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There is a discount of 20 percent on orders of 20 or more. Orders from outside the U.S. must be paid in U.S. funds with international money orders or checks drawn on U.S. banks. Outside the U.S., add $2.50 per copy for handling. Questions? Call ASNE, 703/453-1122.

This handbook is also on the internet: http://www.asne.org/ iojw/report99/report/localnews.htm
FOREWORD

Newspaper editors across the country are struggling to maintain, or restore, the suddenly fragile relationship of mutual need and trust we have shared with our neighbors for more than two centuries.

As lifestyles evolve and media choices proliferate, we editors are finding that our newspapers no longer are an essential daily ritual for many people but rather, increasingly, an alternative information source, among many.

Circulation and readership have declined, slowly but certainly, for a generation.

We still edit with joy and optimism and with high ideals and earnestness of purpose, and our newspapers are better than ever. We continue to be a powerful and positive force across American society, in our traditional democratic roles and some new ones.

But if we are to remain effective and vital, we must do more, to change ourselves and to become more relevant to those who think that they are "too busy" to read journalism.

They have taken time to tell us, in survey after survey, nationally and locally, that their greatest strength and greatest opportunity is local news. They quickly add, however, that newspapers' local news coverage, while good, isn't good enough to make that much difference in their lives.

What is local news? We all, readers and journalists alike, think we know it when we see it. But our working definitions tend to be limited to instinct, experience and tradition, as well as democratic responsibility and reader feedback. Most of what we are doing is likely on target, but this work asks whether we are doing all of it right and whether we can't do more.

We certainly can be more thoughtful and analyzed about our news judgments and standards. One editor involved in this project said it caused her to take time to reevaluate her newspaper's coverage: "A lot of the time, you're on autopilot. Who has time to think?"

This handbook assumes that, as a profession, we have matured enough to seek, and accept, advice from some of our natural allies, other champions of our communities. Here, they are the scholars who have studied citizenship and community for most of this century (the oldest reference in this book is from 1926, or if you count Tocqueville, 1835). While we have been reporting what goes on in our towns, they have been researching and thinking about why. Perhaps their angle of view will inform ours.

It may be our nature to focus on the circulation numbers that threaten us, but please keep in mind that we are building on great strength. Our national

readership study last year found that 84 percent of American adults still read a newspaper at least once a week, and most of them regularly. It's the essentiality, the daftness that is falling.

In the pages that follow, you will find general concepts, hard research and good ideas; some from other newspapers, many from other disciplines. If at some point you find yourself in too familiar territory, skip on. There is much here for us to learn.

Please listen as your neighbors talk, through scholars and researchers, about what is essential to them — their lives and their communities. It is there that we can build our journalism.

Frank Denton
Chair
ASNE Readership Committee

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many people dedicated to newspapers and communities contributed to this work:
— The committee members who volunteered to write chapters and take on the challenge of conveying theory, research and experiences into practical advice. Other committee members who offered ideas and support.
— John R. Bartolomeo, managing partner, and Mark Smith, vice president, of Clark, Marlinee and Bartolomeo, who conducted the national survey of editors and publishers.
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— Laura Sparks, graphics editor of the Wisconsin State Journal, who designed and produced this handbook.
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Frank Denton
CHAPTER 1

IS NEWS JUST
"WHAT WE SAY IT IS?"

Frank Denton
Wisconsin State Journal

With the magic of instant communication, with the case of modern mobility, with our vast range of choices, Americans can live anywhere, go anywhere else quickly and exercise freedoms beyond all previous human experience.

But we still live on a human scale, among other people close to us and in communities that are meaningful to us. We socialize, shop, play, learn and seek safety, security and support within a world we ourselves construct from the myriad possibilities of daily life, mostly those we can see, touch and experience directly.

It is a world on a human scale that can be well served, even created in part, by the local daily newspaper.

When our readers and potential readers tell us, over and over, that they want more, and more-local, local news, they are saying they want information and help to live better, they want to know what is going on around them and they want to be part of a community.

Readership studies at all levels have been telling us that for years.

In 1987, an ASNE report titled Leave Us and Leave Us: New Subscribers One Year Later found that the primary reason people subscribed was local news, cited by 63 percent. A year later, "Subscribers overwhelmingly gave excellent or good ratings to their newspaper's coverage of specific content areas. Yet they were most negative about coverage of their own community or neighborhood." Among subscribers to the larger newspaper, 41 percent said coverage of community and neighborhood news was "not good" or "poor," compared to 22 percent for the medium and 28 percent for the smaller newspapers.

The Next Newspapers, a 1988 report of the ASNE Future of Newspapers Committee, warned that the top threat to newspapers, even more than a decline in the reading habit, was "losing touch with your local market."

In 1991, a national readership study, for an ASNE report named Keys to Our
IS NEWS JUST "WHAT WE SAY IT IS?"  

Surely, found that, among 33 news topics, the top two — by far — were "your city or town" and "your neighborhood."

"It's clear to us that local news is the franchise," Washington Post polling director Richard Morin said after a 1996 survey for the Newspaper Association of America. "Perhaps more than ever, readers primarily use the newspaper as a source for what's going on in their communities."

The most recent reinforcement is from the 1998 national media-usage study sponsored by ASNE and NAA (published in reports titled Leveraging Newspaper Assets and So Many Choices, So Little Time, respectively) found that the "top tier news interests" of Americans included "news about your local community/neighborhood" (76 percent rated extremely or very interesting) and "news and information that helps your local community to deal with problems" (71 percent).  

"Newspapers score far higher than any other medium for community/neighborhood coverage and for providing news/information that helps communities solve problems," the report said. "Even so, newspapers' scores fall far below people's expectations for local coverage."

They are telling us, again, that they want more and better local, and intensely local, news, and they want us to be constructive parts of the community.

Message received, loud and clear.

So, in the face of such strong consumer demand for more and better local news, how have America's newspapers responded? Furthermore, given that the demand clearly is not being met, what more must we do?

Those were the two major questions that inspired an ASNE survey of editors and publishers of daily newspapers in December and January of 1998-99.

The researchers said their "most striking finding" was very strong agreement between the publishers and editors on the issues surrounding local news.

First, they agreed that their newspapers do a good job of covering local and community news, but then they also said that their future depends on significantly improving that coverage.

Asked why they aren't making more improvements, the publishers and editors agreed the barriers are not in the market or the newsroom or the competition, but rather in their newspapers' commitment to invest — especially in people and paper.

HOW WELL ARE YOU DOING?

"Taking into account the needs and expectations of your market," the respondents were asked, how well do you personally believe your paper covers eight categories of news and features? With minor variations, editors and publishers strongly agreed on the rank order and the ratings (on a five-point scale from "excellent" to "poor"):  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Editors</th>
<th>Publishers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>City or metro news</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>4.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community or local-local news</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>4.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sports</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>4.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Features</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regional or state news</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business news</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National news</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International news</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

WHAT MUST YOU DO BETTER?

"Looking forward," the survey asked, "how important do you think it is to the future success of your newspaper to significantly increase the resources that you allocate to coverage" of the same eight areas?

Among the publishers, 92 percent gave a 4 or 5 (on the five-point scale) to "community or local-local news," and 85 percent rated "city or metro" news that high. Among editors, 89 percent awarded 4 or 5 to both categories. Whether a paper zones local coverage had little effect on the ratings. Again, the rankings agreed.

Here are the average ratings (with 5 as extremely important and 1 as not at all important) and the percentages of respondents who gave a rating of 5 or 4 to each type of news.
IS NEWS JUST "WHAT WE SAY IT IS?"

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>category</th>
<th>EDITORS</th>
<th>PUBLISHERS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Community or local-local news</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City or metro news</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>4.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business news</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sports</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Features</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regional or state news</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National news</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International news</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

WHY AREN'T YOU IMPROVING LOCAL NEWS MORE?

This most important news also, unfortunately, is the most expensive news to gather and publish. Asked to identify the barriers to improving local and local-local coverage at their newspapers, editors and publishers alike pointed to one big issue: resources.

First, the question was open-ended, without suggestions of types of barriers. Seventy-nine percent of editors and 80 percent of publishers said the major barrier at their newspapers is staff, largely the number of reporters, but also turnover, experience, training and community knowledge. Twenty-one percent of editors and 17 percent of publishers cited news hole constraints.

Other open-ended responses pointed to resources or financial constraints generally, presumably also involving staff and newshole. (The percentages sum to more than 100 because some respondents named multiple barriers.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>category</th>
<th>EDITORS</th>
<th>PUBLISHERS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reporters/staff</td>
<td>79%</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Space/newshole</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Money/financial reasons</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Too few resources</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geography/geography too large</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of time</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defining local news</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Then, the editors and publishers were provided a list of barriers and asked to indicate which applied to their newspapers.

By far, "the investment in more people" was the main barrier, rated a 5 or 4 by 80 percent of editors and 66 percent of publishers. The second biggest bar-

IS NEWS JUST "WHAT WE SAY IT IS?"

rier was "the cost of newsmarket," cited by 35 percent and 28 percent, respectively.

Neither group expressed much doubt that investing in local news would pay off, and publishers were even more confident than editors. Only 25 percent of publishers and 29 percent of editors said "uncertain return on investment" is a major barrier at their newspaper.

Publishers as well as editors and publishers saw advertising or business-side support as more of a barrier than negative newsroom attitudes about local news.

Here are the average ratings (with 5 as a major barrier and 1 as no barrier at all) and the percentages of respondents who gave a rating of 5 or 4 to the barrier:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>category</th>
<th>EDITORS</th>
<th>PUBLISHERS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The investment in more people</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The cost of newsmarket</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting advertising/business-side support</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uncertain return on investment</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Production problems/limitations</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of understanding/research on what is needed</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative newsroom attitudes about this type of news</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The market is not easily defined into separate communities</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entrenched local news competition (dailies or weeklies)</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It must be noted that the barriers to improving local news, in both the open- and closed-ended questions, were heavily internal, within our organizations. Market, lifestyle or competitive factors were not seen as major problems.

As interesting, about one-fifth of editors and publishers admitted that they do not know what to do about local news, because they lack understanding or research on what is needed.

This uncertainty is not lost on readers, who continue to tell us they are disatisfied with our traditional conceptions of local news.

That 1996 Washington Post survey found that, among regular newspaper buyers, 39% said their local newspapers were only fairly useful in helping them deal with their daily lives. 28 percent didn't find their local papers very effec-
IS NEWS JUST "WHAT WE SAY IT IS?"

tive, 16 percent found them not at all helpful, and 15 percent said their newspapers are effective in addressing their workday concerns.

In the 1998 media-usage study, readers said they are performing well beyond their ratings of importance in the two categories that have been the mainstays of traditional local coverage—crime and local government and political news.

In two less traditional but, according to readers, more important areas, however, we are well short of what they say they need and want. While 76 percent said "news about your local community/neighborhood" is extremely or very important, 64 percent gave newspapers high marks.

It's worse for "news and information that helps your local community to deal with problems." Seventy-four percent had high interest, but only 55 percent rated us as excellent or very good.

"In our reader studies," researcher John Bartolomeo said, "we generally observe much more of a gap for local-local coverage between what readers want and what they feel they get. For regional/state news, we generally observe a better fit between reader expectations and perceived delivery."

And the most important measure is overall readership. If we were meeting readers' needs for news and information relevant to their lives, would they be drifting away from us, even as newspapers continue to improve, at least by our own standards?

This seeming disconnection between reader needs and newspaper tradition and practice raises an intriguing question that should be asked even before the issues of people and paper can be argued persuasively:

What is local news?

The first instinct is to answer, "Obviously, it's news that happens here." But most of our efforts to deepen and enrich that simple definition dealt almost exclusively with considerations of the "here" rather than "news." That is, when newsrooms plan and organize their local news coverage, they tend to think most about geography and, secondarily, about beats.

And when editors design beat structures, we allocate coverage first to traditionally newsworthy institutions (local government, police and courts, schools), then to geographies (suburbs, region) and then to evolving areas of clear interest or importance (environment, technology, health care, science).

A more thoughtful editor might look to industry or academic research or theory, but would be disappointed. A search of association reports, books on news and the academic literature finds little to nothing on defining local news, reinforcing the old newssroom joke: "News is what we say it is."

IS NEWS JUST "WHAT WE SAY IT IS?"

For example, in a 1981 article in the Newspaper Research Journal, promisingly titled "Defining Local News," Maxwell E. McCombs and James B. Winter conclude that local news may be defined by geography, by "specific news topics" or by some combination:

... (The entire set of news topics (government, crime, sports, schools, obituaries, etc.) originating in the local area, with the geographic boundary for what is local set in terms of a city or county boundary or the limits of a metropolitan area.)

McCombs and Winter defined "news topics" by asking the managing editor of the local paper where they did their study. His or her list predictably consisted of schools, local governments, obituaries, school sports, crime and "other news about people and events" in the local geographies. This is consistent with most reader research. The newspaper or the researchers supply the topics for which interest is to be measured.

Thus, our working definitions of local news tend to be newsroom-driven—how we see them and their interests—rather than reader-based—what real people might need and want to know.

This handbook proposes a different way of defining local news. It begins not with newspaper traditions nor with community institutions, but rather with people—why they live in communities and what they need and want from their communities. It will attempt to define local news the way real people do.

HOW EDITORS ARE TRYING TO UNDERSTAND LOCAL NEWS

The national survey showed that editors are struggling with issues surrounding defining, or at least understanding, local news.

Fifty-nine percent of the editors said they have "gone through any process to define the meaning of local news in your market beyond geographic coverage areas." Interestingly, of the editors who rate their local coverage as less than good, 71 percent said they have tried to redefine local news. Also, 72 percent of those who zone say they have sought redefinition, compared to 50 percent of those who do not, implying that the rethinking was based on geography.

The 319 editors who said they have redefined their coverage then Continued...
were asked in an open-ended question to describe their process. Their responses fell into two general categories: 55% mentioned changes in coverage, such as beat reevaluations, and 50% mentioned reader research of various types.

Here is what they said they have done, with the percentages of the 198 who have done something:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Projects</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reader research projects</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More attention, expanded local coverage</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reader panels or focus groups</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Covered non-local issues that have local impact</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Added or improved zoning</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restructured beats</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tried to focus more on issues</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improved education coverage</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newsroom meetings or discussions</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In-depth coverage</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wrote a mission statement</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organized reader call-ins</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

WHAT NEWSPAPERS ARE DOING TO TIE INTO THEIR COMMUNITIES
Editors and publishers were asked about cultural and external activities designed to improve local news coverage. Here are the average ratings of respondents' papers own performance (with 4 as excellent and 1 as poor) and the percentages of respondents who gave high ratings (5 of 4 on a scale of 5) to general importance:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>IMPORTANCE</th>
<th>RATING OF OWN PAPER</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Rated 4 or 5)</td>
<td>(On a scale of 4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Editorial culture truly supportive of local news</td>
<td>94%</td>
<td>95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approach local coverage not just editorial from &quot;total newspaper,&quot;</td>
<td>79%</td>
<td>91%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Columns, articles, photos from readers</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paper-sponsored local events</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>74%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reader research on local coverage</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>79%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reader advisory board</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Require reporters to live in areas they cover</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local satellite offices</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff serve on local boards</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Continued...
Editors also were asked if they have "any local news beats that you think are unusual or innovative." Thirty-two percent answered yes, including 54 percent from newspapers of 50,000-100,000 circulation and 49 percent from larger papers.

What kind of beats? The substantial categories of answers, with the percentage of the 104 editors who claimed unusual or innovative beats:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Neighbors/neighborhoods</th>
<th>16%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Religion/faith/spirituality</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business/economics</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environment</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Growth/development</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health/health care</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recreation</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local history/nostalgia</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kids/youth</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethics/values</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other miscellaneous beats</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Here are some of the beats mentioned as innovative:

- Economics of local arts
- Diversified industrial growth
- High tech business
- Retail business (e-tail)
- Working
- "Back Fencer"
- PCE beat
- Department of energy
- Toxic waste
- Infrastructure
- Tourism
- Social issues

- Non-profit agencies
- Good news beat
- "Vision"
- Pop culture/modem living
- Issues and answers
- Casino industry
- Public life
- Impact of major traffic corridor
- Civil journalism, public involvement
- Transportation
- Local cultures column
- Uniquely Utah
- Indian affairs
- Gender
- Retirement communities
- Bayer's Edge
- Pop culture
- Computer technology
- Community
- The undercovered (women, elderly, etc.)

References

CHAPTER 2

THE POWER OF LOCAL NEWS

Frank Denton
Wisconsin State Journal

Local is derived from the Latin word locus, which means place, and it is fair to say that most of what people care about are the events, people, and institutions that touch their lives most directly in their place in the world.

In that place, there are the obvious, self-serving or utilitarian aspects of life — economic opportunities, public services, taxes, shopping, entertainment. But they, and other human needs, occur or exist in a more holistic human experience.

Even amid the technological transformation that seems to almost define contemporary Americans, one of the fundamental themes of the 20th century has been a "quest for community," according to the sociologist Robert A. Nisbet. All the wonders of contemporary society cannot provide the individual a sense of security and fulfillment, he maintained, because the scale is too large.

The modern world's abundant offerings of democracy, education, production and communication are too often only on a mass scale, denying the individual the security and belongingness that are essential to a sense of well being.

"The state," Nisbet wrote, "can enlist popular enthusiasm, can conduct crusades, can mobilize on behalf of great causes, such as wars, but as a regular and normal means of meeting human needs for recognition, fellowship, security, and membership, it is inadequate."[7]

So people seek community. When asked about their ideal residence, most Americans say they prefer to live in a small community within commuting distance of a large city, thereby having the advantages of both, the resources of the big city but the community of the small one.

What is a community? Essentially, it is the basic instinct or need of human beings to cluster for mutual benefit. Baker Brownell defined community as "the cooperative fullness of action, the sense of belonging, the face-to-face
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association with people well known."

But the American experience goes beyond that. Alexis de Tocqueville, after his visit to America in 1831, wrote that what he found was that European settlers had created a society different from what they had known before. These were communities formed around an unusual social invention, small groups of ordinary citizens coming together to form organizations that solve common problems.

Indeed, compared to other countries, the American system of local control of many government functions—such as schools and land-use—is highly unusual. In this country, social action tends to begin at the local level.

In addition to the obvious community definition of being a physical place and a form of social organization, Dennis P. Popkin suggested that a community typically is formed around "a sharing of common values, beliefs and goals."

Furthermore, as a cultural variable, community sentiment also involves norms, that is, community members have a set of shared behavioral expectations to which they supposedly conform. As a psychological concept, community sentiment encompasses many things, including a feeling of "we-ness." Presumably, many community members think of each other as "we" and of other persons as "they."

It has also been argued that whatever psychological security and stability the individual enjoys comes to him by virtue of his community membership. Perhaps in an era in which family names mean little and in which society is extremely complex, the only way that an individual can place himself in the larger scheme of things is by claiming his identity from his home community.

The nature and degree of this relationship between an individual and his or her community can be dissected and measured. Social psychologists have researched what they call "psychological sense of community," defined as feelings of belonging, being connected and sharing values and influence. The characteristics of this sense of community are among the keys to journalism aimed at community-building.

COMMUNITY IN THE CITY

Early in the 20th century, some sociologists were warning of the death of traditional communities as cities grew larger and larger.

But the "Chicago school" of sociologists maintained that the presence of masses of people did not necessarily destroy community life on a smaller scale. They put forth the concept of "natural areas," the idea that communities tend to emerge from natural factors, including landscape features and, more impor-
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and news media use, wrote that transportation and communication technologies have "greatly expanded the life space of the average person," so people often live in one community but work in another, dividing their attention.

Furthermore, Stamm continued, "In many urban areas, it is no longer accurate to think of the community as having a single center. As previously dis- tinct communities have grown together, and shopping centers and major busi- nesses have moved to the suburbs, a multi-center arrangement has resulted. (Further) fragmentation of communities has come with advanced industrialization. With the growth of centralized shopping centers and of various com- plexes for professional service, service institutions have also been large- ly separated from places of residence. The residential community that has retained its own local school is nowadays in the minority."Stamm emphasizes that this loss of community cohesiveness "represents more than local access to services, but also the loss of an important basis for community organization. For example, the (local) grocery store was once a place where neighbors regularly met. Store owners and clerks were in a position to dispense neighborhood news and gossip, and to organize neighbor-hood activities. It seems that even government has abandoned the residential community. The residential community is only gratuitously represented in the political structure through the precinct system. City hall, the center of local power, is downtown, geographically removed from the residential areas."

This new governmental structure in metro areas differs greatly between the central city and the suburbs. "In the suburbs, the structure of local government is horizontal and diffuse - a maze of small governmental units," Stamm wrote. "Most of the suburbs' problems cannot be solved through this municipal structure. They cannot approach such problems as area-wide traffic control, inadequate drainage and sewerage or economic development and planning. The central city, by contrast, houses a vertical organizational structure orchestrated by a mayor who often rises above party politics, as he/she is forced to give prime consideration to the common interest of the city as a whole."Stamm argues that these complex, multi-governmental political and bureaucratic structures cut across or ignore the natural communities and frustrate people's efforts to make

Local newspaper coverage also has been stymied by these entangled govern- ments and by the diversity and fragmentation of the metropolitan audience. Stamm found "scarcely any solid research evidence which distinguishes the role of the daily press from that of the community press. Just a lingering sus- picion that the daily press is too large and remote to play a significant role in local communities." The Chicago example was a precursor to some newspaper zoning notions, trying to create artificial communities out of large, diverse areas.

So people's lives and relationships with their communities have become vastly more complicated, and as our circulation trends indicate, newspapers - whose major competitive advantage may be their role in tying people to their communities - have not kept up.

But no other news medium or other institution, including government, has stepped up to fill the crucial need for community leadership, leaving a rich opportunity. The daily newspaper, in its written and - perhaps in the future - its digital forms, may be unique in its potential for facilitating a more rele- vant democracy, helping build community and, in diverse dimensions, enabling people to live better in their daily lives and their communities.

JOURNALISM TO HELP PEOPLE BUILD COMMUNITY

Contemporary Americans are torn between their strong individualism and self-interest and their need for community, sociologist Robert N. Bellah and others wrote in their influential book, *Habits of the Heart.* Perhaps the crucial change in American life has been that we have moved from the local life of the nineteenth century - in which economic and social relationships were visible and, however imperfectly, morally interpreted as parts of a larger common life - to a society vastly more interrelated and integrated economically, technically and functionally. Yet this is a society in which the individual can only rarely and with difficulty understand himself and his activities as interrelated in morally meaningful ways with those of other, different Americans.

Though urban Americans still get involved in an astounding variety of voluntary associations, the associative life of the modern metropolis does not generate the kinds of second languages of social responsibility and practices of commitment to the public good that we saw in the associative life of the 'strong and independent township.' The metropolitan world is one in which the demands of work, family and community are sharply separated and often contradictory, a world of diverse, often hostile groups, inter-
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dependent in ways too complex for any individual to comprehend.15 Bellah and his co-authors single out television as unusually encouraging community, not just by isolating people but also by dwelling on the dark side of human nature, casting doubt on everything. "Most people turn out to be unreliable and double-dealing. Where strong commitments are portrayed, as in police dramas, they are only between buddies, and the enacting atmosphere, even within the police force, is one of mistrust and suspicion."16

Yet Americans, of course, remain in great command of their lives and their relationships. One consequence of the increased size and complexity of the larger community is that the individual has gained great personal freedom: "For the most part local ties are not obligatory; they are open to choice," Stamm wrote. "Local ties are at a small degree left to the initiative of the individual. It is up to the individual, for example, whether he will belong to a religious community, and what importance that community will have alongside other institutions that are a part of his life."17

In their book, Creating Community Anywhere, Carolyn Shaffer and Kristin Amundsen point to the demise of old-style communities, "defined primarily by blood ties, place and necessity," and the development of new models of community based on choice, shared values and lifestyles.18 Inner-city neighborhoods may differ. They may be formed less by common characteristics of their residents and more by physical boundaries, such as freeways and railroads. They have been called "defended communities," but they too can become effective communities when residents come together to solve common problems.19

Whether community becomes possible because of shared values and lifestyle choices or problem-solving, newspapers have the opportunity to help people form the communities they need and want. True democracy has been described as diverse groups joining together actively to create communities, with common goals and interests, and an absolutely essential element is communication.20 If this process of community involves more than a relatively few people in a neighborhood, the coming together — the recognition of a problem or opportunity and the process of agreeing on action — requires a medium of information, communication, ideas and encouragement. Government and other organizations cannot do it, Stamm wrote, because their communication mechanisms are "much distrusted and abused...subject to manipulation by governmental bureaucracy, which often uses them to produce the appearance of public consent..."21

"The New England town meeting is often held up as a fitting example, but this mechanism is not practical in most communities," he wrote. "What is needed is not a mechanism by which we agree to agree, but a means of think-

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ing together, of making productive use of a plurality of ideas. In this context, it seems particularly fortunate that the content of local newspapers reflects largely the views of a governmental elite rather than those of citizens acting through local voluntary associations."22

FACE-TO-FACE DEMOCRACY

Neighborhoods, or small communities, are key to working democracy because they offer the possibility of face-to-face interaction, "which lies at the heart of participatory democracy."23

In a book called Size and Democracy, Dahl and Tufto concluded that political participation and sense of effectiveness among citizens are directly related to the size of their communities. While larger political jurisdictions (federal, state, metro) may be necessary to handle larger needs (defense, highways, universities, welfare systems), they also seem to contribute to feelings of political powerlessness among people. "By virtue of their greater accessibility and understandability," Dahl and Tufto wrote, "local governments nurture participation and heighten the citizen's sense of effectiveness."24

So it is not surprising that research has found that suburban residents are more interested than urban residents in "integrative" news, that is, news which emphasizes common community values and reports of the work of local voluntary organizations.25

Indeed, while perceptions of civic apathy persist, especially in political participation in the most visible state and federal elections, survey after survey shows that Americans continue to involve themselves in their local communities. For just one example, a survey of community involvement in Philadelphia conducted by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press found that that 92 percent of those surveyed were civically involved. 83 percent in two or more activities in the past year. More than half of them said they had joined or contributed money to an organization or cause in the past year, and almost as many had joined with coworkers to solve a problem. Three in 10 had attended civic meetings, and the same proportion had contacted elected officials in the past year.26

The Rebirth of Urban Democracy said citizen interaction is at the heart of participatory democracy.

The literature on face-to-face interaction is of crucial importance to constructing a plausible case for participatory democracy because it attacks the notion that individual behavior is based on self-interest. Experimental research shows that group identity is a critical variable in leading people away from self-interested behavior. People place a high value on benefits accruing to groups
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they identify with, and thus having the group reach a good decision can take on greater importance than having one’s own preference chosen...

Neighborhood-based government draws easily on people’s sense of identity with the area they live in. People know they are going to have frequent interaction with their neighbors, so even if they attend meetings infrequently they have a powerful incentive to think about long-term relationships in addition to the policy questions at hand.26

This phenomenon of community involvement offers great potential for a local news medium that effectively can provide useful information and facilitate face-to-face interaction on matters of common concern.

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17. Stamms, Newspaper Use and Community Ties.
CHAPTER 3

THE DIMENSIONS OF LOCAL NEWS

Frank Denton
Wisconsin State Journal

Journalists tend to look at their day-to-day work as cause-and-effect. That is, we’re producing this story so the reader will know or so the issue will be addressed.

At a deeper level, people who study communications are beginning to look at communication as more of a tug of war. The journalist brings a lot to the relationship — news, writing, presentation, credibility — but so does the reader — literacy, of course, but as important some degree of interest or need to know.

In the case of local news, this appetite grows largely from the reader’s personal needs and daily life, as affected by his or her immediate surroundings, the proximate events, people and forces.

How might journalists understand how a person relates to this personal world — and cover it, with relevant news and information?

A survey of the thinking and research in several fields — sociology, political science, psychology, social psychology and geography, as well as mass communications — suggests 10 general types, or dimensions, of relationships between the individual and his or her communities. They are both what people need from their communities and what they need to give back to their communities. They are worthy of consideration by journalists because they offer the potential reader’s perspective on our opportunities, as opposed to the roles we have inferred from journalism’s history, tradition and assumptions about civic interest and responsibility.

Some caveats:

This work represents a simplification, probably an oversimplification, of complex concepts for the sake of a specific purpose.

Within any one field of study, the relationships between an individual and the community can be seen as multifaceted and complex. For example, in sociology: “The community is a social system, the major subsystems of which
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are the institutions of government, economy, education, religion and family," composed of a variety of social or associational groups. Dennis E. Poplin has written, "The individual becomes a part of these groups, and hence a member of larger social systems, by playing the roles that are attached to these statuses."

This work focuses on common local, human relationships. That is, it excludes long-distance interests, such as national and world events, and virtual relationships, via the Internet. Furthermore, it does not consider relationships or interests much beyond the immediate community. For example, many economic (working) and leisure-time activities might not be considered particularly local because, in this largely urban society, they often are disconnected to the community in which one lives. That is, people often drive across the city for work and major entertainment, removing themselves from their immediate communities.

Understanding and use of this framework requires an editor to step away from the newsroom and consider the people of her or his community and how they relate to their community — without regard to any preconceptions of "news." Then, upon that view of community life, the editor can overlay the newspaper's beats and news processes and consider whether they reasonably reflect the readers' real lives and needs.

So these 10 types of relationships are not beats; they are dimensions of the personal involvement between the individual and the community. Beats might be built around them. For example, the dimension called "utility" includes the individual's day-to-day activities, such as leisure-time opportunities. Among the relevant beats would be the entire range of arts, entertainment and recreation coverage.

Some of these dimensions hardly are news to editors; they reinforce the importance of much of our traditional news coverage, particularly of local government, education and personal safety. The value of this framework is not to diminish that coverage, but rather to improve it and to broaden and deepen coverage of other, less traditional areas.

It is also important to emphasize that the coverage suggested by this framework refers to what most editors would agree is the most important role of newspaper journalism under the First Amendment: to inform and educate the reader and to maintain a tough, honest eye on government and other forces that may threaten the individual or the community.

At the same time, that role will be most effectively fulfilled by the newspaper that has earned its readers' credibility and loyalty because it understands and serves their needs.

THE 10 DIMENSIONS

What follows is an introduction to the 10 dimensions of local news. Succeeding chapters will develop the concepts more fully and tie them to newspaper coverage and to the survey of editors and publishers.

Proximity

Editors have long known, from common sense as well as extensive feedback from readers, that news is newest the closer it is to the reader. A car wreck or a routine election in the next city would be of little, or no interest, but the same news story in one's own town may be interesting because it involved people or issues within his or her daily experience.

In his collection of newspaper research, Leo Bogart sought to explain the primary interest in local news: "It seems reasonable to assume that an interest in the wider world hinges on a capacity for abstraction and on the imagination necessary to empathize with remote figures in an unfamiliar environment. Accounts of local news events, even in the impersonal metropolis, have points of reference to the reader's own experience. The reader who seeks out the news of his own immediate world must be thought of as more literal-minded and as taking comfort in the security of familiar scenes and protagonists. Correspondingly, as he reads he resists any involvement with the threatening forces that impinge on his little world from the great and troublesome world outside."

Research in social psychology suggests that some primitive human instinct, akin to fight-or-flight, causes people to pay attention to threatening information, and one might surmise that the same instinct heightens interest in news closer to the individual, because it might affect him or her.

Furthermore, people seem to empathize with or care more about people in their community, even if they don't know them, than people in other communities. Communications theorist W. Russell Neuman, with two co-authors, studied how several news media frame issues and found that journalists tend to present news through the lenses of powerlessness and conflict. But then they used depth interviews to understand how ordinary citizens frame issues and found that the dominant frame by far was human impact, whether a situation helped or hurt people:

Expressions of concern for one's self and family and the effects of an issue on the individual's immediate circle of acquaintance were seen in most of the interviews. One man drew a particularly narrow circle around himself, claiming not to be interested in knowing
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anything about drug abuse because it did not affect him or anyone
he knows... (But) individuals more often widened the scope of the
impact to include friends and community. A housewife in her mid-
thirties identifies very closely with her town and issues that affect
that sphere.

"To me, my community is more important than the world. OK,
I mean, I have to live in this community. I have to live in the world,
but it's so big, and my community is so small. Where I have to live
in that community, where it affects me personally, then it is some-
thing that I should do about it."[1]

How are newspapers serving this intensity of close-to-home interest?

Safety

Above all, people must feel safe in their own homes and neighborhoods. Traditionally, of course, this has been a mainstay of newspaper news content: If nothing else, newspapers have covered the local police and fire departments and, perhaps to a lesser extent, other security services.

Evidence is mounting that our traditional coverage might be too intense and, at the same time, too superficial, overemphasizing crime, arrests, trials, fires and other symptoms, at the expense of more thoughtful, contextual coverage. A relevant concept from mass communication research is cultivation. Supported by numerous studies, this idea is that television immerses viewers in so much fictional and real crime and violence that they come to view the world as violent and dangerous and react accordingly.[1]

While the research has concerned television, we might suppose that an overemphasis in newspaper coverage of crime and violence would have a similar effect on readers. It could help explain why readers commonly complain that newspapers carry too much "bad news." It also could be feeding the public's demands for lawmakers to "crack down on crime" at a time when crime is already falling.

What are some new ideas about covering personal safety as a public-health issue? What innovative ways are newspapers covering community safety?

Utility

The 1998 national media-usage study, named So Many Choices, So Little Time by NAA and Leveraging Newspaper Assets by ASNE concluded that

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newspapers' two biggest assets, or competitive advantages, are local news and utility.

"When it comes to the utility of advertising content, papers beat the competition and come very close to meeting consumer expectations," the report said. However, "when it comes to the more general rating of helpfulness — providing information that helps you get through the day — newspapers fall short of expectations and have only a slight edge over the competition."

That is, 65 percent of those surveyed said it is extremely or very important that a news medium contain "information that is helpful in your daily life." Fifty-nine percent rated newspapers as excellent or very good on helpfulness, compared to 55 percent for magazines, 53 percent for radio and 51 percent for TV.

A newspaper's usefulness might be measured against a person's daily activities and the information he or she needs to enjoy or survive them. Readers likely don't make all the distinctions journalists do between public and commercial, so these activities include public services, like streets and traffic, shopping, taxes, utilities, communication, local entertainment and recreational activities.

How are newspapers being thoroughly, creatively, relentlessly useful to their readers?

Government

Editors do not need convincing that intense coverage of local government is at the heart of their mission. Certainly, we accept the responsibility implied by the special place the free press is granted in the Constitution and our democratic processes. A more relevant issue here is how we can cover local government to make it most responsive to the public, to allow, even encourage, the most citizen involvement and participation.

Amid great concern about citizen disengagement from public affairs, there is also abundant evidence that individuals do feel a strong sense of civic responsibility. In The Moral Sense, James Q. Wilson wrote that human nature includes "a natural moral sense" involving duty, "the disposition to honor obligations even without hope of reward or fear of punishment." As an example, Wilson pointed to voting, for which there is little real reason: "To have an effect, your vote would have to make or break a tie. In the vast majority of elections, the number of votes cast is so large that the chances of any one determining the outcome is much less than the chance of the voter being struck by lightning... (A)bSENT a sense of duty, voting is irrational." That's especially true for absentee voting, Wilson said, but in 1992, nearly two mil-
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Ilion Californians, about 17 percent of all voters, voted absentee.

More concretely, in national focus-group research done for the Kettering Foundation in 1991, the Harwood Group challenged the popular belief that Americans are apathetic about public affairs. Rather, Harwood concluded, people are alienated because they feel “pushed out” of the political process by powerful special interests — including the news media. However, Harwood said, people will become involved in public life when they believe they can make a difference, usually at the local level where they can see the effects.

“Citizens want to be more than bystanders, merely confident that the game of politics is being played cleanly and in their interests. Citizens want a way to understand and participate in politics ... for themselves,” Harwood recommends, offering abundant opportunities for newspapers to play a new and expanded role in the important relationship between Americans and their politics and government. More on that later.

The National Commission on Civic Renewal, among many other recommendations, said in its final report in 1998 that our engaging the citizenry is critical to public life: “Whenever possible, civics education should include the regular reading and discussion of newspapers, because the habit of newspaper reading has been shown to enhance civic information and participation throughout adult life.”

In addition to our traditional reporting of the activities of local government, how might newspapers become more valuable to people by accepting these challenges to help them govern their communities?

Education

We’ve always covered local education, for parents who have kids in school and for the taxpayers who have to pay for it, and sometimes even for the kids themselves.

But that may be thinking too narrowly. The schools seem to have a large place in the hearts and minds of citizens, even beyond their education and taxation implications. Perhaps they are seen as a sort of core of the community, a measure of its health and a link to its future.

The respected Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the Public’s Attitudes Toward the Public Schools, which has been conducted for 40 years, found in 1991 that 76 percent of American adults have “quite a lot” or “some” interest in what is going on in the local public schools. — 86 percent of public-school parents, as one would expect, but also 82 percent of nonpublic-school parents and 67 percent of people without children in school.

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Interest may be growing. The poll also asked how much the respondents knew about the public schools, and 69 percent said “quite a lot” or “some” — up from 64 percent in 1983 and 58 percent in 1969.

Newspapers increasingly are the primary source of information people use to judge the quality of local schools. The poll in 1988 found that 52 percent named newspapers — 55 percent of people without children in school, 54 percent of nonpublic-school parents and 45 percent of public-school parents (77 percent of the last group listed their students as “primary sources”). The 52 percent was an increase from 42 percent in 1983 and 38 percent in 1973.

Of course, parents want coverage of their children’s educations, and of course, taxpayers want an eye on costs. But what are people generally trying to tell us they want in newspaper attention to their community schools?

Spirituality

Nine of 10 Americans say they believe in God or other higher power, eight say they pray regularly, seven identify with organized religion, and four attend services in any given week.

One could argue that religion is a purely personal matter without “local” implications, but rarely does one practice religion alone, or even through television. People seek out others in the community who share their beliefs, and in fact, many more people attend weekend worship services than sports events.

A national study in 1989 found that American adults ranked religion news below education, health, business and food in importance, but above entertainment, sports, arts and personal advice. Among news they were most likely to read, the respondents gave religion about the same ranking. However, when they were asked about their satisfaction with news coverage of the nine topics, religion fell to ninth.

“For most people, faith is a spiritual melody that gives meaning and definition to life,” John Dart and Jimmy Allen wrote in a 1993 report for the Freedom Forum First Amendment Center. “Yet, many journalists are tone deaf.”

The Hoover study found that the appetite for religion news was strongest for national coverage and ethics and values issues, but there remains great opportunity for richer local coverage in this area.

The Freedom Forum report recommended that newspapers expand and intensify their religion coverage as “a fascinating, news-laden area of coverage that resonates with a high proportion of readers and viewers.” Specifically, Dart and Allen suggested that religion could be “enlivened” by expanding it in
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concept and name, for example, “religion and ethics,” “beliefs” or “faith and philosophy.” Furthermore, the report said, small newspapers should approach religion coverage creatively.

How might we serve this intense reader interest in religion, values and ethics in our local coverage?

Support

Americans are participating not only in organized religion but also in a wide and rapidly growing variety of support groups in their communities.

A national study conducted by the Gallup Organization in 1987 found that 40 percent of American adults say they are involved in “a small group that meets regularly and provides caring and support for those who participate in it.” The groups range from self-help and recovery groups to book clubs and discussion groups.

Nestle, in a 1990 cover story, estimated that 15 million Americans attend 500,000 support-group meetings per week. The number of such groups quadrupled between 1980 and 1990, the magazine said.

After researching the community involvements of people in Philadelphia, Andrew Kohut of the Pew Research Center for People and the Press said, “Most Philadelphians engage in informal activities that promote social contacts and are the basis of interpersonal networks. Most respondents, whether they’re playing softball or are in a self-help group, say they develop friendships and meet people who they can rely on to help them with personal problems.”

The Gallup study was the basis for a book, Sharing the Journey: Support Groups and America’s New Quest for Community, by Robert Wuthnow, a Princeton sociologist. He concluded that people are seeking out support groups because “nearly everyone in our society desperately wants community, but... most people have trouble finding it in all the way they would like to be present in their lives.”

Gallup found that more women are involved than men (44 to 36 percent), and participation increases by age, education and income — just like newspaper readership.

A very small percentage of the groups claimed community service or political objectives as their primary reason for existence. But members of groups were more likely than others to be involved in charitable or other community work. As Wuthnow put it, “The members of small groups are quite often prompted to become more active in their communities, to help others who may be in need, and to think more deeply about pressing social and political issues.”

Wuthnow suggests that the support group serves as a sort of surrogate for traditional communities and lifelong relationships that have been largely sacrificed as Americans become more mobile and free of traditional lifestyle constraints.

It provides a kind of social interaction that busy, rootless people can grasp without making significant adjustments in their lifestyles. It allows bonding to remain temporary... If small groups are the glue holding together American society (as some argue), they are then a social solvent as well.

The attachments that develop among the members of small groups demonstrate that we are not a society of rugged individualists who wish to go it entirely alone but, rather, that we are a communal people who, even amid the dislocating tendencies of our society, are capable of bonding together in bonds of mutual support.

Wuthnow called the growth of small groups a “movement” that “is beginning to alter American society.”

Small groups enrich the wider society, not so much by eradicating it of social ills or by fostering a better way of governing ourselves. They enrich social life by linking the individual to larger social entities and by bringing a personal, human dimension to public life. They allow people to be themselves, to be vulnerable, to be weak, to be emotionally distraught, to be recovering from addictions, and yet to participate in the collective life of our society.

The small group movement is testimony to our continuing quest for community.

Sharing the Journey says that the growth of support groups has been little noted because “Groups such as these seldom make the headlines or become the focus of public controversy. They are not the stuff that reporters care very much about.”

If 40 percent of the adults in our communities are finding personal value in support groups, how might newspapers serve these interests?

Identity

People want to be part of a community.

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the desire for attachment or affiliation. That desire is evident in the instinctively prosocial behavior of the newborn infant and in the instinctively caring response that parents make to that behavior.25 Wilson wrote that the motives for this prosocial instinct are both selfish and selfless: "The former include the desire for human company, for keeping unpleasant quarrels to a minimum, and for appeasing attractive or praiseworthy in the eyes of others. The latter include feeling the pain of others, taking into account the worth of others, having a good opinion of ourselves, and responding reflexively to an inner voice. The motives that shape our morality all arise from our social nature . . . ."

Contrary to widespread perceptions of community disintegration, Americans hardly have abandoned their local communities.26 In fact, Americans participate in their local communities more than any other Western people.

Group or community identity and face-to-face interaction are important to participatory democracy, according to The Relothing of Urban Democracy. The authors point out that people who know they will see and have to live with their neighbors are more likely to think about long-term relationships.27

For more than 30 years, social psychologists have studied what they call the "psychological sense of community." They have used a number of definitions, built on feelings of belonging and connectedness, reciprocal fulfilling of needs and beliefs that members of the community share values and influence.28 Predictably, people who have a strong sense of community are more likely to be involved in local political and civic activities, are more interested in local, state and national news and are better newspaper readers.29 Within mass communication, Keith R. Stammm and others have done numerous studies confirming the strong relationship between community ties and newspaper readership.30 But when their suburb is just one of many in a metropolitan area, they may not feel their "psychological community" is reflected in the newspaper.

"Community" in this context of belonging encompasses far more than geography. Within physical communities, substantial groups of people share intense identities and feelings of closeness by virtue of their race, ethnic origin, sexual orientation, language or many other traits.

A good tool for measuring whether a newspaper adequately reflects the wholeness of its community or communities, and thereby serves the need for belongingness, is a newspaper content audit. Covering the Community, a report by the 1992-93 ASNE Minorities Committee, can help a newspaper audit itself.

While people closer to their communities are more likely to read the newspaper, it is important to consider that the relationship might well work the other way too. That is, the newspaper may have considerable power to build

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the community that is so important to its members.31 "Media do seem to define a market, not only in the national sense, as specialized magazines do when they single out people who share an occupational or social interest, but also locally, spatially in the traditional sense," one study concluded. "The relation between the newspaper and its market appears to be a two-way affair."32 That seems to be particularly true in the suburbs, which often need more of a sense of identity.33

One intriguing possibility for newspaper community-building lies in the psychological components of the sense of community. That is, social psychologists have developed and validated sets of questions that measure sense of community. Since readership is directly related to strong sense of community, an editor might build readership by developing coverage to address the psychological factors that comprise sense of community. More on that later.

Given the intense need people have to belong to communities, how can newspapers help build a sense of community identity for its members and aspirants?

Recognition

In Madison, Wis., a golfer who finally breaks 80 is less likely to brag about the specific score than that he or she "made metro." That refers to a tiny corner of the Wisconsin State Journal's sports statistics page which lists golfers around the area who shot a sub-80 round the previous day. Having one's name there, in six-point type, is a mark of distinction.

Every editor knows the importance readers, even infrequent readers, place on having their accomplishments reported in the newspaper. A TV mention is fleeting, but somehow, having one's name printed positively in a newspaper and delivered to most of the homes in town is an affirmation of high honor. There in an old saw, that all local residents get their names in the paper twice - when they are born and when they die. Any mentions in between are very meaningful to people, whether positively or negatively. People want to be able to see their, and their kids', and friends' names in the paper, as if their accomplishments need to be published to be validated. Even people who don't get their names in the paper still can aspire to it, while they see what their community values.

Morris Janowitz referred to it as "democratizing prestige."34 How can newspapers leverage this competitive advantage as the community's honor roll?
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Empowerment

People who study communities agree on at least three things: Community is a place, a relatively small one. Community represents a way of life, what people want and how they do things. And community is defined by collective action, people joining together to act on the common concerns of life. In fact, the reliance on voluntary community action for the common good may be the most important characteristic distinguishing the American community from those in other cultures. That has been true since the beginnings of the nation, according to the National Commission on Civic Renewal in 1998: “For centuries, foreign visitors to America have been struck by the variety and vitality of our voluntary institutions.” The commission’s report said this characteristic is rooted in our traditions of limited government and our political and social egalitarianism. Toqueville wrote how Americans were different, particularly from his European experience:

Americans of all ages, all stations in life, and all types of disposition are forever forming associations. There are not only commercial and industrial associations in which all take part, but others of a thousand different types — religious, moral, serious, futile, very general and very limited, immensely large and very minute. Wherever, at the head of some new undertaking, you see the government in France, or a man of rank in England, in the United States you will be sure to find an association.

As soon as several of the inhabitants of the United States have taken up an opinion or a feeling which they wish to promote in the world, they look out for mutual assistance; and as soon as they have found one another out, they combine. From that moment they are no longer isolated men, but a power seen from afar; whose actions serve for an example and whose language is listened to.

The first time I heard in the United States that a hundred thousand men had bound themselves publically to abstain from spirituous liquors, it appeared to me more like a joke than a serious engagement, and I did not at once perceive why these temperate citizens could not content themselves with drinking water by their own firesides. I at last understood that these hundred thousand Americans, alarmed by the progress of drunkenness around them, had made up their minds to patronize temperance. They acted in just the same way as a man of high rank who should dress very

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plainly in order to inspire the humbler orders with a contempt of luxury. It is probable that if these hundred thousand men had lived in France, each of them would singly have memorialized the government to watch the public houses all over the kingdom. The American tradition continues. The 1998 ASNE Journalism Credibility Project found that 54 percent of the people in their national survey said they volunteered at a school, church or other non-political organization, and 10 percent said they volunteered for a political party or candidate.

Andrew Kohut of the Pew Research Center for People and the Press said his research among Philadelphians found that most reported some volunteer activity in the past year. “Fully 49 percent spent one or more days in the month prior to the interview volunteering. One in four did church-related volunteer activities. One in five did volunteer work with non-church-related volunteer activities to help the disadvantaged. And one in five worked with kids, either in sports programs or in developmental programs.”

Mobilizing people is particularly difficult in metropolitan areas, where life is more complicated than in human-scale communities. In their important book, *Habits of the Heart*, Robert N. Bellah and his co-authors wrote:

The metropolitan world is one in which the demands of work, family and community are sharply separated and often contradictory, a world of diverse, often hostile groups, interdependent in ways too complex for any individual to comprehend. Unlike the town father, the metropolitan resident’s work is carried on in large, private corporations that produce commodities for a national or international market or in large government bureaucracies that deliver a range of services in response to the pressures generated by conflicting interest groups. The urbanite’s family and community relations are carried on in homogeneous circles of individuals with whom he feels a personal affinity because they share similar beliefs, values and styles of life. The separation between the worlds of work and of family and community is often expressed and realized by a daily commute between factory or office and residential neighborhood.

In such circumstances, what positive meaning can public life have for a private individual?”

David Mathews, president of the Kettering Foundation, is optimistic: “Our communities were formed out of associations, and they survive through associations. ...(T)he people in the Harwood discussions talked of their ‘community’ as a set of associations. Associated life is the defining characteristic, or condition, of community life. Furthermore, community action through associ-
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eations is the nonmetropolitan way that Americans have always understood what democracy is all about. The politics of problem solving is, as it always has been, association politics. In associations, Americans come to understand — in practical, unambitious terms — what it means to be part of a public rather than just a mass of unassociated people."

This American phenomenon — and need — for mobilizing and organizing is good news for newspapers, because mobilization requires communication and because the people mostly likely to become involved in the community are also the most likely to be newspaper readers.27

The close relationship between community involvement and newspaper readership exists at several levels, including the fact that people who are demographically similar tend to do both. However, in the context of empowerment, the relationship is mutual and utilitarian. That is, newspaper coverage can inspire people to become involved and then show them how to do it; conversely, the public uses the newspaper to get information and make connections as an outlet for their need for civic involvement.

Newspapers forever have served this function, even if not constantly or intentionally, as readers react to news coverage and organize or otherwise get involved. But during the 90s, this dimension has spawned civic or public journalism, in which some newspapers deliberately seek to encourage and facilitate citizen involvement.

Given this basic human need of people, in what ways can newspapers empower or mobilize their readers to volunteer and organize in addressing public concerns and solving civic problems?

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PROXIMITY
CHAPTER 4

PROXIMITY

Meegan Holland, Booth News Service
Michael S. Lloyd, Grand Rapids Press

The decision to purchase any product, even a newspaper, is based on the expectation of value to you personally. What will it do for me?

The chances of that expectation being fulfilled by a general-circulation newspaper improve the closer the news is to you. Proximity counts.

A four-car, triple-fatality pileup on the Wongo-Bongo expressway 20 miles on the other side of the metropolis you live near may be spectacular. But you'll satisfy most of your curiosity about that crash with the sound bites on the 6 o'clock television news or drive-time radio reports. After all, you only drive the Wongo-Bongo once a week on the way to that cabin in the woods.

A two-car fender bender at the stop sign a half block from your suburban ranch home is the accident where you want every last detail. The next door neighbor's two daughters were taken away by ambulance. Will they be treated and released in time for baby-sitting duties next weekend? What about the hormone-crazed boy driving the other car? Will this finally stop his speeding through the neighborhood? More importantly, will he be still allowed to start at quarterback in the Friday night championship football game?

The Big City Daily, with journalism awards and kudos draping off every newsroom desk, covered the expressway pileup in immense detail. Its subscribers even learned that one of the drivers was wearing a cranberry-red thong bathing suit and coconut suntan oil, SPF 4. The big paper's policy on car collisions requires a fatality or something very unusual, or it won't even be written up for the Police Blotter briefs. The stop-sign snafu was not news.

But in the Small Town Sentinel, the banner headline was: "Quarterback Faces Suspension for Accident." And the subhead highlighted, "Two teen girls taken to hospital; police blame high speed of star athlete's car."

And the Wongo-Bongo pileup? It got two paragraphs in the roundups on The Region page inside.

In this particular suburb, a half-hour's drive from the downtown of Gritty
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City, which daily newspaper is the second buy?
The answer is easy: the one that’s better written. The one with the higher standards. The one that won’t let readers send in their poetry. And, the one that doesn’t publish a calendar of school lunch menus or free obituaries.

While all newspapers are struggling with issues of readership and household penetration, there is a noticeable and unmistakable value in the community newspaper that’s closest to home. It’s all relative. “Big city daily” means 100,000 circulation in some places, half a million in some and more than a million in a few cases.

But at the lowest level of the daily-paper food chain are many successful newspapers. Each has defined a community and covers it very well in a product not overly diluted with news from anywhere else.

The national survey of editors and publishers conducted for this handbook found strong support for coverage of “news that is of interest only because it occurs in a given town, near to readers.” Eighty percent of editors and 83 percent of publishers rated such news as important. As to how well they believe they are covering such news, respondents indicated they are doing a pretty good job but could do better. Editors rated their performance as “good” (62 percent), compared to “excellent” (26 percent), with similar proportions for publishers. Generally, the editors of smaller papers ranked this kind of news as higher in importance and gave themselves higher ratings for their coverage.

What follows are examples of papers hidden under the umbrellas of much bigger metropolitan dailies. The big papers have more resources, often better writers and more space. But they do NOT have that nameplate that says My Town.

PROXIMITY IS EASY WHEN HOMOGENEITY RULES

When a town has a homogeneous population, the newspaper’s goal to satisfy readers is a bit easier.

You can’t find a place with much more in the way of a common-denominator population than Sun City, Ariz., whose bylaws spell out that residents must be age 55 or older.

Maryanne Leyshton, editor of the Daily News-Sun, lives in Sun City by virtue of her husband’s senior citizen status — unlike many younger members on the staff.

The Arizona Republic is the state’s newspaper, and it’s always trying to grab readers. Sun City’s circulation is stable — hovering between 16,000 and 17,000 — thanks to its stable population of high newspaper readers.

“Today we are trying to grab new readers.” Leyshton said. “We can concentrate on the elderly every day.”

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When the 50th anniversaries of World War II battles were coming up, it didn’t take a rocket scientist to figure out readers would be interested in reliving those days. The paper not only rehashed every key battle, it published an edition called Reepesakes, dedicated to the roles women played in the war.

Women are a huge part of Sun City’s readership: They often outlive the men, along with their own disposable incomes. The paper pays attention to the issues of later-life poverty, transportation problems when a person can’t drive and health concerns of the elderly. It has a weekly “Doers” column featuring Sun City volunteers.

If their readers get upset with the youngsters on the staff, “They don’t tend to get angry, but they scold us,” laughed Leyshton.

Another tightly knit community is McKeesport, Pa. It has a blue-collar, aging population, many of them former steelworkers who worked in the now closed mills. The majority are lifelong residents. The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette is available in McKeesport, about 10 miles southeast of the city, but readers find the volume of stories on local clubs, town meetings, weddings and school news.

These are “things that the Post Gazette would just throw out the window,” said McKeesport Associate Editor Donald Dulac. Readers must turn to the McKeesport Daily News (circulation 24,000) for those items and obituaries. The paper prints obits for free and treasures them so much it doesn’t put them online for fear their circulation would drop, Dulac says.

DEALING WITH A MOBILE AUDIENCE

Suburban papers with transient communities have a tougher job exploiting proximity for their purposes.

“Don’t make assumptions about proximity,” said Jim Ripley, managing editor of The Tribune (circulation 89,000 daily and 91,000 Sunday), which has editions in Scottsdale and the East Valley just outside of Phoenix, Ariz. “It’s a chicken dinner and it happened down the street, that still doesn’t make it news for us. We say we edit the paper for the East Valley and for Scottsdale. We don’t say it’s news from the East Valley and from Scottsdale. We used to do more chicken-dinner news, but now we focus on more important issues like health care and schools, because that’s what our readers tell us is important. The distinction is we do our damnedest to put ourselves in our readers’ shoes to figure out what is relevant to their lives.”

Ripley spends a lot of time taking the pulse of his readership. During intensive sessions with focus groups, participants get maps of the area and are told to draw a circle to define their local news area. Some people said local news is “wherever I can drive in 20 minutes,” Ripley said. “A Scottsdale resident said, ‘Chandler is local to me because my daughter lives there.’ It really fluctuates.”
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Thomson Newspapers bought the Tribune in December 1996 and quickly consolidated four East Valley editions into one paper, keeping Scottsdale as a separate edition. Its format front-loads local and regional news into the A section to compete against The Arizona Republic's daily zoned editions in East Valley communities.

The format makes way for as much local news as the staff can produce. "It used to be if a story didn't make A-1, we used to say if it better make B-1, B-2 or beyond." Ripley said. Often the first seven pages of the A section are local and state, with national and world coverage following.

LISTENING TO YOUR READERS

An effective way Ripley's staff monitors what's important to readers is a feature called "The Vent," which allows people to pick up the phone and anonymously comment on issues. "It has become a barometer to me what gets people's dander up," Ripley said.

Ripley said the Tribune boosted its coverage of a crime story after readers assaulted "The Vent" with phone calls about the way police handled the case. Officers fired 36 bullets, fatally shooting two teens who stole a car.

"The calls just started coming in so we really dug in and made it our story," Ripley said. "I don't think we were inclined to keep beating on it, but we saw that readers were really interested in it. The Republic was kind of a Johnny-come-lately on it, as they often are on (East Valley) crime news."

A similar example of a paper opening its doors to readers is the North Country Times in northern San Diego County, an upstart paper going after the attractive demographics also coveted by the San Diego Union-Tribune.

The North County Times was forged from a combination of papers three years ago. Its two main feeder papers — Oceanside and Escondido — were practically killing each other off in a circulation battle. Howard Publications bought the two papers and some others, and started modeling the reader-named North County Times after its sister in Munster, Ind. Today the paper is firmly zoned and operating out of seven offices. In the beginning, the circulation was about $7,000; now it's 91,189 daily and 93,192 Sunday and still growing, said Mark Hanschel, circulation director for Escondido and group director for Howard.

"The launching of the zoned editions gave the reader value," Hanschel said. "We're like a small local daily but with the weight of a large paper and all the strengths that can bring. It's not uncommon for someone to see their Little League team in there, and a paper our size doesn't very often do that. Tight local news and zoning are the key."

To engage readers, the paper runs every letter to the editor within the bounds of good taste, ethics, libel law and 200 words, said Editor Kent Davy.

"During the height of the election, we printed as many as 10-12 pages of letters in a single week. The letters editor has the authority to order additional space. We want as quick a turnaround on letters as we can."

Davy promotes the policy "brings us a fair amount of scorn. If we get 20 letters all declaring the president is a miscreant, someone calls up saying they're sick of that viewpoint. We can only hope the old, tired topics get edited down and moved to the bottom. We'll be arguing about some topics like abortion forever. But it creates a lively conversation in the community, and that's an enormous asset."

Closer in to San Diego, The Daily Californian in El Cajon also works hard to reflect its community, said Managing Editor Robert Wright.

When it had a major controversy with the makeup of a school board that governed 10 high schools, "We tended to try to cover whatever was going on within the board — the good, bad, whatever," Wright said. "The San Diego Union-Tribune tended to cherry-pick. They very early took an editorial position that the conservative majority should be ousted. We chose to take a somewhat more centrist position. We felt we were reflecting our community more accurately. They reflected certain vocal elements of the community."

WE ALL KNOW IT: LOCAL IS KING

The Norman Transcript and the Edmond Sun sit as sentinels at opposite ends, framing in Oklahoma City and the major metro daily there, the Daily Oklahoman. The Oklahoman, with a circulation of 200,000, rightfully views itself as the local paper for the region. In fact, many residents in either Edmond or Norman are subscribers. But not as many in those two towns get only the Oklahoman as get only the Transcript or the Sun.

"We don't fight the battle with the Oklahoma," said Carol Hartzog, managing editor of the Sun. "We fight the battle for our readers' time."

Local is king at these two papers, even if they're covering fast-growing towns with transient populations.

Three times a week, the Oklahoman has a zoned section for Edmond, a 70,000-population suburb adjacent to the north. "We see it. We watch it. We are not scooped by it," Hartzog said.

With a respectable 12,000 circulation, the Sun covers local schools heavily. The quality local schools are a key attraction for residents moving in. "But more and more empty-nesters and retirees are moving here," she said. "To attract them, we have revamped our feature coverage to include more consumer and health issues."

Edmond is the fastest growing city in Oklahoma, adding almost 20,000 resi-
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dents since 1990 and expecting to jump by another 25,000 in the next 10 years. What that means is that half the town's population did not live there before 1990. "But they specifically chose to live in this community," Hartsoy said. "For the Sun to be of value to them, we must be their paper, reflecting their community. The bottom line is we are local, local, local."

The paper has a home page on the Web with links to other sites around the community, such as the high schools, businesses and the chamber of commerce. It has just started a branding campaign with the theme "Your time, your paper."

"The effort to win readers is never ending," Hartsoy said.

The competition from the Oklahomaan has been good for journalism standards in the area.

Although 30 percent of the workforce in Norman holds jobs in Oklahoma City, "we pride ourselves in being more than a bed and breakfast for them," said Andy Reiger, managing editor of the Transcript. Unlike Edmond, there is some distance between the city limits of the "big city" and Norman. Plus, Norman is home to the University of Oklahoma. "That does help give us a separate identity," Reiger said. "But that doesn't stop the Oklahomaan from trying to make this their town."

Four days a week, the Oklahomaan has a zoned section for Norman, six to eight pages in the larger paper. "They do a good job news-wise. They have a staff of 18 here and a very nice office on the west side of town. I have 21 on my staff. They have made us a better paper. We're more aggressive now. We never hold a story."

The Oklahomaan is a morning paper and weekdays, the Transcript comes out in the afternoon. Its circulation is 16,000 and growing, Reiger said. "The Oklahomaan had a big circulation push on here a while back with blanket sampling everywhere. That helped boost our circulation.

"No matter what they do they will still be the out-of-town paper. We are still the first buy in our community . . . We are Norman's paper, and when the big guys come in here, the community will rally for us."

"As one reader said to me, 'You may be a rag but you're our rag'."

The Ottowa Courier, circulation roughly 19,000, doesn't face that same daily big-city hippo hovering over it. Des Moines, home of the Register, is 85 miles northwest. Even when the new expressway is completed, that will still be a solid hour's drive away.

"I don't see a time when the Register will ever be more than the second buy here," said Dave Kraemer, Courier editor. Most of the Register's sales are on Sunday. Kraemer said, "and that's because we are a six-day paper. We don't have a Sunday edition."
Cooper coasts to board seat

Officials figuring cost of fluoride

Movie is ‘cool’ deal for former Edmond man

Music takes teen beyond physical limits

... But the Sun is all Edmond: "The bottom line is we are local, local, local" ...
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No, the challenge for the Courier is being the local paper for all the little crossroads communities dotting the Southwestern Iowa countryside. In places like Bloomfield, population 3,000, or Banita, less than 1,000, Ottumwa is the big city way over in the next county.

So the Courier started a feature called "Hometown." When a story appears in the Courier about some news event in a particular outlying community, "We will use that to promote a larger Hometown piece which will be on the front page of the Courier the following Monday," Krueger said.

One of the regional reporters writes a front-page column that will be an in-depth profile of that little-bitty burg. "Then the reporter will be in that town all that day, in the coffee shops, wherever, and circulation will sample that town that day. We'll offer a special 13-week subscription package. We will pick up a fair number of new subscribers each time we do it. And it makes us go out and cover those towns."

"HOKEY" CAN WORK

De Kalb is an hour outside Chicago. The market is exploding, said John Secor, managing editor of the Daily Chronicle (circulation 11,000 daily and 12,000 Sunday), as people escape the high prices, traffic and other urban problems of the big city.

There is also a significant community of transient readers, with Northern Illinois University in the town. "Everyone here is well acquainted with the Chicago Tribune, and probably everyone buys the Trib at one time or another," Secor said. "But the Trib has no news presence here. There is nothing local for a De Kalb reader in that paper.

"Our mission is to be the opposite. We are the local paper. Others might call what we do hokey or unsophisticated, but our goal is to get as many local voices in this paper as possible. On the news pages, the feature pages, the religion pages and, of course, the editorial pages, everything has a local focus, a local voice."

"I don’t want anyone in this community to question our intention. In De Kalb, we are it."

Carrie Jacobson is trying to put out a paper in an extremely competitive and tightly populated market. She’s the editor of the Westerly Sun in Westerly, R.I. Still, she finds the same formula is as successful for her as it is for De Kalb. Maybe some people think items in the Westerly Sun are hokey, like poetry written by readers, but it works for them.

Westerly is virtually surrounded by competitors, the only exception being to the east where the Atlantic Ocean laps at the edge of the town. "We are a very small paper," Jacobson said. "We are probably the only paper a lot of our read-

ers get regularly, but we always think of ourselves as their second buy. It keeps us humble and open to what our customers want."

Pounding at the Courier, almost as hard as the surf, are the New London Day (40,000 circulation), the Norwich Bulletin (32,000), the Providence Journal-Bulletin (170,000) and the Hartford Courant (210,000).

"Our circulation is about 11-12,000. We cover only five towns in Rhode island and two in Connecticut. All the big guys make runs at us, particularly the Journal and the Day. But you know what? What we give our readers, (those papers) can’t possibly provide."

"We’re in these little dinky towns with our little dinky paper, but we are covering the extremely local issues that matter to the people there. We are part of their communities. We are their paper. Like the family dog, they know us and they love us because we care. And because we share our paper with them.

"We have a local editorial every day. We have a People’s Forum with no holds barred. Our subscribers write columns. They write poetry. They write about memories of other times."

The Monitor of Concord, N.H., (circulation 22,000 daily and 24,000 Sunday) also makes sure readers have plenty of space to see their names and ideas in the paper.

The Monitor (which ironically is delivered along the Merrimack River) is the first big town up the Everett Turnpike from Manchester. Both the Manchester Union-Leader and the Boston Globe sell papers there, "but it’s impossible for them to compete with us," said Mike Pride, editor of the Monitor.

"Their nameplates don’t say Concord. Their news emphasis is not Concord. The names in the news stories are not predominantly local names."

Like Westerly, The Monitor’s editor concentrates on having what Pride calls a “lively local forum on the editorial pages. We have lots and lots of pieces written by local readers.”

The paper also has a Town Criers program, enlisting volunteers in each town, and even in some Concord neighborhoods, who submit folklore reports about the small things that are going on. "We publish those reports on Sundays and Wednesdays. Anything that adds to that local feel, that shares the paper with our readers has to be a plus."

THE ARGUMENT AGAINST ZONING

The Monitor’s coverage area includes about 40 towns, Pride said. Stories from them go on the community news pages, which are published daily. "We do not zone. Anything anybody in the area might want to read about goes on there," he said.

The Stockton Record takes the same approach to zoning. "We don’t do it,"

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said editor Jim Gold. "The people in those towns feel better about themselves and better about us as their paper when we don't treat them as little suburbs of Stockton, but give them equal coverage in the paper with everyone else in the region."

The Record (circulation 55,000 daily and 68,000 Sunday) competes in the Central Valley of California with Sacramento and the Modesto Bee to the north and south. "We're sandwiched that way, and also we have the San Francisco Chronicle and San Jose Mercury News coming at us hard from the west."

About 90 percent of the homeowners in the Stockton area are commuters to the Bay Area for work, he said. And then there are smaller, more local papers in the nearby towns of Lodi, Manteca and Tracy. Each of that trio gets a local news page in the Record.

"The role for a mid-sized daily is hard to define," Gold said. "We try to establish a sense of pride in the region. We give people in each of these communities notice and exposure to a countywide audience. We think we are a different place than either Sacramento or Modesto. We have a distinct community here too." (Please see Linda Cunningham's piece in Chapter 14 for similar questions about zoning.)

SUBURBAN UPSTART TAKES EXTRAORDINARY GAMBLE

All these suburban papers are fighting off the behemoth looming over them in the big city. But why stop there? That was the attitude of the Tribune-Review in Greensburg, fully 30 miles southeast of Pittsburgh in the next county. It made the extraordinary gamble of moving into the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette's turf in 1992 and setting up the Pittsburgh edition of the Tribune-Review. The strike by staffs at the Post-Gazette and the Pittsburgh Press, and the subsequent demise of the Press, gave the Tribune-Review its opening.

So how does a distant suburban paper move into a city and show it can be a home-town paper there, too? Physical presence counts for a lot. The Tribune-Review set up an office in tourists Station Square downtown in an historic building. The visible location showed commitment to the city. It built a $35 million printing and distribution facility in the growing northern suburbs and then bought a couple of Gannett papers there. These moves allowed the Tribune-Review to eventually locate an editorial bureau and advertising and circulation operations in that key area.

When David House came to the Tribune-Review in March 1997, he assessed the strengths and weakness of his competition. The Post-Gazette had better writers and more resources; House had the budget to expand the staff but not to woo highly experienced writers. So he found the best editors he could to develop great writers.

"A big advantage we have is a lot of our editors and some key writers used to be with the Pittsburgh Press, so we inherently had some strength," House said.

The Post-Gazette wasn't working hard enough, in House's opinion, to capture single-copy readers. He put a top priority on great graphics and hired a former Pennsylvanian from Orlando to be graphics editor. "We worked very hard to develop a graphic standard. It's a very contemporary approach. We play the odds. We know readers will read 100 percent of an informational graphic, so the news value of the page on which that graphic appears shows way high."

The paper is buying billboard space and TV time to promote its writers and to "humanize the paper," House said.

The Tribune-Review has more attitude than his competition, he said. "We're more blunt in our coverage. We don't pull any punches. Our style is grittier. Our Page One tries to work very hard on the fronts. We try to have three stories above the fold plus a skyscraper promoting sports heavily."

The formula seems to be working. During the 1992 strike, the Tribune-Review moved in and sold 52,177 papers daily and 85,379 Sunday, according to the Audit Bureau of Circulation. Sales have grown to 84,701 daily and 147,259 Sunday as of March 31, 1998. The Post-Gazette has lost circulation, but still leads with 244,035 circulation Monday through Friday, and 430,762 on Sunday.

LITTLE FISH IN THE BIGGEST POND AROUND

Start spreading the news. The sharpest contrast in approaches to news probably is in New York City, home of the New York Times, arguably at the pinnacle of daily newspaper journalism. It's also home to the Daily News and the Post and, for a long time, many more citywide dailies.

But beneath that level, with a penetration and circulation that would be the envy of any of those others, is a "neighborhood" daily, the Staten Island Advance.

As the Advance's Editor, Brian Laline, describes the journalistic lay of the land, "If you want the most detailed information about Kosovo, buy the Times. If you want to know about the most gruesome murder or sexiest divorce trial in the country, buy the Post."

"If you want to know why your street is being dug up and why your car is blocked in your driveway for a week, or why your taxes suddenly jumped $800 or what your neighbor did to get himself arrested, or what the score was of your kid's Little League game, what properties are for sale in your neighbor-
hood, or who had a baby, got engaged, got married or died — buy the Advancee.

"Local news is the mainstay of our paper. Everything else is filler."

Laline said his staff clearly understands that there is a local story in everything that happens anywhere. "And I mean anywhere."

He cited that day's paper, which featured a story from Manhattan where the Advancee fashion reporter covered the men's and women's fashion shows. Donald Trump's daughter was a runway model. The lead to the Advancee's story, which ran next to a picture of Ivanka, read "I love the Advancee. It's a great paper."

"Thus spoke the Donald," said Laline. "Yes, doting father and Staten Island real estate entrepreneur owns apartment buildings on Staten Island.

"Our Page One every day is local. Most days there is nothing but local. On a non-local issue demanding Page One treatment we might go out and take 10 or 12 head shots with local quotes and run it with the national story."

Laline told the story of his strategy for covering the Woodstock reunion a few years ago. The staff reporters and photographers sent to cover the event roamed through the huge crowds wearing Staten Island Advancee T-shirts. On

The Staten Island Advance trolls for locals at the Woodstock reunion.

the back, in an artful design with a guitar was this message: "If you're from Staten Island, talk to me."

"You wouldn't believe how many people approached us with a tie to Staten Island, allowing us to give our readers the local angle every day."

Laline's job, as he sees it, is to report on life "in our community" not in "New York City."

When the Times, on the other hand, wrote about the big blizzard that hit the metropolitan area a few weeks ago, they "ran a map of New York City showing snowfall — and left off Staten Island."

In the paper's last readership survey taken in February '98, the results showed the Advancee was read regularly daily by 70 percent of the island adult population. The Daily News was at 36 percent, the Post 23 percent and the Times 20 percent. Circulation is about 65,000 daily and 85,000 Sunday.

"Some of us also involve ourselves in the community through volunteer work on boards," Laline said. "Our publisher's wife is extremely active and I am on several boards. Our business executives each belong to a separate Rotary. And our marketing guy is all over the place. Our circulation manager is active in the Boy Scouts. We take tables at luncheons and dinners — and fill those tables with Advancee people. We could invite community members and sometimes do, but the more Advancee people we get out in the public, the more we spread our message."

THE ADVANTAGE OF SMALL DAILIES

Jim Ripley of the Tribune in Arizona hits on a major problem that big city newspapers have in exploiting proximity as well as their smaller counterparts do.

He gives the example of the Arizona Republic and other large papers playing the Clinton impeachment news on their front pages every day. His paper didn't feel compelled to do that, and instead played it out front only when something important happened. The rationale: "As best we can tell, focus groups told us they just wanted to know 8-10 inches. We're trying to be sensitive to readers on that issue."

But Ripley says he understands how such news decisions happen, having been metro editor at the Dayton Daily News in Ohio. "I know how difficult it is when you're sitting in the core city and you're looking out there. You think, if we run a story on the south suburbs, who's going to care in the city or the north 'burbs'? So it's kind of a catchall ... I can understand why these decisions are inconsistent. It's difficult to edit a paper for a very broad audience."

And as Carrie Jacobson of the Westerly, R.I., Sun points out, proximity works for small papers because readers don't just see the local news, they also
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see the local editor on a regular basis.

Readers don't have a close relationship with the Sun's competition, she
tells. "They don't know what the editor of the Journal looks like. They know
me. They see me at their grocery store or walking down their streets."

That's being close to your readers.

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CHAPTER 5

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Jane Amari
Wilmington News Journal

Crime coverage is tailor-made for newspapers. It is an excellent example of the definition of news — something that has just happened that the public doesn’t know about. It is still the exception: Most of us don’t rob banks, so when somebody does, we call that news. Crime coverage is relatively easy. There are lots of documents in a central location and public employees to use as sources. And many of the documents are privileged, allowing us to report on them without fear of lawsuit. The best crime stories have what every reporter looks for when he or she sits down to write — drama, conflict, good and evil.

On some level, this is information our readers want. In a 1987 article in Media, Culture and Society, Jack Katz of UCLA suggested that reading crime news is a “ritual moral exercise.” In other words, readers know the material will depress them and frighten them, but not reading it will in some way be more distressing. According to Katz, we read crime because it allows us to work through our own moral issues. It allows us to experience emotions vicariously and to feel superior without requiring us to actually do anything.

Newspapers have institutionalized crime coverage. Virtually every newspaper has a police reporter. Some have several. The job of those reporters is to contact police when something “newsworthy” happens and get all the details.

But the very efficiency of that approach to covering crime has led to some unforeseen byproducts.

The first is the proportion of crime news to other news. Because we have at least one reporter assigned full time to covering the police, and often others assigned full time to covering criminal courts, we produce a quantity of coverage that may make the world look unsafe to our readers.

In her 1980 book, Crime Notes and the Public, Doris A. Graber noted: “The mass media supply a large amount of data about specific crimes. These data convey the impression that criminals threaten a legitimate social system and

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its institutions."

But crime is not increasing. In a 1998 Freedom Forum report titled Indicment: The Nexus Media and the Criminal Justice System, Wallace Westfeldt and Tom Wicker wrote: "Crime in America, in fact, is not out of control. Its incidence remains too high, certainly, and no doubt many crimes are never reported. But available evidence shows that reported crime rates are declining. The number of serious crimes reported to the police in 1997 fell for a sixth consecutive year nationally and dropped too in every region of the nation."

Nevertheless, the public perception is that we are under assault. All media, including newspapers, tend to write about violent crime more than any other kind of crime. The fact is, more than 90 percent of all crimes are property crimes. But it would be safe to say that most of our crime coverage in newspapers is violent crime.

As a result, according to Kenneth D. Tunnell, in a 1992 article in Sociological Spectrum, "Although Americans may see their situation as being threatened by increasing levels of property and violent crime, in light of actual victimization rates, such definitions appear to be groundless."

THE COSTS OF CRIME COVERAGE

The news media's overemphasis on crime news hurts both society and the news media. The Freedom Forum report pointed out that this disproportionate and superficial coverage fuels public fear and anxiety, which then can cause politicians to overreact and pass unnecessary and costly get-tough-on-crime laws. In February 1999, an American Bar Association study on "Federalization of Criminal Law" criticized Congress for passing "misguided, unnecessary and harmful" anti-crime laws, for fear of appearing "soft on crime." State law, after all, accounts for about 95 percent of all prosecutions. In his 1998 report on the federal judiciary, Chief Justice William H. Rehnquist made a similar point, blaming pressure on Congress "to appear responsive to every highly publicized societal ill or sensational crime."

Newspapers pay a price too, some say, with declining circulation. The problem is the readers. When surveyed, newspaper readers increasingly are telling us they are sick of the negativity in newspapers. As Geneva Overholser wrote in a 1998 Washington Post column, "Post readers often rue the prevalence of crime news in local reporting and its displacement of other newsworthy activities. They deplore not only the misrepresentation but the feelings it engenders. Said one reader: You don't realize how much all this endless negativity tears down people's hopes. Similar sentiments are often cited by nonreaders as a reason they don't buy the paper."

Nowhere was that more apparent than in research presented in May 1998 by the International Communication Association. Analyzing the content of 40 newspapers from 1985 to 1995, the researchers charted the amount of space devoted to certain subject matter, such as crime, community news, business news, sports, etc., and correlated it with circulation increases and declines. Their conclusion: "Crime coverage was associated with decreases in circulation. In short: Community sells, crime does not." The result was the same for both small and large papers and in all geographic areas. The authors concluded that papers devoting a proportionately larger part of their newshole to covering civic and community issues had a growing base of readers. Papers that relied increasingly on crime coverage had a diminishing reader base.

Most of us probably have heard the same story from other readers: "There's too much bad news in the paper... I don't want all the negativity... When are you going to report some good news?"

Another unfortunate byproduct of current reporting systems is point of view. Our main sources for these stories are police and court officers. That is understandable when we have reporters whose jobs involve keeping in contact with them. Rarely do we get the side of the accused — even when attorneys permit interviews. And victims frequently want to remain in the background.

The result is often the exact opposite of our stated goal: an unbiased, dispassionate recitation of the facts. In the journal Crime and Delinquency, Steven M. Gorelick wrote that objectivity for journalists is actually "a series of practices that journalists use to defend themselves against mistakes and criticism." Harsh words. But his point is that, in using police reporters to write less of stories based on records and interviews with arresting officers, we are presenting one point of view — the law enforcement side.

In his view, such a law-enforcement bias portrays crime as "the personal actions of individuals and omits(s) information about the social and historical context of a criminal act." That is understandable considering that law enforcement is engaged in hunting down and arresting the individuals. But as journalists, shouldn't we also be looking at the big picture?

Context is the issue. Part of the problem is caused by how we journalists see ourselves. We think of ourselves as impartial chroniclers of events, not agents for change. In Graber's words, "Glibster deficiencies in the existing criminal justice system and personality defects in individuals are depicted by the media as the main causes of rampant crime. Social causes play a subordinate, thought by no means nonexistent, role. Suggested remedies are sparse and do not generally include social reforms."

It is certainly more difficult for us, and possibly also for the police, to view crime as the result of a flawed society. If that is the case, the difficulties appear
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That may not work well in the "news you can use" era.

Chief Judge Judith Kaye of the New York state Court of Appeals wrote in the December 1996 issue of the New York Law Journal that journalists often make the courts a scapegoat for "complicated and deep-rooted problems of crime in our society." Her remarks were reported in the Freedom Forum book, which went on to say, "In her view, and that of many thoughtful persons, too much of the press pictures crimes as primarily a concern of police and courts, rather than a complex problem for society and government generally."

Here, the public is way ahead of us. In a survey of New York Daily News readers a few years ago, 85 percent of respondents cited poverty and economic problems as reasons for crime.

Then there are the victims. We are not very good at reflecting victims in our coverage. Crime coverage is a three-legged stool, including police, courts and victims, only the victims have no dedicated reporter. Because of that, the victim sometimes falls between the cracks.

We are very good at covering arrests, and we are good at covering convictions. But we do both as isolated activities. We are less good at covering a criminal act as it goes through the judicial process. Part of that is probably because of our beat structure. It is difficult for the cop reporter to hand off to the court reporter, because they may never see each other. Also, what is necessary enough for a police brief may not meet the standard for coverage from a court reporter who will have to invest hours covering a trial.

Even when our court reporters do take on a case, there are problems. The Freedom Forum authors note several of them: We often cover trials like horse races, there's a winner and a loser.

Reporters seldom ask, understand or report on why juries, lawyers and judges do what they do. Reporters tend to quote legal documents such as indictments that have more of a sense of legitimacy to them than the denials of the accused.

The press likes to cite colorful details that prejudice coverage. For example, in the John Gotti trial, Salvatore Gravano was consistently referred to as "Sammy the Bull" Gravano. The nickname suggests criminality where the real name doesn't.

Errors in names, dates, addresses, etc., tend to be repeated because they become part of the boilerplate in coverage of the case. Because a court reporter's sources are often prosecutors and judges, there is a tendency to overreport from that side of the case.

Consequently, readers see crimes being committed, but they have no sense of the criminals being processed, convicted and jailed. Our criminal justice system does not always work perfectly, but it often works better than we let our readers see. The result is the impression that violent crimes are increasing and the courts are letting criminals go free.

Our court reporting suffers the same context problem police reporting suffers. We tend to single out the highly publicized cases or the extraordinary sentence. Even Readers' Digest has hopped on this bandwagon with a monthly compilation of absurd miscarriages (to their point of view) of justice perpetrated by judges. And yet, we have little knowledge of who these judges are, how they came to be on the bench or the problems they must grapple with, like crushing caseloads. Ask yourself how much space your paper devoted to candidates in your last judicial election.

As Doris Graber observed, "The image of the system could also be improved by reporting more facts about apprehension and conviction of criminals, and by featuring incidents when penalties were swift, certain, and substantial."

The prisons are another part of the criminal justice system often ignored by journalists. There are 1.7 million inmates in this country. As the Freedom Forum book points out, there is great debate on whether U.S. prisons should treat prisoners as ruthlessly as they do, since most of those inmates eventually will be rejoining society more embittered and less able to cope than they were at sentencing. In other words, prisons may be worsening the crime problem rather than alleviating it.

The authors conclude: "This possibility is actively debated among criminologists and law enforcement professionals, but little of that debate is echoed in the American press. Nor do newspapers and television dwell on the fact that, as the nation turns more often to criminal law to deal with social problems, prisons are becoming a primary form not just of criminal but of social control as well — with, unfortunately, a distinctly racial cast."

Why have we ignored the issue of prisons? How many of us, other than very large papers, have a reporter assigned to correctional institutions?

SOLUTIONS

So what can be done? Obviously we still need to cover the criminal justice system. However, a clear conclusion here is that the coverage should be more thoughtful and more contextual.

To start with, a new publication that can be very helpful is Covering Criminal Justice, a comprehensive resource guide for the working press (also available online at www.cjjo.org or www.soros.org/crime). It includes annotated listings of sources for information and ideas in many areas of criminal justice, including guns, hate crimes, family violence, sentencing, prisons, crime rates and statistics, costs of crime, public opinion and violence as a public health issue.
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A possible solution, based on the research on circulation, is to transform crime coverage into community coverage. Rather than just covering isolated incidents, perhaps we should provide a framework with which to view the news.

One approach is to re-examine our beat structure. Nothing determines the quantity of coverage as much as dedicating a reporter to that coverage. Perhaps the traditional cop reporter has outlived his or her usefulness. One paper in Oregon is trying that approach by moving some crime reporting back to regional reporters in an attempt to get better balance. They retain their city cop beat, however.

Perhaps we need to think about covering victims as a beat. We certainly need more in-depth examination of anecdotal events. The Detroit Free Press did just that when it analyzed crime stats to debunk widely held myths about crime in their city. More of us should be covering prisons, and not just appropriations.

One approach that goes beyond these measures is to view violence in our society as a public health problem, not a criminal justice problem. An argument for that point of view was forcefully presented in Reporting on Violence: A Handbook for Journalists, published in 1997 by the Berkeley Media Studies Group. The book begins with a pointed quote from Dr. David Satcher, director of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: “If violence is not a public health problem, why are all those people dying from it?”

Treating violence as a public health problem stands some accepted practices on their head. Crime stories would need to be treated as we would treat stories about an epidemic. Take AIDS, for instance. In reporting on AIDS we normally include information we wouldn’t think of adding to crime stories—like incidence of cases and trends for specific populations and risk factors.

As Jane Stevens wrote in the violence handbook, “Violence is a difficult epidemic to understand and control because no one factor—elimination or reduction of guns, decrease in availability of alcohol or reduction of media violence—will prevent all violence. Each type of violence in a particular community results from a unique combination of social, cultural, biological and economic risk factors and thus requires a unique combination of preventative measures. Therefore, prevention approaches must involve a unique combination of people who attempt to solve the problem: doctors, researchers, community organizers, lawmakers, police officers, judges, social workers, teachers, parents and citizens.”

In its practical application, the approach would have reporters include three classes of information in stories about crime:

TEARFUL TEEN GETS 15 YEARS TO LIFE FOR 1993 SLAYING

John Henry Vasquez was 16 when he killed another teenager at a party over a momentary insult. At his sentencing Wednesday in Sacramento Superior Court, Vasquez pleaded for the family of the victim to forgive him. They were unforgiving.

“ I made a mistake. There are no excuses,” said a tearful Vasquez, who was given a 15-years-to-life sentence for the second-degree murder of Robert Maisonet.

Maisonet was shot dead in an apartment living room in the early morning of July 24, 1993. Vasquez is 21 years older now, but appearing in court with his round face and brass-rimmed glasses, he looked like a boy. A boy dressed in jail-issued sweats.

Maisonet’s death is typical of a growing trend in California and across the nation. One of the record-breaking 97 homicides that occurred in Sacramento County in 1993, this one featured a victim and a killer who knew each other. That’s the case in 76.3 percent of all homicides nationally.

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Their ages are also typical in California, where juvenile homicide rates have exceeded adult rates since 1989 and where almost 20 percent of alleged killers are 11 to 17 years old. Nationally, death by homicide ranks as the second leading killer among juveniles, right behind motor vehicle accidents.

“I know you said I will burn in hell. Please forgive me. That’s all I want is for you to forgive me,” Vasquez said in a quivering voice to the Maisonet family.

Though Maisonet’s girlfriend, Veronica Barrios, and his sister, Ana Rodriguez, sat only 20 feet away, neither Vasquez’s words nor his tears touched the angry young women.

“You had no right to take the life of the father of my kids,” Barrios said. “I am grateful the jury came back the way they did, but the ultimate price which you will pay will be something between you and God,” she shouted.

While Rodriguez was speaking, Vasquez turned away to avoid her glare. “Why did you take my brother?” Rodriguez yelled at Vasquez. “You still have your life. You can still see your family. All we can see is a headstone.”

According to trial testimony in August, Vasquez and two companions went to a party on 21st Avenue. At the door they were rebuffed by party participants, including members of a rival street gang.

Vasquez and a friend returned to the party 15 minutes later, and as his friend pushed open the door, Vasquez pulled out a gun and fired multiple shots. Two bullets struck Maisonet, one piercing his aorta.

Three of every four homicides in California involve guns. 88 percent of which are handguns. Gang activity, for which Vasquez received a special sentence enhancement of at least 15 years in prison, also featured prominently in this case, as it does in one of every four homicides in California, according to the Legislative Analyst’s Office. Nationwide, the figure is about 6 percent, according to the U.S. Department of Justice. Defense attorney James Carroll asked the judge to run the gang penalty concurrently so that Vasquez could be considered for release in about seven years.

Reporting on Violence also suggested these additional editing points:

- What were the blood-alcohol levels on Vasquez and Maisonet? Had the other partygoers been drinking alcohol? Was there evidence of other drug use?
- What type of gun was used? Who is the manufacturer? Was it a "crime" gun—a Saturday night special or a 9 mm handgun? Did Vasquez own the gun? If he bought it, how much did he purchase the gun for? To whom was the gun registered?
- Accompanying graphs might show U.S. victimization by age group, race, sex per 1,000; victim/offender relationship in solved homicides. (Information for the graphs is in the violence handbook.)
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THE SURVEY OF EDITORS

Regardless of the problems associated with coverage of crime, the ASNE study found that 87 percent of editors rated it extremely or very important. However, the importance rating was directly related to circulation; that is, crime coverage was considered important by 89 percent of editors of papers under 10,000 but only 70 percent of editors of papers over 100,000. The same was true among publishers, with crime news rated important by 86 percent of publishers of papers between 10,000 and 50,000, but only 53 percent of publishers of the largest papers.

Both editors (89 percent) and publishers (93 percent) think their papers do a good or excellent job of covering crime.

However, the survey also measured their ratings of importance and performance on less traditional or obvious news of public safety beyond routine police, court and fire news, suggesting some more thoughtful approaches.

While 81 percent of editors and 86 percent of publishers rated such coverage as important, 67 percent of editors and 73 percent of publishers reported doing a good or excellent job. While 51 percent of editors felt they are doing a "good" job, 31 percent admitted to being only fair.

In other words, we know it's important to go beyond standard crime reporting, but we don't think we do it well.

• Sidebars or followups could address gang-violence trends, such as how the change in choice of weapons has increased the rate of homicide and how former gang members are joining together to prevent guns from getting into the hands of gang members.1

Some of the italicized passages may seem a little labored to those of us more comfortable with quoting arresting officers. And we would need to be careful that including context does not result in drawing conclusions about why something happened without any proof. For example, citing the incidence of alcohol-related cases of domestic violence in the discussion of a man on trial for killing his wife would appear to conclude that he is guilty. But it is an example of one way to include context in reporting on crime.

One thing seems clear. Doing nothing may no longer be an option. It is our mission to reflect our communities. If, in carrying out that mission, we allow our processes to determine our content, we have done a disservice to our readers. And now, it seems, we may also be hurting our franchise.

SOME IDEAS FROM COLLEAGUES

The Daily News-Sun in Sun City, Ariz., covers the big crimes in its area. But it does a particularly good job of heavily covering property crime, the biggest

problem for its (and our) readers. The coverage is written to be news readers can use. Many of the topics — phone slamming, bogus travel clubs and charity rip-offs — tend to target older people, a large part of the News-Sun audience. The stories run with "Be Alert" boxes that include practical information on protecting yourself. Editor Maryanne Leysen says they took this approach after meetings with community leaders.

"Rather than just report crimes in the communities we serve (which we continue to do), we tried to do something practical about crime — to help people avoid becoming victims, to help ensure at least some criminals pay for their misdeeds, and to offer suggestions where those who have been victims can get help," she explained.

The Evansville Courier has an approach to mapping that works well in a smaller market or would work in smaller zones of a metro market. Its weekly half-page map plots most of the felonies within the city limits from homicides to burglary and prostitution. Past weeks' maps are archived on their web site. Included with the map are coping tips on preventing some kind of crime.

In a similar approach, the Ventura County Star runs zoned color crime maps with different symbols for violent and property crime.

In an effort to see justice from behind the bench, the St. Cloud, Minn., Times has asked a judge to write a weekly column explaining the criminal justice system. According to editor Susan Jine, he'll be tackling topics often mysterious to readers such as bail-setting, public defender appointments, what happens in pre-sentence investigations, traffic ticket appearances, etc. He will be writing about the judge's role and principles of law the court considers.

The Ventura County Star helps readers with color-coded and zoned crime maps.
In the wake of school shootings in Springfield, Ore., the governor of Washington called for statewide public forums on school safety. According to Scott Sines, managing editor for opinion and presentation at the Spokesman-Review in Spokane, it quickly became clear that nothing concrete would come out of the forums. But they did result in a statewide conversation. “We decided to capture that conversation by bundling together with other papers in Washington,” Sines said. “Everyone contributed to the reporting on school safety, and the series was available to all the papers in the state. Nearly three-quarters of the state’s dailies ran the series.”

According to Kenneth Robberson, editor of the Tri-City Herald, this approach allowed smaller papers with tight resources to participate in and print a quality project. The work was directed from at the Spokesman-Review and most was edited there. Tacoma also contributed to the editing.

The Detroit News wanted to find out if the common beliefs about crime in its city were true. So it undertook a major project that examined crime stats and looked at the background of crime, crime-fighting approaches and other ancillary issues. The bottom line was that the beliefs were false.

Similarly, the Wisconsin State Journal in Madison used computer-assisted reporting to develop a double-truck crime map showing that, contrary to pub-
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ile perception, violent crime was isolated in a few small spots. Readers were
invited to use a coupon to request their own neighborhood crime reports;
those who did were mailed computer printouts listing police calls within five
blocks of their home.

And finally, the Norwalk Bulletin has an interesting way of getting average
people into the story in crime reporting. According to Executive Editor Keith
Fontaine, the police reporter does a column using focus groups of neighbor-
hood watch captains as the source. The column describes complaints and
problems from the point of view of these average citizens.

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CHAPTER 6

UTILITY

Ron Martin
The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

For many editors, the news in the ASNE/NAA media-usage study in 1998 that being useful to readers is crucial to our success is hardly new. We've been hearing it for years. And the best newspapers and editors have gotten more and more effective at developing fixtures, features and attitudes that serve readers in this way.

But this new report, Leveraging Newspaper Assets, which for the first time measures newspaper strengths and weaknesses against all other media, leaves no doubt that utility and local news are the two greatest strengths newspapers have going for them. We are risking our future if we don't move now to locate these assets throughout our newspapers in every way we can think of, and then make sure that we advertise these strengths aggressively and successfully.

Most senior editors have been hearing this call to be more useful throughout their careers. Twenty years ago this spring, researcher Ruth Clark urged newspapers to pursue the key strategy of helping readers cope with their increasingly busy lives. In her landmark Yankelovich study for ASNE, named The Changing Needs of Changing Readers, Clark told us that readers "want more attention paid to their personal needs, help in understanding and dealing with their own problems in an increasingly complex world, news about their neighborhood, not just the big city and Washington, and advice on what to buy, where to play, how to cope."

She went on to say that "people are making more and more demands on their newspapers to sort out the information they urgently need in their daily lives and to organize it in time-saving ways. They want mini-reviews — repeated, if necessary — of movies, plays and television programs. They want an orderly presentation of content so that the information they need is easily found."
Many editors heard Clark's wake-up call. Particularly in features sections (or women's sections, as many were back then), more emphasis began to be placed on being helpful, on providing information useful in the daily lives of readers. Better television listings, improved utility in food sections, more useful movie and entertainment calendars and roundups. But for many years, not much effort was made to apply this "copying" strategy to the rest of the paper.

Now fast-forward to 1998 and the media-usage study, which NAA published under the title So Many Choices. So Little Time. This report is telling us that newspapers have made headway in showing readers they are useful, but it warns that we haven't taken advantage of some obvious ways to exploit this strength more aggressively and productively. Some suggestions from the report:

- We ought to drive home the message of our usefulness more effectively in marketing and in-paper.
- Seeing the success of the Sunday paper, the food day and the weekend entertainment packages ought to spur us to build that kind of utility into every day.
- We ought to link utility and local coverage — local calendars, employment opportunities, evaluations of local hospitals, schools, etc. Local "news you can use" on a daily basis.

In her introduction to So Many Choices, Readership chair Jennie Buckner said this about usefulness:

"The research tells me we should consider increasing the volume, quality and visibility of 'news to use.' We should be as local as possible on consumer information... Readers want news connected to them — with more break-out boxes of where to write for information. With Q&A columns that address reader questions. Being useful means better, detailed crime maps... better calendars... more entertainment listings... evaluations of local hospitals... annual comparison guides to local schools, complete with test scores and teacher-student ratios..."

In the same report, Sharon Warden, research director of the Washington Post, said:

The two most striking and unexpected results of this study were (1) the functional, utilitarian role that newspapers play in consumers' lives and (2) that consumers look to advertising in newspapers to satisfy their need for utilitarian information. That is, consumers read newspapers for news and information, and to them it appears that advertising is news and information just as stories are news and information...
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boxes, Q&As, quizzes. And in some instances they've expanded the help-for-the-reader approach to include career tabs tied into career day seminars and investment-strategies tabs tied into investment conferences.

Among community papers, a great model for how to connect with and help the reader is the Centre Daily Times in State College, Pa. (see John Miller's piece at the end of this chapter).

To help you decide whether your newspaper is doing all it can to be useful to readers, we've developed a checklist of many of the best practices. Many, many newspapers already are doing some or all of these, so we can't credit them all.

Clearly, there has been major progress in expanding and exploiting our usefulness in the years between Ruth Clark's 1979 report and the one last year. A key challenge in the period ahead may well be in finding ways to link our usefulness from the printed page to the Internet — a challenge and a chance researchers of the '70s and '80s couldn't have imagined.

For now, though, we want to single out some unusual approaches that have been developed, and some ways the categories of usefulness have been expanded.

A CHECKLIST OF WAYS YOU CAN HELP READERS

• Put reporters' phone numbers and e-mail addresses with stories.
• Run advance agendas for all government and public meetings, then follow up with recaps of action taken, with phones, addresses and e-mails for public officials.
• Regularly tell readers what's coming in each section tomorrow, and regularly explain when all regular sections, columns and features appear.
• Run plenty of calendars — and tell readers when the calendars appear and how to get their material included.
• Tell readers how to get news into the paper.
• Do plenty of previews, rather than just reviews.
• Be anticipatory — help prepare readers for news that's coming, or decisions about to be made.
• Do plenty of break-out boxes to alert readers to what's coming up on TV and at meetings.
• Use plenty of fast-read grids and formatted stories, instead of only prose/text.
• Run logs and maps that show where crime is happening, where real estate transactions are occurring, what restaurant inspections show, what licenses are issued for new stores and businesses, what zoning changes are approved.
• Make sure your entertainment and food sections are full of interactive features: Q&As, reader exchanges, shopping lists.

• Consider a general Q&A to answer whatever is on readers' minds.
• Don't forget children and parents. Tell them what kids will see at the movies and on TV. Help them find fun places to eat.

SOME CHECKLIST IDEAS BY CATEGORY

Food
• Recipe swaps
• Seven-day and other meal planners
• Advice on where to buy takeout
• Advice on kid-friendly restaurants
• Budget restaurants
• Advice on buying wine and matching it with meals
• Calendar on upcoming food and wine events

Weekend sections
• Movie guides: what's showing, what's worth seeing
• Grids: Readers love at-a-glance comparisons
• Who's at the clubs
• What's at the galleries, museums
• Plenty of ratings, best if consistent scoring is used (A,B,C, etc.)

Family sections
• Entertaining places to go for kids and families
• Reviews of children's books
• Extensive listings of the best things to do on weekends
• Reviews of kid-friendly restaurants
• Parents' guide to new movies and their content

Home and garden sections
• Q&A on gardens and growing season
• Guides to wildlife
• Tips on decorating and stylish living
• Tips on antique values and collecting
• Guides to home and garden events around town
• Local growing calendars

Religion
• Guides to church services and faith-oriented events
• Features on local volunteers and volunteer opportunities
Travel
• Tips on special airfares and hotel deals
• Answer to travel questions
• Tips on nearby getaway destinations
• Guides to websites, books and magazines

Arts and books
• Best-seller lists, localized if possible
• Best-seller lists in business, health, sports, etc.
• Listings and grids
• Look-ahead planner
• On-sale dates for concert tickets and availability
• Previews on what’s worth reading, seeing, doing

TV
• VCR alerts on what not to miss
• Best bets for daily viewing

Video
• Tips on new videos to rent and buy
• What to rent when hot releases aren’t available

Consumer
• Tips and advice on bargains
• Shopping destinations, with store/mall maps included
• Comparison shopping
• Advice on consumer rights
• Recall lists

A LOOK AT SOME NEW APPROACHES
The Oregonian in Portland begins with a mission statement, said Mark Wig- ginton, senior editor/features.

By ‘useful,’ we mean tips, schedules, guides, calendars, critical commentary, reviews, expertise, sources, consumer-oriented info, new products, techniques and always striving to give readers tools for their daily lives.

Our yardstick for all the stories is pretty simple: Is it actionable or entertaining? We try to spin stories to the actionable side, so rather than doing the profile of the Girl Scout who sold the most cookies, we do the 10 things your kids need to know about selling

cookies, based on the girl’s expertise.

Our daily living section has a daily Smart page that runs through a week’s worth of topics, aimed at new products and steps readers can take, in fitness, pet care, fashion, parenting, tech toys and home decor.

Any story that mentions a recording artist includes an audio sample so people can hear what we talk about.

We almost never cover events, but instead preview them so people can take part ...

In summary, in features, it isn’t one thing, it’s an attitude that everything we approach needs to answer the reader question: “How can I do this?”

The Austin American-Statesman has established a Community Information Coordinator to work with a team of editorial assistants who compile calendars, lists and guides of upcoming events. She also organized a series of “community outreach workshops” to educate community leaders and organization representatives on the newspaper’s efforts to be more accessible and help them get their information into the paper.

The Saratoga Herald-Tribune devotes almost a half page to an excellent guide that introduces the management team and explains how to reach all the key individuals and departments.

Special guides
The Palm Beach Post does extensive special guides each year on summer camps for kids, clubs that Palm Beach area residents can join, and holiday bazaars.

Netsday does a comprehensive Long Island Fun Book that goes to subscribers at the start of each summer. It’s the “ultimate source” for info about Long Island life. The paper keeps it up on the website as well.

The Austin American-Statesman produces an annual tab (104 pages in 1998) that is a combination guide, primer and yellow pages for services. The Wisconsin State Journal’s version, called Answer Book, had 92 pages last year.

Health
The Indianapolis Star/News’ Thursday health section includes a “fitness formula” in which readers share the health/fitness regimen that works for them.

Weather
The News Sentinel in Ft. Wayne, Ind., runs a monthly weather map that readers can clip and post on the refrigerator.
Sports

The Arizona Republic each month publishes a clip-and-save sports calendar. The Daily Camera in Boulder, Colo., runs a daily "Get Out" feature packaged with its weather page and focused on things readers can do in this active outdoors area.

Food

The Baltimore Sun wraps its Sunday Home & Family section with a spadea wrapper labeled Menu Planner with a week's worth of menus and a shopping list. The Sun-Sentinel in South Florida does a "Lost & Found" feature to which readers write looking for missing grocery favorites and "You asked for it," which supplies readers with recipes from local restaurants. The Los Angeles Times produces a page called "What's for Dinner," designed to help busy readers get dinner on the table quickly. It includes game plans to help readers maximize their time and shopping lists to make it easier to pull menus together.
Shopping and consumerism

The Tennessean publishes a daily “Shortcuts” page filled with advice and, twice a week, Ms. Cheap, a column on being a smarter consumer.

The Minneapolis Star Tribune and the Atlanta Journal-Constitution both run weekly “Buyer’s Edge” sections chock full of advice on bargains, comparison shopping, hard-to-find items, interesting shopping destinations and more.

The Sun-Sentinel in South Florida does a weekly “Cutting Corners” column with bargain tips for local shopping.

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution offers its readers an intensely helpful Buyer’s Edge.

Living and coping in metroland

The Boston Globe, Atlanta Journal-Constitution, Washington Post, Virginian-Pilot and many others publish daily and weekly columns focused on commuting, traffic and transportation. Atlanta also does a weekly Horizon section that tracks growth and development in booming metro Atlanta and helps readers stay on top of zoning and other decisions. The Reno Gazette-Journal runs a weekly map that spotlights building and development, and invites readers to phone in their sites.

The Orange County Register produces daily “focus” pages, including one each Monday on growth in the county. Previous pages and topics are available online.

The Philadelphia Daily News produces a spectacular graphic showing readers where to call for city services, problems, etc. It can be posted for handy reference.

News

The Sun-Sentinel in South Florida runs a daily summary of the top six stories that didn’t make page one. Readers say that if they only have time for the front page, they value this feature highly.

Ventura (Calif.) County Star runs weekly crime maps by neighborhood for six different zones. The paper gathers crime data from police and enters it into mapping software that pinpoints locations of crimes.

Entertainment

The Oregonian in Portland produces one of the most user-friendly weekend entertainment sections. Its A&E tab is full of interactivity, bargains, useful tips, rankings, grid-style movie and dining guides. The tab broadens “entertainment” to also mean walls of the week, neighborhood browsing and brew-pubs.

Utility in a Small Town

John W. Miller
Centre (Pa.) Daily Times

Even our most loyal readers don’t have the time or patience to figure out the often mysterious rhythms and rules of a newspaper. How many newspaper employees could even answer questions about what columnist appears when, what day a certain calendar runs, how readers can submit items to the paper?

At the Centre Daily Times, a 25,000 daily in State College, Pa., we try to edit from the outside in, anticipating readers’ questions and providing signposts throughout the newspaper. We provide that map day in and day out, over and over. We place a strong emphasis on design-driving-function. We are relentless in promoting what’s in today’s paper and every day’s paper. We want to tease even the infrequent reader to pick up tomorrow’s paper.

As a result of these efforts, we have been selected by the Society of Newspaper Design as one of the best designed newspapers for three years in a row. The judges not only consider looks but also how well the paper reflects its community and its usefulness.

Continued...
Here are some of the "useful" things we do. The tops of the Sports and Features fronts always list the themes and columnists for the week. At the bottom of the fronts, we have an index of stories inside the section and a headline for what we think will be the best story for the next day. We frequently use the bottom part of 1A to promote stories coming later in the week.

In Features we run a short box on how to get items included in the paper. We also run a calendar of standing features every day telling readers what day such things as student achievements or weddings appear in the paper. At the bottom of every day's themed calendar, we tell readers how to submit material for publication in it and which editor to contact with questions. In addition, we have added features to help readers plan their entertainment. This includes the Just Go grid on Thursdays previewing new movies, performances, concerts and other happenings. And we do a daily Movie Grid so readers don't have to look through the itty-bitty type in some of our ads for movie times.

Because we have such a large coverage area, including 36 municipalities and five school districts, we use a variety of short cuts to help readers. We run a "what's on the agenda" section to alert readers about government meetings. On Saturdays we run a government meetings roundup.

The format is almost like box scores with who attended, how they voted, what was discussed and when they meet again.

Every story possible has a breakout for more information or useful phone numbers or interesting web sites. A list of bylined stories ends with the reporters' e-mail addresses and phone numbers to help readers communicate directly with us.

Our primary focus is local news. But to serve as one-stop shopping for our readers, we use a "Breakfast Briefing" on 2A. This serves not only as an index of the top national and international stories in the paper, but also as a briefs package. Some of the items do not refer to inside stories (like the front page of the Wall Street Journal). This allows us to increase our national-international story count while saving space. We also include the top business indicators, the lottery numbers, the people column, our Out & About column and Dilbert. Although this is designed to save readers time, many readers have told us that this makes them spend even more time with the paper.

To balance the short, snappy items, we have a facing Spotlight page on 3A. The page is devoted to one subject in depth. It can be one story or multiple stories with photos and graphics. We occasionally will use a local story there, but its primary purpose is to anchor an island of reading on national or international issues.

Local news that doesn't fit on 1A is packaged together with clearly marked briefs packages for police, courts, Penn State or around the state.

Probably the crowning achievement of our philosophy of utility and time savings for readers is the redesign of our Friday entertainment magazine, Weekender & More. The focus is on information and functional design. That means using lots of grids, Top 10 lists, easy to follow calendars, phone numbers, standing features, breakouts, Internet links and, most importantly, very short formatted stories. The only traditional narrative is our Spotlight feature.

How did we make this such a priority with the staff? Together, we developed a document of guiding principles for the newsroom. High on that list is "customer satisfaction." So editors stress reader interests and needs in deciding what stories to write and how they should be presented visually. We constantly critique ourselves against those goals. And we are constantly seeking new ways to help readers navigate the paper with logos or referers or breakouts. Finally, we are shameless at stealing good ideas from other papers and implementing them quickly rather than suffering through death by task force.
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CHAPTER 7

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Susan Deans
Myrtle Beach Sun News

"In today's world in the United States, the communities we serve and the country we serve face very daunting problems that must be solved if we are to continue to realize the promise of America for our children and grandchildren. And I deeply believe that newspapers, well edited, well published, are wonderfully situated to be instruments of helping America find its way, solve its problems, seize its opportunities. And that's an ennobling way to spend one's life. . . ."

James E. Batten
Former Chairman and CEO, Knight Ridder

News is sometimes defined as whatever happens to or near an editor.
That is especially true if one assumes that an editor is a typical resident of the community, interested in what other residents are interested in, and affected by the same things that affect other residents. Government, for good or for bad, is one of those things.

Good advice for covering government is to cover it as if you live in the community and as if it matters to you. Unfortunately, that's not always how we do it. Too often we and our newsrooms consider it "boring but important" — and sometimes not even important. Boring is in the eye of the beholder, however. As one well-thumbed journalism textbook puts it, City Hall "is no place for the dull reporter."

Let's take a look at why we should cover government more, not less, and at some ways to make government coverage less boring.

The First Amendment gives us freedom of the press so that we can report openly on what the government is doing:

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the free-
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dom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.

In order for citizens to exercise this freedom of speech, they must be fully informed about what their government is doing. The traditional function of the media, the so-called Fourth Estate, is to be the watchdog on government, the observer that keeps the public informed of what the government is doing. The citizens can then act on the information we give them. Our responsibility is to provide the information citizens need to make informed choices.

Research conducted by the Harwood Group in 1991 challenges the commonly held belief that Americans are apathetic about government. Their report, *Citizens and Politics: A View from Main Street America*, reached these conclusions:

- Today Americans are not apathetic — but they do feel impotent when it comes to politics. Citizens argue that they have been "pushed out" of the political process and left little room to understand, engage, and make a difference in the substance of politics.
- Citizens engage in specific areas of public life when they believe they can make a difference. It is as if they choose to participate only when they believe a political compact exists that suggests: "When I participate there will be at least the possibility to bring about and witness change." By and large, citizens do not believe this compact is present in most areas relating to political action today.
- Reconnecting citizens and politics will take more than legislative changes that attempt to make the system and its "loyalists" more accountable. Citizens want to be more than bystanders, merely confident that the game of politics is being played cleanly and in their interests. Citizens want a way to understand and participate in politics ... for themselves.

The study concerned civic involvement generally, not the news media, but its six recommendations give newspapers opportunity for a new and expanded role in the relationship that Americans have with politics and government. The report said we must:

- Find ways to refocus the political debate on policy issues — as an alternative to the clamor of special interests — and how those issues affect people's everyday lives.
- Find ways for citizens to form a public voice on policy issues and for public officials to hear that public voice.

- Find public places where citizens — and citizens and public officials — can consider and discuss policy issues.
- Find ways to encourage the media to focus more on the public dimension of policy issues.
- Find ways for citizens and public officials to interact more constructively in the political process.
- Find ways to tap Americans' sense of civic duty in order to improve our public health.

Another Harwood report, two years later, focused on the need to do better at helping people make sense out of what government is doing. According to *Meaningful Chaos: How People Form Relationships With Public Concerns*:

"(Many efforts today pursue a linear, step-by-step approach that can fail to capture the essence of meaningful chaos; these can fail to account for the diversity and the overlap in the factors that drive the ways in which people form relationships with public concerns. The interplay between and among the various factors is critical in this constellation; that is where the factors draw their power and relevance to citizens.)"

Americans, the report said, "lament the fragmentation and sense of isolation that seems to pervade the way we think about and discuss public concerns" and tend to see issues in a larger perspective, through their whole lives and experiences.

Harwood found that citizens cite nine factors that affect their involvement in public affairs:

- A desire to make connections between public concerns.
- The importance of personal context.
- A desire for coherence in understanding public concerns.
- A need for room for ambivalence, that is, an opportunity for face-finding, listening, testing of ideas and figuring out how they feel.
- Expression of a range of emotion as a natural and vital part of people forming relationships with public concerns.
- Authenticity, straight talk that rings true, as a crucial filter.
- A greater sense of possibility, that progress is possible and they can play a meaningful role.
- Ordinary people who are catalysts for action on public concerns.
- Mediating institutions, such as schools, churches or neighborhood organizations, that provide places for people to meet and talk about public concerns.

This suggests that solutions are an important element in providing government news that readers find relevant.
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WHAT DOES GOOD LOCAL GOVERNMENT COVERAGE LOOK LIKE?

When a group of Knight Ridder editors met in 1996 to talk about improving coverage of local government, they had these thoughts:

- It answers the question, "What does it mean?" with facts, graphics, supporting material. It is readable and well-written.
- It gives readers an opportunity to respond and a way for them to respond.
- It reports the government's response. It produces or contributes to solutions. It updates progress on problem-solving efforts. It emerges from grass-roots efforts, broadening the definition of government, partnering with the community.
- It includes real voices. It anticipates what readers need to know. What's next? It gives people a chance to state their opinions or get more information.
- It breaks down issues to make them understandable. It uses graphics to simplify and explain. It includes both depth and layers of coverage.
- It's not just about government; it's about the whole of public life.

DO READERS CARE?

Local government and politics is one of the outstanding strengths of newspapers uncovered in a 1998 survey by Clark, Mottre and Barrios for ASNE. In Leveraging Newspaper Assets, the ASNE Readership Committee report on that survey, Jense Buickner, editor of the Charlotte Observer, points out in her introduction, "Readers want information that helps the community deal with its problems."

And, the report warns, "At the present time, relevance is NOT a strength of newspapers. It should be."

Buickner said the newspaper should be "an intelligent agent operating on the reader's behalf, offering expertise and authority. We need to be better explainers, to help readers connect the news to their lives."

Results of the survey show the two greatest assets newspapers have are local news, including community news, local government and politics, and utility, the day-to-day helpfulness of newspapers for decisions people must make.

People want more news about their community and their neighborhood, the researchers found. They want news, information and analysis that helps solve the community's problems. They want coverage that goes beyond the traditional sources, more active enterprise reporting that reveals what is actually happening locally from the reader's point of view, and why.

The survey results show that readers think newspapers outperform television in reporting local government and politics, but then they say TV is their preferred source for that news.

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3. Understanding: People who are following the story begin to perceive and interpret the details of the issue, forming an overall understanding of it. “Coverage at the understanding phase includes analysis pieces and stories summarizing pro-con arguments. Reporting is designed to clarify options, explain consequences, and suggest the implications of either action or inaction.”

4. Attitude change: While this may be going on at the same time as the knowledge and understanding phases, it occurs when public opinions begin to crystallize. “Individuals declare their positions. By now the lines are drawn, and many of the gray arguments turn to black and white,” Van Leuven and Ray said. “These indicators prompt three specific needs for coverage: 1) to fairly and accurately reflect opposing viewpoints; 2) to declare the medium’s own position; and 3) to provide a forum where others may declare their positions and attempt to influence the public.”

5. Action: As the time approaches for a decision, the public “again needs specific, detailed information.” Van Leuven and Ray said. “Media again emphasize event coverage as they did during the awareness stage. For example, advance stories announce the polling places and other election mechanisms. Coverage may include a brief issue summary or a description of campaign highlights.”

HOW TO FRAME

Government coverage can be framed in a number of ways to meet the needs of readers.

Perspective:

Newspapers talk about giving readers “breaking news.” But in today’s media explosion, much of what they read in our papers has already reached them through radio, TV, the Web or word of mouth. ASNE’s 1998 report, Beyond Survived: Keys To Forging Ties With Potential Readers, points out that newspapers risk being thought of as repetitious if they stick to the same approach they had when they did break the news consistently to readers. “Instead of ‘headline news,’ [potential readers] want newspapers to build their knowledge base and provide perspective. Potentials want their news either as a quick bite or a satisfying meal.”

Watchdog:

Readers want us to be their eyes and ears in covering government. But they don’t want to be talked down to. Beyond Survived, the 1995 ASNE study, found that potential readers have two problems with our definition of the “watchdog” role: “One is that it implies a superior/subordinate relationship. The other is that the definition is too narrow.” They want an equal relationship; they want us to watch together. Utility, again, was emphasized. Community columnists, Q&A formats and information on how to communicate with the newspaper and the government let people feel like part of the solution. They also want us to put less priority on covering the institutions of government and business and more on the social fabric itself.”

Solution-oriented/civic journalism:

A definition from Jay Rosen, associate professor at New York University, could be used to think about covering government: “It’s a set of practices in which journalists attempt to reconnect with citizens, improve public discussion and, generally, try to make public life go well.” Further, he suggested in a 1994 APME Readership Committee report, journalists need to invent new routines for reporting, writing the news, engaging the community and experimenting with different kinds of coverage. “I’m talking about routine ways of listening to the community... routine ways of creating forms of conversation in the community that might not have existed otherwise: new conventions, new ways of hiring and training people; new ways of organizing the newsroom... A lot of this is going on anyway under other kinds of pressures — economic, technological and occupational. What we want to do is add an element of concern for public life, citizenship and democracy to changes that are occurring anyway.”

Whatever the controversies that surround the civic journalism movement, it seems clear that solution-oriented journalism fills a need that readers say they have.

Writing in Columbia Journalism Review, Susan Benesh noted, “As journalists, we often write about a social problem, then let other institutions, like government, worry about the solutions. But in the past year or so, solutions journalism — reporting on efforts that seem to succeed at solving particular social problems — has blossomed in news organizations across the board.”

The San Diego Union-Tribune was among the first newspapers to assign a full-time “solutions editor,” according to Benesh. Karen Lin Clark described her job: “My task is to provide hope...not only the information but help and hope.” And in U.S. News & World Report, which published “20 Ways to Save the World” in 1997, editor James Fallows said reporters should cover what’s right and how to improve what’s wrong. “The average journalist, normally so directed and morally self-confident, shrinks instinctively from considering solutions,” he wrote.

Benesh theorizes that many so-called “good news” stories are poorly done. “Positive stories are often written quickly, poorly, in a saccharine tone, or
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they're formulaic," she wrote. "That reinforces some reporters' distaste for the genre." Perhaps the genre should be thought of, she continued, as "tough-minded reporting of news that is largely, but not altogether, positive. It's not soft news or puff pieces, and it's not civic journalism, which usually casts journalists in a role of greater involvement with 'the community.'"

And the most important difference from other good journalism, she concluded: "Instead of pointing out what's wrong in the hope that someone will fix it, solutions journalism points out what's right, hoping that someone can imitate it."

WHERE TO GET MORE INFORMATION

Here are some sources that may be useful in thinking about government coverage:

- The Harwood Group, Citizens and Politics: A View from Main Street America, a report prepared for the Kettering Foundation, 1991.
- The Harwood Group, Tapping Civic Life: How To Report First, And Best, What's Happening In Your Community, report prepared for the Pew Center for Civic Journalism.
- Poynter Election Handbook, Poynter Institute, 1996.

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SOME GOOD IDEAS

Much of the good advice on how to cover government better is rooted in getting back to basics, in covering a beat well and knowing the subject. Reporters and editors must make a hard look at their procedures to make sure they are focused on scrutinizing the money, the power, the duties of government and their execution.

Back to basics on covering meetings

Although it dates back a few years, one of the best common-sense packages of advice we found on covering meetings, the mainstream of local government beats, comes from a January/February 1985 article in Editorially Speaking, a Gannett publication that provides training information to people in Gannett's newsrooms. City editors were asked to collaborate on assembling a primer of advice on how to better cover meetings. Following is a summary of some of the points they made:

The late Fred Palmer, then city editor at the Rockford (Ill.) Register Star, had two first steps to making a meeting story readable:

- Convince beat reporters that the newspaper office is a place where they can pick up their mail and see who is trying to get in touch with them. The office is not a place where they work.
- Convince beat reporters that the city hall, the county courthouse or the police station are only starting points on their beats. Warn them that those places are almost as deadly as the newsroom. "Just where do I work?" the reporters might ask. "Wherever
something is happening," you say, "if we can get away from City Hall, we can find people who think their street needs to be fixed, who don't like it when rainwater backs up into their toilets and who worry a lot about an iron deficiency in their oak trees. These people also will talk to reporters, and very often what they have to say has something to do with a meeting story."

More advice from Palmer:

- Read meeting agendas. A reporter should not go to a meeting without knowing what is on the agenda and what it all means. So he or she will have to make a few calls and visit a few people sometime before the meeting. Very often these calls and visits will turn into a story.
- Don't ignore minor boards and commissions. We might get by without covering all of the meetings these boards have, but we must check all their agendas for those wonderful stories about people fighting City Hall.
- Don't be satisfied with reporting only what government officials tell you, which is almost all you will get at a meeting.
- Make sure your reporters know their beats firsthand. If you really want to shake up the Park District reporter, ask him or her how many parks he or she has visited this year. Ask the education reporter how many of the schools he or she has visited. Ask how many school cafeterias the reporter has eaten in this year. How many teachers does the reporter know?
- Remember that business people, ministers, mechanics, retirees and vacuum-cleaner salesmen all have different ways of looking at what City Hall or the Housing Authority does.
- Talk to the people who show up at public meetings, even if they do not stand up and speak on some issue. Few people come to a meeting for entertainment.

When writing the story:

- Show off that great information you gathered before the meeting. Build the story around that whenever possible.
- Tuck the boring but important information with bullets, dashes or whatever your style is.
- Summarize, somewhere near the top of the story, or in a box packaged with the story, the major actions taken at the meeting. For many readers, this will be all they care about, and they will appreciate you for it.
- Humanize your story, but don't do it superficially. Instead of the boiler-plate graf that the fictitious owner of a $100,000 house, talk to Simon Jones at 224 Main St. and let him talk

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about his problems.

- Write more than one story. Often a separate story will let you showcase an interesting or unusual meeting action that otherwise would be buried.
- If you have a staff artist, have charts or graphs or maps made up in advance to illustrate the tax increase or the location of the new sewer line.
- If you send a photographer to the meeting, let him or her stay a while. When citizens speak, make efforts to use their pictures when appropriate. Everyone knows what the council members look like.
- Don't use bureaucratese.
- If you can't understand a story, don't let it through.

Kathleen O'Dell, from the Springfield (Mo.) News-Leader, had these tips:

- Do your homework. Meeting coverage seems to be 60 percent background work and 40 percent actual meeting sessions. Attend the study sessions that often are scheduled days before the regular meetings of school boards and city councils.
- Break the news before the meeting. Keep your readers ahead of the story, not behind it.
- Background yourself on the names, personalities and special interests of the board members or meeting principals.
- Be sure your quotes are correct.
- Don't rely on your memory to get answers or quotes or correct name spellings after the meeting. Jot down questions as they occur; keep a running list in the front of your notebook during the meetings.
- Get details, such as the number of people attending, any protest signs that were displayed, applause, heckling and any gestures or mannerisms the speakers made that you can include in your story to add life to it.
- Watch for trends that develop over weeks or months of meetings: alliances, expenditures, etc."

At the Sun News in Myrtle Beach, S.C., a place where many politicians believe that government is none of the citizens' business, we make sure to include in stories the amount of time public bodies spend in so-called executive sessions. We challenge these sessions when they occur to make sure they are legal and enlist the help of the South Carolina Press Association when necessary. We set a new precedent in our state when we sued the local school board over its reluctance to release the names of candidates for a superintendent's position; the settlement document that was negotiated, requiring them to release the names and information on finalists for the position, has helped
Doug Clifton. “In other words, our focus isn’t exclusively to produce a project or two a year. We get our ideas in a number of ways: from skeptical reporters with a finally honed instinct for smelly rats, from tipsters in and out of government and from people who read our stories and respond to them via e-mail.” The stories on unacceptable or suspicious governmental behavior run under a “how government works” sig, averaging one a month. A new Sunday section, Special Report, gives the Herald four pages to display hard-hitting stories, keeping the pressure on “to keep a flow of high-impact stories in the pipeline,” Clifton said. Recently they examined “impact fees,” the money collected from developers to offset the impact of their housing developments, finding many misuses and abuses.

- In the Post-Bulletin, Rochester, Minn., Council Report graphics appear the day after the council meetings, including some of the action items from

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**THE COUNCIL REPORT**

A summary of other action from the Rochester City Council meeting

**OLD CITY HALL money**

The city sends for additional costs to help offset that added cost. Additional money was sought after the city’s portion of the 2012 city council meeting.

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**CITY COUNCIL**

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**Old City Hall money**

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**WESTERN WALES INC.**

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**SOUTH HILLS DEVELOPMENT**

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**COUNCIL MEMBERS**

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**Meeting planned on U.S. 52 impact**

By Rodney Hensgen

The Post-Bulletin

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**City Council members**

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**Transportation officials**

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Rochester Post-Bulletin graphics report government-meeting action items worthy of a full story.
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the agenda that might not be substantive enough for an individual story. They are done for city council, county board and school board meetings. "It's our belief that these news bits would go lost if they were attached to the bottom of a meeting rundown story or if they ran with small headlines," editor Jon Lonnness said. "With our format, these items get some prominence and because they're grouped together they become a relatively substantial item. It's also easy for readers to spot the items that are of interest to them."

• Post-election local government coverage at the Murray (Ky.) Ledger & Times has focused on changes the new crop of public officials will bring about. The paper has highlighted the new faces on public bodies, new issues they have brought to public attention and the ways they are dealing with the old issues. "The readers are interested just in seeing pictures of them," managing editor Amy Wilson said.

• A stringer network covers 76 municipalities for the Reading Times/Reading Eagle. Editor Charles Gallagher said the stringers go to meetings and write the routine, mostly formatted stories for Your Community, leaving the beat reporters free to concentrate on the bigger issue stories. The stringers are independent contractors and are paid by the story, usually $25 to $35. Their reports are anchored on the second page of the paper's local section. Gallagher said the stringer network was started in 1993. "We're not paying reporters to sit in meetings any more," he said. The nightside city editor handles the

Douglass considers public input on aging bridge

A stringer network covering 76 towns produces routine, mostly formatted stories for the Reading Times/Reading Eagle.

stringer network; on busy nights like Tuesdays, as many as 15 stories might be coming in. Stringers include college students, lawyers, retirees and stay-at-home moms and dads.

• "Instead of the old-fashioned running minutes of the meeting, we concentrate on how it affects the individual," said Dave Owen, editor of the Parkersburg (W.Va.) Sentinel. Owen said a veteran reporter with more than 20 years' experience is "good at translating things" and makes the government coverage reader-friendly. One example he cited was a private utility's efforts to purchase a municipal water system. Through the style of writing and the display, he said, "We try to make what goes on in local government understandable to people."

• The Manhattan (Kan.) Mercury convenes — in cyberspace — a citizens' panel called the Grand Jury, a group of about two dozen local citizens who comment on local issues. Their discussion is reported in the paper and on the website every couple of weeks, helps set the agenda for campaign coverage and identifies issues local governments should address. Executive Editor Bill Felber said he didn't believe a group that size would last too long if members were asked to attend regular meetings. "Rather, jurors function via e-mail," he said. "Their sentiments are sent to me and I post them for all jurors to view and respond to as they choose. The result is something along the lines of a dialogue." The names of jurors are listed collectively with the coverage of their discussion, Felber said, but specific comments are not attributed to individuals. The entire discussion is posted on the paper's Internet site, with a brief version published in the paper.
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- The Elkhart (Ind.) Truth feature Government at a Glance — called informally in the newsroom GAAG, as in "gag me with a spoon," said editor Terry Greenberg — includes short stories on about 50 meetings each month. Greenberg said that freelancers and even staff writers were sometimes hard-pressed to write an exciting lead for routine government meetings. GAAG, he said, "cut down on boring stories and give weaker writers an easy-to-follow format." The format includes the municipality's name and a small headline, then lists the meeting, when it took place, key action taken and other actions, and when appropriate, cost and what happens next. "We still cover and write stories for other meetings and many of those end up on the front page," Greenberg said. "But we're not as government-heavy as we used to be."

- From Susan H. Miller, a publisher-turned media consultant from Carmel, Calif., on government coverage that makes newspapers more appealing to women:

  Cover community quality of life as a serious, Page One topic. Investigate residents' complaints about lack or slowness of public services. ... Poll citizens to identify their priorities for improving communities.

  Provide in-depth analyses of issues facing your communities, such as environmental cleanup, economic development and the nature and pace of growth. Provide perspective by outlining pros and cons and profiling other communities that have faced similar problems. Cut out jargon and help readers understand the choices they must make.

  Write about solutions, not just problems. Explain how other communities have tackled challenges and describe programs that work.

  Give high priority to "news you can use in your personal life in the next 24 hours." ... Accompany news stories with boxes on "what you can do."

- Editor Stan Tiner of the Mobile (Ala.) Press and Register has "three simple rules for changing the status quo quickly and effectively":

  1. Implement a "news agate" page, much like the box scores in the sports section, where readers can get a daily news summary at a glance. This immediately reduces the "governmentness" tilt of the paper, giving a shorthand version of city council, school board, county government and legislative meetings. If there is big news from these meetings, pull it out and highlight it on Page One or the local front. For the most part, however, the agate page alone will satisfy the public's interest in governmental news, and it has the additional advantage of packaging items that are related.

  2. Inventory the "important" news in a community. Instead of waiting for "news" to happen, editors and reporters should determine what really matters to your readers.

  3. Create two lists of stories, one for "short range" and one for "long range" attention. Rank these stories, assign them to specific reporters, and put them on deadlines.

- From Jennie Buckner, editor of the Charlotte Observer, speaking at the 1997 Readership Issues seminar at Northwestern University: "We had a government team but now we call it our democracy team. They give readers information they need to make smart choices as citizens. We try to provide 'how-to' information for public life — just as we provide it for private life in our home sections or food sections. Things like: how to fix your schools; how to fight city hall; how to fix your democracy." She also proposed using "empowerment boxes." "If anything is really important, we ought to take the next step of telling people where to get more information, such as books to read, who to call, where to write." At the same seminar, editors proposed a mock newspaper called "The Useful Gazette." It would "take a hot local issue, identify the players, boil down the background and the obvious, lead readers through research and lay out decision options. It would help readers feel more connected to the community because it provides a support network, a 'buzz' that serves as conversation starters."

- From Chris Urban, president of the research firm Urban and Associates, at the 1997 Readership Issues seminar, Northwestern University: In-depth and accessible need not be mutually exclusive. The Wall Street Journal is an example of a paper that is easy to use but famed for its depth and thorough reporting. She said in-depth reporting can be made more accessible to readers through layering — presenting some in the paper, with additional online or by fax for those who want it. And, she said, more agate-type information can help with the issue of depth — listings, sports info, statistics, obits.

Offering solutions

Editors ideas for solving the "solvent gap with readers," at the 1997 Readership Issues Seminar at Northwestern:

- Offer models that have worked in other places.

- Don't rely on experts. Introduce ordinary people who have solved problems.

- Be narrow and specific in discussing solutions.
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- Offer solutions throughout a series — don’t wait until the last installment.
- Hold community forums.
- Use break-out boxes.
- Provide newcomers’ guides.
- Find out what people are talking about.
- Never stop reading your community.

Collaborate

The first news-gathering alliance formed by newspapers within a state was the “Voices of Florida” project, launched in 1994 with six newspapers and four television stations. In 1996, the coalition shuffled its television partners, bringing in the Florida News Network, which includes ABC and CBS affiliates across the state. Two public radio stations were added as well. A similar statewide coalition was launched in North Carolina in 1996 to focus on issues in two heavily contested elections, one for governor, the other for U.S. Senate. This alliance, building on the pioneering 1992 election work of the Charlotte Observer, included six of the state’s largest newspapers, five broadcast television stations, North Carolina Public Television and North Carolina Public Radio. The result was a coalition called “Your Vote, Your Voice,” that reached every corner of the state and also included a dedicated website.

A selection of ideas from ASNE’s Editors’ Exchange

- Each year residents of Butler County, Ohio, are told the salaries of the highest-paid county employees by the Hamilton Journal-News (circulation 25,000). Last year’s list had 800 professional-level salaries (no secretaries on this list). In the five or six years the paper has done the survey, it has been extremely popular with the public and not so popular with the officials, although they have come to accept it. The newspaper sends out letters a few months in advance requesting the information.

- Does your newspaper answer the following questions about your community? If not, how can you be its eyes, ears, voice and heart? (Taken from the Donrey Media Editors’ Reporter.)
  - How is your community different from others in the state?
  - Why was it established where it was?
  - What is the employment rate, and who are the major employers?
  - What are the most popular entertainment activities, and what event in the past year drew the largest crowd?
  - What are the big institutional assets (museums, colleges, tourist attractions, sports teams)?

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- Who are your experts? What are their fields of expertise?
- What is the dominant religion/philosophy, and how are people who are not a part of it treated?
- What’s the driving economic force (retail, agriculture, tourism, industry)?
- What are the major social problems?
- Who are the most creative people in town in business, the arts, education, society?
- How many people move into and out of this community every week and why?
- What’s the biggest change in the nature of the community in the last decade?
- What’s the high school dropout rate and the percentage of graduates who go on to college?
- What legends or stories do old-timers tell?
- How old is the oldest business?
- What accomplished people have roots here?
- What kinds of books have been our community’s best sellers over the past five years?
- What are the most popular TV shows?
- What happens in our community that has a significant impact on people elsewhere?
- What’s the demographic profile of our community? How does it compare to neighbors?

- Instead of the typical year-end section with the top stories, the Auburn (N.Y.) Citizen (circulation 15,500) decided to look ahead. “During year-end stories, the inclination to provide some sort of closure is to provide a wrap-up of the year’s past stories,” wrote City Editor Alan Vaughan. “We decided that our readers already know what did happen. So let’s tell them what’s coming up that they will need to know about in the coming year.” Each of the Citizen’s reporters came up with one or two stories on their beats that they thought would be on the agenda for the coming year. “This series, I think, was successful and provided our readers with some general ideas about what issues will affect them,” Vaughan wrote. Did the paper abandon the year-end wrap-up story altogether? No. “We also included six inches or so about the past year’s ‘top 10’ stories,” he noted.
First Amendment Checklist
A First Amendment checklist for your newspaper (source unknown):
1. Does your newspaper carry a daily listing of all public meetings in your circulation area? Is it anchored in the same place every day? Does it tell readers where the meeting will be, what time it starts, and include a one-liner about the agenda?
2. Does your newspaper publish at least one public service enterprise package every month?
3. Do your editorials take a bold stand or do they dance around issues for fear of offending someone?
4. Do your stories and editorials include information to help empower readers to act or react to the government? Do they include "how-to" boxes?
5. Do you get a lot of letters to the editor? If not, do you know why? Do you accept letters by fax and e-mail? Do you publish the letters promptly?
6. Do you solicit opinions other than yours to encourage healthy debate in your community?
7. Do your news pages and your editorial pages reflect the diversity of your community?
8. Does your newspaper set the public agenda for your community? Does it provide strong leadership?
9. Did your newspaper fully inform readers about the current year's city, county and school budgets? Were the stories easy to understand? Did you look at taxing and spending trends? Did you look at the effectiveness of programs?
10. Do your stories quote Joe and Mary Doe about how government impacts them or do they rely too heavily on Paul Politician?
11. Do you know what the most important concerns of your readers and your community are? Quick! Can you name the top 5 concerns? Are you covering these concerns in stories and editorials?
12. Do your reporters routinely check the expense reports of governmental officials and politicians? When they go out of town to their association meetings, do you report on the cost?
13. Do you encourage readers to let your newspaper know about wrongdoings of government? Do you quickly follow up on tips? Do you have a news hotline?

References
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CHAPTER 8

EDUCATION

Linda Grist Cunningham
Rockford Register Star

The one-room school house in Backwenai had everything: a perky, refined, educated teacher devoted to two things: getting married and helping those darling children learn something.

The students of Backwenai behaved well, respected the flag, motherhood, the country and God. They could recite the Pledge of Allegiance on cue and were equally adept at the Ten Commandments and the Lord’s Prayer. They did their homework and got to class on time. A disciplinary problem was a spit wad, a pigtail in the ink well or, mother of all crises, a swear word.

Backwenai parents baked pies and raised roofs to help out the school. When the school board got a bit testy and didn’t want to spend money, why, these parents just got themselves together and shamed the board into doing the right thing.

The problem with Backwenai is twofold. First, it never existed, unless you count the books and television series that raised Laura Ingalls Wilder from a Midwest writer to a national cliche. And, second, most of us think it did.

Witness the recurrence of Backwenai. “Back when I” chant school board members, teachers, education writers, taxpayers and anyone else with a modicum of interest in schools and education. Certainly those who can claim one foot out of the grave these days went to school, and there’s something apparently magical about sitting in a classroom for a handful of years. It makes us experts on education, on how classes should be taught, how much education should cost, what programs should be implemented, how they should be measured.

If newspapers are to improve coverage of education, something we have said for decades we are committed to doing, we need to explore three significant issues and how they affect what we cover.
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1. Trends in education, including a sizable disconnect between readers and newspapers.
2. How we cover education, from one-point, quick hits to massive, tree-eating projects.
3. Advice from teachers and education writers.

TRENDS IN EDUCATION

The disconnect between readers and newspapers on education should be raising alarms in every American newsroom.

While earlier surveys have shown that newspapers are the general public's primary source for judging the quality of local schools, a 1997 survey by the national Education Writers Association and Public Agenda asked where people get the "most useful information about what's happening in the schools in your community." While 22 percent of parents and 46 percent of non-parents listed the news media, 35 percent of parents and 32 percent of non-parents cited "conversations with people you know." (The other major choice was "your own experiences and observations," chosen by 37 percent of parents and 18 percent of non-parents.)

At the same time, EWA asked education writers to identify their audience, and 85 percent listed parents and taxpayers. We are not doing our jobs when roughly one-third of people are having to rely on friends and acquaintances for the most useful information about their schools. But it should hardly be surprising.

Readers have told us for years they want less coverage of school board politics and more coverage of education. We've responded by producing massive projects and countless "schools pages," filled too often with the detritus (school of the week, project du jour, student/teacher profiles, etc.) that, while it has its place, certainly is not an appropriate substitute for substantive education coverage.

But there's more going on here than simply newspapers' failure to cover the real education issues.

Education Week reporter Ann Bradley explains it well in her Nov. 6, 1996, special report:

First, the public itself is changing. As the population ages, only about 25 percent of households have school-age children. Turnout for school board elections is generally low — in single digits in some communities. At the same time, public schools are serving a more diverse mix of students with greater needs than ever before.

Second, the public's faith in and support of its institutions has waned. Many people distrust government and bureaucracy and are hesitant to pay taxes to support education systems that may not be producing results.

Third, the public has reacted with confusion and suspicion to high-profile efforts to improve schools. Goals 2000; Educate America Act has been a lightning rod for conservative critics. Pennsylvania's first efforts to overhaul schools were delayed when the public couldn't make sense out of outcomes-based education. The new California Learning Assessment System, or CLAS, was dropped in 1994 after parents and taxpayers raised countless questions. And many other smaller-scale efforts to change teaching and learning — from new types of report cards to more demanding graduation standards — have run up against resistance and skepticism from a wary public.

Fourth, signs of growing support for alternatives to public schools — including charter schools and vouchers — are prompting some thinkers to question whether Americans have lost touch with the role public schools have played in forging our democracy. As people focus directly on their own needs and those of their children, and less on society as a whole, they become less committed to the ideal of public schools as the glue binding a diverse society.

Let's see what we have here: Readers turn to their neighbors or rely on personal observations — not newspapers — for education news. Those same readers — the public — have lost respect for institutions, including schools and newspapers. They don't understand the terminology and the pros and cons of the new reform movement, so rather than research it, this same public simply washes its hands of it.

This dysfunctional combination is hardly representative of the somewhat glowing grades ASNE editors gave themselves for their coverage of education. A whopping 89 percent of those who responded to ASNE's survey acknowledged the importance of covering traditional school board and classroom news (awarding a "4 or 5" on a scale of 5), from 95 percent of the editors of the smallest papers to 74 percent among the largest. The proportion grew to 91 percent for the importance of covering school news beyond the basics.

Across the board, from big papers to smaller ones, 90 percent of us thought we are doing a good or excellent job covering basic education news. Our publishers agreed. We did acknowledge falling short on our coverage of education beyond the obvious institutional news: Only 25 percent said they are doing an excellent job and 43 percent good, leaving almost one-third of us who admit to poor or fair performance. The smaller the paper, the lower the editor's rating.

In short, newspapers and their readers agree on one thing: Education is important. But the public isn't using newspapers for news about education. If, indeed, our coverage is as good as we say it is, the public doesn't know it because they aren't reading us. They are talking to the teacher or neighbor down the street.
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Newspapers can begin to rebuild their connections to readers seeking useful information on education by recognizing that the public wants three things from its schools: safety, order and the basics. Once it believes those are in place, and once it has useful, understandable information, the public will support innovative programs.

Long gone are the days when taxpayers and parents would simply accept school board decisions, and in these days when taxpayers far outnumber parents with children in schools, value for dollar — outcomes, if you will — is what the public will demand.

But we cannot expect the bridge rebuilding to be an overnight construction project nailed shut and finished off with a half dozen multi-part packages on school report cards, discipline in the hallways, or visits to the classroom. Those projects play an important part in what we do, but alone, they are not sufficient.

TODAY'S BUZZ WORDS

Success for All, Core Knowledge, Reading Recovery, Coalition of Essential Schools, the Foxfire Network, School Choice, Charter Schools, American Read, Phonics, Whole Language and School-Based Management. If you can't accurately define them and explain the pros and cons of each, or if an archive search of your newspaper's education coverage over the past five years doesn't turn up explanatory coverage, it's likely your readers aren't getting what they need from you.

They are all education reform programs, some with rave reviews, others more obscure and questionable, all with supporters and detractors. And why not? There is at least $150 million in additional federal grants to school districts riding on picking the right program. Most of the programs have decades-long soldiers within the education communities, but only in the past five years or so have parents, taxpayers and newspapers paid much attention.

In 1997, Rep. David Obey, D-WI, and Rep. John Edward Porter, R-IL, cosponsored a bipartisan Congressional bill designed to spur what they called "whole school" reform. Unlike previous school reform legislation, the Obey-Porter bill, on which $150 million is riding, listed 17 models. These models, they said, were examples of what the bill meant when it said "successful, externally developed, comprehensive school reform approaches."

The problem, says Teacher Magazine, is that the list "has created division and rancor. Researchers and program developers alike question why a number of unproven programs won Congressional blessings while others with better track records did not."

Two programs that made the list, Success for All and the Coalition of Essence...
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Newspapers do not have to predict the future, but we must tell our readers what these programs are. The reform models, these latest developments in educational theory — whether they be proven effective ones or obscure, untested models — can sneak into a school district. Touted by those who developed them and who will probably benefit financially, often implemented by independent contractors, they are rarely, if ever, questioned by the school board or even the newspaper.

Once the program is in place, it’s virtually impossible to dislodge, even if it is ineffective. It’s at that point those who oppose such curriculum, perhaps longing for backwash, begin their campaigns against it. If the newspaper is not prepared to sift through the pros and cons of each curriculum introduction and explain what may and may not happen, parents and taxpayers have no chance of getting accurate information.

One does not have need a doctorate in education to bone up on the dozens of hot-button school reform models. An evening spent with Education Week Magazine Online (www.edweek.org) provides as good a short course as there is. It’s balanced, easy to understand and updated regularly.

In a political and social climate that demands results, education reform is clearly a hot button among readers, and there are countless numbers of reform models, consultants and success/failure stories to choose from.

Of the alphabet soup, however, there are three areas to which newspapers should pay particular attention, trends likely to most directly affect education in the future:

- **Public schools that function well**, including the often maligned Edison Project. Many education experts who follow the trends believe there are public schools that are doing well today and that there are innovative programs, such as those in Texas and the Chicago suburbs, that will eventually serve as models for the rest of the country.

- **Charter schools**, just getting their legs, these public schools that function much as private school concepts, are winning approval in many communities. The charter school concept allows the school to experiment with reform models, educational philosophies, structures and processes without many of the restrictions placed on public schools in general. The single greatest challenge charter schools face is funding. Many school districts that like the concept simply lack the additional funds to open a new school.

- **Private-school vouchers** that target inner-city students. Already being experimented with in several communities, the voucher concept generally wins approval with the public.

WHAT THE PUBLIC EXPECTS OF ITS EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

Actually, it’s pretty simple. The public wants results at a reasonable price. It’s the parsing of that sentence that leads to school district wars.

Survey after survey report similar results. In its third edition of *Quality Counts*, published in early 1999, *Education Week* says “Accountability, the idea of bringing responsibility home to roost, has become the order of the day.”

*Education Week’s* study of all 50 states continues to be one of the most exhaustive and detailed research tools available to education writers. The results of its 1999 research show dramatically just how much emphasis the public has placed on results. Educators are getting the message; the question long term will be whether test scores can accurately predict the quality of the education. *Quality Counts* ’99 highlights these findings:

- 48 states now test their students, and 36 publish annual report cards on individual schools.
- But fewer than half — 19 — publicly rate the performance of all schools or at least identify low-performing ones.
- Only 16 states have the power to close, take over, or overhaul chronically failing schools.
- Only 14 states provide monetary rewards for individual schools based on performance.
- Only 19 require students to pass state tests to graduate from high school.
- Only six have laws that will link student promotion to test results in the future.
- Only two have attempted to tie the evaluation of individual teachers to how well students perform.

Therein lies one of the challenges newspapers face as they report on the educational trends affecting their communities. The public demands results; the states are testing and beginning to report the results. But no one yet knows what the scores mean, or how they will affect education long-term, or what programs or models can be used successfully to improve schools.

It is interesting to note that educators are likely to stand opposite parents and taxpayers when it comes to testing, evaluation and accountability. *Quality Counts* ’99 offers additional insight:

- There is considerable dissonance between the information states now include in school report cards and what the public wants to know. School safety and teacher qualifications were among the top two or three concerns of parents, other taxpayers, and educators. But only 17 state now include information about school safety on their report cards, and only
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16 include data on teacher qualifications.

• Only one-third of the 260 participants in the focus groups thought test scores should be used as the main measure for holding schools accountable. In general, parents and other taxpayers rated test scores more highly than educators did.

• Most employers (77 percent) and parents (70 percent) think it's a good idea for principals to work under contracts that could be terminated if their schools failed to reach specific goals. But most teachers (64 percent) say that's a bad idea.

• Employers (66 percent) and parents (62 percent) also support overhauling persistently failing schools. But 68 percent of teachers disagree.

• While 60 percent of employers and 53 percent of parents believe it’s a good idea to tie student performance to financial incentives for teachers and principals, 76 percent of teachers do not.

Clearly, the division between the educational community and the public at large over how results will be measured and how children will be educated is a scenario for major conflict — which is exactly what the public tells the Education Writers Association it does not want more of.

In EWA's 1997 survey, in conjunction with Public Opinion, readers and viewers of education news said they were not getting the type of education news they wanted.

According to EWA's survey, respondents want more substance and less conflict. "More than three-quarters of the public surveyed wants more information about raising academic standards," EWA said in releasing the survey results. "In addition, the public is very interested in more news about curriculum, school safety, innovative programs and quality of teachers.

"Only 26 percent want more reports on school board, superintendent and union disputes. And, while they'd like to see more good news, that's not what they think reporters' jobs are. They want the press to tell them what's happening and how issues can be solved."

Newspapers have been told that before, and we have made improvements. So, if we know what's wrong and we know what we must do to fix it, can we ever get it right?

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HOW WE COVER EDUCATION, FROM ONE-POINT, QUICK HITS TO MASSIVE, TREE-EATING PROJECTS

This introduction to Lawrence T. McGill's The Twilight Zone Beat says it all: "Newspaper editors typically rate the education beat as one of the most important, but in fact education stories rarely receive prominent play and reporters and editors alike treat the beat as a professional purgatory."

According to McGill's research, from a list of 18 beats, editors with circulation under 100,000 rated education as either the most important beat, or as number two. At newspapers over 100,000, education ranked number five. But, reported McGill, "education, ranked by editors as the most important coverage area overall, fails to show up among the top five categories of news stories most frequently appearing on the front pages of newspapers of all sizes."

So, do we just talk a good game? There have been improvements in education coverage since McGill's analysis was first published in the early 1990s, but newspapers may not have made the progress we hoped. Readers still perceive that we spend too much time covering conflicts, and they turn elsewhere for their information. What's wrong?

Newspaper education coverage comes in four varieties:

• The traditional newspaper conflict model. Coverage generally includes school boards, teachers unions, contract negotiations, breaking news, particularly of the controversial or violent variety. This can range from the latest fight over Creationism to busing to sex education and guns in the hallway.

• The "school of the week" model. Frequently touted as our "innovative" work, this model brings students, teachers and classrooms into the newspaper pages. The model includes calendars, briefs, new programs, retirements, celebrations, successful students, classroom projects, students and teachers and administration-written guest columns, homework hotlines, tips for parents, advisory panels and Newspaper in Education projects. While weeklies and small dailies have long recognized the intense interest in such information, it's only within the past decade that larger newspapers have adopted the model. The model, though often criticized as superficial, helps readers connect with newspapers, provides useful information and puts a face on what is all too frequently institutional coverage.
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- **The project model.** In the past 10 years, education as project fodder is getting top billing. Recognizing readers' intense interest in education — and in children, families and taxes — newspapers have turned their attention to subjects ranging from violence, drugs and discipline to the now seemingly ubiquitous "school report cards." The project model, which often involves reader advisory boards, community outreach and extensive reporting on solutions, offers readers comprehensive, carefully researched, contextual information. Its only downside, and this can be significant with many readers, is the tendency for project models to be overwhelming.

- **The background model.** Elements of background models can be found in the traditional conflict model and in the project model. It's probably the model readers would be happiest to see expanded, because it goes to the heart of what they say they want out of education coverage: useful information.

For instance, if a local school district is introducing Core Knowledge to its elementary schools, the newspaper focuses its reporting, not on the conflicts between which board members love the idea and which hate it, but instead on what the program is, where it has and has not worked, whether the district's demographics are suitable for such a program.

Lacking such background — and neutral — reporting from the newspaper, public opinion will be shaped almost exclusively by whichever group talks the loudest. Unfortunately, background-model reporting tends to take a sidestep position to the conflict model — or it will grow into a project model so large and time-consuming that it may lose its impact for readers by the time it's finally published.

Woven together, the four models can be highly effective. Treated separately, or one to the exclusion of others, will virtually guarantee failure.

ADVICE FROM TEACHERS AND EDUCATION WRITERS

Of more than a dozen education writers who participated in an e-mail question-and-answer session earlier this year for this report, Jane Zemel, local news editor/education for the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, explained it most eloquently: "The best way to cover education, in my opinion, is to integrate the coverage into every area, every aspect of life. I know this goes against the current trend of creating an 'education page' or 'education section' within the newspaper."

"But education should not be relegated to a once-a-week education page.

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Education issues are found in sports, national news, local news, Page 1 news, international news, the arts, entertainment, even the food section. Education, like health, is a universal topic.

"By artificially grouping all education stories on a regular inside page, I believe the message to readers is: This is a specialized topic. Here it is if you want to read it. If you're not interested, just go on to the next page.

"Our message to readers should be: Education is important to everyone. So what if you don't have a kid in school? Your tax dollars are going to the schools, whether you like it or not. And the kids in those schools one day could be working on your car, cleaning your teeth, running your country or robbing your house. You need to care."

Bill Hirschman, an education reporter at the Sun-Sentinel of South Florida, who also participated in the e-mail exchange, offered a cautionary note for those who may be tempted to stray too far down the "soft features" path: "Everyone seems to be getting out of the administration building and into the classroom. Yes, that's essential. But reporters have been doing that for decades.

"We need to bear down even harder on covering school boards and administrations. Yes, we currently cover the politics and bickering, but that's not the real story. My sense is that most coverage of school boards as bureaucracies is about as tough as the coverage of a small town government — which is not meant as a compliment. School systems are often the most confused, disorganized and wasteful organizations you will ever cover — despite the fact that they have as much, if not more, money to spend than other local governmental agencies. Some school district bureaucracies are breathtakingly arrogant, disconnected, profligate, thick-headed and often not well-versed in education or administration.

"Rather than retreat from covering the government/stewardship facet of the beat, I think we should do a better job of holding their feet to the fire.

"Of course, that means we must redouble our efforts to explain the relevance of such stories to the readers, in every story every time, no matter how obvious the relevance may be to us. Government coverage is not boring, and it does not alienate readers — if we make their relevance clear."

"There is no dissonance between the views of these education journalists. Both synthesize the difficult task facing newspapers if we are to reconnect with readers seeking useful information. The answers are not as simple as doing a project, or adding a schools page. None of the models works successfully alone; together they can provide a platform to improve education coverage."
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INNOVATIONS AND JUST PLAIN IDEAS TO EXPLORE

More than 100 editors, education writers and teachers offered dozens of ideas for improving education coverage as they responded to the ASNE survey and a series of e-mail discussion group queries. More than 30 classroom teachers at public and private schools participated in an ideas brainstorming session in late January in Rockford, Ill.

Ideas ranged from projects to features, from daily quick hits to intensive investigations. These are some of their ideas:

- **Choosing your child's school.** Ask parents what's important to them in their child's educational life, then research your schools. Which offers what? While test scores are important, also research safety, curriculum, teacher preparedness (how many are actually certified to teach what they are teaching). Parents also want to know how a school "feels," said one writer. "Give the reporter some latitude to simply explain observations after being in the school."

- **National best practices.** Who's doing the best jobs teaching, implementing curriculum? Where are the success stories? Compare and contrast what your school district is doing. Give local readers the context they need to determine how well — or how poorly — their schools are doing. Some of the best background analysis can be researched easily on the Internet.

- **School report cards.** With 48 states gathering information and 36 publishing annual school report cards, newspapers are gaining access to information traditionally not available. Every newspaper that has tackled report cards offers similar warnings: Data without analysis can be confusing and misleading. There are significant arguments pro and con over the value of such report cards, so before you do your first one, do your homework. Educational web sites are the best place to start.

  The *Omaha World-Herald*, the *Detroit Free Press*, the *Charlotte Observer*, the *Arkansas Democrat Gazette*, The *Seattle Times* and the *Philadelphia Inquirer* are some of the newspapers producing regional report cards on schools. Many of the report cards are available through newspaper web sites.

- **Do it yourself.** This combination category with suggestions from parents, teachers, writers and editors, is a two-way exercise. It can broaden the reporter's expertise, and it can provide the sometimes illusive "human dimension" for statistical stories.

  Ideas included: Parents take the same tests as their students and compare the results. Follow a single classroom, student or teacher through a school year; using the singular experience to help readers understand the broader issues. Explain homework policies and show how they work — or don't. **Teach the class. Spend time in the classroom. Work in the school cafeteria. Attend the class on racism with the students.**

  Many of these suggestions came from parents who wanted the kinds of information they couldn't get elsewhere. What's it really like inside the schools? What are they really being taught? Let the students write it. Several newspapers invited students to do their own reporting or columns as part of other projects, ranging from science projects to Black History Month. Create rotating student discussion groups that meet regularly with the newspaper staff to discuss substantive news issues; transcribe the conversations for publication, bringing the students' voices into high relief.

- **Schools pages.** They are popular at mid- and small-circulation newspapers and a strong contender as part of metro newspapers' zoned editions. The most successful combine calendars, student/people items, success profiles, guest columns from students and educators, homework help tips, contact names and numbers, upcoming events, photographs of classroom projects. One newspaper offers this handy tip: Develop a "what are you doing?" form the schools can fill out and fax back; it helps them report the information effectively.

  Regardless of the space and resources devoted to these efforts, readers will appreciate the efforts to provide useful "good" news about schools. But as many who participated in the survey warned, don't let this kind of coverage substitute for substantive, consistent news content. Readers need a mix.

- **Train the reporters and their editors.** Although we take it for granted that sports writers ought to know something about basketball before they cover the NBA, newspapers frequently are content to staff the education beat with a generalist who knows little or nothing about education. That's a mistake, says just about everyone asked for this report. Reporter expertise is critical, says one veteran education writer. Especially since many education reporters do not have education backgrounds, do not have children in schools and generally have no connection with classroom. Training can include everything from time in classrooms and in-depth mentoring by master teachers to advanced academic training.

- **Cover the big annual events.** If it sounds like a no-brainer, it is. But it's easy to forget how important the annual "teacher of the year" awards are to the school community, including parents and students. It's an excellent time
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to recognize success and to highlight the connections between the schools and the community. Add substance by exploring the methods and models these teachers use to create success — and explain what those models are and where they stack up against the "nation's best." One newspaper editor suggests: Use the awards banquet as a chance to ask the folks there to suggest ideas for coverage. A handful of note cards at each table can be filled out and dropped in a basket on the way out.

• Partnerships. From major projects in which the newspaper serves as the catalyst for community forums and for the research and development of solutions, to simple partnerships in which newsroom staffers tutor at-risk students in English and math, establishing connections between newspapers and their education audience is clearly a priority. Some of the most remarkable, and often controversial, work is being done by newspapers under the rubric of civic or public journalism. More information on this area is available in the Empowerment section of this handbook.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

• Education Week Magazine. When education writers are asked for their best research resources, there's no dispute about the top recommendation. This weekly publication is a veritable treasure trove of up-to-date, easy to understand information on education. From spot news to special reports, EdWeek is at the top of everyone's list. It's available by subscription and on the web at www.edweek.org. Links to other education sites and deep archives make this an especially strong online source. The online version offers extensive background information on educational trends, explains the alphabet soup and appears to avoid particular biases. Education Week, 6935 Arlington Road, Suite 100, Bethesda, Md. 20814-5233. For subscriptions: P.O. Box 2083, Marion, Ohio 43305. Cost: $69.94 per year for 43 issues.
SPIRITUALITY
SPIRITUALITY

Pan Luecke
Lexington Herald-Leader

Religion is hot. Once a subject considered impolite to discuss in public, religion is now not only polite but trendy. The surprise popularity of "Touched by an Angel" soon spawned several TV clones.

Bookstores are expanding their spirituality sections to accommodate an influx of books about faith, angels and the hereafter.

Newspapers, too, are discovering religion as a subject that broadens the scope of local news beyond city council meetings and school boards.

Much as newspapers 20 years ago discovered that the business community offers a lode of local-news stories, they are now mining the potential of the faith community. Where religion news was once relegated to an inside weekly "church page" to fill the space around church advertisements, more and more papers are designating — or adding — full-time religion writers and creating freestanding weekly faith sections. Stories with strong faith angles are also making it onto the front page during seasons other than Christmas and Rosh Hashanah.

"It is a kind of local news that connects us to the community in ways that political and business coverage doesn't," said Tim McGuire, editor of the Minneapolis Star Tribune (circulation 387,000). Since his paper beefed up its religion coverage with additional staff and space on Saturday, he senses the community's feelings have softened about who and what the newspaper is. "It's proven to be something special in our market," McGuire said.

Minneapolis isn't the only place that has gotten religion. Consider:

- In a 1996 survey of religion reporters by the Religion Newswriters Association, 64 percent said coverage had increased at their papers in the past five years, and 70 percent said coverage had improved.
- Weekly religion sections, usually published on Saturdays, continue to sprout. While several sections predate it, the Dallas Morning News' sec-
SPIRITUALITY

Conferences & speakers


> "The Integrity of the Church," held at the University of Notre Dame, South Bend, Indiana. May 16-18, 1999.

> "Conflict Clinging," held at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, May 14-16, 1999.

> "Theization of the Church," held at the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, May 20-22, 1999.

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> "Theization of the Church," held at the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, May 20-22, 1999.

> "Conflict Clingen...
opportunity," he wrote. Others suggest that aging baby boomers — including those now running news organizations — are becoming more interested in the topic as they raise children who ask pesky questions about heaven or face their parents' mortality — or their own.

Theologian Martin E. Marty, associated with the Public Religion Project at the University of Chicago, suggests that religion is in the news more because it has gone public more. "Today, religion is at the crossroads of so many spiritual paths that hard-billed editors who used to disdain religion are learning that they will miss some of the best stories and many of their best readers if they continue to ignore faith," he writes in an article on the center's web site. "People kill each other in the name of their religions and make prime time for doing so. People feel others in the scope of religious faith and sometimes make page one for doing so. So this answer amounts to 'There's more of it around, so more gets covered' — and not just on the Saturday religion page."

RESPONDING TO PUBLIC INTEREST

Studies certainly indicate that the vast majority of Americans care about religion. John Durt and Jimmy Allen, in a comprehensive Freedom Forum publication entitled Bridging the Gap, cite a survey estimating that 90 percent of Americans profess a belief in God or higher power; 80 percent say prayer is a regular part of their lives; 70 percent identify with a religious group; and 49 percent attend religious services in any given week.

A study by the Independent Sector, a non-profit foundation, found many more people worship at weekend religious services than attend sports events and they contribute nearly $40 billion in support of their views.

But are people interested in reading about religion simply because they are religious? Apparently yes. A 1995 study by the Newspaper Association of America found that 42 percent of readers were very or extremely interested in faith and religion — higher than the ratings for TV listings, opinion and analysis or professional sports.

Observant editors say they don't really need studies to justify their increased coverage of religion, though. "Stick your head out the door and you have all the evidence you need," said Mike Burbash, editor of the Columbus Ledger-Enquirer in Columbus, Ga. (circulation 56,000). Last fall, his paper devoted two pages of newsprint from Sunday business news to create a Saturday "Faith & Spirit" section. He also added three-fourths of a staff person to cover religion, a position cost-justified by a subsequent increase in religion advertising.

THE SURVEY OF EDITORS AND PUBLISHERS

In the survey for this handbook, 72 percent of the editors responding ranked "church news" as a very or extremely important factor in local news. That placed it just below local entertainment news (74 percent) but higher than "things to do with kids." Its importance was highest (77 percent) among editors of papers with 10,000-50,000 circulation and lowest (54 percent) at mid-sized papers. Sixty-three percent of the editors of the largest papers — those with circulations above 100,000 — rated church news very or extremely important. Among publishers overall, 68 percent thought church news important.

When asked about the importance of more general coverage of values, ethics or religion news, the editors' ratings fell off for the smallest papers, but remained high (65 percent) for papers over 10,000 circulation. In fact, among the 50,000-100,000 newspapers, the importance rating increased significantly, to 68 percent. Publishers also rated this coverage relatively high, at 65 percent.

Despite the high value placed on such news, editors as a group don't consider their coverage very strong. Only 71 percent rated their church coverage good or excellent, below their ratings for high school sports, local government, schools, crime and entertainment. The editors feel even less satisfied with their more general coverage, beyond just church news, as only 44 percent of editors of papers over 10,000 (including a bare majority of metro) rate their performance as excellent or good. Among papers between 10,000 and 50,000, a troubling 59 percent said their coverage is only fair or poor.

AN EXPERIENCE GAP

One long-running concern about religion news is whether reporters are up to the task of covering such a complicated beat. Most communities have a wide variety of faiths, each with its own history, hierarchy and vocabulary.

"It's an enormously complex subject," said Debra Mason, executive director of the Religion Newsletters Association, a former religion reporter who notes that there are 63 Baptist denominations alone. Religion stories require extensive research, she said, yet editors don't always appreciate that. "Most religion reporters seem intimidated just trying to maintain the normal flow of events."

Allica C. Shepard, in a 1995 American Journalism Review article about the increase in religion coverage, observed that it's difficult "to learn about the different forms of Islam, and how a Methodist is different from a Mormon, or how the Lutheran Synod operates, or what Baptists or Bahais believe. It's easy to confuse the liberal United Church of Christ and the conservative Churches of Christ. It took the press a long time to figure out what then-presidential candidate Jimmy Carter meant when he said he was born-again Christian."

Adding to the beat's difficulty can be the new sections many newspapers
SPRITUALITY

have started — especially if they were created without adding resources. The higher profile sections place more demands on religion reporters for generating stories and arranging photography and art, but the beat still tends to be perceived as more expendable than others. Mason said. “If you need someone to fill in on the Sunday weekend desk, you pull the religion writer.”

Small papers in particular must juggle a lot to give religion its due. Typical of the challenge is that faced by the Midland Reporter-Telegram (circulation 22,000), which publishes an ambitious religion section each Saturday. Jimmy Patterson is the religion editor, but he also serves as a families columnist and online content editor. He plans his section six weeks in advance, lays it out and writes for it frequently. Additional reporting duties rotate among reporters on the city staff for one-week stints. Despite the challenges, Patterson attempts to put out a credible, complete section. “We’re not giving lip service to the religious community,” he said, “and we’re not church cheerleaders. Our objective is to educate readers.”

MUST THE RELIGION REPORTER BE RELIGIOUS?

Some critics of religion coverage have suggested that reporters are ill-prepared for the task because many are non-believers. The 1996 study by the Religion Writers Association debunked that myth, finding that more than 70 percent of religion writers consider religion very important in their lives and are very or somewhat active in their particular religion.

Still, John Dart and Jimmy Allen suggest that many journalists are “tone deaf” to the spiritual melody that gives meaning and definition to life. To them, religion in all its complexity is either a disturbing cacophony of sounds or innocuous background music easily tuned out.

In a profession that prides itself on skepticism and objectivity, is it necessary that someone covering religion be a believer?

Allan R. Andrews, an executive news editor for the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, said being religious is not a prerequisite for being a good religion reporter — just as having served in the military is not a prerequisite for covering the military. However, he wrote in a recent issue of Editor and Publisher, “a reporter steeped in these topics, though not necessarily experienced or specially trained, has deeper affinities with the larger reading audience.” He urged journalists to resist “experience-elitist attitudes” but also to “insist that reporters have a built-in compulsion to acquire as broad a range of knowledge as possible and pass some along to readers.”

Fortunately, journalism educators are responding to the increased market for knowledgeable writers about religion. The Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication has just created a religion and media interest group, and several journalism programs are adding courses on religion writing. Columbia University’s Graduate School of Journalism offers a seminar taught by Ari Goldman, a former religion reporter for The New York Times. Northwestern University’s Medill School of Journalism has teamed with Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary to offer a master’s in religion and journalism. The degree is coordinated by the Center for Religion & the News Media, which also sponsors regular conferences on the topic and has recently received funding from the Ford Foundation to study how the media cover religion, spirituality and ethics. The study focuses on the two Chicago newspapers, three weeklies and two network television news broadcasts and two local news broadcasts. It is due for release in the fall of 1999.

Still, most would agree there is plenty of room for improvement in religion coverage. “Research conducted over the past 20 years consistently shows that many journalists seriously underestimate both audience interest in news about religion and their dissatisfaction with what passes for coverage in many newspapers and on television,” according to Buddenbaum in Reporting News About Religion. She cites a 1989 nationwide survey that ranked religion news second in importance only to news of education. Sports, in contrast, ranked as the least important of nine kinds of specialty news. In reader satisfaction, though, sports was at the top, while religion was last.

WHAT NEWSPAPERS ARE DOING

Many newspapers are trying to close that satisfaction gap. Everywhere you look, there are signs of vitality and originality in covering churches as well as the broader areas of religion, values, ethics, volunteerism and spirituality. Much of the evidence can be found in weekly sections, although more and more often stories with religious themes — and not just stories about aberrant cults — are finding their way onto the front page.

Just as “women’s pages” yielded to “life” and “style” pages when their scope grew beyond recipes and engagement announcements, so too have church pages outgrown their name.

The 1996 survey of religion writers found the name “church news” has disappeared in all but the smallest markets. “Religion” is the most common name for separate pages and sections, with “faith and values” and “beliefs” not far behind.

Today’s religion sections typically include a mix of local content, wire stories and syndicated columns that suit the particular market. Some sections and pages still cling to local churches and clergy as the backbone of their content. Others venture into morality and the broader non-profit world. “At newspapers where there is a real commitment,” writes Judith Buddenbaum. “stories
in the religion section create a picture of the local religious community but they also serve as a window on the world."

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution (circulation 306,000) includes "religion, spirituality and volunteerism" as an underline to its "Faith & Values" section. The San Jose Mercury News (circulation 289,000) calls its section "Religion and Ethics."

The Bradenton (Fla.) Herald (circulation 43,000) combines stories about the body, mind and spirit in its weekly "WellBeing" section.

CONTENTS OF THE COVERAGE

Even religion sections in the biggest cities still have standing headers to package church events and briefs columns to handle items not worth a full-fledged story. Many are finding ways to package these fixtures with attractive design and clever names, such as "Amen Corner" in the Atlanta Journal-Constitution and "Word on the Street" in the Indianapolis Star and News (circulation 224,000).

The rotating column or guest sermon from local clergy is still a mainstay at many smaller newspapers. But some are finding fresher ways to involve local people and churches in their pages:

• The Midland (Texas) Reporter-Telegram is running a 66-part series on books of the Bible, written by a local minister. Each short segment gives a quick overview of the book and includes a sample verse. And each month, it poses questions to a representative of a non-mainline church in a segment called "What it means to be...?" The answers are printed verbatim with little trimming, according to Patterson, the religion editor. "It takes no writing," he said. "Just good questions."

• The Indianapolis Star and News gives details about a place of worship each week in its "Community of Faith" feature. The presentation is in a graphic format, complete with a clear locator map. The Minneapolis Star Tribune takes a different approach to a similar feature, called "Seeker's Diary." A freelance religion analyst attends a church service, takes his own photos and presents a narrative critique.

A common way religion sections have branched beyond the local churches is by covering religious publications, music, radio and television.

• Minneapolis' music column, called "Otherworldly Unplugged," offers readers a chance to hear the music being reviewed via audionet.

Indianapolis' new section offers several innovative features, including a profile of a place of worship and a weekly ethics question for reader response.

• Indianapolis plays off Marshall McLuhan for a column called "Media and the Message." The feature, compiled from staff and wire reports, surveys what's new in religious and spiritual arts, publishing and entertainment.

• The Grand Rapids Press (circulation 129,000) has a weekly column on "Books for Families," which contains new titles with spiritual themes.

Like other newspaper sections, religion sections are testing ways to engage and involve readers.
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- Minneapolis includes an item called "Gladly" in its weekly briefs column. The tag line for the item says: "We hope people of all faiths will join celebrating the fun, innocence and lighter side of faith."
- Indianapolis invites readers to submit "their special moments of spiritual clarity and inspiration" for a regular feature called "Touched by the Spirit."
- Indianapolis also invites readers to respond to a weekly ethics question, pegged to a timely subject. After Colombia was devastated by an earthquake, for example, the question concerned pleas for help in that distant country: "Is charity best directed closer to home?" After a Michigan company began offering lecture notes from Indiana University classes over the Internet, the column asked readers: "Is it OK to use these cyber-notes instead of going to class?" A sampling of answers is published the next week.
- Dallas recently invited readers to write about changing faiths and carried a sampling of the 46 responses.
- The San Jose Mercury News has a weekly "Door's Profile" on people who devote their time to helping others. Readers are invited to submit names for consideration.
- Several newspapers include readers' letters on religious topics in their religion sections, rather than grouping them with letters on the opinion pages. Atlanta's section has a full forum page, with the "Heaven's Salve" comic strip by Mike Morgan (Creators Syndicate) and a column by Dale Hanson Bourke, publisher of the Religion News Service.

NEW APPROACHES TO STORIES

Perhaps the greatest innovations in religion coverage can be seen in how religion reporters frame their stories. While they will still write plenty of holiday features and profiles of new ministers, many now stretch the definition of religion to include the intersection of faith with other facets of life and moral choices in the secular world.

Forgiveness was a common theme on religion pages in the wake of President Clinton's trials in 1998, for example. Atlanta's section has written about ministers who stray from the straight and narrow.

Charles Honey in Grand Rapids, Mich., has recently written cover stories for the Press' robust religion section about such topics as the devil, the theology of the millennium and assisted suicide. "Religion is a really broad area that can take you all over the place," said Honey, who has been religion writer since 1994. "I make a conscious effort to take it into different parts of the community."

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Todd Van Campen, religion writer for the Lexington (Ky.) Herald-Leader (circulation 122,000), has generated stories by inviting panels of clergy to view current movies with religious themes, such as "The Apostle" and "Prince of Egypt." He attends the movies with the clergy and gauges their reactions. For "Prince of Egypt," the panelists completed a questionnaire and graded the film for accuracy and quality.

Jimmy Patterson in Midland, Texas, cites a story he assembled after a spate of local layoffs. He sent an e-mail to 30 ministers asking whether they had addressed the issue from the pulpit and used their responses for a story.

Kelly Ettenborough, religion writer at the Arizona Republic (circulation 469,000), conducts occasional "reflections of faith" roundtables with local clergy; inviting 10 to send in brief statements on topics such as "why should

The Arizona Republic conducts "reflections of faith" roundtables of local clergy on timely topics.
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we be good” or the implications of the Starr Report. While these probably take longer to assemble than a routine reaction story, she said, they can be attractively packaged on the section’s centerspread — and generate a “ton of response.”

Etterborough also encourages writers on other beats to be attuned to faith angles. “Reporters on every beat have to realize the faith element in a story.” Ahearn at the Associated Press preaches similarly to his reporters around the globe.

Judith Buddenbaum concurs, saying it would be appalling if news organizations thought they had done their jobs of improving religion coverage simply by creating a religion section. “It should be everywhere,” she maintains. “Religion connects itself to everything.”

Research for this chapter was also gathered by Todd Van Campen, Todd Welbail, Lu-Ava Farrar and Susan Waggener of the Lexington Herald-Leader.

Genesis — and Exodus

Just as aggressive reporting of local political institutions can spark controversy, greater attention to religion is not without its risks.

The Daily Independent in Ashland, Ky. (circulation 22,000), started a monthly religion tabloid section in 1995. Managing editor Mike Reliford speaks with great pride about the section, which once had as many as 64 pages. But the newspaper discontinued the section in July 1998, in part because of community backlash to some stories that went beyond the mainstream faith of its readers. Some local ministers criticized the section from the pulpit, Reliford said, and some advertisers withdrew support. “We went the gamut and kind of cut our own throat,” Reliford says ruefully. “This is the Bible Belt at its best.”

DIVINE INSPIRATION


Dart is the recently retired religion writer for the Los Angeles Times. This 50-page handbook offers excellent, practical tips on covering religion. It includes a long list of other sources of information.

• Reporting News About Religion: An Introduction for Journalists (1998, $29.95), by Judith M. Buddenbaum; Iowa State University Press, 2121 S. State Ave., Ames, IA 50014-8300; 1-800-862-6657; www.isupress.edu. Buddenbaum is a professor with the Department of Journalism and Technical Communication, Colorado State University. A former reporter in Oregon, she was into writing religion before religion writing was cool.

• Religion Newswriters Association, 88 W. Plum St., Westerville, Ohio 43081; 614-891-9001; manuford.org or http://ma.org.

Debra Mason, a professor at Wittenberg College, is executive director of the Religion Newswriters Association. The association has several hundred members and holds an annual convention, usually in July. Membership costs from $25 to $75 per year and includes a bi-monthly newsletter and directory of members. Its 1998 awards booklet includes samples of winning religion writing, results of a phone survey of religion reporters, and a resource list for researching religion reporting.

• Religion in the News, a publication of the Pew Program on Religion and the Media, based at the Center for the Study of Religion in Public Life, Trinity College, 300 Summit St., Hartford, CT 06106; 860-297-2953; www.trincoll.edu/resources/esp.html. This new journal, published three times a year, provides commentary and perspective on religious issues in the news.

• Bridging the Gap: Religion and the News Media, by John Dart and Jimmy Allen; Freedom Forum First Amendment Center (see above).


• Unsecular Media, Making News of Religion in America (1998, $11.96), by Mark Silk; University of Illinois Press.

Continued...
SpiriPatternly

- Center for Religion & the News Media, 2121 Sheridan Road, Evanston, IL 60201; 847-866-3950. The center is run jointly by Garrett Theological Seminary and Northwestern University's Medill School of Journalism.
- The Public Religion Project, 919 N. Michigan Ave., Suite 540, Chicago, IL, 60611-1601; 312-297-6400; www.publicreligionproj.org. This project, funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts, is a joint effort of Pew and the Divinity School of the University of Chicago.

TRADE ARTICLES

Many journalism trade publications have written about trends in religion reporting in recent years. Among them:

- "God in the Newsroom," Nieman Reports, 47 (Summer 1993).

References

CHAPTER 10

SUPPORT

Alan Burcher
Beaver County Times

If 40 percent of American adults are involved in something, then it must be a good idea to cover it, right? But most newspapers aren’t buying it when it comes to regular coverage of support groups. It’s just not a hot item for newspapers around the country, even if it is a hot movement in our communities.

Researchers are examining the phenomenon of the growing support-group movement even while newspapers seem to be oblivious to the number of people who participate in these groups.

A national study conducted by the Gallup Organization in 1991 found that 40 percent of American adults say they are involved in “a small group that meets regularly and provides caring and support for those who participate in it.”

In a 1990 cover story, Newsweek defined support groups more narrowly but still estimated that 15 million Americans attended 500,000 group meetings per week. The number of such groups quadrupled between 1980 and 1990, the magazine said.

Andrew Kohut of the Pew Research Center for People and the Press researched the community involvements of people in Philadelphia, then said: “Most Philadelphians engage in informal activities that promote social contacts and are the basis of interpersonal networks. Most respondents, whether they’re playing softball or are in a self-help group, say they develop friendships and meet people who they can rely on to help them with personal problems.”

The Gallup study was the basis for a book, Sharing the Journey: Support Groups and America’s New Quest for Community, by Robert Wuthnow, a Princeton sociologist. He concluded that people are seeking out support groups because “nearly everyone in our society desperately wants community, but . . . most people have trouble finding it in all the way they would like it to be present in their lives.”
SUPPORT

Gallup found that more women are involved than men (44 to 36 percent), and participation increases by age, education and income — just like newspaper readership. Wuthnow reported these common denominators:

- Most demographics of those involved are no different from those who are not involved. In other words, small-group participants come from all walks of life.
- Small groups are diverse. They focus on different issues, follow different formats, vary on how they’re organized, and draw a diverse attendance.
- Small groups are quite stable and are taken seriously by their members.
- The groups provide encouragement to their members and they provide a wide variety of services.
- It doesn’t take a great deal of special knowledge or skill to make a group function well.
- Small groups do not, for the most part, compromise the individuality of their members.
- Many participants attend religion or spiritual-based groups, such as Bible study groups. It appears about 20 percent fit this category.
- Small groups make a difference to the lives of some people because it gives them an opportunity to tell their stories and they can receive nurturing at the group meeting.
- Members are often prompted to become active in their communities as a result of their thinking or discussing social and political issues.

WHAT ARE THESE GROUPS?

At first mention of “support group” or “self-help group,” the image of a 12-step or counseling program comes to mind. But Wuthnow’s conception encompasses any “small group that meets regularly and provides caring and support for those who participate in it.” Here are the most common kinds of groups, as described by their members, with the percentage of all group members who said each description applied to their current group or groups:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group Type</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Discussion group</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support group</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special interest group</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prayer fellowship</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bible study group</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunday school class</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women’s group</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-help group</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Since those are percentages of the 40 percent of Americans involved in support groups overall, that would mean, for example, that 10 percent of the population (26 percent of the 40 percent total) were “self-help” group participants. Kohn’s research in Philadelphia had similar findings: 11 percent of all adults participated in some sort of self-help group, and 21 percent were active in a “reading group, religious study group or other study group.”

Newsweek’s narrower definition: “Support groups in the past few years have sorted themselves into four basic categories: those that address problems of addictive behavior (Compulsive Shoppers, Workaholics and others that often follow a slight variation on AA’s 12 steps); those for physical and mental illness (Parkinson’s Support Group, Recovery Inc.); those for dealing with transition or some other crisis (Widowed Persons Service, Recently Divorced Catholics); and those for friends and relatives of people with a problem (Adult Children of Alcoholics, Parents of Agoraphobic Teen-agers).”

In its breezy style, Newsweek said, “These days nothing is too personal, it seems, to share with a group of strangers. The sexually dysfunctional gather at Inpotents Anonymous. Those who subsist unhappily among stacks of old Vogues and Ladies’ Home Journals can call Messies Anonymous — or maybe Crossroads, a group for male transvestites.” Groups, the magazine said, have “grown to include Compulsive Shoppers, Pedestrians First, the Triehotomaniacs Support Network (for people who pull their hair out, strand by strand) . . .

And so there is a group for every season. Got the midwinter blues? (Call Depressives Anonymous.) Are you obese? (Overeaters Anonymous or the National Association to Aid Fat Americans.) A gay Episcopalian? (Integrity.) Consider yourself asexual? (Finding Your Own Way.)”

More seriously, in an article in the Journal of Applied Behavioral Science, Morton A. Liebermann and Lonnie R. Snowden suggested that such diversity and specificity of common problems testifies to the vigor and scope of self-help groups.
SUPPORT

WHY DO PEOPLE SEEK OUT SUPPORT GROUPS?

Wuthnow wrote that 73 percent of his respondents joined their groups out of a "desire to grow as a person," and 60 percent joined because they were "invited by someone you know." Others said they wanted to become more disciplined in their spiritual life, needed emotional support or were having problems or a crisis in their lives.

A very small percentage of the groups claimed community service or political objectives as their primary reason for existence. But members of groups were more likely than others to be involved in charitable or other community work. As Wuthnow put it, "The members of small groups are quite often prompted to become more active in their communities, to help others who may be in need, and to think more deeply about pressing social and political issues."

Wuthnow suggests that support groups serve as a sort of surrogate for traditional communities and lifelong relationships that have been largely sacrificed as Americans become more mobile and free of traditional lifestyle constraints. "Community is no longer something we are born into. It is now something we must choose. And because people have diverse needs and interests, the range of communities competing for their attention has become equally diverse."

A small group, Wuthnow wrote, "provides a kind of social interaction that busy, rootless people can grasp without making significant adjustments in their lifestyles. It allows bonding to remain temporary... If small groups are the glue holding together American society (as some argue), they are then a social solvent as well."

"The attachments that develop among the members of small groups demonstrate that we are not a society of rugged individualists who wish to go it entirely alone but, rather, that we are a communal people who, even amidst the dislocating tendencies of our society, are capable of banding together in bonds of mutual support."

Wuthnow called the growth of small groups a "movement" that is beginning to alter American society. Small groups enrich the wider society, not so much by eradicate it of social ills or by fostering a better way of governing ourselves. They enrich social life by linking the individual to larger social entities and by bringing a personal, human dimension to public life. They allow people to be themselves, to be vulnerable, to be weak, to be motionally dis-traught, to be recovering from addictions, and yet to participate in the collective life of our society...

"The small group movement is testimony to our continuing quest for community."

WHAT NEWSPAPERS ARE DOING — OR NOT DOING

Sharing the Journey says that the growth of support groups has been little noted because "Groups such as these seldom make the headlines or become the focus of public controversy. They are not the stuff that reporters care very much about."

Nor do editors, according to the national survey for this handbook. Asked about the importance of covering "organized and informal support groups, such as discussion groups, AA and Parents Without Partners," editors ranked it last among 18 categories of news. On a five-point scale of importance, 48 percent of editors awarded the neutral 3, and 23 percent rated this subject lower, as unimportant.

And their coverage reflects this prioritization: 54 percent of editors rated their coverage of support groups as only fair or poor.

Interestingly, the higher editors rated their "community or local-local news" coverage, the more they thought of covering support groups. Among the editors who rated their local-local coverage excellent, 43 percent considered support-group coverage important and 69 percent said they are doing an excellent or good job covering it.

However, other findings of the survey indicate that editors may not understand this kind of news. Respondents were asked to indicate whether their papers "do anything innovative or interesting" in covering support groups as defined above. When the 15 editors who responded positively (out of 410 total respondents) were contacted later, they generally talked of their coverage of volunteer opportunities, donations needed, "soup kitchens" and other social-service efforts.

This misunderstanding sharpens the important distinction between people's outwardly motivated community activities — discussed in the Empowerment section of this handbook — and the support groups that are inwardly orient-ed, that is, they exist to serve the needs of their members, not other people.

To understand the small-group phenomenon, however, is to appreciate its potential for a new link to readers. The two editors who worked on this section of the handbook are planning to expand coverage. The Wisconsin State Journal, which now runs a weekly listing of support groups open to the public, is expanding that to a weekly feature highlighting one group and explaining how it began, how it functions and whom it serves. The Beaver County Times (circulation 44,000), in western Pennsylvania, is beginning a monthly lifestyles page feature on people who participate in the many self-help groups in its circulation area.

In pointing out that the small-group movement is well below the radar screens of traditional newspapers, Wuthnow said it is "a quieter revolution"
SUPPORT

SUPPORT GROUPS

Daily
Alcoholics Anonymous, a fellowship of men and women helping each other
recover from the disease of alcoholism, meets at numerous sites and times
daily in Madison and surrounding com-
munities, 220-6866.
Al-Anon, for people affected by al-
oholism in their family and friends, meets
daily at many sites around Madison, 241-
6554.
Overeaters Anonymous, for compuls-
ave eaters, no dues or fees, meetings
patterned after the 12-Step program,
279-5995.
Narcotics Anonymous, for recover-
ing addicts, meets daily, 258-1747.
Parents Anonymous has six groups
that meet weekly in Madison, 241-4666.

Tuesday
Narcotics Anonymous, self-
supporting recovery program to gain
freedom from nicotine, 6:30 p.m., 2015
Garnon Lane, 287-9780.
Recovers Inc., a self-help group for
people suffering from depression, tears
and anxiety, 7 p.m. at WMAI Neighbor-
hood Center, 663 Jenifer St., Information:
Tomi, 236-6020, or Dave, 244-1108. Also
at 7 p.m. at Yahara House, 532 E. Nor-
hem St., Information: Steve, 249-5950 or
Ann, 241-3038.
Parents Place West, 9:05 a.m. at
Covenant Presbyterian Church, 226 S
Regen Rd., 241-5150.
Parents Place P.M., especially for
single parents, 6:30 p.m. at 2130 Ford
Ave., 241-9100.
Parent Haven, 7 p.m. at 2200 For-
dam Ave., for parents of teens, no child
care provided, 241-5150.
Families Anonymous, 7 p.m. at St.
Matthew's Church, 20 Dempsey Road,
(Westwood's East), 231-2058.
Cassandra, 16-step recovery for au-
vivors of child abuse.

Monday
Workaholics Anonymous, noon
Mondays, music room at St. Paul's Uni-
versity Catholic Center, 723 State St.,
220-5050.
TOPS, a weight loss group, 5:45 p.m.
at Laverne Christian Church, 2626 Mar-
garet St., near the East Side Business
Men's Association, Information: Kanen,
244-9583, or Jan, 222-1458. A TOPS
workshop meeting is at 5 p.m. every Mon-
day at the Madison Senior Center, 330 W.
Mifflin St., 266-4051.
Feminist 16-Step Empowerment
Group for Women, based on Charlie
Kail's book "Man's Ruins, One Jour-
ney," 7 p.m. at the Inland, 14 W. Mif-
flin St. No charge, 244-9002.
Parents Place Allied, 6:30 p.m. at
2366 Red Arrow Trail. Call for avail-
able, 241-9100.
Low-Vision Support Group, 10 a.m.
the second Monday of each month at
the Madison Senior Center, 330 W. Mifflin,
833-6305.
Survivors to Thrivers, for education
and encouragement of victims of rape,
incest, child abuse or sibling abuse, 7 p.m.
weekly, 6701 Seybold Road, 279-4442.
Breezeway
Pet Loss Support Group, 6 p.m.
the second and fourth Tuesday at the Ven-
ery Medical Teaching Hospital, 2015
Linden Drive, 248-6170.
Schizophrenics Anonymous, for
persons with mental illness, twice a
month every other Saturday at 1 p.m.,
2069 Abudio Ave., 248-7198.
Head and Neck Cancer group, 1
p.m., second and fourth Wednesday.
Information: 262-5430.
Uptowners Toastmasters, noon on
the first and third Thursday at the
Frauenthal Building, 219 King St. Joes
the Wilson Street entrance.
Single Parent Connect.

The Wisconsin State Journal's full listing of local support groups can fill
a half page.

References
1. Robert Wuthnow, Sharing the Journey: Support Groups and America's New Quest for
2. Charles Leerhsen, Unile and Conquer: America's crazy for support groups. Or maybe sup-
   port groups keep America from going crazy, Newsweeke, Feb. 6, 1993.
   Research Center for The People and The Press, Washington, D.C.
4. Wuthnow, Sharing the Journey: Support Groups and America's New Quest for Commu-
   nity.
5. Morton A. Lieberman and Lorraine R. Snowdon, Problems in Assessing Prevalence and
   Membership Characteristics of Self-Help Group Participants, Journal of Applied Behavioral

American society:
Few people are involved in small groups because they are trying
 to launch a bill or address the attention of officials.
These groups have little to say about tax initiatives, the
national debt or the public school system. They are not staging
protest marches or picketing the nation's capital. Seldom, if ever,
do members of small groups appear on talk shows to make scoun-
dalous statements about sex, politics or religion. They are, for the
most part, off in the wings when others are clamoring about abor-
tion rights or attempting to challenge the Supreme Court. With
the exception of a few lobbying groups, they are not trying to
influence public policy. Nor are they soliciting funds, selling stock,
distributing products or earning a profit. They are simply the private,
largely invisible ways in which individuals choose to spend a part
of their free time. In an era when television networks and nation-
al newspapers increasingly define what is important, it is thus easy
to dismiss the small-group phenomenon entirely.

To overlook this trend, however, would be a serious mistake.

So now you know about it. Coverage of support groups certainly is not the
silver bullet we all want to find to shoot or declining circulation numbers
upward. But creative coverage of this phenomenon may well be another tool
that editors should keep in their toolboxes if they are to remain relevant to
readers' real lives.
IDENTITY
NEWSPAPER editors and academic researchers agree the daily newspaper plays a vital role in reflecting a community's identity — and, in fact, reinforcing readers' sense of membership in the community.

The researchers provide detailed studies showing people's desire to belong to a community. They offer evidence of a link between newspaper readership and a strong sense of community.

The editors provide passionate reasons to keep the link strong. They offer innovative ways to help build community, which by extension should help build newspaper readership.

In his book, News Values: Ideas for an Information Age, Jack Fuller, former editor of the Chicago Tribune and now president of Tribune Publishing Co., wrote: "To survive, a newspaper must reflect a specific audience, usually by holding up a mirror to a particular place. It must share with its readers a sensibility and a set of interests, tastes and values."

At the Daily Reporter in Greenfield, Ind., helping the people of Hancock County feel they belong is about more than contributing to the community; it's about survival of the newspaper itself, according to Editor Dave Scott.

At the Mercury News in San Jose, Calif., assistant managing editor John Krim said, "This is something we see as essential if daily newspapers are to survive: to define the singular characteristics of a community and to have the newspaper reflect some of those."

People want to belong to something, to identify with something beyond themselves. "Man is by nature a social animal," James Q. Wilson emphasized in The Moral Sense."

Numerous surveys in recent years have shown that, despite disaffection with political institutions and politics generally, Americans continue to care deeply about, and be active in, their communities.

Identity and a sense of belonging often are defined geographically, particu-
IDENTITY

Ariz., and found that "newspapers play a role in maintaining community identity and cohesiveness. This study, conducted in the nation's largest retirement community, found that as readership of the paper increased, people were more involved and less satisfied living in the community." They hypothesized that, in this case, more knowledge and involvement heightened residents' awareness of problems.

A large body of research supports the strong relationship between newspaper reading and people's ties to community. A 1996 study demonstrated that, while newspaper reading contributed to individuals' community ties, TV news viewing did not. The newspapers' advantage was concluded to be "greater geographic specificity" and "greater space...for detailed reporting." That study also found that people define for themselves a "geography of relevance." That is, "It stands to reason that the more often people leave their resident community to perform routine activities, the less likely is their intense attachment or involvement in that community. Likewise, the local newspaper will be of less immediate relevance."

Another 1996 study found that the more a person used local news media, the greater his or her "community integration"—including psychological attachment or sense of community, interpersonal discussion networks, identification with community social groups or organizations and political involvement. But this research too raised the chicken-and-egg question: "Local media use may strengthen community ties, but it is also possible that strong community ties lead people to pay close attention to local issues in their daily newspapers and local broadcasts."

For a newspaper, however, the debate is academic. If a strong community identity is an attribute of readers, the only question for a newspaper that wants to increase readership is how can it foster a sense of identity among community members and then reflect that identity in its pages.

HOW SOME NEWSPAPERS UNDERSTAND SENSE OF COMMUNITY

The first step is understanding the community identity or identities, which will vary from community to community and newspaper to newspaper.

- Randolph Brandt, editor of the Journal Times in Racine, Wis., defines community identity as a "feeling of pride in place mixed with a sense of civic responsibility." If the newspaper is tied into that, the newspaper is probably mining that community identity as well as helping to build it. If you read the newspaper and you get a sense of the place, the newspaper is probably doing well." Brandt said community papers have opportunities to foster identity and connect with readers where metropolitan dailies may not. "The goal is to build sort of an intimate relationship with
readers," he said.

- At the Virginia Pilot in Norfolk, Va., editors want the paper and its readers to have an "emotional bond," which it fosters by making sure all readers can see themselves in the paper, not just officials, criminals, celebrities. They've developed special community pages that "attempt to capture what's normal" instead of "what happened yesterday or will happen tomorrow," said Deputy Managing Editor Tom Warhover. "It's less about information than a conversation. . . As a friend, I'm going to help you cope with your daily life."

- At the San Jose Mercury News, Krim tells his reporters and editors to find the community's definition by thinking like outsiders. If they came to the community for the first time to do a story, what dominating characteristics of the community would appear in the story? Local newspapers sometimes lose sight of what defines their communities, so they need to take a step back and look at the area as an outsider would, he said. "I believe that every newspaper can more aggressively look at their community and identify one or two characteristics and write more about them." Krim said. "If a newspaper can't describe what's unique about the community, they're not looking very closely."

- In addition to looking closely, journalists should look frequently, because the community identity or identities change. As Jeannine Gutman, editor of the Portland Press-Herald in Maine, said, "The hard thing about identity is that it evolves. That's the most difficult piece for journalists because we like to, on some level, label things. Communities evolve very rapidly."

- How the community defines itself often is more hopeful and less critical than newspaper reporters and editors view the community, according to Mark Ridolfi, city editor of the Quad-City Times, which serves Davenport, Bettendorf and Rock Island in Iowa and Moline in Illinois. "To make it work, you have to identify a handful of community topics that are important to readers, then make sure your reporting doesn't stray from those key topics," he said. "Creating community — that is, audience — is why our business is vital. Our franchise is the geographic community where we're located. Our future is identifying the demographic communities within the geographic communities and creating 'interest communities' that cut across demographics."

Understanding the identities within a newspaper's area is hard work. While the industry has created some measurement tools to determine community identity (more on that later), a "psychological sense of community" scale devised by Davidson and Gorter offers a new way to think about community.
IDENTITY

Identity and how a newspaper can reflect it. (See accompanying article.) People who score higher on the scale also scored higher on social identification and on civic involvement. Its application to newspapers is obvious for some of the scale's statements, but the others may offer unrealized potential for fostering community in a newspaper.

How to build sense of community

If building a sense of community also means building readership, editors might consider using the same tool that scholars use to assess what they call "psychological sense of community."

While psychologists have used a variety of approaches to understand and measure sense of community, a 17-item psychological sense of community scale devised by Davidson and Cotter in 1986 has been tested a number of times and found valid and reliable. In the hands of creative newspaper editors, it might offer a new way to think of community identity and how a newspaper can reflect it. Here are the 17 questions that, together, provide a good measure of sense of community:

Sense of Community Scale
1. When I need to be alone, I can be.
2. It is easy to make friends and meet people in this city.
3. The people in this city are polite and well mannered.
4. I like the house (or apartment) in which I live.
5. I like the neighborhood in which I live.
6. I feel safe here.
7. I like my neighbors.
8. This city gives me an opportunity to do a lot of different things.
9. This is a pretty city.
10. I feel I can contribute to city politics if I want to.
11. It would take a lot for me to move away from this city.
12. It is easy to get around in this city.
13. I would say that I am involved in lot of different activities here.

14. If I need help, this city has many excellent services available to meet my needs.
15. There are good opportunities here for me to practice my religion in this city.
16. When I travel, I am proud to tell others where I live.
17. I feel like I belong here.

Since these items measure psychological sense of community, might we encourage that sense — and thus readership — by augmenting or reinforcing these attributes in our communities? While some of these items are beyond our influence (No. 1, for example), others offer potential as elements of our coverage.

For instance, the statement "there are good opportunities here for me to practice my religion in this city" shows a need for strong and useful religion coverage. Or, "if I need help, this city has many excellent services available to meet my needs" points to aggressively providing information on what help is available related to a story's topic. "This city gives me an opportunity to do a lot of different things," and the newspaper can list them all, with helpful information. Traffic updates can help the reader easily "get around in this city."

More subtly, "this is a pretty city" tells a newspaper that its readers and potential readers want to see the attractive aspects of their town when they pick up their papers. That may mean more photos of the city at its best, more coverage of museums or historic homes, more pages for gardening and outdoor activities to show the natural beauty of a community. A typical weather photo can show a community scene negatively or positively and still accurately portray the weather. It involves reflecting the community from a different mindset.

The same goes for "I feel like I belong here." And combine that with "I feel I can contribute to city politics if I want to," and stories about politics may become framed around community problem-solving and help for getting involved (see Empowerment section of this handbook).

Frank Denton
IDENTITY

Newspapers already are addressing some of these components of sense of community. For just one example, the Lima News in Ohio undertook a project that reflects the item, “When I travel, I am proud to tell others where I live.” In 1998, Editor Ray Sullivan sent his local columnist and photo editor to report on 18 other Limas in the United States and how they compared to the Ohio one. This year, the paper is providing monthly in-depth reports on the city — its history, ethnic mix, economic and social changes — that will culminate in stories on “people who love Lima and why they’re not crazy.”

WHAT EDITORS AND PUBLISHERS THINK

In the survey for this handbook, 72 percent of editors and 85 percent of publishers agreed that it is important for newspapers to provide coverage that gives “local communities identity and help(s) residents feel a part of the community.” Thirty percent of editors and 42 percent of publishers rated it “extremely important.” Among the 19 content areas included in the survey, community identity and belonging ranked 14th in importance among editors.

Both groups believe newspapers are doing very well in coverage of these types of stories, with 73 percent of editors and 80 percent of publishers giving their papers either excellent or good ratings. But that leaves one in four editors and one in five publishers who considered their coverage only fair or poor.

It may be significant that the higher editors rated the overall quality of their own community and local-local coverage, the more importance they placed on building community identity and the better job they thought they were doing on that issue.

There apparently are no comparable studies asking readers specifically for their opinions of newspapers’ coverage of news, institutions or organizations that promote community identity or readers’ sense of belonging.

WHAT NEWSPAPERS ARE DOING

A number of newspapers around the country have tried in varying ways, and with varying degrees of success, to tap into the sense of identity and belonging of their areas’ residents. The efforts center on three themes, which are used concurrently. Large projects to illuminate community identity, regular features that offer opportunities to reflect identity, and integration of those identities into the daily paper. Newspapers have created innovative ways to implement those themes, from mailing front sections almost entirely local, using zoning more effectively, changing the narrative style of the paper, creating special sections, finding new columns and projects that have lasted as long as a year. And Web sites increasingly are part of their strategies in reflecting and fostering community identity.

IDENTITY

The communities covered often revolve around geographic areas, but many papers also created communities based on ethnicity, age and other factors. In some cases, newspapers have created a sense of community identity where none was apparent. Some have developed concrete measures of success; others have more informal methods to determine whether their efforts have fostered a sense of community identity.

PROJECTS

• The Spokesman-Review in Spokane, Wash., took on the issue of reflecting community to attract readers directly. The paper spent two years asking women readers about their lives in the community and how they see themselves reflected in the newspaper. Then it reported the results in its Perspective section. "Women asked us over and over why our front pages didn’t seem to reflect the issues they truly care about. So I asked the woman to write headlines that would appear on their own 'personal front pages,'" wrote Interactive Editor Rebecca Nappi in one of the stories. "They had some universal worries on those personal pages, such as the environment and schools. But they also had these questions: 'What will I make for dinner? Why do my teens make me crazy? What will I do for my aging mother? Why am I so tired?'" Other findings: Women didn’t see themselves pictured in the paper, they wanted hope as well as the hard news of the day, they wanted solutions as well as problems, and they want to read how they are connected to their community, workplace, families and past.

• Newsday used the notion of shared history as community identity in its project, “Long Island — Our Story.” In 273 parts and 20 special sections spread over nine months in 1998, the paper told the history of the island from its formation 20,000 years ago to today. “This did more than anything Newsday had ever done to create a sense of community on Long Island,” said Managing Editor Howard Schneider, who directed the project. “One requirement of community is a
sense of a collective past. Without a shared past, it's hard to have sense of community. But we wanted to connect it to what's going on today, so in addition to creating a sense of historical community, you needed (to read) it to understand today's community."

In addition to publishing the project in the paper, Newsday created a Web site that offered more information, archived by community, and included video and audio information. The paper also produced a weekly show on Long Island history with the local cable TV station and a daily radio spot. It developed a curriculum through its Newspaper in Education program; 1,600 classrooms read the series every day.

The project continues through a special bus Newsday sends to schools and communities groups — a rolling museum of Long Island historical artifacts, from a wigwam to cookstove and Long Island native Jerry Seinfeld's report card. The paper also is running a series in 1999 examining the future of Long Island. "This project so stimulated another part of our brain in terms of how we tell stories," Schneider said. "It's about giving people a sense of time and place and the contextual glue for a community as we become an increasingly fragmented society."

* The San Francisco Examiner is continuing a project called "New City" began in 1998 as a one-year look at the changing demographics, culture and economy of the city as it becomes increasingly Asian. The occasional series the first year featured extensive reporting on the neighborhoods, businesses and people of a changing city; it also included "First Person" features written by readers. "We decided to continue to run with the 'New City' logo because it's really the story of San Francisco," said Managing Editor Sharon Rosenhouse. "It's the story of San Francisco for the rest of our lives."

The paper conducted a multi-language poll to find out how residents, particularly new residents, felt about the city on topics such as crime, government, the neighborhoods. Editors also hired an urban demographer to give them a tour of the city outside the usual stops, which has become so popular that more than 100 staffers have taken it.

"When we started we thought we were doing a pretty good job of neighborhood coverage," Rosenhouse said. "We found we were not doing as good a job as we could."

Reporters from all sections of the paper contribute to the "New City" series. Rosenhouse cites a prep sports reporter who found that the games played by new residents are different — cricket instead of baseball, for instance. "There is tremendous newsroom-wide support for the project," she said. "Each story was an eye-opener."

IDENTITY

- The Tri-City Herald in Washington serves three cities on the Columbia River, with residents divided between researchers and farmers. Last year, the paper's staff realized Hispanics had grown into a major proportion of the area's residents, so they put together a 16-page special section called "A New Majority," addressing the Hispanics' newfound political and economic strength.

Similarly, the Poughkeepsie Journal in New York's Hudson River Valley used a 16-page report to address the growing number of Mexican immigrants in the area.

REGULAR FEATURES

The Philadelphia Daily News also was concerned that immigrants might not view the paper as their own. The paper ran a special section, "The New Philadelphians," with excerpts in the languages of the source in the main profile each day. The special section became the basis for regular features in the paper. It's "One of Us" feature profiles a "new" Philadelphian once a week now, and the Clout page of movers and shakers, features a monthly profile by the immigration/ethnic communities.

- The Observer in La Grande, Ore., has changed during the last year to offer 80 percent local news. The nine communities served by the Observer have been given the opportunity to contribute to a Community Spotlight column. Although the program just started, Editor Ted Kramer envisions city councils and chambers of commerce writing articles about their activities. Communities tend to identify themselves by their schools, Kramer said, so the newspaper has decided to offer a page each month to each area high school.

- The North Adams Transcript in Massachusetts also gives its readers access to the news pages with its "Wish List" column, which allows nonprofit groups and schools to submit requests for things they need, and is planning a supple-
ment called "Local Heroes" (readers make suggestions of heroes and the reporters write stories).

- Because most of the residents of Boulder, Colo., have lived there only a short time, the Daily Camera publishes a weekly page called "Our Town" to create a sense of community identity by highlighting a neighborhood or a slice of community life. The page has featured stories on the alleys of Boulder, historical homes turned into offices, and life on the farm.

  "We hoped to connect these new residents with their new hometown," said Editor and Publisher Colleen Conant. "And we hoped that by sharing information about people, places and history, we would remove some of the barriers that had grown up between Boulder city folks and Boulder county folks. Circulation is on the rise... and readership is showing solid improvement," which were the two measures the paper used to determine success of the page, Conant said.

- Another Colorado newspaper, the Gazette in Colorado Springs, launched a weekly "Our Town" section essentially fronting the local news report in the Monday paper. It focuses on communities of interest like political action groups or the elderly as well as geographic communities.

- The Herald in Rock Hill, S.C., reflects its community by its weekly Neighbor of the Week, Teacher of the Week and Business Profile of the Week, which include photos. "Over the course of a year, we get a lot of names and faces in the paper, all of which reinforce the notion that our readers are part of a community," said Editor Terry Plumb.

- The "Good News" page in the Utica, N.Y., Observer-Dispatch salutes student achievers and offers a community photo of the week as well as the top story from a neighborhood.

- Dave Scott, editor of the Daily Reporter in Indiana says Hancock County has seen a large influx of residents from Indianapolis. As the community and its leaders deal with the changes, the Daily Reporter has taken steps to guarantee its central role. "It's a tough thing to incorporate new people into an existing social structure," Scott said. "There's a real identity crisis in parts of this county."

  As long-time residents leave, farms disappear and a new group of suburbanites moves in, the sense that Hancock County residents belong to a unique community is weakened, he said. "Many new residents "sleep in Hancock County but work, play and go to church in Marion County."

The Boulder Daily Camera's weekly Our Town page tries to create a sense of community identity among the city's many newcomers.

The small daily newspaper recently initiated several changes aimed at fostering community identity. The paper now devotes its front page almost entirely to local news, and it provides editorial space once a month to a nongovernmental group of concerned citizens called "Front Porch." Residents involved
IDENTITY

in “Front Porch” meet regularly to discuss issues fueled by growth, such as
dimensions: 1034.0x677.0
changes in education and housing. Representatives of the group write a monthly
column in the Daily Record that serves to keep residents informed of issues and
events that affect them, Scott said.

He believes that efforts aimed at connecting with new residents — and
convincing them of the relevance of the Daily Reporter — are paying off in terms
of circulation gains. “We’re picking up more and more of those people all the
time, but there’s a lag” between the time they move to the county and when
they begin subscribing to the newspaper, he said. “It’s tougher all the time to
convince folks that there is a community here and that they belong to it.”

INTEGRATION INTO THE DAILY REPORT

• The Journal Times in Racine, Wis., which serves an ethnically and racially
diverse readership area, used the ASNE Covering the Community diversity audit
to establish a baseline of the paper’s awareness of its communities. The
results were good, but the paper has identified several areas for improvement,
said Editor Brandt.

Staff members at the paper have responded well to Brandt’s increased efforts
at recognizing diversity and leveraging it for the paper’s benefit. “We seem to
be increasing the numbers of diverse sources in stories,” he said, adding that
staff members did not resent the diversity audit: “Most people find it to be eye-
opening.”

Brandt measures how well the paper is doing by monitoring unsolicited read-
er feedback in the form of letters and phone calls. When a reader does take the
time to call, Brandt acknowledges their interest by keeping in touch with them
over time to continue receiving feedback.

• At the Portland Press Herald and Maine Sunday Telegram, reporters are
aggressively going into neighborhoods to “do a lot of listening. We’ve done sem-
ninars on developing listening skills, developing quotes from people who don’t talk in sound bites,” said Editor Guttmann. “The harder part is reflecting and
connecting with people every day in the paper.”

The paper has started a daily column of local dispatches with the goal of
making it about all the groups working within a community. It intends to cre-
ate a reader advisory group to provide ongoing feedback.

Guttmann said she also constantly examines the beat structure to make sure it
matches the community. “What if we took the education beat and renamed it
children? Would that change the sort of stories we’d get out of that beat?”

“We try to make the stories connect to people — sometimes very difficult on
deadline,” she said. “We monitor our watchdog role and pay attention to things

that impact a lot of people, like government. The challenge is to explain how
it’s affecting them, to include them in the stories.”

• The Sun News in Myrtle Beach, S.C., uses its new daily Community Page
with a featured story and briefs to get news about as many communities as pos-
sible into the daily paper.

• Warhover said the Virginian Pilot has three weekly pages — education, pub-
lic life and public safety — that are intended to let readers see their stake in the
community by giving them useful tools to assess the performance of pub-
lic institutions and framing politics as community problem-solving. The pages
use a lot of scorecards, test scores, crime maps, non-narrative copy and data-
base reporting to get at those things.

“If we’re kind of creating communities, then that’s success,” he said. The
paper also conducts reader surveys and has found reader satisfaction is high
for the themed pages.

• Krim of San Jose said that identifying and tapping into the characteristics of
a community’s identity “gives a newspaper purpose. ... It helps you provide a
compass when you’re trying to allocate resources,” he said.

At the Poynter Institute, Krim picked up the term “master narrative,” which
he uses to describe how a newspaper should approach telling the community’s
stories in its pages each day. Although not every story deals with the master
narrative, the overall concept is that the newspaper’s not just a mirror to the
community (because that won’t teach people anything) but a window (because
people can look in and learn). “You’re beginning to focus your newspaper
around the identity of the community,” Krim said. “It makes the newspaper
more relevant.”

Ed Carter, a graduate student at Northwestern University Medill School of
Journalism, contributed to this chapter.
WHERE TO GET MORE INFORMATION


Going Online to Build Community Identity

"To really accomplish community publishing, it is critical for the newspaper to see itself as far more than the newsroom. We are a vital glue to the community on many fronts," according to Glenn Ritt, vice president of news and information at the Bergen Record in Hackensack, N.J. "The model sees the newspaper as a communications company that serves its entire region as a digital infrastructure. Once in place, it becomes a vast and deep window to the local world that can be used by reporters."

Ritt said the paper created three sites that the newspaper staff has used to expand the online editorial presence into interactivity:

- Latino columnist Miguel Perez has become editor of a site (www.njlatinos.com) that extended his franchise into connecting much of his community.
- The features department created a community around its book club (www.njcommunities.com/sites/recordbookclub), which also appears in print.

- There is a growing sport fan club site (www.bergen.com/index/sports.htm) where the paper offers opportunities for readers to talk about sports online.

“Our news accounts need to be professional and accurate and as objective as possible,” said Ritt, noting that partnering with community groups should be done outside the newsroom. “But, does the process of knowing your community occur with detachment? Or, can community building and sharing the digital franchise with your communities and governments provide the newspaper company with unprecedented and valuable information, knowledge and insight to do its job better?”

Jack Fuller’s book notes that “this new medium seems to appeal to its audiences in large part because of the way it pulls people together.”

But he also wrote that “newspapers grow out of the soil of community. They have always been a kind of Daily We. They should capitalize upon this communal element as they attempt to harness the power of the interactive medium. The fragmentation of society makes people uncomfortable. They need to have new ways of finding one another and connecting. They need something to build conversations on. That is what the common, traditional newspaper has always provided.”

Creating community, and with it, audience, makes the newspaper company vital.

“Our opportunity is to create interest communities that cut way across geographic lines, using the Internet,” said the Quad-City Times’ Rudolf. “The newspaper and the Internet aren’t mutually exclusive endeavors. It’s what we can do best.”
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References
13. Davidson and Cotter, Measurement of Sense of Community Within the Sphere of City. (The second, seventh, and twelfth items are actually stated negatively in the scale for methodological purposes, but have been reversed here for understanding.)

RECOGNITION
CHAPTER 12

RECOGNITION

James R. Osteen
Gainsville (Fla.) Sun

Some people refer to them as "refrigerator medals" — newspaper clippings of individual accomplishments which adorn the most used kitchen appliance in America.

These newsprint medals account for an important connection between a newspaper, its community and its readers. News which serves to recognize individual accomplishments provides a sort of community honor roll. And, such listings of achievers does more than merely brighten the day of the reader who sees his or her name in print; it promotes a sense of place and brings a paper closer to people's lives.

"Drill down deeper," Jennie Bueser, editor of the Charlotte Observer, wrote in Fighting Smarter, the 1998 ASNE Readership Committee report. "Don't think you're too sophisticated for community journalism. Our definition of 'important' journalism must include stories about grass-roots struggles and hometown heroes if we're going to better connect with readers."

From the 19th century to the present, the success of local newspapers has been dependent on the ability to link readers in a common bond of local identity. With the trend toward suburbanization of cities and continuing fragmentation of readership, the job of providing a sense of community has become more complex. But it is clear that giving recognition to those who work on community projects does in itself serve to build a connection. In a sense, the importance of noting the achievements of our citizens is back-to-the-future thinking.

At an ASNE session on small newspapers in 1990, John McMillan challenged editors: "In the search for public life, look beyond government. Look at the voluntary associations. . . and all the other groups that we tend to regard as sacred cows. . . persons active in those voluntary organizations are our best readers." They still are.

Modern research on the phenomenon of recognition-by-publication is
sparse, but the phenomenon was recognized almost a half century ago by Morris Janowitz. In his important book on the complementary roles of urban-neighborhood weeklies and metro dailies, Janowitz identified four advantages of the community press. One was: "The community press is generally perceived as an extension of the reader's personal and social contacts because of its emphasis on news about voluntary associations and local social and personal news. As such, it constitutes a device for democratizing prestige, especially since there are few barriers to inserting personal or organizational news. For the majority of readers, this function acts as an extension and reinforcement of social contacts which have real existence in the local community." In other words, some readers expect to find the names of people they know in the paper.

However, Janowitz went on to point out a substantial minority of readers for whom "such content would serve as a substitute gratification in the absence of primary social contacts." He illustrated with quotations from two of the respondents in his research. One said: "It's very neighborly even if you don't know the people; you know the streets and you can just about figure out which house they live in." The other said: "I always look for names, maybe you do not know them, but you know they're neighbors."

Janowitz also noted that "readership of social and personal news involves 'equals.' The individuals publicized are men and women quite similar to the reader. Associative remarks reveal not only an interest in the names of neighbors but also a preoccupation with the democratic aspects of prestige."

In a 1993 Twentieth Century Fund book on the future of the daily newspaper, Frank Denton offered an editor's perspective on this recognition function:

"While TV may have become Americans' tribal campfire, the newspaper remains the community chronicler, the traditional wall on which banners are posted. Somehow, many occasions in our culture are not really recognized as important until they are in the newspaper. It is where we recognize achievements, honor heroes, announce engagements, report weddings, celebrate anniversaries, shame malefactors, and thank benefactors and Samaritans. It is as if the newspaper holds the power of validation. Editors learn the minimum level of recognition to be given a local high-school championship team, and they know clippings of honor rolls and civic clubs live forever in family scrapbooks."

"I remember the high-powered lawyer who steamed across a crowded room to tell me how angry he was at my newspaper. Since he also was a lobbyist, I assumed the issue was political, but that was not what was so important. His daughter had just graduated..."

with considerable honors from Stanford, and he had been told the paper didn't have a regular place for such an item (we created one). There was the woman who routinely called me to demand coverage of crew regattas whenever one was in town. After several years of trying to satisfy her, it came out in one of our conversations that she only picked up the paper when she thought there would be a crew story. "I never have time to read the paper," she said merrily, but she believed firmly that the crew results were so important they should be there. Our family archives include several copies of one of my competitor's front pages, because my four-year-old was accidentally included in a feature photograph. Somehow, to us, the photo became special by our knowing it had been plopped on front porches all over town.

Editors call this phenomenon "refrigerator journalism" because so many of those clippings end up behind magnets.

If a lot of crime news creates the perception among readers of "too much bad news" in the paper (see this handbook's section on safety), then too little of this recognition news may have the same effect. Readership research for years has shown that varying majorities of Americans feel that newspapers seek bad news and avoid good news. For example, after finding that 66 percent of her respondents felt newspapers pay too much attention to "bad news" and not enough to "good things," veteran researcher Ruth Clark quoted one: "If there is a drug bust in the high school, it is on the front page. If we raise money for the band to take a trip, it is not in the paper."

"That is not to argue that we avoid bad news like the drug bust, but rather that we balance it with sufficient good news to give a more accurate, as well as constructive, view of life in our communities. As metropolitan areas become more racially and ethnically diverse, this role of democratizing prestige can help build community as well as readership. "Newspapers," Leo Bogart once wrote, "represent a unique force for social cohesion."

WHAT EDITORS THINK ABOUT "REFRIGERATOR JOURNALISM"

Editors of the smallest newspapers, of course, have always understood and valued this kind of news. Editors of larger papers traditionally have disdained it, or at least surrendered to the difficulty of producing it for their larger circulation areas. But as all newspapers work harder to get close to their audiences, there is evidence this is changing.

The survey of editors and publishers for this handbook found that newspapers across the country, large and small, are making a central part of their mission the goal of helping the community learn about itself and its people. And
local achievers, good Samaritans and other community achievers are a vital piece of the local news picture.

Asked about the importance of the newspaper’s "recognition of local heroes, good Samaritans or other achievers in the community," 89 percent of editors awarded a 4 or 5 on a scale of 5, with 53 percent rating it "extremely important." Predictably, the ratings were directly related to the size of the newspaper, with 94 percent of small-paper editors rating the coverage as important, compared to 71 percent of 100,000-plus editors. The same was true for publishers, including the overall importance rating of 88 percent.

Editors and publishers also think their newspapers do a pretty good job of recognizing people in the community. Eighty-four percent of editors and 52 percent of publishers said their papers do an excellent or good job. Again, the scores went up as the circulation went down.

One disagreement should interest editors of newspapers over 50,000 circulation. Twenty percent of them rated their coverage in this area as fair or poor, but 35 percent of their publishers expressed that level of dissatisfaction. The increased support of small-paper editors for this kind of news may stem from the role of the newspaper in a smaller community, David Stoneberg, managing editor of the Lake County Record-Bee in Lakeport, Calif., said. "You have to do this in a small community," he said.

HOW NEWSPAPERS ARE PROVIDING RECOGNITION

Intentionally or not, every daily newspaper confers recognition on its community achievers — in major profiles but also in voluminous small-type listings, in sports achievements but also promotions at work, and in general good works around the community. Here are examples of papers that do it deliberately and systematically:

• At the Orange County Register, which has been an incubator for innovation, there is a concerted effort to reach deeper into the community. The California paper has two part-time employees assigned to a "making a difference beat," according to Rebecca Allen, a team leader. Working with the Harvard Group of Bethesda, Md., she has been running a program designed to help the newsroom find new sources of news at all layers of the community and write stories that are "essential and useful" to readers. As part of that, the paper is working to expand its source lists by looking for people who spark change and people who connect various groups. "In other words," Allen said, "people who know what is happening in our community before it reaches the city council or the county board of supervisors." The Register also seeks to find people doing something interesting for a regular Sunday front-page article, and finding heroes and good news is a priority.

• At the Gainesville (Fla.) Sun, a part-timer was hired to do a Sunday feature called "Hidden Heroes," which recognizes volunteers and others who are doing significant good works in the community. The Sun also asks readers to nominate candidates for a Community Service Award given annually, with the recipient selected by a panel of previous winners of the award.

• The Sarasota (Fla.) Herald-Tribune places great emphasis on individual activities and accomplishments, according to Executive Editor Diane McFarlin. The recently redesigned paper has created a place for recognition on virtually every section of the paper. McFarlin said the centerpiece of the effort is the "Community Central" page that appears daily in the B section and is zoned for each of the paper's five editions. "It's labor-intensive, but serves our primary venue for very local news about people and organizations," McFarlin said. Features include briefs columns like "Take a Bow," photo packages like "Here's Looking at You," and profiles like "In a Class of His (Her) Own." Also, columnist's missions include celebration of the accomplishments of people and organizations.

• "Lake County Stars" is a similar local recognition program sponsored by the Lake County Record-Bee. Managing Editor Stoneberg said the point of the awards is "to recognize people who've been in the community and have done a tremendous amount of things with no recognition." This year's awards included a 19-year-old clerk who saw a man collapse in the store, started CPR..."
and saved the man's life. The newspaper hosts a black-tie dinner for 500 people in this community of 50,000. Local businesses sponsor a five-course dinner. Stoneberg said the community response has been tremendous.

- A similar award has been established at the Newport (R.I.) Daily News. Editor David Offer said the only restrictions are that the winner is recognized for service, and not in elective or appointed office. A committee of eight business leaders was recruited to judge the Daily News award. The program was announced in a story on 1A and with a series of house ads. Offer said there were about 50 nominations for the award. According to Offer, the project costs very little but results in "enormous community interest and good will" for the newspaper.

- Sue Deans, editor of the Sun News in Myrtle Beach, S.C., said her newspaper has been recognizing "Volunteers of the Year" for a number of years. Nominees are profiled in the paper and honored at a luncheon. The winner is selected by a newspaper publisher from outside the area. "It's a very feel-good event," Deans said. The Sun News also publishes a regular Monday feature called "Making a Difference," which salutes people who do just that. Reporters at the paper take turns writing it.

- "Know Your Madisonian" has been a very popular fixture of the Wisconsin State Journal in Madison for decades. It is a Sunday profile of an interesting person in the community who somehow contributes to civic life and who is not otherwise in the public eye. Every reporter on the paper is responsible for a "Madisonian" on a rotating basis. People in the city consider it a high honor, and local businesses tend to send the honorees laminated copies. In addition, the State Journal has an annual award for "Ten Who Made a Difference" in the community the previous year, with a prominent package of profiles. The paper also co-sponsors a statewide Academic All-State Scholars program and, at the end of the school year, publishes a tab section recognizing the academic top 4 percent of graduates of local high schools. Frequent "Salutes" on the editorial page create great prestige for those mentioned.

- At the Birmingham (Ala.) News, local hero stories are published in weekly zoned sections, but Executive Editor Hunter George notes that the newspaper is working on a special presentation as part of a remake of the local news section.

The Sun News in Myrtle Beach recognizes "Volunteers of the Year" and honors them at a luncheon.
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Many newspapers use sports sections as a way to get deeper into community coverage. "Scoreboard" and other agate pages are an extremely efficient way to publish acres of names of adult and youth athletic accomplishments, particularly in individual competitions. All-city and all-area prep teams are closely watched and respected in communities. Some papers have added recreation sports pages to the week's line-up; for example, at the Santa Barbara (Calif.) News-Press, a "REC Roundup" page spotlights local sports heroes and high achievers.

At newspapers large and small, the coming of the year 2000 is the catalyst for looking at people past and present who have made a difference in their communities. For example, the Messenger in Madisonville, Ky., will be recognizing up-and-coming leaders for the new century in a series called "20 for 2000." Tom Clifton, executive editor, said the paper will profile 20 individuals who are emerging as people who will be in leadership roles around the year 2010. In a related project, teenagers in the community will write a series of 20 articles on elders in the community for a reflection on the century from the view of an older person and written from the perspective of a young person.

Kimberly A. Lanfer contributed to this report.

References
3. Research on credibility is summarized in the 1988 report of the Journalism Credibility Project of the American Society of Newspaper Editors.
EMPOWERMENT

Ellen Foley, Philadelphia Daily News
Ray Ottweiler, Asbury Park Press

Mobilizing readers, once thought to be only the purview of the editorial pages, is emerging as a routine tool for reporters and editors concerned about flagging circulation and the credibility and effectiveness of newspapers. The act of reaching out to readers with useful and empowering information has become commonplace even as it has become more innovative in the 1990s. For example:

- An increasing number of newspapers place reporters’ e-mail addresses at the end of articles for readers who seek more information or a conversation with a journalist.
- Several newspapers have sponsored mock trials with readers as jurors to provoke lively discussions about otherwise overlooked bureaucratic decisions important to readers’ quality of life.
- The St. Paul Pioneer Press took it one step further after discussion groups and book clubs in 1996 gathered more than 2,500 people in mid-winter Minnesota. The paper then published a spiral bound “Community Action Pack” with agency phone numbers and other helpful information to stoke reader efforts to solve problems explored in the paper’s series, “Poverty Among Us.”

During this decade, journalists have been embroiled in the controversy over whether
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dissapassionate journalists should facilitate reader action. However, the tone of the debate has changed. Most now agree that journalists should produce reader-focused and solution-oriented reporting. Many readership studies tell us that readers want more “utility” from newspapers, news they can use. While we haven’t quite decided what to call this kind of material, for purposes of this chapter, we will call it empowering or mobilizing journalism.

Disagreement over the appropriateness of empowering journalism centers on the boundary that defines journalist as observer versus journalist as activist. Other forums will wrestle this controversy to consensus. In this chapter, we look at the roots of empowering journalism in an attempt to ferret out why it continues to grow and what its boundaries might be.

THE ROOTS OF EMPOWERING JOURNALISM

First a definition: Researchers define mobilizing journalism as any information that allows action by persons willing to do so. This information could be just plain old-fashioned, responsible journalism which dictates that articles include not just what happened but how and why. In those articles, readers can take action if phone numbers, addresses or the names of people, places and things are included.

Mobilizing information could also be an invitation to a town hall forum or pizza party. It could take the form of a call to join an action team that identifies problems and solves them.

The reasons for the success and proliferation of mobilizing journalism lie not in our profession’s ability to devise new bells and whistles to get the attention of readers who left us in recent years. Rather, the success and the future of this kind of reporting is embraced in a quote from writer Richard Goodwin, a student of Americans’ flight from large cities to smaller towns: “What America hungered for is not more goods or greater power,” he says, “but a manner of life, a restoration of the bonds between people that we call community, a philosophy that values the individual rather than his possessions, a sense of belonging, of shared purpose and enterprise.”

In Chapter 3 of this handbook, Frank Denton traced the distinctive American penchant for collective action from the very beginnings of the nation, described in 1835 by Tocqueville, to modern research confirming that most Americans still volunteer in their communities. Denton wrote: “This American phenomenon — and need — for mobilizing and organizing is good news for newspapers, because mobilization requires communication and because the people most likely to become involved in the community are also the most likely to be newspaper readers.”

Jennie Buckner, editor of the Charlotte Observer and a pioneer in the field of civic journalism, tweaked the definition of a journalist to that of a “connection maker.” She said that “Journalists are in more than the information business. We are in the connection-making business. One of the reasons newspapers exist is to help us see that common ground is so important to our common good.”

Keith Stamm, the leading scholar studying civic ties and media use, points out that “the construction of community — sharing of values and objectives — requires a communication process.” But government and other national institutions have a limited ability to mobilize the community because they increasingly are mistrusted.

The heart of the matter is that community process still lacks a communication mechanism that lives up to the democratic ideal of citizen involvement. The New England town meeting is often held up as a fitting example, but this mechanism is not practical in most communities. What is needed is not a mechanism by which we agree to agree, but a means of thinking together, of making productive use of a plurality of ideas. In this context, it seems particularly unfortunate that the content of local newspapers reflects largely the views of a governmental elite rather than those of citizens acting through local voluntary associations.

For 50 years, studies have shown the importance of the local newspaper to community organizations. In his 1949 book, American Community Behavior, Jesse Bernard wrote: “Without the support of a good newspaper, most community enterprises are doomed to disappointment. With the backing of a good newspaper, even attacks on vested interests may succeed.”

In the study by Morris Janowitz, a community leader said of local organizations: “You know, I think that if it weren’t for the fact that community newspapers exist to give them help, they could not do their jobs at all.”

Those authors wrote before television reached its zenith, but there is good reason to think that development has not eroded this advantage of newspapers. One weakness of that medium is its generality, its lack of specificity and detail in empowering information. More recently, in a 1988 study of the effects of communication of the quality of life in an urban neighborhood, W. Phillips Davison found that, while other news media are important, the local paper in particular is an important link between community organizers or leaders and the public. He found that press coverage was also pivotal in keeping people interested in public affairs and motivated to participate.

The opportunity for newspapers may be no less in the growing suburbs. One
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How Newspapers Are Empowering Their Readers

How can newspapers help or encourage their readers to volunteer and organize in addressing public concerns and solving civic problems?

The examples are numerous and growing. Many of the innovations are occurring under the rubric of civic journalism, according to Jan Schaffer, executive director for the Pew Center for Civic Journalism in Washington, D.C. Some have been used for a long time. Others have been resurrected. Some venture into new territories. But Schaffer, who won a Pulitzer Prize at the Philadelphia Inquirer, says all start with a common denominator: "That it's ok to interact with readers."

"Journalism is more than dumping data on the community. More than unloading a lot of information and then washing our hands of it, saying it's up to others to take it from here," she said. "We know (from our industry surveys) that journalists say they got in the business to make a difference. And we know that's where people these days choose to get involved in public life - where they, as individuals, can make a difference. It is not in the voting booth: Voting is no longer the baseline measure of civic participation."

Readers choose their places of worship, soccer teams and other volunteer groups as places to get involved because they feel they can make a difference.
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there, and targeting these areas for calling sources and story ideas is one tactic of civic journalism. Schaffer said readers are not some timid tribe, too stupid to know much. too nippy for journalists to listen to their complaints. Yes, sometimes they are stupid and nippy, but often they are very smart about what's going on in their daily lives. And when a journalist listens, dignifies their opinions, another sort of energy — or maybe it's just self-esteem — sets in. We've seen the process of journalists validating the concerns and opinions of ordinary citizens serving as a catalytic process that has unleashed some power mobilizing forces in the community — sometimes to the astonishment of the journalists.

Indeed, the mission statement of the Norfolk Virginian-Pilot states that part of its job is to "improve" the community. And part of the mission statement of that paper's state capital team states that the reporters will write about state government issues as "exercises in civic problem solving."

Schaffer said much of the philosophy behind civic journalism rose from a simple question: If the media did their jobs differently, would citizens do their jobs differently? The answer seems to be a resounding yes — as reflected by experiments over the past 10 years in newsrooms around the country:

- The Wisconsin State Journal routinely uses what it calls "democracy boxes" with government stories to tell readers how to express their opinions to the appropriate public official, get more information or otherwise get involved. Government officials say anecdotally that, when the boxes appear, public calls or other contacts multiply. The Virginian-Pilot uses WMTY ("What It Means to You") graphics with articles. And the Wichita Eagle has experimented with special public-hearing boxes.

- When the highly regarded Charlotte Observer's "Talking Back our Neighborhoods" series in 1995-96 profiled 10 high-crime areas, the coverage included simple "Needs Lists" itemizing specific things the neighborhoods said they needed. The needs ranged from a new recreation center to baseball bats and gloves to just someone to sew drill-team uniforms. Thousands of Charlotte residents volunteered to fill the needs. Research showed that, by the end of the project, more than 80 percent of the people in Charlotte knew about the project and that the Observer was involved.

- The Charlotte Observer, in writing about parent volunteers at school, published a list of the things one could do — if he or she had only 30 minutes to give or could only volunteer at night. The newspaper published a phone number, and more than 300 people responded.

Many newspapers have sought ways to continue the community conversation about topics that have been explored in depth in the news pages:

- In Utica, N.Y., more than 400 people participated in study circles designed to open communication between the races following a series published in the Observer-Dispatch called "Building Bridges: Fighting Racism in the Mohawk Valley." The newspaper's efforts helped create the Inter-Faith Bridge Builders Coalition, a group of clergy who led the study circle project. The Observer-Dispatch is working with the clergy group this summer to help increase the conversation and bonds within the city's neighborhoods.

- After the Portland Press Herald published a major computer-assisted series on alcohol abuse, community leaders came to the newspaper urging that the issue not be dropped. The newspaper agreed to work with a steering committee that helped communities throughout Maine hold their own study circles to solve their alcohol problems. More than 70 communities met and came up with action plans, which have been published in a book. Now they are implementing them.
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Town meetings or civic forums after publication of a major news project have become a frequently used tool to promote debate and discussion of local issues on the community level.

- The San Francisco Chronicle, in its “Commuter Chronicles” initiative, held town meetings on Bay Area transportation throughout the region — and did more than the newspaper had planned because communities kept begging for them.

- Both the Myrtle Beach Sun News and the Springfield, Mo., News Leader brought community residents and civic groups together after publishing series. The Sun News’ civic gathering came after its “Living In a Boom Town” series. In Springfield, a “Good Community Fair” drew 7,000 people who pledged 13,000 hours of community service after the newspaper set out to examine the youth of Springfield and start a conversation about what the community was doing, and could do, to build a better future for them.

- As part of a year-long project designed to promote a discussion in Delaware about race relations, the Wilmington News-Journal invited 500 readers and stakeholders for an afternoon of conversation and debate of three topics chosen by readers. The newspaper partnered with the University of Delaware and the YWCA Study Circles.

- At a town meeting in Binghamton, N.Y., 140 people signed up to work on one or more of 10 action teams formed as part of the Press & Sun-Bulletin’s ambitious “Facing our Future” project. Supported by 160 people, who had previously signed up, the action teams’ charge was to brainstorm and come up with recommendations for improving Binghamton and its economy. A number of suggestions have been implemented, including consolidating the region’s 911 system, fixing up the airport, creating a venture capital fund.

- In Philadelphia, the Daily News created a “Rethinking Philadelphia Team” that writes daily stories with a future focus and publishes quarterly sections on pressing urban issues. A breakfast, usually free, follows so readers interested in those issues can talk with a panel of community leaders. The most recent breakfast, sponsored with the chamber of commerce, drew 800 people.

- The Seattle Times convened 100 citizens for two consecutive Saturdays as a mock jury. On the first Saturday, the “jury” met to hear “evidence” and render a verdict on how well the region was planning for growth. The second Sat-

urday, the group was “sentenced” to come up with solutions. The Times also took the Spokane Spokesman-Review’s idea of buying the pizza for small neighborhood groups to meet and discuss community problems issues and report back to the newspaper. Some 2,500 people attended Seattle’s pizza parties in 1997-98 to discuss problems of growth and gridlock.

- The Savannah Morning News has had great success in working with neighbor-

hood groups meeting over barbecues to discuss issues. Most gratifying, says
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editor Rexanna Lester, is that new groups have liked it so much, they are gathering on their own.

- In New Hampshire, news organizations have created a “tax challenge” location on the Web where residents can calculate what different state tax reform proposals will cost them. The citizen conversation on this site at one point exceeded 100 pages.

- Binghamton took a different approach on the issue of taxes. After reporting that few area residents were taking advantage of a tax break that could save them several hundred dollars, the Press & Sun-Bulletin printed a copy of the form in the newspaper and invited four assessors to accept questions from readers at the newspaper’s office one evening. “We were swamped with phone calls,” said executive editor Marty Stoeffens.

- In Burlington, Vt., mobilization took another form. After a winter ice storm ravaged trees in the area, altering city street landscapes, the Burlington Free Press started a Trees for the 21st Century campaign that raised more than $100,000 from hundreds of people. “Trees are real, and their loss is a long-term loss for the community,” said executive editor Mickey Illtien.

- In Elmira, N.Y., the master plan was the big local issue. The Star-Gazette published a special section outlining key points, then co-sponsored with the city two community meetings where people could hear more about the plan. About 100 people attended each meeting, the highest number in memory for a community meeting. City officials changed the plan in response to the public’s input.

- The Rapid City, S.D., Journal helped empower its readers in another way. It ran an extensive package explaining “How to navigate city government.” Stories ran through a list of questions that bring people to city hall, including where to go for answers, a list of city officials and their phone numbers, and helpful tips in trying to get something done.

- The La Crosse (Wis.) Tribune spotlighted community needs in a project called Neighbors Helping Neighbors. The newspaper published a list of needs (a senior citizen who needs help painting a house, for example), then sponsored Very Huge Day, a volunteer festival featuring community organizations at which residents pledged volunteer hours.

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ENGLISH-ONLY IS NOTHING NEW FOR MANY

Many students never taught in native tongue

By JILL WALKER
San Bernardino County Sun

MANY SCHOOLS in San Bernardino with more than 50% of students who speak only Spanish are struggling to cope with the diversity of cultures. In the San Bernardino City Unified School District, one in every four students speaks Spanish. This year, the district will spend $21 million on multicultural education.

Expansion of bilingual programs is underway.

A New Language

Spanish-speaking parents who want their children taught in their native language have become more knowledgeable about bilingual education.

For topics in its year-long "Unity 2000" project, the San Bernardino County Sun asks readers to submit "Ideas about issues that polarize our community."
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• The Asbury Park Press, as part of its “What Ails Asbury/House of Cards” project that focused on issues facing the city of Asbury Park, held two public forums that each drew more than 150 people to discuss solutions and civic connections following extensive reporting in the newspaper. One forum focused on crime and recreation; out of it came more formal recreation programs and better coordination among agencies dealing with youth. The other, focusing on a complex mortgage fraud scheme, led to the introduction and ultimate passage of a bill in the state Legislature that tightened up the appraisal process.

• In downtown Olympia, Wash., the issue was a proposal to build a transitiona! housing complex for the homeless. The Olympia joined forces with a local radio station and a local cable access station to bring supporters and opponents together for the first time with public participation. This led to mutual respect and the eventual opening of the project across from a park. The partnership has since tackled other local issues including school vouchers, land use issues and charter schools.

• The Reporter of Lansdale, Pa., has been urging its readers to gain more access to public information. The newspaper published an eight-day series on citizens’ right to know in 1997 and began putting a tabline at the bottom of each story that could be reported because of open-government laws. In 1998 the Reporter developed a Sunshine Law brochure and made it available to the public. The newspaper publishes a “closed meetings” box each Saturday, listing when various governmental agencies go into executive session. “The public has really caught on, and we regularly get calls about violations,” says executive editor Dennis Lyons.

• One group of readers of the Trenton (N.J.) Times mobilized for a different reason: more focused coverage from the newspaper. A community group based in Ewing, a growing suburban community of about 30,000, had fought successfully to pass a school referendum. Next the group went to the Times editors to campaign for better coverage than the Times was providing in its Trenton-zoned edition. The solution: The Evening Weekly Times, a special weekly tabloid section was launched in November 1998 solely for Ewing readers: it’s inserted in the Thursday paper and sold separately on newstands for 25 cents.

If there is a common theme to many of these initiatives, it is an attempt by editors to reach out beyond the traditional power structure of elected officials and institutions, to bring a broad range of voices to bear on community issues and to involve non-traditional leaders and groups in the search for solutions. "We’re looking for more citizen and grassroots involvement," says Editor Rick Jensen of the Observer-Dispatch at Utica. "We can’t wait for the politicians.” Schaffer of the Pew Center said, “Traditional journalists are discovering that they stand to miss stories if they are not plugged into new layers of their communities. When a journalist listens, dignifies their opinions, another sort of energy — or maybe it’s just self-esteem — sets in that can itself serve as a mobilizing force for individuals.”

Schaffer underscores that when the job of setting a community agenda belonged solely to the editorial board, readers began to complain about a growing arrogance on the part of newspapers. The newer forms of mobilizing journalism — including those on editorial pages — aim for a consensus-based community agenda that readers, not the newspaper, own. "A sense of ownership seems to play a big role in giving that agenda legs," Schaffer said.

She points out that this factor is the rub of misunderstanding about the intent of civic journalism. Critics say the newspaper should not be in the business of setting agendas. Civic journalists counter that it’s the community’s agenda, not the paper’s.

Mobilizing journalism appears to have a wellspring in the demographic of emerging newsroom leaders. Baby boomers who generally appear more comfortable sharing control and listening for ideas are rising through the ranks. "From my observation, they seem to be more ‘democratic,’ more willing to try new things, take risks," Schaffer said. "I find they will simply keep and clone what works and throw out what doesn’t and move on to try something else. They don’t feel they’ve failed if they need to adjust or refine later.”

Journalists appear to be turning to mobilizing journalism for another reason. We are beginning to recognize that a new generation of community leader, hidden below the elected official, is more often making news and nurturing change. Traditional journalists find they stand to miss stories if they are not plugged into new layers of their communities led by these so-called civic entrepreneurs who fill leadership vacuums in many communities.

The job of journalism has not changed all that much since Joseph Pulitzer admonished us that "(t)he newspaper that is true to its highest mission will concern itself with the things that ought to happen tomorrow, or next month, or next year, and will seek to make what ought to be come to pass.”

Mobilizing readers appears to be the new millennium’s answer to Pulitzer’s elation call. Our technology and our culture encourage us to interact with the people who best know what ought to be: our readers.
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WHERE TO GET MORE INFORMATION

- Civic Journalism Interest Group of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication
  AUMC
  234 Outlet Pointe Rd;
  Suite A
  Columbia, S.C. 29210-5867
  803/798-0271

- Lisa Austin
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  37 Haven Road, South Portland, Maine 04106
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- Pew Center for Civic Journalism
  Jan Schaeffer, Executive Director
  1101 Connecticut Ave. NW, Suite 420
  Washington, D.C. 20036
  202/331-3200
  Email: jours@pewcenter.org

SUGGESTED READING


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7. Roy Center and Peter Clarke, Suburbanites, City Residents and Local News, Journalism Quarterly, 40 (1963).
ZONING AS A SOLUTION
I've never seen a purple cow, and I've never seen a media study that doesn't show local news among the topmost reasons readers turn to metro and community newspapers. But being "local enough"—in news coverage or in the public's perception—is a challenge today as our metropolitan areas continue to grow and disperse.

As a result, more and more newspapers are subdividing their broad territories into geographic zones in hopes of strengthening (or preserving) their local news franchisee and of gaining (or at least holding their own in) readership.

Creating different editions for different geographic territories is hardly a new idea. Many newspapers long ago were producing targeted editions—usually with earlier deadlines that allowed same-date distribution—for outlying rural areas or for statewide audiences. As new suburban areas developed postwar, a number of papers such as the Chicago Tribune had by the 1960s developed extensive networks of community-news sections.

But zoning today is being used more extensively, more elaborately and more strategically than ever before. Few newspapers any longer vie for statewide dominance—it's just too expensive. Most do aspire, however, to keep on top of all or a chunk of their sprawling home regions.

Increasingly, zoning is a tool embraced by traditional "downtown" metros struggling to maintain metropolitan leadership as well as by erstwhile "suburban" or small-town papers that have emerged to new prominence in highly coveted growth areas.

***WHO ZONES?***

The ASNE local-news survey of editors and publishers found widespread use of zoning among mid-size and large newspapers, and especially so among the
zoning as a solution

largest.

About 40 percent of all editors responding to this survey reported that theyzone to some extent. But zoning is heavily concentrated at the upper end of thecirculation range: Nearly 90 percent of newspapers with circulation above50,000 are zoning, versus just a quarter of those in the 10,000-50,000 range.

(Editors of newspapers with less than 10,000 circulation were not asked aboutzoning in the survey.)

Any editor today knows well the dynamics that are prompting newspapers tozone or to consider doing so. These include sprawling regional growth; diffusionof the metropolitan center and often of its core identity; the growth ofsuburban newspapers into a major competitive force, not only for single-buyreaders but for advertising dollars; the strong demand from readers for newscoverage that hits close to home.

Local, local, local, local. This is the mantra we hear from readers, whether inone-on-one conversations, focus groups or quantitative surveys. But what do readers mean by local, anyway? How local is local enough? How do they define what is local to them? And how local can you afford to be?

One of the most commonly repeated admonitions among the editors andpublishers responding to the ASNE survey was this: There's no one-size-fits-allformula for zoning. Know your market. Know it exceedingly well, then tailorto your zoning decisions — including whether to zone at all — to the particulardemographic, geographic, civic and identifying characteristics of your area.

The first question that needs to be answered, frankly, is: Why zone at all? In cohesive markets that retain a traditional central-city orientation, it may be not only wasteful but even counterproductive to zone. (See Linda Cunningham's piece at the end of this chapter.) In many newspaper markets, however, there are very good reasons to at least examine zoning.

If you are considering zoning, it's essential to know in advance what you think you could accomplish by doing so: Is the goal readership, incrementalrevenue, or both? Are there competitive gaps left by other media that could beproductively filled?

Eventually, these overarching strategic questions break into a larger set ofimplementation issues. And there's no one way the pieces of the zoning puzzlecome together. Indeed, the most effective zoning generally reflects an indigenous assemblage of the elements.

Some newspaper managers swear by stand-alone community sections that complement the regular news and feature sections. Others insist on mainsheet zoning, arguing that separating out suburban or neighborhood news into subsidiary sections sends a "second-class" message to those communities. Some
doa combination of both.

This is just one example of the key decisions that have to be resolved beforemoving into zoning. To help newspaper managers make these decisions,ASNE's local-news survey included extensive questions about how newspaperszone.

Among 736 editors and publishers participating in the survey, about 40 percent—138 editors and 141 publishers — said they zone and described theirnewspapers' zoning practices. Interestingly, the higher the grade editors gave totheir overall local-locale coverage, the greater their commitment to zoning;Editors who rated their local coverage higher zoned more often, had smaller-population zones and invested in substantially larger staffs than other editors.

As part of the survey, the editors and publishers who zone offered some learned counsel. What follows are some of the critical zoning components that they advise you to resolve before making any decision to zone.

defining zones

Typically, newspapers have tended to define zones by lines you can see on a map — boundaries set by governmental jurisdictions — or by lines you can see on the landscape — highways, waterways, other physical barriers.

Particularly in the case of municipal boundaries, however, these arbitrary definitions sometimes have surprisingly little correlation to how residents define their own spheres of interest.

Traditionally, community identification centered around one's family, neighbor-hood, town, schools and region. (See accompanying article on "natural areas" later in this chapter.) In our increasingly decentralized and transient society, the identifiers beyond one's immediate neighborhood get fuzzier: I care about my community, yes, and especially about such at-home issues aslocal crime and property taxes. But is this all that's "local" to me? In a typicalsuburban environment, likely not.

In reader surveys and focus groups locally and nationally, what typicallyemerges as people's definition of what's "local" to them is a sum of this: It's where I live, work, shop and play.

Keith R. Stamn, in his 1985 book Newspaper Use and Community Ties,recognized this growing phenomenon: "There is not at present any singlejurisdiction that subsumes working, living, playing and educating in a single taxingandservice area. The physical separation of work and residence, among otherthings, has brought about a community life space that extends beyond the influence of any single local government."

The problem for those of us trying to define zones, then, is to develop a keenunderstanding of how readers perceive their own zones of interest and opera-
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tion. The bigger problem is this: In our ever-spreading suburban and exurban areas, readers have seemingly endless permutations of answers to this question.

In the ASNE survey, drawing zones from residents’ sense of community, as opposed to using government boundaries or other arbitrary definitions, was one of the most frequent cautions offered by editors and publishers alike: “Make sure your zones make sense” and “Draw zones that conform with the way residents view themselves” were typical words of advice.

Readers love zoning if it gives them what they see as local and relevant to them. Readers hate zoning if they perceive it as losing news coverage they’re used to getting, or as not getting “all the news.”

Research of all kinds is critical to defining zones. Focus groups or reader forums — talking to people directly and listening to them express their own sense of community — is vital. There are also some quantitative measures that can help:

- Commuting patterns offer valuable indicators. In metropolitan markets where traditional downtown papers are competing with full-service suburban dailies, one of the biggest indicators of newspaper choice is a suburbanite’s daily commuting pattern. Is the reader driving into the city every day to work? If so, she is most likely to subscribe to the downtown paper. Commuting trans-suburbs within the competing paper’s territory? Then the downtown paper has a very hard sell. After all, the “water cooler” phenomenon — people who read the newspaper so they can take an active part in office conversations — is a significant driver of readership.

- Similarly to commuting patterns, the representation of suburban readers who have moved out from the metro core, or who still have close ties there, is a strong indicator of their connectedness to central city news.

- Other paths of community connectedness are shopping patterns, church attendance “commutes,” and the location and draw of major cultural and sports institutions.

Indeed, in markets that remain fairly traditional — those that may be growing out geographically but whose central city remains the heart of the region — it may turn out best not to zone at all. Suburban readers in a centrally focused market don’t like to feel they’re “losing” coverage of their larger community, their former neighborhoods, or the homes of their families and friends.

This can be an issue even in less traditional suburban markets, such as ours in ever-sprawling and unfocused South Florida, where readers occasionally complain they don’t get “all the news” that their cousins or coworkers get in their zoned versions of the Sun-Sentinel.

When zones are drawn in artificial ways that don’t well-reflect readers’ own community links, this issue is certain to become a real problem. In the ASNE survey, this was a caution cited by close to 10 percent of editors and publishers who zone. “Over-zoning” emerged as a particular concern among mid-size newspapers.

Even with the most carefully drawn boundaries, though, a significant number of editors and publishers warn that it’s important to give each zone ample news from elsewhere in the region, and to pay particular attention to the most closely adjoining communities outside a zone.

And there will be inevitable conflict between serving the suburban reader who says he doesn’t want news from the old city and his neighbor — perhaps literally next door — who still wants a lot of central-city news. Balancing these competing demands is a challenge that can sometimes be resolved by “regional roundups” of out-of-zone news (remember that those “roundups” or summaries take a good deal of editing time to produce) or by other packaging that offers city news in secondary placement.

With remarkable consistency across newspaper size, surveyed editors ranked the following factors as the single “most important” in configuring their zones: community identity (40 percent), governmental boundaries (28 percent), desirability of the market (25 percent), school districts (15 percent), shopping or business patterns (8 percent).

While “shopping and business patterns” appear to get short shrift in that initial ranking, this trait leaped to the top of the list (43 percent) when editors were asked about secondary factors in their line-drawing decisions. In this secondary list, the number of available advertisers and carrier routes also emerged as decisive concerns.

One area of zoning potential that many newspapers overlook is demographic clustering. Here’s a burgeoning example for many of us: Immigrants usually clamor for more “news from home” — from their homelands. If one or more immigrant groups are concentrated in some parts of a region, it might make good sense to zone foreign news coverage, as well as cultural or even sports coverage, to account for differing interests beyond local news.

ZONE SIZE

One of the most basic questions newspapers have to address is the size of their zones. And although some editors in the ASNE survey warned against “over-zoning” to too-narrow geographic targets, zone size is often determined more by dollars and logistics than by ideal circumstances.
ZONING AS A SOLUTION

Not surprisingly, then, the survey found that the largest circulation newspapers also have the largest zones in terms of coverage territory. Responding newspapers of 100,000-plus circulation have a median population size in their zones that ranges from about 100,000 to 200,000. This zone-population range drops to 32,000-79,000 in newspapers of less than 50,000 circulation.

The largest papers tend to have the most zones, too. Those with more than 100,000 circulation reported publishing anywhere from two to 10 or more zones, while those in the 10-100,000 range typically offer two to four.

What sociologists might suggest about zoning

Newspaper zoning is hardly the stuff of academic inquiry, but social scientists long have studied some of the issues that editors and publishers planning zoning must think about.

For example, sociologists identified the concept of "natural areas," the notion that communities tend to form themselves around natural factors, especially similar demographics, ethnic characteristics, behaviors or other traits of people. Robert Park once wrote, "Every natural area has, or tends to have, its own peculiar traditions, customs, conventions, standards of decency and propriety, and, if not a language of its own, at least a universe of discourse, which is appreciably different for each local community."4 Undoubtedly, that phenomenon is less powerful in today's suburbs, but still, people continue to cluster together for reasons.

Governments often have ignored these natural areas and laid their boundaries across them, sometimes frustrating people's need to make their local governments meaningful to them. Similarly, some newspapers might be confusing or conflicting with people's sense of community when they gerrymander zones for the wrong reasons, such as circulation routes, zip codes or numbers of advertisers.

As for the size of zones, sociologists have argued for a long time over the ideal size of a community, that is, large enough to have sufficient resources but small enough to have face-to-face democracy and relationships. Some early thinking suggested an optimum com-

munity of 5,000 people, with a primary school of 600 students and shops within walking distance. But later researchers criticized that as being "both insufficiently intimate and insufficiently urban. Experience has shown that if a neighborhood center is to provide a range of standard urban services, it needs from three to four times as many consumers as originally stipulated. This could call for two types of local units, a smaller and a larger one, each performing different functions. The larger one would provide basic amenities for somewhere around 20,000 people; the smaller one, whose size remains problematical, would encourage social intimacy."

The best study on the optimum size of a democratic unit was conducted in Sweden beginning in 1966. The Local Government Research Group found that participation and effectiveness are best achieved in densely populated communities under 8,000 population.

In recognition of the "natural areas," newspapers should try to use traditional names, or the names the residents use for their communities, rather than "Neighbors East" or somesuch. In his 1988 study of communication in the New York City neighborhood, W. Phillips Davison concluded: "The mass media probably do a great deal to promote community identity merely by using traditional neighborhood names — e.g., Kingsbridge Heights, Marble Hill — and by treating these areas as having a character that is distinct from that of other parts of the city."

Frank Denham

One popular means to address zone size vs. daily logistics is to mix zone products to offer both regular mainsheet zoning and stand-alone, inserted sections covering smaller territories and local-local matters. Several dozen survey respondents indicated they have some mix of offerings for zoned editorial content.

At the Sun-Sentinel in South Florida, for example, we zone ROP every day in three editions, each of which covers a sizable geographic territory. Two to three times a week, we also offer preprinted "community" sections subdivided into eight zones, each covering just a small number of grouped communities. One of our competitors, the Miami Herald, has mainsheet editions zoned to
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match county boundaries and, in key competitive areas, also produces preprinted “Hometown Herald,” each labeled and formatted for one suburban town.

Another method suggested by some editors is to break up large ROP zones into “subzones,” which offer one or more replated pages within local sections for more narrowly targeted coverage.

What you call your zones matters, too, and this isn’t always easy to decide when zones cover multiple communities that don’t have a common identifier. At the Sun-Sentinel, for example, we used to call our South Broward County zone “South,” until we realized that to the tens of thousands of new residents who had moved there by driving up north from Miami-Dade County, their new neighborhoods didn’t seem at all south.

ZONING FREQUENCY

Daily zoning is becoming the dominant approach among the largest papers: Two-thirds of zoning newspapers with circulation of 50,000-plus now do so six to seven days per week, as do more than half of those in the 10,000-50,000 range. Among the largest newspapers that zone, only 8 percent do so just once a week, while 17 percent of papers in the 10,000-50,000 range do so. Very few newspapers of any size zone local news in the range of two to four days per week.

ZONING STAFF AND RESOURCES

This is the single biggest source of regret and cautionary warnings from editors who participated in the ASSE survey. Even a significant number of surveyed publishers agreed: Understaffing a zoning effort is one of the most common mistakes newspapers make.

Zoning is people-intensive. And it consumes not just reporters but photographers, artists, clerks and editing staff. Depending on the zoning methodology, it may well require additional help in operations, packaging and advertising.

Nineteen percent of surveyed editors and more than 10 percent of publishers said having enough people to handle zoning is a critical issue. As one editor wrote, “You can only fake it for so long.”

Readers are not stupid. They can see through “smoke and mirrors” zoning, if not immediately then certainly over time. If your zoning labels and claims lack credibility, so will your entire newspaper brand over time.

Forty percent of the largest papers said they have at least 50 editorial staffers involved in zoning. The smaller papers more commonly reported fewer than 10 staffers. Typically, 10-15 percent of zoning staff is clerical.

STAFF AND CONTENT

You have to be a bit schizoid to manage zoning.

As many editors and publishers warn in the ASSE survey, you can’t be afraid of — or disdain — the so-called “chicken dinner” news. More often, it’s not so much actual dinner coverage as the stuff of recreation leagues, neighborhood association meetings, condo board regulations, library services, elementary-school honor rolls, senator-citizen fly-shots and event calendars ad infinitum.

Just as many editors, though, warn not to go too “soft” in zoning coverage. “Don’t ghettoize the good news in zones,” wrote one editor. “Readers see through this.”

Indeed, you can recognize simultaneously that readers seem to have an unceasing appetite for calendars and honors and that they want local news of substance. A newspaper that doesn’t provide hard-edged zoning news is just not going to be regarded as serious about it by serious readers.

“Don’t treat zone readers as second-class,” wrote another editor. After all, we’re zoning news because we say local-local news is important. So why don’t we put more of it on Page One?

The same split personality applies to treatment of the staffs who write for and produce the zones. “Don’t treat bureau staff like they’re second-class citizens,” was important advice offered by several editors and publishers.

At the same time, a number of editors said, it’s vital that zone staff understand and respect the importance of local-local coverage. These are not opposing concerns, actually. If you make your bureau staff feel important, it sends the message that what they cover is indeed worth their best effort.

A small number of editors also believe staffers should live within the zone they cover. There is no question about the advantage to knowing the community you cover intimately, and there’s no way to know it better than to live in it. This is sometimes a difficult rule to enforce and maintain over time, however.

When planning zone coverage, think long and hard about which material truly requires a trained reporter — or even a newly minted, $60,000-intuition-bills journalism grad — to produce. A quality secretary or conscientious clerk with solid language skills will handle vital neighborhood news such as changes in garbage pickup schedules with more care and accuracy than that J-grade.

At the other end, having some of the newspaper’s most experienced and respected staffers involved in zoning coverage is a big plus also cited by a number of editors. You can’t populate suburban offices solely with young grads waiting to be “promoted to downtown” and expect either a strong commitment to community news or good morale.
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Generally, too, the responsibility for “local” news should not be solely the province of the Local or Metro staff. Business, entertainment, sports and lifestyle coverage, as well as columns and opinion pages, need to be examined for zone relevance and opportunities. When readers are deciding whether their paper is truly local to them, they don’t look just at the ‘local’ or ‘community’ sections; it’s the relevance of the entire newspaper.

Local, local, local isn’t the only mantra of zoning. Some editors added another: communicate, communicate, communicate.

Zoned news departments tend to be highly decentralized operations. This makes it imperative, albeit considerably more time-consuming than we sometimes would like, to establish comprehensive communications systems that include fixed meeting schedules (with good speaker phones), routinely updated budgets for stories, photos and graphics, and well-informed decision-making.

ZONING EXPANSION

We can expect to see continued emphasis on zoning. It is considered so important by already zoning newspapers that many have recently expanded their zoning effort, and expect to continue to do so.

Among zoning newspapers, more than 40 percent said they had increased their number of zones within the last two to three years. Only about 10 percent said they now have fewer zones than they used to have. Similarly, a third said they now offer more content and more frequently than they did a few years ago. Only a small percentage are zoning less often.

Not coincidentally, about half said they have increased the size of the editorial staff involved in zoning and the news hole devoted to it.

Furthermore, many plan to continue this expansion. About 40 percent of all zoning newspapers — and 60 percent of the largest — said they expect to increase their number of zones within the next year or two. A similar number expects to zone more frequently, and half expect to increase zoning staff and news hole. Almost no one forecast retreatment.

ADVERTISING

Whether newsroom editors like to admit it or not, advertising is content to many readers and a major reason to pick up the newspaper. For some readers, coupons, classifieds, sales and local-business ads may represent a bigger driver of newspaper buys than the news offerings.

And if you’re going to tell readers your coverage is local to them, they will expect to find community businesses among the advertisers. If you don’t stress local/locally advertising as well as local/local news coverage in your zoning sec-

The effort is COMPANYWIDE — AND LONG-TERM

Several publishers pointed out the utter necessity of having all departments working together to develop the newspaper’s zoning plan. Zoning isn’t the prime responsibility of any one department, although often just one department is initially pushing for it. Warred the publishers: Don’t get into zoning without firm, cross-departmental commitment and a comprehensive plan.

In addition to advertising issues cited in the section above, there are obvious implications for all other newspaper departments, ranging from prepress stops and starts to targeted marketing.

Equally important, editors and publisher editors said: Understand that your commitment is for the long haul. Don’t start zoning unless you’re committed to sticking with it. Newspapers that have been inconsistent with zoning endeavors, or that have gone in-and-out-and-back-into territories over time, have seldom been as successful as those that have stuck with a general strategy and identity that are maintained and enhanced over time. “Those who go stop-and-go never make it,” wrote one editor.

The corollary is, of course, as some survey respondents noted: Don’t expect miracles from zoning (such as giant leaps in circulation), and don’t expect overnight success. Promote your local coverage, over and over again. This was strongly urged by a good many editors and even more publishers.

A few did note that it may be best to wait on promotion until coverage and logistics are up and running with proven consistency. Don’t promise anything
ZONING AS A SOLUTION

to readers or advertisers until you know you can deliver it and you're confident you can sustain it.

And zone promotion has to go beyond traditionally defined marketing methods such as advertising. Some respondents pointed out the advantages of having a "physical presence" — a prominently located, well-branded company office — in each zone.

Too, get out into the community and be active, get to know key people and participate in events, on a routine basis. That's old news to editors of smaller newspapers but something editors and bureau chiefs of large metros are having to get comfortable with.

Research (discussed above) was listed by many as vital to zoning. And it's not enough to do it in advance and assume those findings endure unchanged over time.

Some newspapers are decentralizing more than their newsrooms into zones and bureaus. Some have created local publishers, general managers and or cross-departmental management teams for key zones.

COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS & THE NEWSPAPER'S ROLE

While cost and logistics may be the first concerns that arise in a discussion of whether to zone, eventually another one will come up: When we zone, do we in any way abandon our traditional role as a unifying voice for our total community? Do we pull on the thread of unravelling civic bonds?

The city haters among our readers — and we all have them to varying degrees — love zoning if it takes all that "downtown" news out of their sight. Is it a newspaper's "duty" to force it in front of them? Unfortunately, readers don't respond to duty; and they won't put up for long with newspapers that give them a lot of things they don't want.

The challenge to American newspapers is how to maintain our traditional civic role in community environments that are increasingly nontraditional — even anti-traditional.

As with every other zoning question, the most effective answers will uniquely reflect our own communities.

Five reasons not to zone

Linda Grist Cunningham
Rockford (Ill.) Register Star

Zoning has long been a handy tool for customizing local news coverage. At its most basic, zoning gives metropolitan newspapers the opportunity to cover city news aggressively in one edition and focus on suburban news in another. It's practical, often cost-effective and frequently a hit with readers.

But after almost 30 years of both successful and unsuccessful geographic zoning, I'd suggest asking and answering these five questions before making a final decision. You may still decide to zone, but the answers may help you tailor which news runs where.

1. Is your center city or hometown a regional center?

Many second-tier cities are the region's hub for employment, banking and finance, education, entertainment and recreation, health care and retail shopping. They remain home for large segments of the population, even though the suburban communities may be growing. If your hometown is a regional center, drawing suburban readers into the city consistently, the ties between suburbs and city might be too strong to break entirely. Suburban readers can and do complain they don't get enough news about the city in which they work, shop and entertain themselves.

2. Who is driving the population growth in the suburbs?

If those suburbs are home to folks moving in from outside the market, they may well be prime targets for zoned editions. But if the suburbs are being fed by former residents of your center city, an edition that contains little or no city news may not meet their needs. This can be especially true if there are close family ties among city and suburban readers. If grandmother lives in the city and grandson in the suburbs, they will be concerned they're not getting the same news — and if there's a terrible story on grandson in the suburban edition but not in metro, there can be hard feelings.
ZONING AS A SOLUTION

3. Will the suburban edition be perceived as having less news?

Even though readers may choose not to live in the city, many remain interested in city news, especially if the news, trends and issues will eventually affect them. The flip side also can be true. Playing stories differently between editions may make more sense than zoning stories out. As readers of zoned editions have told me in many markets, "I want all the news you've got, not just the stuff from my town." Readers want information about their communities, and they want lots of it, but they also want news from neighboring towns.

4. Are there overlapping governments, agencies or organizational boundaries?

Failing to recognize that a school district boundary stretches into another zone can mean not getting that school news into all the editions affected. Similar challenges arise when ZIP codes that cross governmental boundaries are used for circulation distribution. The county border and the ZIP code or taxing district border may not be the same. For instance, the mailing address might be XYZ County, a perfect match for your new edition, but the horse might actually be in a neighboring county — and a different edition. This can be a hidden irritation when you find that an entire suburban housing development targeted by your new edition is actually in a different government area.

5. Will the additional zones change the timeliness of the news offered to readers?

Adding editions often means the press run lengthens, resulting in an earlier press start. And that may mean readers accustomed to receiving the latest sports scores, the late-night meeting news and the lottery numbers are now receiving an edition with less information or only partial information. The benefits of zoned editions may well outweigh this concern, but don't underestimate the irritation of long-time subscribers when they don't get the lottery number.

DOES YOUR PAPER ZONE LOCAL NEWS COVERAGE?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>CIRCULATION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EDITORS</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Answering</td>
<td>339</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41%</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>201</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>59%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PUBLISHERS</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Answering</td>
<td>375</td>
</tr>
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<td>141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38%</td>
<td>88%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>234</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>62%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Even in the most challenging of circumstances, the concerns raised in these five questions can be remedied. But, it makes sense to ask and answer them up front, to develop the marketing plans and explanations ahead of time. Asking the "devil's advocate" questions before kicking off a zoned edition can save hours and days of fixing problems after the fact.
### ZONING AS A SOLUTION

**HOW MANY LOCAL ZONES DO YOU PROVIDE NEWS COVERAGE FOR?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CIRCULATION</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>100,000-plus</th>
<th>50,000 to 100,000</th>
<th>10,000 to 50,000</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Answering</td>
<td>135</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Zone</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Zones</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Zones</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Zones</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Zones</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Zones</td>
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<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Zones</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
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<td>8 to 10 Zones</td>
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<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over 10 Zones</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
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### WHAT IS THE POPULATION OF SMALLEST ZONE?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CIRCULATION</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>100,000-plus</th>
<th>50,000 to 100,000</th>
<th>10,000 to 50,000</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Answering</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under 50,000</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under 15,000</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15,000 to 29,999</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
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<td>30,000 to 49,999</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50,000 or more</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50,000 to 74,999</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>75,000 to 99,999</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100,000 to 149,999</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>150,000 or more</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median</td>
<td>39,000</td>
<td>109,000</td>
<td>39,000</td>
<td>32,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### ZONING AS A SOLUTION

**WHAT IS THE POPULATION OF LARGEST ZONE?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CIRCULATION</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>100,000-plus</th>
<th>50,000 to 100,000</th>
<th>10,000 to 50,000</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Answering</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under 100,000</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under 30,000</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30,000 to 49,999</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50,000 to 74,999</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>75,000 to 99,999</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100,000 or more</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100,000 to 149,999</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>150,000 to 199,999</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>200,000 to 349,999</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>350,000 to more</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median</td>
<td>105,000</td>
<td>295,000</td>
<td>110,000</td>
<td>79,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### ZONING AS A SOLUTION

**WHAT IS THE NUMBER OF EDITORIAL AND CLERICAL STAFF DEDICATED TO ZONES OR ZONED NEWS?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CIRCULATION</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>100,000-plus</th>
<th>50,000 to 100,000</th>
<th>10,000 to 50,000</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Answering</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>12</td>
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<td>10</td>
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<td>6 to 9</td>
<td>13</td>
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<td>10 to 19</td>
<td>16</td>
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<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>20 to 29</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>7</td>
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<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30 to 49</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50 or more</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
If watchdogging local politics is your newspaper's calling, keep at it. If you are taking on the toughest problems in your town, don’t let up. If you’re knocking open closed doors and liberating secret records, more power to you. If you’re improving writing in your paper, hang in there.

This point of this handbook is not that traditional approaches to local news are wrong; it is that they are not enough.

An editor who reads this book is likely to come away reconsidering his or her concepts of local news in at least two major ways.

First, the editor might begin thinking about whether some of our traditional coverage — of crime, for example — is having the desired effects. Journalists are not accustomed to thinking much about effects; in fact, some suggest that our job is merely to report the facts and let others worry about the fallout. This handbook steps back and asks these questions: Which facts? Why them and not others? The answers inevitably lead back to thinking about effects — that is, why we do journalism in the first place.

For example, do we cover crime so much “just to sell newspapers,” as our critics often charge? Or do we cover crime to inform the public so, in our democratic system, citizens can do something about it? If your answer is the latter, Chapter 5 challenges some of our traditional assumptions about the cops and courts beats.

Second, an editor who reads this book may come to think much more broadly about the categories of content in the newspaper and whether they adequately serve the real-life needs of readers. Chapter 1 suggests that while we do pretty well with our traditional coverage — government, courts, crime and other institutional subjects — readers are looking for more, if we are to be worth their time.
USING THIS HANDBOOK

The handbook has identified some different opportunities for local-news coverage by, again, stepping back and making this basic proposition: Local news is based on the reader's relationships with his or her communities. So, what is the nature of those relationships? Why do people live in those communities? What do they need and expect from their communities? What do they need to give back to them? And finally, how can we inform and help readers, thereby making ourselves more valuable to them?

SOME USES FOR THIS HANDBOOK

The Local News Handbook may cause a newspaper to seriously consider whether it is investing enough in local news. The survey reported in Chapter 1 found that 92 percent of publishers and 89 percent of editors believe their newspapers' futures hinge on significantly increasing the resources they devote to local news.

At the same time, they acknowledge that there are major barriers to improving local news, most of them financial: the investment in our most expensive resource, people, but also in print.

Why have those investments not been made, given the massive evidence of customer demand clearly recognized by the people who run newspapers? The survey found that only 25 percent of publishers and 29 percent of editors doubt the financial return on such investments — leaving great majorities who believe that smart investments in better local coverage would pay off not only in readership and circulation but also in dollars.

While there probably are a number of answers to that question — primarily having to do with the economic model of newspapers — one relevant to this handbook emerged from the survey. Nineteen percent of editors and 21 percent of publishers acknowledged that, for lack of understanding or research, they don't know how to improve local news.

The handbook may be most helpful to those brave souls and to the rest of us who think we do know but whose beliefs about local news apparently are not sufficiently responsive to reader needs and interests.

While there are many good ideas to take from these pages, the best use of this work is to provide a framework for a broad reconsideration of local-news coverage. Ideally, the editor will share the book with newspaper colleagues and start a conversation. Then they will overlay the framework proposed here onto their current local coverage — and look carefully and open-mindedly for discrepancies to transform into opportunities.

USING THIS HANDBOOK

CHALLENGING YOUR COVERAGE

Using the dimensions developed in this handbook, here are a few of the many questions that might be raised in such a reconsideration:

Proximity

Is your newspaper taking full advantage of its close link to readers and nearby news?

A homogeneous community is easier to cover, so does a heterogeneous community require extra attention to news that directly affects sizable segments? Though it will burden newsroom resources, isn't that advantage: the newspaper has over other media that cannot so segment and target their audiences?

Does your newspaper have regular, systematic ways of keeping in touch with your community, with what its people are thinking and caring about, what is directly touching their lives? Does it take advantage of the ties and contacts staff members have in their ordinary lives?

If your paper is in the shadow of a larger one, have you calculated the advantages of proximity your coverage can have underneath the metro's unwieldy umbrella?

If your paper is the metro, in what ways can you invest your greater resources to be more local?

Does your newsroom culture encourage staff members to take pride in intensely local news?

Safety

Does your newspaper cover this social pathology as a public-health issue or as a gladiator sport?

Have you objectively evaluated the level and impact of crime in your town?

Are you overemphasizing it, at the expense of other issues competing for coverage?

Are you considering the direct and indirect effects of your crime coverage?

Are those sensational details of individual crimes really necessary?

Are you too focused on the aspects of crime easiest to cover — the arrest, court appearances and trial? What about the victims and the criminal-justice and penal systems?

Do you seek out the context of crimes that adds sense and perspective?

Are crime decreases as newsworthy as the increases were?

Utility

Might the multitude of ideas in Chapter 6 suggest a "utility audit" to identify all the ways your newspaper can be useful to readers? Have you asked them
USING THIS HANDBOOK

for suggestions?

Does your paper have one comprehensive, detailed daily calendar presented and anchored so that readers always can rely on it as the top-of-mind source?

When a reader calls to ask for information, does that sound an alarm that perhaps the information should have been in the paper in the first place?

What useful information can your newspaper provide that other local media cannot or do not?

Local government

Have you asked your local-government reporters and editors why your paper covers this stuff? What are readers supposed to do with this coverage? Are we giving them the right news and information?

Are we showing readers how government affects their real lives?

Does your newspaper cover government and politics as sport, based on getting opponents to yell at each other, or as serious business?

Do your editing processes evaluate whether each government story will make sense to the typical reader, with sufficient background, context, clarity and helpful information?

What can your paper do to help people connect with government in ways meaningful to them?

Does your paper seek out and report successful examples of public involvement?

Education

Who is the presumed audience for your education coverage—parents? ... taxpayers? ... ordinary citizens who care about the future of the community?

Does your education coverage consist of only school board meetings and classroom features?

Does your newspaper plan education coverage?

Does your education reporter read Education Week?

Does your newspaper periodically compare your schools to different and more successful schools?

Spirituality

Is religion and values coverage derided at your newspaper or taken as seriously as other coverage?

Does your paper emphasize “church news,” or broader and deeper coverage of ethics, values and spiritual issues?

Is coverage segregated on a “church page” or integrated into the total news report?

Support

Given that the small groups described in Chapter 10 seem to be a substantial and growing movement, is this phenomenon represented anywhere in your newspaper?

How can the newspaper recognize and facilitate this need of our readers?

Identity

Does your staff understand that, taken as a whole over time, your newspaper plays a major role in shaping the sense of community of your town, for better or worse?

How does your newspaper make your community feel about itself?

What might your staff learn from a discussion of the “psychological sense of community” scale presented in Chapter 11? Might some of these elements be considered in routine coverage?

If your town, or a section of it, suffers from a lack of identity (a new suburb) or a negative identity, what might your newspaper do about that?

Recognition

How does your newspaper recognize local heroes, Samaritans, achievers. Is it enough? What more might you do?

Is there a format for recognition in every part of the paper?

Your newspaper lionizes sports stars; how about academic stars? Business promotions are news; aren’t achievements in public service?

Empowerment

Does your staff consciously use the power of its journalism to involve and mobilize readers?

What specific devices in the newspaper might help readers learn more, get connected or take action?

Paraphrasing Jan Schaffer in Chapter 13: If we do our jobs differently, will citizens do their jobs differently?

The strength of these dimensions was reflected in the ASNE survey. The higher both editors and publishers rated their own local-local coverage generally, the more importance they placed on all local-news categories and the higher they rated their newspapers’ performance on individual content areas. But the difference was sharpest for the less traditional categories represent-
ed among the 10 dimensions: 78 percent of those who considered their local-local coverage "excellent" also gave themselves high ratings for the less traditional coverage areas, compared to 73 percent of editors with 'very good' local-local coverage and only 49 percent of editors who rated their overall coverage lower.

While self-ratings can be questioned, the results suggest that the editors most satisfied with the quality of their papers' community coverage are more likely to appreciate the rich potential of the dimensions of local news presented in this handbook.

Implicit throughout this work is the intriguing theme that the newspaper with the shortest distance to its readers has the best chance of profoundly affecting the 10 dimensions of reader-community relationships.

It is not accidental that many of the good ideas in this work and elsewhere come from medium and small newspapers. The survey found that editors of smaller papers were much more confident of the quality of their community or local-local news: 42 percent of editors of 10-50,000-circulation papers rated their coverage excellent, compared to 28 percent of 50-100,000-circulation editors and 18 percent of metro editors.

Traditionally, journalists who work on smaller newspapers tend to envy the larger newspapers, with all their resources and visibility. But in local news, the metros can look to their more intensely local colleagues for inspiration and ideas.

Whatever the size, however, the advantage goes to the newspaper that finds more creative and intense ways to work closer to the reader and the community and become an essential part of the lives of both.