decisions are especially crucial for local readers as they directly influence the choices they make as Grand Forks citizens.

Based on the evidence, the *Herald* appears to have a broader geographic definition of "local news" than the definition used by many community journalism scholars, or even the local categories established for this study. Editor Steve Wegner's claim that his journalists produce 10 to 15 local stories each day is only accurate if the number of stories written by Grand Forks Herald journalists in the County or Regional categories are added to the tally. By the newspaper's definition, "local" articles include stories written about outlying areas located hours away from Grand Forks. This notion of "local" directly challenges Bill Reader's definition that community journalism is the "specific practice of gathering, packaging, and distributing news in predominantly small, distinct geographic markets with an emphasis on local news and information about community life," (Reader, 2012, p. 3). Since many rural communities operate their own newspapers, the real motive of this extended geographic coverage could easily be questioned.



The likely answer, however, is not a real mystery. By expanding this idea of “local coverage” to a wider scale, the *Herald’s* aim may be to remedy two of its most troubling issues: advertising sales and circulation. While all media companies strive to keep the interests of their news and advertising divisions separate, Forum Communications is a business, first and foremost. With print ad sales dropping nationwide, the *Herald* may use this longer “local news” reach to appeal to a wider base of advertisers. This appeal would be leveraged even further with the inclusion of articles from both sides of the state’s North Dakota-Minnesota border. For a larger retail business looking to promote itself within the *Herald’s* pages, the newspaper’s regional circulation numbers would likely be more enticing than the Grand Forks numbers alone. This allows the newspaper to justify its rates based on its larger regional audience. In terms of circulation, the *Grand Forks Herald* envelops more readers into its “imagined community” of northeastern North Dakota, and northwestern Minnesota by covering select news stories in these rural areas. The breadth of this type of news reporting may serve to increase the *Herald’s* overall readership.

There may be many overlapping reasons behind the *Grand Forks Herald’s* coverage of outlying areas. However, Benedict Anderson’s notion of “imagined communities” takes on a completely different meaning when a story written from outside the area has tangible consequences for Grand Forks residents. *Grand Forks Herald* articles about the North Dakota state legislature fall into this category. As previously mentioned, Forum Communications staffs reporters at its state capitol bureaus in Bismarck, North Dakota and St. Paul, Minnesota for the purpose of reporting legislative news, and each local resident is affected when a new state bill is signed into law. This makes the story relevant to Grand

Forks readers and epitomizes how community journalism practices serve the public interest, even when the articles are written from afar.

Publisher Korrie Wenzel has only led the Herald through one North Dakota legislative session (2015) during his tenure. Yet, the news space devoted to the state's legislative proceedings dropped to its lowest point in a decade last year with just four stories (44 total column inches) published during the sampling period. In the previous four sessions (2007, 2009, 2011 and 2013), the column inches devoted to the North Dakota state legislative news hadn't dropped below five stories (50 total column inches), peaking in 2007 with 10 stories (129 total column inches) recorded during this same examination period. Conversely, the number of stories about the 2015 Minnesota state legislature rose to five stories (57 total column inches), its highest level since 2007's peak of six stories (76 total column inches) recorded during the sampling period. Time will tell if these latest numbers develop into real trends during next year's North Dakota and Minnesota sessions.

While the numbers indicate that local news is making a comeback within the pages of the *Grand Forks Herald*, the evidence is not as black and white as it appears. The relevance of the news presented to the local reader must be considered. Even the word "local" is more complex when its definitions are contrasted between newspaper practitioners and scholars. However, while corporate policies may have enormous influence over how the local newspaper is run, the news philosophies of the *Grand Forks Herald's* editorial staff might be the greatest determinants in whether the newspaper fulfills its community journalism mission to serve the citizens of Grand Forks.

**RQ3: If local news coverage has been affected, can this be attributed directly to media ownership?**

Based on the evidence presented here, there is a correlation between media ownership and the changes made to the *Grand Forks Herald's* local news coverage, but ownership should not be pinned as the sole cause for these changes. Rather, ownership decisions combined with other economic and societal pressures appear to have altered the company's mission over the past decade. Several examples of these factors and how they may affect local readership follow.

Print newspapers across the nation have experienced downslides in advertising leading to cutbacks in personnel and other resources. Forum Communications is no different. The company's choice to cut experienced *Grand Forks Herald* journalists has contributed to the loss of local news on several levels. By eliminating newsroom staff positions, the remaining *Herald* journalists may miss an important city story, or find it necessary to choose between covering two community events due to understaffing. Research cited in the earlier literature review indicates that satisfaction levels amongst newsroom "survivors" are also generally lower following a round of newspaper layoffs, leading to a loss in morale and a potential loss of quality at the newspaper.

Second, according to its new publisher, the increase in *Grand Forks Herald* online users has added to its print circulation concerns. This has prompted the reduction of newspaper pages and the company's aspirations to build up its digital distribution. This move has the prospect of affecting *Grand Forks Herald* readers in two ways. By cutting print pages the reader may be stripped of local articles which encourage civic engagement, like

volunteering for a community project, or taking action at a local school board meeting. Because the *Herald's* online version or mobile application isn't as complete as its print edition, online readers may miss local stories of relevance.

Finally, the change in local media ownership has arguably challenged the diversity of media voices in Grand Forks. When the Knight-Ridder/McClatchy sold the *Grand Forks Herald* to Forum Communications, the power structure of traditional media in the community underwent a permanent change. The monopoly created by the singular ownership of Grand Forks' only broadsheet newspaper and television station may have also limited the scope of the topics and opinions received by Grand Forks residents. This proposition provokes two larger questions: who now speaks for the community, and how have other community voices been compromised?

Based on the ideas shared earlier in this paper, three points will be included in this discussion. First, the diversity issues created in the wake of the 2006 purchase have recently been paired with concerns about the *Herald's* shrinking number of professional journalists. With fewer reporters available, residents have fewer sources they can trust for articles containing vital community information or stories about unique individuals or groups within the city. Second, Forum Communications' lack of company-sponsored online discussion forums may limit the feedback from citizens who wish to take part in meaningful community discussions. While Forum Communications had made these types of public forums available in the past, they are now only available through third-party websites which require separate memberships to join. Finally, Forum Communications' push towards digital distribution may endanger those who rely on the print editions of the newspaper as a community lifeline.

Previously-cited studies have noted how common it is for readers to discuss the information they've read in the newspaper with others. While restructuring or diminishing the newspaper's print resources may be a cost-effective measure for the company, these moves may not be ideal for all.

Some decisions made by Forum Communications have undoubtedly contributed to the overall growth of its regional brand, like the creation of Forum News Service or the purchase of additional properties. However, it's easy to see how other company decisions may negatively affect the *Grand Forks Herald's* local readership. When resources are curtailed and voices are silenced, these choices may hamper genuine efforts to improve the Grand Forks community.

### **Future Research**

While this study doesn't claim to be extensive in its methods for breaking down the elements of a local newspaper, the research methods used here could easily be adapted for a similar newspaper project, and the variables could be tailored in a variety of ways. Due to time and technology limitations, only a small number of newspapers were represented within this research paper. The number of newspapers could certainly be expanded to offer a more comprehensive look at the material. Also, instead of simply estimating the number of column inches per story, digital technology could be used to track each story's word count which would lead to better accuracy in the column inch tabulations. Finally, this study did not explore the newspaper's content to its full extent. A researcher who chose to look more closely at the articles themselves would add to the research behind this topic.

## Conclusion

Protecting economic capital is essential to any newspaper's business interests, but encouraging Coleman and Putnam's ideals of social capital by receiving and sharing information is arguably more important to its readership. In *Who owns the press?*, author Mary Pardue suggested that a family-owned news company needs to value the quality of its news product as much as it guards its bottom line. "Balance good journalism with good business," she wrote. "Both are equally important, and you don't have to choose one over the other," she wrote, (2010, p. 156).

For local newspaper readers, Forum Communication's choice to deplete its local resources may have long-lasting effects, some of which may never fully be recognized. As the staff decreases, each article that goes unwritten leaves a small informational void within the community. As the news hole shrinks, we may never know which local stories were left untold. As this study has attempted to show, a strong local newspaper fueled by the ideals of community journalism is crucial to making a community work.

## APPENDICES





## Appendix B: *Grand Forks Herald* News Topic Codes

**AC** = Accident  
**AG** = Agriculture  
**BZ** = Business  
**CE** = Community Event  
**CR** = Crime  
**ED** = Education  
**EN** = Entertainment  
**EV** = Environment  
**FO** = Feature (Other)  
**FP** = Feature (Person)  
**HL** = Health  
**HO** = Housing

**MI** = Military  
**OP** = Opinion/Editorial  
**PS** = Public Safety  
**UN** = Uncategorized  
**W** = Weather  
  
**GFGO** = Grand Forks City Government  
**NDGO** = State Government (ND)  
**MNGO** = State Government (MN)

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