

# THE LOCAL NEWS TOOL KIT

*Readership Issues Committee*

*2001*



American  
Society of  
Newspaper  
Editors

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Copies of this book are available for \$15, or \$25 for both The Local News Handbook and The Local News Tool Kit. To order, send a check or money order to:

ASNE  
Publications Fulfillment  
11690B Sunrise Valley Dr.  
Reston, Va. 20191-1409

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 book for handling. Questions? Call ASNE, 703/453-1122.

This book and The Local News Handbook are also on the internet:  
<http://www.asne.org/kiosk/reports/99reports/localnews.htm>  
<http://www.asne.org/kiosk/reports/2001reports/2001localnewstoolkit.htm>



## FOREWORD

This book fills a gap created by *The Local News Handbook*. That work, published two years ago by ASNE, proposes the first methodical definition of local news, the heart of our newspapers and their future. The core of the *Handbook* is a framework of 10 types, or dimensions, of the relationships between the individual and his or her communities. The framework was developed through a survey of the thinking and research in a number of fields — geography, political science, sociology, social psychology, mass communications and community-building. Because it rests on such wide-ranging scholarship and theory, the framework is, in some ways, abstract.

At the other extreme, however, the *Handbook* is also a rich collection of ideas and experiences from scores of newspapers, offering specific ways to address the 10 dimensions.

What is missing from the *Handbook* is the how-to, the mechanisms editors might use to embrace the new thinking about local news and apply it in their newsrooms and their communities — and in their own ways. That is the purpose of *The Local News Tool Kit*.

As with the *Handbook*, the *Tool Kit* is based on a belief that local news is all about readers and community, a complex concept that must be understood and appreciated by editors who want their local journalism to succeed. As the *Handbook* explained, newspapers are reliant on Americans' innate need for community, and in turn, newspapers can help build community. Done right, the relationship is wonderfully interactive.

So this *Tool Kit* offers a process for improving — broadening, deepening, sharpening, enriching — your newspaper's local report. It was developed through brainstorming by ASNE's Readership Issues Committee.

The first section offers a variety of ways that a new editor, or an editor who wants a new outlook, can really learn about her or his community. Brant Houston starts with the numbers, how to access databases and census data to develop local insights. Then Tommy Miller and others offer ways to understand the history, traditions and culture of the place. Chapter 3, led by Pete Weitzel, suggests a wide range of mechanisms for listening to your community.

The second section of the *Tool Kit* proposes some methods for evaluating how well your existing local coverage succeeds. My Chapter 4 suggests a process for using the 10 dimensions from the *Handbook* to set priorities in your local coverage and assess the breadth and depth of your report. Michele McLellan's work will help you see who's not in your newspaper.

Now what do you do? The third section will help you envision what your

local coverage can become. Weitzel would have you paint a figurative mural of your town, and Jan Schaffer and others explore the idea of a community's "master narrative," also known as your newspaper's "franchise issue." This is probably the most important and biggest story in town, the one by which you can define your newspaper.

Change, that old bugaboo of newsrooms everywhere, is the theme of the final section. Weitzel proposes a process for change, and Carolyn Kingcade and John Humenik suggest ways to measure your progress. Again building on concepts introduced in the *Handbook*, my Chapter 4 offers a reporting and editing protocol based on the notion that all journalism, done well, is local.

There are many more tools in this kit, far too many for any one newspaper to use. The idea is that editors who want to improve their newspapers' local coverage should read *The Local News Handbook* and consider new ways of thinking about local journalism. Then use *The Local News Tool Kit* to put those ideas to work in your newspaper and your community.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Jan Schaffer, Pete Weitzel and Tommy Miller were major contributors to this book, not only in their own chapters but also in organizing other chapters.

Laura Sparks, graphics editor of the *Wisconsin State Journal*, designed and produced this book.

Robert G. McGruder, chair of the 2000-01 Readership Issues Committee, provided leadership and support for this project.

Frank Denton

# UNDERSTANDING YOUR COMMUNITY



## CHAPTER 1

# COMMUNITY BY THE NUMBERS

*By Brant Houston*

Ten years ago most journalists hadn't heard of the term "database." If any of them ever thought about going online for data on the Internet, they discovered the task was cumbersome and often not an option in newsrooms.

Since then, there has not only been a revolution in the use of databases and the Internet, but also a widespread acceptance in newsrooms that electronic data sets are an essential part of journalism in the 21st Century.

Journalists have found databases are useful for much more than long projects, and many reporters are starting to analyze databases for their beat reporting and daily stories.

Now, the question is not whether journalists should use databases, but rather which databases should they use?

### THE APPROACH

To be sure, once a newsroom wants to accumulate databases, it's difficult to decipher what's necessary to get from the huge thicket of information. In the past decade, however, dozens of newsrooms have developed effective approaches.

Here are some general principles:

- Whenever possible, a community database should not be for one story. It should be archived and valuable for years, be a part of a reference library and, when appropriate, distributed on a newsroom intranet.
- Community databases do not come from only local agencies. A multitude of regional, state, federal and commercial databases can be easily sliced to the local level.

Brant Houston is executive director of Investigative Reporters and Editors Inc. and author of *Computer-Assisted Reporting: A Practical Guide*. He was an investigative reporter for 17 years before joining IRE in 1994.

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- There should be a plan for periodic updating of databases to keep them current and to provide the opportunity for trend stories.
- Reporters and editors need to keep up with the databases that are available online (particularly on the World Wide Web) which can augment or update databases in-house. There should be a schedule for downloading that information.
- When an electronic database doesn't exist, it's reasonable for a newsroom to consider building its own from hard copy.

### DEMOGRAPHIC DATA

The preparation in newsrooms for the 2000 Census demonstrated that Census data sets are a key component for a database library for community reporting.

The Census serves not only as a way to better understand the composition and change in a community, but it also serves as a "template" on which other data on other topics such as environment or health can be compared.

The 2000 Census is composed of several different releases.

The first release (December 2000) was the number of persons in each state, and state legislatures use it for the apportionment of U.S. congressional seats. The second release (March 2001), known as PL94-171, contained the race and ethnicity of persons, and the Census Bureau breaks it down to areas of state, counties, tracts and blocks. This data set provides the basis for stories on diversity, growth, segregation and redistricting. It also is far more complex than the 1990 Census because it includes categories for multiple races.

For the 1990 Census, a respondent could choose only one of five races and information about Hispanic-origin. That meant there could be only 10 possible categories. With multiple race and Hispanic origin combinations, the 2000 Census has 126 possible categories.

The third release (distributed state by state throughout the summer of 2001), based on the answers to the so-called short form, has additional information on age, gender, Hispanic origin, and length of time at the residence. It also has relationship of each person in the household to the person who filled out the form. From this data set, newsrooms can pursue stories on the profiles of age, gender and race, and on family relationships.

The fourth release is based on answers to the 52 questions in the long form. The release, delivered in the winter of 2002 and into the spring, includes detailed information on a wide range of items that lend themselves to strong stories for nearly every beat in a community.

Included in the fourth release is information on ancestry, language, place of birth, vehicles, commuting times, education, median housing prices, rent,

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description of housing, income and house heating fuel.

Naturally, newsrooms should have at least the 1990 Census in-house in order to make comparisons.

For more detailed information on the Census, go to the Census Web site [www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov)

The screenshot shows the U.S. Census Bureau website interface. At the top, there's a navigation bar with links for Bookmarks, Netsite (http://www.census.gov/), Instant Message, Internet, Lookup, and NewtCool. The main heading is "U.S. Census Bureau" with the subtitle "United States Department of Commerce". Below this, there's a section for "Subjects A to Z" with a grid of letters. To the right, a prominent box highlights "Census 2000 resident population and apportionment counts" with a "Click here" button. Further down, there are several categorized links: "New on the Site", "Search", "Access Tools", "Catalog", "Publications (PDF)", "Jobs@Census", "About the Bureau", and "Related Sites". On the right side, there are more specific links under categories like "People", "Business", "Geography", and "News".

For more information on reporting on the Census go to [www.2000census.org](http://www.2000census.org), which is operated by Investigative Reporters and Editors Inc. and is a good one-stop Web site that also links to other sites such as that of Census expert and Arizona State University professor Steve Doig.

In addition, newsrooms should make contact with state data centers and local demographers.

For profiling community demographics, the Census Web site provides other useful data sets that can be downloaded and links to other sites.

Profiles of local economic sectors by city or ZIP code, are available at [www.census.gov/epcd/www/econ97.html](http://www.census.gov/epcd/www/econ97.html). Databases on county business patterns that show employment, payroll, and business size distribution can be



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obtained at [www.census.gov/epcd/cbp/view/cbpview.html](http://www.census.gov/epcd/cbp/view/cbpview.html)

The IRS Migration data set also adds information to the Census with data on buying county-to-county and state-to-state migration data at [ftp.fedworld.gov/pub/irs-soi/prodserv](http://ftp.fedworld.gov/pub/irs-soi/prodserv)

The Bureau of Labor Statistics also has data on employment and unemployment at <http://stats.bls.gov:80/datahome.htm> while the Bureau of Economic Analysis has data on personal income at its BEA Regional Facts Web site (Bear-Facts) at [www.bea.doc.gov/bea/regional/bearfacts/index.htm](http://www.bea.doc.gov/bea/regional/bearfacts/index.htm)

For the impact of federal money on the economy, The Consolidated Federal Funds Report shows how much in federal funds in expenditures, grants and loans is flowing into an area. The entire database can be bought rather than having to look up reports on the Web.

CONSOLIDATED FEDERAL FUNDS REPORT (CFFR)	
Fiscal Year 1999	
Wisconsin	
Oneida County	Congressional District: 07 08
Population (July 1, 1999 estimate) . . . . .	36,052
TOTAL DIRECT EXPENDITURES OR OBLIGATIONS - TOTAL	170,423,715
Defense. . . . .	3,518,000
Non-defense. . . . .	166,905,715
RETIREMENT AND DISABILITY PAYMENTS - TOTAL	98,220,477
Social Security. . . . .	84,427,262
Federal retirement and disability payments	8,065,092
Veterans benefit payments. . . . .	3,628,428
All other. . . . .	2,099,695
OTHER DIRECT PAYMENTS - TOTAL. . . . .	31,925,755

As for commercial databases on demographics, among those recommended by experienced reporters are:

- Rand Corporation: ([www.rand.org](http://www.rand.org)) demographic data, real estate data.
- Claritas: ([www.claritas.com](http://www.claritas.com)) Demographic data, wealth and income data and retail sales data.
- Woods and Poole Economics: ([www.woodsandpoole.com](http://www.woodsandpoole.com)) economic and demographic data.
- WEFA: ([www.wefa.com](http://www.wefa.com)) economic, wealth data.
- Acxiom/DataQuick: ([www.dataquick.com](http://www.dataquick.com)) Real estate data.

This is only a sample of the demographic and economic data sets, but the information gleaned from these sites is a good, reliable starting point.

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### STATE DATA SOURCES

Before getting to locally kept data, there are key state agencies that reporters should tap into both for on-line data and databases that can be brought in-house. Not every state has opened all the records, but most of these databases with local information are available.

Among those agencies offering data:

- The tax department for income levels of individuals, businesses, homeowners and renters.
- The secretary of state for databases on for-profit and non-profit corporations, partnerships, and election information (The IRS database on financial filings of non-profits is a good supplement to this information.)
- The labor department for employment by industry, wages, income.
- The justice department or highway patrol for arrest and crime statistics.
- The education department for extensive information on schools, budgets and testing.
- The health department for medical facilities data and health statistics.
- The transportation department for accident levels, spending and infrastructure.
- The economic or finance department for state funding patterns.
- The housing department for data on public and private housing.
- The vital statistics department for birth and death records.
- Professional and occupational licensing boards. These boards have databases of names and address, and at a minimum the databases of licensed physicians, lawyers, and certified public accountants should be acquired.
- Motor vehicle department. They may have drivers' licenses open to the public.

### LOCAL DATA

Before there were databases, good journalists kept Rolodexes, index cards, and hard-copy reports to understand the community. Much of the following list is simply getting in electronic form what reporters formerly acquired on paper. What makes it complicated is that the availability of the local data varies because of state laws. (Most states now have their open-records laws on the Web, but a helpful guide is available at the Reporters Committee on Freedom of the Press Web site, [www.rcfp.org](http://www.rcfp.org).)

Newsrooms can now break down the basic local databases into different categories based on a beat or topic.

#### Politics

A database of voter registration is an excellent tool for finding and identifying people in the community. The tabulations of votes in previous elections



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also are often kept in electronic form.

Of course, campaign finance reports are critical. Make sure to get federal campaign contributions for the state house and senate; they are electronic. For state legislatures and municipal candidates, if they are not in electronic form, it's well worth building databases of contributions and expenditures in local elections. These databases help to trace the influence and the players in a community. And they provide yet another "people finder."

Most communities also require some officeholders to file disclosures on their business and personal finances to prevent conflict of interests. Sometimes, these are electronic, but if not, a newsroom can build a database of these records.

### Business and economy

While the federal and state governments may provide overview data, a reporter can get only the nitty-gritty data at local offices. For a profile of businesses, a newsroom can begin with a database of business licenses issued by the city or county. Those records should have name of the operator of the business, the address and kind of business. Other license databases to get include taxi licenses and liquor licenses. (Liquor licenses may be issued by the state.)

To see loans obtained by businesses for equipment or other assets, the Uniform Commercial Code records are the place to go, and those records are generally electronic.

A database of building permits also helps gauge a community's economic health.

### Property and tax records

A database of property assessment records goes to the heart of most communities. This database is critical for looking at the equity of the property tax system.

Tax delinquency records should be updated twice a year. They are available from the tax collector's office and frequently forecast business or personal bankruptcies. They can be checked against public officials' names, too.

If a county maintains a database of tax liens, it should be obtained. Tax liens, filed by the IRS or the state against businesses or individuals also forecast business or personal financial problems and offer great tips for stories.

### Guns

Most communities have a database of gun permits issued, and the federal Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms agency has a database of registered gun dealers. The federal database can be cross-referenced with local business licenses to see if the local gun dealers have proper licenses.

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### Crime

The Uniform Crime Reports by the FBI is a standard database to have, but the report should be supplemented by the U.S. Department of Justice's Bureau of Statistics surveys and any local crime data sets that are available. The FBI does not include certain crimes if they do not fit into the FBI's definition. Furthermore, a database of local incidents, arrests and charges give a more detailed look at crime in the community.

### Education

Test-scores databases are available both from local and state agencies and are a standard database to have.

But school-enrollment databases are good both for education stories and stories that show how a community is changing.

Personnel information about school employees (names, titles, salaries, date of hire and other information) is a good reference database and can be coupled with time and attendance records for school employees. Poor attendance can signal trouble at schools.

### Courts

Many courts now have electronic civil and criminal dockets, and a database of dockets for the preceding year can show patterns of litigation. The personnel database for courts also is a must-have.

### Jail

Local jails keep a database of prisoners and usually have data on race and ethnicity and whether the inmate is awaiting trial or convicted.

### City Hall or the County Building

Every newsroom should have the database on municipal employees that includes the name, title, gender, race, department, salary and date of hire. This database should be updated every six months.

Also, the vendor database — companies and individuals supplying goods and services to the municipality and how much each of them was paid — should be updated twice a year. It can be compared to databases on campaign finance.

Databases of building inspections and restaurant inspections should be kept too along with actions and fines.



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### FEDERAL DATABASES

#### Infrastructure

Two good databases available from the federal government are the National Bridge Inventory and the Dam Inventory. The National Institute for Computer-Assisted Reporting, ([www.nicar.org](http://www.nicar.org)) a joint program of IRE and the Missouri School of Journalism, has these databases and can inexpensively slice and distribute local data from them. NICAR also distributes many of the databases listed below. A list can be found at <http://www.ire.org/datalibrary/databases> with descriptions of the information in those databases.

#### Environmental data

There are numerous environmental databases, but a good starter database is the Toxic Release Inventory kept both by state agencies and the Environmental Protection Agency. The database offers information on the estimated pollution by manufacturers. A Web site, Right to Know, has a good introduction to environmental databases at <http://www.rtk.net/rtkdata.html>.



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#### Accidents

If it collides, newsrooms want to report on it. There are several good federal databases to have to check for possible stories and to have as references.

#### Highways

There is federal data on fatal accidents. Called FARS, it has information on the location of the accident and number of fatalities nationwide. State highway patrol departments generally have more detailed information on both fatal and non-fatal accidents.

#### Aircraft

There are reports on maintenance problems and in-flight difficulties for specific aircraft available from the Federal Aviation Administration, the National Transportation Safety Board and NASA.

#### Railroad Accidents

This database can be downloaded from the site of the Federal Railroad Administration: <http://safetydata.fra.dot.gov/Officeofsafety/>

#### Boating Accidents

The Coast Guard keeps a database of U.S. boating accidents — both in the ocean and on inland water — with detailed information.

### FINDING DATABASES

First, newsrooms should assume there is a database — probably more than one — for any potential story. Second, some journalists have created indexes on useful government databases.

Two of those indexes are [www.reporter.org/desktop](http://www.reporter.org/desktop) and the NICAR Nettour at [www.ire.org/training/nettour](http://www.ire.org/training/nettour)

Here are some other tips for finding databases.


#### Federal

Although somewhat out of date, a useful CD-ROM is Information USA. Available from InfoBusiness in Orem, Utah (801-221-110), it has a searchable index of thousands of federal databases and where to get them.

There are many Web sites that link to hundreds of federal agencies that list their databases. Both the Census site and [www.fedworld.gov](http://www.fedworld.gov) are good gateways. And many federal sites list the databases they have on their Web sites.



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### NICAR 'Net Tour

A Strategy Guide with Starting Points  
Tom McGinty and Sarah Cohen  
National Institute for Computer-Assisted Reporting  
*A joint program of Investigative Reporters and Editors Inc. and Missouri School of Journalism*

Click on links to jump to each section

• <a href="#">Reliable government sources</a>	• <a href="#">Finding experts</a>
• <a href="#">Telephone directories</a>	• <a href="#">Downloadable data on the Net</a>
• <a href="#">E-mail and Web address finders</a>	• <a href="#">Searchable online databases</a>
• <a href="#">Listserv and newsgroup postings</a>	• <a href="#">Other links collections for journalists</a>

Some journalists have created useful indexes for governmental databases.

### State and local

Only recently have some states created an index of their databases. Sarah Cohen, a database editor at *The Washington Post*, suggests that newsrooms acquire the Y2K reports done by states or municipalities because those studies determined where databases were and list them.

Both the Web index [www.yahoo.com](http://www.yahoo.com) in its regional section <http://local.yahoo.com/> and a Web site call "Search Systems" <http://pac-info.com> offer excellent indexes on information available in the 50 states and locally. Also, state agencies and municipalities are beginning to list available databases on their Web sites.

### INTRANETS

Many newsrooms are putting some of their databases on their intranets and thus creating vast reference libraries. One challenge of an intranet is determining the limitations of each database and making sure to warn reporters of those limitations. Another challenge is keeping the data sets updated.

Here is a sample of what some newsrooms have placed on their intranets:

- Voter registration
- Business registrations
- Real estate records
- Local payroll records
- Crime incident reports

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- Campaign contributions
- County assessment records
- Aircraft safety reports

### TRAINING NEEDED

A newsroom can collect hundreds of data sets at relatively low costs, but the value is lost if reporters are not trained to do more than look up specific information on those data sets.

Newsrooms bring entire databases in-house so reporters can do independent calculations or summarize data to find patterns, trends or tips.

Reporters need to know three basic software tools: skilled on-line searching techniques, spreadsheets (Microsoft Excel, for example) and database managers (Microsoft Access).

The two advanced tools, which reporters are using more often, are mapping software and statistical software. Because of the Census and the importance of visualizing numbers, mapping software is gaining in popularity. While statistical software is more challenging, newsrooms are beginning to see skilled CAR journalists add statistical software to their repertoire.

(The author would like to acknowledge the work of these reporters on this subject: Steve Doig, Arizona State University; Tom McGinty, IRE and NICAR; Paul Overberg, *USA Today*; Sarah Cohen, *The Washington Post*; Jennifer LaFleur, *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*; Andrew Lehren, Dateline NBC; Paul Adrian, freelance; David Boardman, *The Seattle Times*; Mary Jo Sylwester, IRE and NICAR.)



## CHAPTER 2

# HISTORY, TRADITIONS AND CULTURE: OLD GLORY AND NOODLE

*By Tommy Miller  
Houston Chronicle*

On my first night as a newspaper reporter, I almost met my journalistic Waterloo because of Old Glory and Noodle.

The distressing moment came in 1963, when I was a freshman at Hardin-Simmons University in the West Texas city of Abilene, about 500 miles from my east Texas home in Beaumont.

On the first day of my newswriting class, the professor told me to report for work on Friday night at the *Abilene Reporter-News*. My job: take information from phone callers and write stories about high school football games.

During my brief instructions from one of the sports reporters, I was told about six-man football. (For the non-football-junkies, six-man football was, and still is, played in small Texas towns that don't have enough players for an 11-member team. Scores in six-man games are unusually high.)

"Get everybody who scores in the story, but keep it to three paragraphs," the sports reporter said.

I nodded as if I knew exactly what he was talking about, but, in fact, I didn't have a clue. In East Texas, as far as I knew, we played with 11 players or we didn't play.

In a few minutes, phones started ringing throughout the newsroom. They were ringing loudly and often, and sports reporters and editors were yelling at each other with questions about games and stories. The best way I can describe it now is to compare the newsroom scene with the television show *ER*, but without the gurneys and surgery.

After I had survived several callers, who usually were the home-team

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coaches or a student, I got a caller who said he had a six-man game. He began listing names of players who scored. He listed four or five players. Then four or five more. He kept listing them, and even though he was well into the 20s with names, I continued to dutifully write the names along with information about how these names scored.

Then, I noticed a couple of people behind me were laughing. I turned around and saw that quite a few people were laughing. Then I realized that my caller was a sports staffer who had called me from another phone in a corner of the room.

After the laughter subsided, a veteran staffer mumbled that I had fallen for a traditional rookie-initiation rite. "Now you can really get to work," he said.

More phones rang. I kept taking callers. Several calls later, I answered the phone and a man said: "I've got the Old Glory-Noodle game."

I paused and said, "OK. You got me the first time. But I know there can't be any towns named Old Glory and Noodle."

The caller protested, but I hung up, confident that I had averted another embarrassing initiation rite.

The phones kept ringing. I kept answering them. A few minutes after I hung up on the earlier caller, sports editor Fred Sanner, a huge, gruff man, stood at his desk and growled (yes, he really growled), "Who was taking the Old Glory-Noodle game?"

It is at about this point, as you might expect, that my memory has grown fuzzy about the events that followed that night, primarily because I think I may have lost consciousness for a moment.

But I seem to recall that the newsroom became very quiet. Sports writers and others around me shook their heads. I felt a bit sick to my stomach. I figured that if I admitted what happened, my journalism career would be over. But I think I did walk to Sanner's desk and say something like, "Mr. Sanner, I think someone called me with that game a few minutes ago, but I kind of had a bad connection."

He looked at me and said, "Well, the coach is on the phone. Talk to him." I did, and as you might expect, the coach was not happy. He yelled something about how he couldn't believe I didn't know about Old Glory and Noodle. I told him I had just arrived in town about a week earlier and hadn't had a chance to check out the area. But I assured him that I would visit both Old Glory and Noodle soon.

Of course, had I been given a quick primer about the towns in the Abilene area, things would have been much better that night.

But that was a time when young journalists were often thrown into newsrooms and expected to sink or swim. I didn't sink, although I never told Sanner

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what really happened.

Two years later, after transferring to Baylor, I was back on Friday night football duty at the *Waco Tribune-Herald*. This time, I studied the names of the surrounding towns before the phones started ringing, and I didn't hang up on the caller who said he was from West, as in West, Texas, which is a few miles north of Waco.

Now, most newspaper editors know that new staffers must quickly learn about a community as a part of achieving credibility and trust with readers. And, of course, cities and towns across the country still have their Old Glories and Noodles — those dead giveaways that cause long-time readers to say to a new reporter, "You must not be from around here."

For example, in Monroe, La., a city of about 50,000 people, a new staffer can trip up anything ranging from the name of the parish (For non-Louisianans, a parish is the same as a county) to a person's hot-sauce culinary habits.

Kathy Spurlock, executive editor of *The News-Star* in Monroe, said the "name of our parish is Wash-ah-Tah." (That's spelled Ouachita).

"A newcomer would stand out by calling it o-wa-chita," she said. "And someone might say Mon-roe, instead of mon-Roe, with the emphasis on the wrong syllable." Or, Spurlock said, the real test for a newcomer is knowing that the city got its name from a steamship named for President James Monroe.

"Of course, the other thing that immediately distinguishes someone new is how much hot sauce and pepper they put on their food," Spurlock said, indicating that the less hot sauce, the more likely that a person is from elsewhere.

And then there's Detroit, a city of about 970,000 people, where *Detroit Free Press* Recruiting and Development Editor Joe Grimm says "the way people talk" in Michigan separates the long-timers from the short-timers.

So, how do Michigan people talk?

"Well, people around here think they don't have accents," Grimm said. But they apparently do, because they have streets such as Cadieux, which is pronounced caj-ew, or Freud Street, which most people would think is pronounced like the last name of the famous psychiatrist. But Grimm said, "We say Frud," which rhymes with lewd.

Then there's Goethe Street. "In Detroit," Grimm said, "it's go-thee. And you've got to know where's the west side and the east side."

"Then there are things such as why are there awnings on empty hotels in Detroit," he said.

That question can really set newcomers apart, Grimm said, because new residents wouldn't know about the car show downtown in 1988. The city leaders wanted to make the hotels, even the empty ones, look good, he said, and they ordered up the awnings. Some of them are still there.



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Of course, training new staffers about a community's history is not entirely new for editors. For example, *The Philadelphia Inquirer* has been doing it for years.

Arlene Morgan, formerly of the *Inquirer* and now director of workshops on journalism, race and ethnicity at Columbia University, said former managing editor Gene Foreman developed a packet of material for new hires that gave them "a pretty good synopsis of the city."

Within two or three months, she said, the new staffers were required to attend a two-day workshop during which various department heads talked about policies of the newspaper and some things to know about the city.

Later, Morgan created an *Inquirer* speakers bureau. "I got 110 reporters and editors to agree to go out (into neighborhoods) to talk to people about what they did," she said. "I guarantee that they learned about the area and brought stuff back for stories."

On another occasion, Morgan brought a group of community leaders to the paper to talk with staffers about this question: Was the *Inquirer* indispensable to their day?

In recent years, some newspapers have taken a more structured approach toward training for new staffers. Others have stuck with informal approaches. But most all recognize the value of avoiding the sink-or-swim philosophy.

Here are snapshots of what some editors are doing:

### SAVANNAH MORNING NEWS

Managing Editor Dan Suwyn has a wonderful way of underscoring the importance of training for staffers, especially new ones:

"There is a great line from a commercial for the new (television) hospital drama *Gideon's Crossing*. Andrae Brougner, the head of a university hospital, is addressing his students: 'This is a teaching hospital. We'd call it a learning hospital, but we'd scare the hell out of the patients.'"

"Well," Suwyn said, "most newspapers are teaching papers. Too often, of course, we're not teaching our reporters and editors the fundamentals of our community, and as a result, we scare the hell out of our readers."

At the *Morning News*, Suwyn takes a very structured approach toward staff training.

The primary tool for learning about the community and the newspaper is the *Savannah Morning News* University (SMNU), which began as a one-day crash course about the region and the newspaper. Later, Suwyn said, staff members wanted more time for classes and more information. Now, the 24 hours of classroom time are spread over a month. The sessions are conducted two or three times a year, depending on turnover.

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Along with basic history lessons, the classes introduce new staff members to the major industries of the area and, in particular, the military bases. "People need to have a strong sense of how the military plays into our economy here," Suwyn said.

Line editors do the training in the SMNU classes. An African-American historian, who was a leader in the Savannah civil rights movement in the '50s and '60s, also leads some of the sessions.

Taking a close look at both the racial history of both the newspaper and the community is especially important, Suwyn said: "The first presses of this newspaper were actually powered by slaves."

Then, in the late 1800s and early 1900s, he said, "this newspaper actually prompted and promoted lynchings in the area."

And during times of newspaper wars in the city, he said, the newspaper "was as anti-black as possible" to maintain an advantage over its competitors. Into the 1960s and early 1970s, the paper "was pretty vehemently anti-black," he said. Many black residents still remember those days, Suwyn said, and new staff members need to know about the newspaper's history when they go out into the community.

Asked how the classroom leaders deal with these sensitive racial issues, Suwyn said: "We just spell it out for them."

### THE DAY

At *The Day* in New London, Conn., Managing Editor Lance Johnson says the newspaper conducts numerous training sessions about reporting and writing, and "Our training as a whole sort of addresses" the topic of learning about the region.

The newspaper also has a part-time writing coach who meets regularly with groups of three reporters. In these sessions, the writing coach can help develop a new staff member's knowledge about the area.

But perhaps most important, Johnson said, is that "we have a local style-book, which we wrote in the mid-'90s, and it addresses a lot of the issues of history, the spelling of local towns and streets."

### COLUMBUS (GA.) LEDGER-ENQUIRER

Executive Editor Michael Burbach says new staffers used to get "a ride with Billy" when they joined the paper. Editorial Page Editor Billy Winn drove them throughout the area and talked about history and culture. Winn has retired, but Burbach said he would like to resume the rides.

The focal point of the newspaper's training, Burbach said, is the Lunch Bunch. The newspaper periodically invites people for a casual, off-the-record



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lunch to talk about what they do. The guests have ranged from the police chief to a yoga instructor.

Burbach has a newsroom of about 70 people, and the lunches usually draw 12 to 15 staffers. "With these lunches," Burbach said, "we are listening to people we might not otherwise have listened to."

### THE NEWS-STAR

In Monroe, La., *News-Star* Executive Editor Kathy Spurlock provides a thorough orientation program for all new staff members, regardless of whether they are familiar with the area.

"We give them a very comprehensive market tour, led by a long-time staffer, to show them how things came to be, how this area developed," she said. They also get some basic tourism and convention information with some useful details, such as how to spell an important word for a river town — levee.

Twice a year, Spurlock invites a historian to the newspaper to talk about Louisiana history, government and culture. And there's also the car tour. "We put a new staffer in a car with another staffer, with kind of a list they are expected to hit, where the universities are, where the river bridges are, the cultural dividing lines in the community. It's really kind of a geographical tour," she said.

"I find that there are people who are natives of our community who have never been to the hot spots," she said. For example, she said, many don't know about the Biedenharn family, which invented the Coca-Cola bottle and founded Delta Airlines, which started as a crop-dusting business.

### DETROIT FREE PRESS

Before new staffers arrive at the *Detroit Free Press*, orientation begins when they receive a large binder with information about company benefits and policies. "But it also includes a lot of material about Detroit and Michigan, such as what's the weather like here and the way people talk," Recruiting and Development Editor Joe Grimm said.

Other key elements of the orientation program are:

- Staff lunches with community leaders. For example, Grimm said, five members of the Arab-American community were invited to lunch, and about 40 staff members attended. From that meeting, Grimm developed a 24-page handbook with answers to 100 questions about the large and important Arab-American community in greater Detroit.
- A van tour of the area.
- Twice a year, the newspaper sends staffers to a three-day seminar at Wayne State University that focuses on learning about Detroit.

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Next year, Detroit will observe its 300th birthday, and the *Free Press* has just completed a 500-page almanac to mark the occasion. Grimm said the almanac might be given to staff members.

### ABILENE REPORTER-NEWS

Back in Abilene, Texas, football stories, including six-man games, are still in the Saturday morning *Reporter-News*, but things have changed for the better for new staffers.

After Editor Terri Burke arrived from *The Albuquerque Tribune* about a year ago, she had a good opportunity to develop a training program for new staff members because the newspaper had 13 vacant positions.

She started with herself. Even though she had worked earlier in Texas for many years, Burke believed she needed a short course about the Abilene area. "I asked staffers to give me three names of people I should meet, and something that I ought to read," Burke said. "I have turned that around, and I have strongly urged new staffers to do the same thing."

But perhaps most important, Burke initiated a quick-immersion plan for new hires. "We're not letting them start work for a week," she said. Instead, they are spending those five days getting acquainted with Abilene.

For example, a new reporter will spend one day touring the area with a staff photographer. On another day, the new arrival will tag along with a veteran reporter. And on a third day, a new reporter may spend the day in another department in the newspaper. The reporter gets a taste of how the department works, of course, but a more important goal is showing staffers a variety of resources for finding information and people.

Burke has plenty of non-Texan staffers to get up to speed about West Texas ways. She has two from Missouri, another from Wyoming, and a copy editor from New York City. "And then there's the new photographer from Bulgaria," she said.

But with all this orientation, new staffers should be armed and ready for Friday night football. As Burke discovered, even Texans who leave and come back can sometimes forget some of the basics. "As a native Texan, I figured I knew everything there is to know about high school football," she said.

But shortly after arriving in Abilene, Burke said, "I picked up the Saturday paper, and there were all these games with 80-something-to-60-something scores, and I said to my husband, 'You know, they have totally screwed up the football page.'" Upon closer inspection, Burke saw why the scores were so high, saving herself from embarrassment with her sports staff. They were six-man games.

But Old Glory and Noodle weren't among those reports in the *Reporter-*



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*News.* Both towns closed down their high schools a number of years back, I'm told, and the few students they have now go to schools in larger towns nearby. I never visited Old Glory and Noodle, as I assured the coach I would. Maybe one of these days I will.

### A DOZEN TIPS FOR TRAINING

- Prepare a packet of material that will give new staff members a good summary of your area's history and culture.
- Create a speaker's bureau and ask staffers to describe what they do in neighborhood meetings. (And ask those staffers to come back with story ideas.)
- Schedule meetings or lunches to invite community leaders and others to the newspaper to talk with staffers.
- Prepare handbooks with information about the history and culture of various groups in your community.
- Establish classes at regular intervals for staffers to learn about your area's history. Use staff members and community leaders to teach the classes.
- Find other history classes, such as university seminars, for staff members to attend.
- Use a writing coach who can bring history into the elements of reporting and writing.
- Develop your own stylebook to address items of history and local spellings.
- Send new staffers out with veteran staffers to tour the area.
- Bring a local historian into the paper at regular intervals to talk about history.
- Tell new staffers to get names from other staffers of local people they should meet. Tell new staffers to read at least one book about your city's history.
- Don't put new staffers to work during the first week; have them spend the week learning about your area's history and people.

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### WELCOME TO THE CHRONICLE

Some newspapers prepare a packet of information for new staff members. For example, the *Houston Chronicle* is preparing a packet with a "welcome to the *Chronicle*" letter that will include a 10-page summary of information about Texas and Houston. The summary was prepared by retired reporter Lynwood Abram, who has a special interest in history.

Here are the topics covered in the summary, along with an excerpt from each section:

#### HISTORY OF TEXAS

At first, Texans were Indians. Later they were Spanish, French, Mexican, citizens of the Republic of Texas, citizens of the United States, then citizens of the Confederate States of America, and then citizens of the United States again.

#### HISTORY OF HOUSTON

After the Texas Revolution, real estate promoters from New York, the brothers Augustus Chapman Allen and John Kirby Allen, founded a city a few miles from the San Jacinto battleground. They named it in honor of the victor of that battle, Sam Houston.

#### STATE GOVERNMENT

The Texas Constitution, adopted after the Civil War, provides for a weak governor, a strong lieutenant governor and a powerful legislative branch. This was done to avert a recurrence of the "carpetbagger" regime during the Reconstruction period.

As a result, like the governor and lieutenant governor, the chief officials of the government — the Attorney General, Treasurer, Land Commissioner, Agriculture Commissioner, Comptroller of Public Accounts and members of the Texas Railroad Commission — are elective positions. They serve four-year terms and are elected in non-presidential years.

#### HOUSTON CITY GOVERNMENT

Houston has a strong-mayor city government. Only for a brief period in the 1940s did Houston have a city manager form of government. Houston City Council is composed of the mayor, the city controller, and 15 councilmen, all of whom serve two-year terms. Term limits are in effect. Ten council members are elected at large. Five represent geographic districts. The mayor and controller are elected at large.

The mayor appoints the chief of police and other department heads with approval of city council.



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### COUNTY GOVERNMENT

Harris County government is in the hands of the Commissioners Court, which is composed of the county judge and four commissioners. The county judge is elected at large. Commissioners represent geographic precincts.

Members of the court serve for four years. Terms of the commissioners are staggered.

Other elected county officers are the county attorney, county tax assessor-collector, county treasurer, and county and district clerks.

All serve four-year terms. There are no term limits.

In addition, there are 59 state district judges in Harris County. There also are 19 county courts-at-law, four with civil jurisdiction and 15 with criminal jurisdiction over misdemeanor cases. District judges serve four-year staggered terms. County court-at-law judges serve four-year terms, but are elected in the same year.

### HOUSTON/HARRIS COUNTY STATISTICS

- **Population:** Harris County, 3.1 million. Houston: 1.8 million.  
Harris County land area: 1,729 square miles.
- **Altitude:** Sea level to 300 feet.
- **Ethnic Breakdown:**  
*Harris County:* White, 64%; black, 19%; Hispanic, 22%; Asian, 4%.  
*Houston:* White, 54%; black, 19% black; Hispanic, 23%; Asian, 4%.
- **Normal Rainfall:** 46.1 inches a year.
- **Mean temperatures:** High 92 degrees; low 43.
- **Average freezes:** Last spring freeze, Feb. 14; first fall freeze, Dec. 11.
- **Economy:** Largest concentration of petrochemical plants in nation; one of busiest ports in nation; center for petroleum refining, gas pipeline transmission; Texas Medical Center; Johnson Manned Spacecraft Center (NASA); major higher education center, including Rice University, University of Houston (two branches), Texas Southern University, Baylor and University of Texas medical schools; University of St. Thomas; Houston Baptist University; center for international trade; farming and ranching.
- **Annual wages:** \$63.3 billion.
- **Property value:** \$144.3 billion.
- **Average family income for Houston:** \$32,895 per year.

### IMPORTANT PEOPLE IN HOUSTON HISTORY

Sam Houston, for whom the city was named, before coming to Texas, was congressman and governor in Tennessee. Twice president of the Republic of Texas, Houston was one of the first U. S. senators from the state and later was governor of Texas. Although he lived in Houston only briefly, his name is indelibly linked with the community. His statue in Hermann Park is a city landmark and symbol.

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### Other important Houstonians:

Jesse H. Jones, "Mr. Houston," the city's foremost civic leader who helped develop the Houston Ship Channel, in 1928 brought the first national convention of a major political party to Houston, led the effort that saved the city's banks from failure during the depression of the 1930s, was publisher of the *Houston Chronicle*. A tireless builder, Jones erected and controlled about 50 office buildings, most of them in Houston. In the administration of President Franklin Roosevelt, Jones headed the Reconstruction Finance Corp. and later was Secretary of Commerce.

### MAJOR HISTORICAL EVENTS

**1836:** City founded after Battle of San Jacinto.

**1900:** The Galveston Hurricane that claimed between 6,000 and 8,000 lives and nearly destroyed the island city of Galveston. The storm also marked the beginning of a long decline in Galveston's importance, and of the increasingly powerful role of Houston in the region's affairs.

**1901:** The Spindletop gusher near Beaumont that inaugurated a major oil field that stimulated founding of major oil companies, including many that were headquartered in Houston.

### MAJOR CRIME

The most sensational crime in the history of Houston was the serial murder of 27 boys and young men by Dean Arnold Corll, Elmer Wayne Henley and David Brooks that came to light after Corll was slain in 1973.

### CHRONICLE STYLE AND SPELLING TIPS

In news stories, use days of the week, not today, tomorrow and yesterday.

The following are correct: La Marque, Sugar Land, La Porte, Acres Homes, Bissonnet, Braeswood, but Brays Bayou, AstroWorld, Westheimer, Cut and Shoot (town in Montgomery County), Barbours Cut, Refugio, Mexia, Atascocita, Old Spanish Trail (O.S.T. on second reference).

### RECOMMENDED BOOKS ON TEXAS:

*Lone Star* by T.R. Fehrenback, a general history of the state, interpretive, not overburdened with dates and detailed accounts. An older, but still valuable history is Rupert Norval Richardson's *Texas: The Lone Star State*. Especially good on early history, development of specific aspects of the economy, such as the cattle kingdom, oil and gas, as well as political history.

Marquis James' *The Raven*, biography of Sam Houston, won the Pulitzer Prize, is a readable, generally factual account. Bill Brammer's novel *The Gay Place* is amusing and vivid portrait of Texas politics and



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a character closely resembling Lyndon Johnson. Larry McMurtry's *Lonesome Dove* is a realistic account of cowboy life and an epic cattle drive.

### RECOMMENDED BOOKS ON HOUSTON:

A general history of Houston is David G. McComb's *Houston, a History*. Other books of interest include George Feuermann's *Houston: Land of the Big Rich*; Marilyn M. Sibley's *Port of Houston*, and Marguerite Johnston's *Houston, the Unknown City, 1836-1946*.

### THINGS TO SEE AND DO IN THE HOUSTON AREA:

Astrodome, Enron Field, Manned Spacecraft Center, Moody Gardens (Galveston), AstroWorld, Galleria shopping center, Burke Baker Planetarium, Sam Houston Race Park, Houston Museum of Fine Arts, Contemporary Arts Museum, Rothko Chapel, Hermann Park Zoo, Old Town Spring shopping district for handcrafts and antiques, Holocaust Museum.

## HISTORY, TRADITIONS AND CULTURE

# THE COURSE ON CHARLOTTE

By Gloria B. Anderson  
*The New York Times*

In the mid-1970s, Charlotte, N.C., was beginning to show signs of the growth that over the next two decades would turn it into one of the foremost metropolitan areas of the South. Happily, visionaries were in key positions at two of its major institutions, *The Charlotte Observer* and Central Piedmont Community College.

When Jim Batten, editor of *The Observer*, asked me to meet with Mike Myers, a continuing education officer at CPCC, I knew Mike would have something interesting to propose. Mike wanted *The Observer* to help create, sponsor and publish *The Course*, a 10-part series devoted to the businesses, services, social history and even the physical characteristics that made Charlotte unique. The Course would be a useful way for *The Observer* to welcome newcomers, Mike said, and he could arrange for readers who enrolled in The Course to get college credit at CPCC.

Intrigued by the idea, I set out to help identify the subjects and writers for the 10 articles, arranging field trips to go along with the pieces and creating course packets of outside readings, homework and other materials that were mailed to the 2,000 readers who signed up.

Among the 10 themes were the area's religion, race relations, health and medical establishment and even the geology. Out near the Charlotte Motor Speedway, for example, the site of one field trip, is an outcropping of leopardite, a stone found only in North Carolina and, as I recall, somewhere in Africa.

For the health unit, readers visited a hospital, put on paper gowns and slippers and were given tangerines and scalpels to try their hands at surgery. They got to see how a lithotripter fragments kidney stones by using ultrasound (for demonstration purposes, we used a hard-boiled egg).

Readers told us that they loved *The Course*, and those of us at *The Observer* learned a lot about our community from researching subjects for the series. The articles themselves were mostly written by experts in their fields.

Gloria Anderson, vice president for international and editorial development of *The New York Times* News Services Division, was Sunday and features editor of *The Charlotte Observer* in 1974-76.

## HISTORY, TRADITIONS AND CULTURE

Dr. Larry Boggs, the Charlotte urologist who wrote the article on health and medical practices, was typical of the neophyte writers: "Kill the paragraph? Can't you find another way of saying that?" or "I know I need to do more research — but in the morgue? Please!"

The Course won a national Clarion Award from Women in Communications, and *The Observer* re-published the articles in 1991. The creative Mike Myers later masterminded "Over Here, Over There," a series of 20 articles about important battles of World War II published in *The Observer*.

## CHAPTER 3

# LISTEN AND LEARN

By Pete Weitzel

The view from my office window when I was working at daily newspapering a few years back was of a shimmering Biscayne Bay, grand cruise ships in dock, and in the distance, the expensive estates of Star Island and the outline of Miami Beach's extravagant hotels and condominiums. It was a view of a world seemingly at ease and doing well, thank you.

The metropolitan area that appeared in the local news pages of the newspaper I helped edit — *The Miami Herald* — was quite different: a world never at ease and only infrequently doing well.

If the contrast was startling for me, imagine what it was for our readers, who saw many different communities, many different Miamis, images captured only in bits and pieces of the daily local news section.

For me, the window view was often — but I belatedly realize not often enough — a reminder of the isolation of the newsroom.

I suspect most editors can relate to my experience. I have yet to find a newspaper where the coverage mirrors the editor's description of his or her own community. I have yet to find an editor who is not concerned that the newsroom is too disconnected from the broad community it serves and who has not asked, in some form:

How can we better understand our community?

That concern has launched many a newsroom reorganization, spawned civic journalism, prompted hundreds of individual newspaper initiatives, and more than engaged ASNE's Readership Committee and other committees of editors.

And we're still trying to figure it out.

This chapter touches on a range of things that have been tried or are being tried. It offers, we hope, some ideas that can be borrowed or modified or that might inspire new approaches. The techniques range from simple to complex, but even the more elaborate are built on easy-to-digest segments.

Pete Weitzel worked at *The Miami Herald* for 38 years, the last 12 as managing editor or senior managing editor. He now is a media consultant and teaches at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.



## LISTEN AND LEARN

At the core are the basics of good journalism.

- Listen well.
- Observe in detail.
- Think about it, collectively.
- Share what you know.
- Remember that what you don't know can't help you and will probably hurt you.

### LISTEN TO UNDERSTAND

The listening we do most often as reporters — and editors — tends to be assignment-driven. Get the facts, get the quotes needed for a specific story, then move on to the next.

Listening to understand — getting to know people and their concerns, and to appreciate their uniqueness and diversity — requires time and a full measure of attention. It means letting people talk in their own way and at their own pace about what matters to them. It means persuading them you care, so they'll also talk about why those things matter — about their values and concerns and worries and joys.

In recent years, editors and reporters have found a variety of ways to step outside their normal roles and put on listening hats.

Here's a quick look at some of the techniques:

• **Public forums** — Open to any interested citizen, forums are usually designed to explore a specific subject. Frequently, a panel of experts starts the program, followed by citizen discussion of the issue. A moderator guides the discussion. Unlike town hall meetings, reporters and editors are there to listen and learn from the experts and the audience, not to respond to questions or comments. Usually, the forums are reported as news events. Indeed, many papers have used them in conjunction with special reporting projects.

(In practice, the terms "town hall meeting" and "public forum" are used interchangeably. The differentiation here is ours — and arbitrary.)

• **Community conversations** — Small group discussions — up to a dozen citizens, 3 to 5 journalists — moderated by an editor or reporter and held away from the newspaper offices. The conversations can be broadly focused on "community concerns" or targeted to specific issues. The former fosters understanding and story ideas; the latter can be used to help develop reporting angles for specific stories. The atmosphere at conversations is casual, using first names. In the best of conversations, the citizens talk as much to each other as to the journalists.

## LISTEN AND LEARN



A town hall meeting in Madison, Wisconsin.

• **Town hall meetings** — Well promoted gatherings at which readers are invited to meet editors, reporters and often business-side officers and to be heard on a variety of local issues as well as newspaper content. Town hall meetings tend to draw familiar faces with familiar complaints or appeals, but ordinary citizens do show up, and new concerns and ideas do surface. The town hall meetings are infrequently reported, although the editor or publisher may write a column based on the meeting.

• **Special interest group meetings** — A conversation among editors and reporters and representatives of any special interest group, often to hear their concerns about coverage. They can be held at the newspaper, but it's often more productive to hold these in the specific community. They have frequently resulted in new understandings and insights, on both sides, and have built both contacts and good will that have paid dividends for the newspaper when new issues arose.

• **Brown bag lunches** — Conversations at the newspaper offices, usually with newsmakers but sometimes with representatives of interest groups or experts in a given field. A dozen or so editors and reporters will talk with the source about the subject he or she knows best around the box-lunch table. It's especially valuable in helping inside editors learn more about people in the news and key areas or topics of coverage. Gannett encourages reporters on topical beats to hold similar "sounding board" sessions with sources and readers.



## LISTEN AND LEARN

• **Field days** — There are many variations — some quite elaborate — of this basically simple idea: Give staff members a half-day or day off to simply go out and talk to people. Ask them what local issues or topics they care about, what matters in their lives, what they read or don't read in the newspaper or might be interested in reading about. Each staffer is expected to share what he or she learned, sometimes by memo, sometimes at team or staff meetings.

• **Walk the neighborhoods** — The field day given form. Reporters and editors are sent to various neighborhoods to interview people there at random. It's a way, whether done within days of each other or over time, to gather knowledge of specific parts of the community and to understand their differing concerns and interests.

• **Visits to community organizations** — The newspaper's editors, and sometimes reporters, systematically attend various civic organization meetings, simply to make contact and to talk with people there about issues and coverage.

• **Mall kiosks, event booths** — Newsroom staffers join the circulation and marketing folks at newspaper kiosks or booths set up in malls or at fairs and other special events and talk with people who stop by about the paper and about their reading interests. The *Lexington Herald-Leader* gave reporters video cameras to tape the people they talked with at a county fair so that other staffers could hear the people talk about what they read and didn't read in the paper.

• **Open news meetings** — Some newspapers regularly invite readers — usually no more than 2 to 3 at a time — to sit in on daily news meetings. This might be done randomly from readers who respond to a promotion in the paper or by invitation to community groups. The reader/citizens are normally invited to join the discussion.

• **Reader Advisory Boards** — A panel selected from regular newspaper readers who agree to "advise," often for a year at a time. Over that time, individual members will sit in on news meetings, shadow reporters or editors, and meet periodically with groups of editors to discuss the paper and individual sections, coverage, story play and their general reactions as readers. Panels are usually 10 to 15 people, large enough to get diversity and allow for absences, small enough to permit manageable conversations. Some newspapers have created larger panels of readers who agree to be contacted by phone about reactions to ongoing coverage like election campaigns.

• **Focus Groups** — Originally a market research tool, and still used that way, focus groups typically involve bringing in up to a dozen readers to test reaction to new features, sections, design changes or other innovations. But many papers have extended this to more general discussions about the paper

## LISTEN AND LEARN

and news coverage and some have done this on a regular, biweekly or monthly basis. In this sense, they function much like reader advisory boards but with a constantly shifting group of observers.

• **Broader civic participation** — At most newspapers, it's no longer required or expected that reporters and editors remain civic virgins. Many papers, while keeping an eye on potential conflicts, encourage at least limited community involvement, believing that participation will help staff members better understand the way ordinary people think about the community and the paper's coverage.

• **Voice-mail, e-mail** — Publishing voice-mail or e-mail addresses of reporters with bylined stories and of editors within the respective sections can generate significant reader response. It's important that senior editors encourage staff members to respond as well and not blow off readers who call or write to complain.

• **"Listen-a-minute" assignments** — Give each reporter this additional assignment: At least once each day, while talking to anyone who is not a regular news source, ask the person about his or her concerns — matters totally unrelated to the story being reported: "Thanks for your help on this story. Can I ask one other question? What else is important to you that's happening in the community right now?" Or, "Is there another issue in the community you are concerned about?" Then write a short note to your editor for what should be a rapidly growing file of ideas and public opinion. It's a simple and cheap idea, but as far as we know, it's never been tried.

• **Daily reader sampling** — Working with the circulation division, The *Roanoke* (Va.) *Times* created a broad sampling of readers who called in each morning and responded to readership questions about stories in that day's paper.

Any of these techniques for better listening can be a wonderful learning tool for the individuals who participate, but if that knowledge is not shared, the value to the newsroom is limited and the influence on the newspaper as a whole is diminished.

Notes to file and follow-up memos are critical to memorializing the information, to translating the individual experiences into group learning. A bulletin board might be used to post the most interesting comments and ideas — and get staff members talking. An intranet forum could be used to pass along ideas and comment.

Most important are regular staff or team meetings at which people talk about what they've learned individually and compare notes, then brainstorm story and coverage ideas using that new information.



## LISTEN AND LEARN

Senior editors need to actively participate in both the listening and the follow-up efforts — to model but also to make sure staff members are sharing and using this new knowledge of the community to improve coverage in ways large and small.

And they should look for trends, for recurring ideas and themes that might suggest important coverage shifts.

### THINGS TO LISTEN FOR WHEN YOU MEET WITH READERS

You never know what kind of new knowledge you'll pick up in a conversation with readers. And what's important is not just what they know or think but also what they don't know or don't care about.

If you paper is, or gets, formally involved in listening, it's important that you and other editors systematically analyze what you're hearing in either individual and group conversations with readers.

Here are some things you may want to listen for:

#### How they view the media

- What's their level of trust?
- Do they generally believe what they read or see?
- What are their expectations as readers?
- How do they measure your newspaper on those expectations?
- What do they, as *citizens*, see as the role of the media in the community?
- How does their vision compare with your vision for the paper?
- How do they rate your performance?

#### How do they view their community

- In what direction do they see the community headed? Growing economically? Slowing? Getting better in some way? Getting worse in some way?
- What are their goals for the community?
- How slow or fast do they want to move toward those goals?
- Are they ready to act or accept the consequences of public action? If not, under what conditions are they willing to move ahead?
- What are their expectations of public institutions?
- What is their level of trust toward those institutions?

#### Their specific concerns

- What are their dominant concerns?
- How do they define those concerns?
- Do the definitions differ from the way "public issues" are framed by your newspaper? In politics and government?

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- How do people experience those concerns in their daily lives?
- What solutions, if any, do they see?
- What are their priorities?

### Public opinion on an issue or issues

- What do people know? How much information do they have at their command on the issue?
- What more do they want to know?
- How do they relate their personal experiences, their daily lives, to the issue?
- Where do they rank the issue in their list of priorities?
- How much more do they feel they need to know to make a judgment?
- How much have they talked with family about the issue? Friends?
- How do they link this issue to others? What relationships do they see? What are the competing values they are wrestling with?
- What tradeoffs are they willing to accept? What compromises?
- How strong is their ambivalence?

### Their personal hopes and dreams and fears

- What are their underlying values?
- What is their vision for their own lives? Their goals?
- What brings "quality" to their lives?
- What are their short- and long-term concerns for themselves and their families?
- What are their dreams and aspirations?
- What experiences have shaped their opinions, their values, their hopes?

### Their public involvement

- How involved are they in civic and community life?
- What connections do they have with others in the community?
- How do they relate their interests and concerns to those of others?
- If they are not involved, what prevents their involvement?

## BROADENING AND DEEPENING SOURCES

What you know depends mostly on whom you talk to. Editors and reporters realize more than anyone else that they too often rely on a relatively few traditional sources, usually officials, spokespeople or others with a special interest. An important key to broadening and deepening local news coverage is expanding routine sources.

Reporters need to be constantly pushed to expand their source lists beyond



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the most accessible officials and the usual civic voices. That's an important first step toward diversity and bringing more of the community into the pages of the newspaper. Taking a quick look at each reporter's source list from time to time is a good way to determine whether the reporting effort is sufficiently inclusive and is expanding.

A related concept is the "beat book" a combination source list and survival guide for reporters. While it's an old idea, it still may be the best way to catalog the things reporters and their editors need to know about a particular beat or topic of coverage. The beat book is a list of all the players — sources and not — with e-mail and phone numbers and home addresses and office locations, and helpful notes or quick reminders about each person. It's a calendar of regular meetings and events. It's a guide to relationships, power and civic capital. It's a primer on how and why things work. An editor should be able to get a sense of how much a reporter knows of the beat from the breadth and depth of the beat book. And the editor, by examining every reporter's beat book, should be able to spot gaps in sourcing and overall coverage.

The beat book becomes three-dimensional when it is expanded into community "mapping," a geographic approach which can be likened to one of those wonderful National Geographic maps that, in addition to the physical boundaries and topography, include sketches of landmarks and blurbs about culture. The idea is to peel back the top layers of officials and civic leaders and find people who are the middle managers of the community. We all know from our newsroom experience that the middle managers determine the success of any project. Much of the mapping work has been done at newspapers working with the Harwood Group. It involves identifying public places where people gather regularly or from time to time to discuss community life and identifying catalysts within communities and connectors between different groups. (More on this later in this chapter.)

### ENLISTING THE COMMUNITY

Some papers have gone beyond listening to readers, actively involving them in the news-gathering process:

**Town criers.** Invite people who are active in their communities — but not at the "spokesperson" level — to act as correspondents, calling or e-mailing from time-to-time with both news tips and information on continuing issues. It's one way to keep up with neighborhoods or civic and special interest groups that can't routinely be covered.

**Stakeholder meetings.** A forum with invited participants, each chosen to represent a specific interest or point of view on a current issue. The technique is often used by government agencies to get disputing groups to consensus, but

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it works well to help journalists understand the range and depth of concerns on broad public issues and to point to potential resolution.

**Listening post column.** Assign a reporter to hold one or more community conversations each week, or otherwise tap into community groups, then write about what matters most to each group. The columns should become increasingly rich over time as the writer listens to the community's diversity and is able to reflect on common values and also draw distinctions.

**Reader advocates.** An ombudsman with a charge to be proactive on behalf of readers rather than simply responsive to their complaints and comments about what has appeared, or hasn't, in the paper. Advocates might facilitate any of the other listening or response techniques.

### COMMUNITY MAPPING I — A GRAPHIC APPROACH

Remember when you were first assigned to cover a beat?

You compiled a beat book — a list of the people you needed to know and regularly contact, their phone numbers, the location of their offices. You included secretaries and key assistants. You jotted down other critical data you needed to remember. The idea was to provide yourself with a handy guide to getting around and getting information in a hurry.

Mapping takes that idea, expands it to a geographic community — and presents it in relief. That third dimension — looking at the community in depth — is the critical element.

It's like one of those wonderful *National Geographic* maps that gives you not just physical setting and natural sights of a region but some of its history, politics, economics and man-made attractions.

When you "map" a neighborhood, you are defining it by first identifying its physical, institutional, structural, social and cultural components, then showing the interrelationships.

That makes the mapping process a powerful tool for understanding community. And a very practical one, because few papers are in a position to bring in consultants and free a team of editors and reporters for such a project.

For most newspapers, mapping is probably best done beat by beat, topic by topic, neighborhood by neighborhood, by the existing reporters. Doing this forces the reporters to learn far more than they currently know — no matter how well informed they in fact are.

It also requires the assignment editors to get involved in the process and, as a result, to learn far more than they probably know about each of the beats and topics they supervise. With that also will come a greater knowledge of the overall community.

The consolidation of each of the individual beat and topic "maps" creates an



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enormous resource and reference — for new reporters and editors, for those shifting assignments or filling in temporarily. It memorializes the common knowledge.

### WHAT MIGHT BE INCLUDED ON YOUR COMMUNITY MAP

- Separation lines — the natural and political boundaries.
- Defining characteristics — rivers, lakes, reservoirs, open space, peaks, valleys, and other natural features that both expand and limit place, that shape its image and the way people feel about it.
- Physical infrastructure. Manmade elements that influence quality of life. Bridges and highways. Stadiums and arenas. Hospitals. Schools. Court-houses, government office buildings and other public facilities. Dominant private buildings. Parks and recreation facilities. Significant commercial areas. Attractions. Commercial areas.
- Demographics. Who lives and works here? The socioeconomic and cultural diversity.
- Economic infrastructure. Major employers, business or industrial zones, economic features.
- Social infrastructure. Who lives where? Who works where? What is the socioeconomic, ethnic, racial, cultural, and religious diversity?
- Institutions — public, private, civic — and the local role they play.
- How the neighborhoods work. The politics. The social capital.
- The leadership. The activists. The catalysts. The civic and cultural organizations that form the civic sector.
- Assets and capacities — institutional, physical, human. What's working well? Where does the community succeed?
- Liabilities — institutional, physical, human. What's lacking? Where does the community come up short?
- Places where people gather and talk with one another. Public Places. Third Places. The Good Places — where people do what they do in their everyday lives. Live. Work. Shop. Learn. Pray. Play. Socialize.
- The principal concerns of residents. Their quality of life issues. The virtual world. Community and civic organization websites, bulletin boards.

### HOW TO LOCATE THE PUBLIC PLACES IN YOUR COMMUNITY

1. Survey your own newsroom. Where are the places staff members have found civic conversations in the past, in both their journalistic and personal experiences?

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2. If you regularly run listing notices, scan those for discussion groups, forums and public meetings.
3. Ask your political writer and others who cover elections to compile a list of places candidates visit while campaigning.
4. Talk with the usual suspects — public officials and civic leaders — about where they go to learn about what people are thinking and talking about.
5. Ask public officials and civic leaders whom they consider leaders and activists in various neighborhoods. Talk to those people to find out where their civic conversations take place.
6. Some people may be uncertain how to answer a direct question about "civic places." But they can tell you where they last had a conversation about the concerns of the neighborhood. And they can tell you whom they go to when they want to find out about something in the area or to get something done.
7. Check, too, the virtual community — civic group websites and bulletin boards for both specific stories and themes.
8. Keep expanding your list as each new story that involves a public place is reported.

The list gives reporters somewhere to go, or be sent, to sample public opinion on existing issues and to check on new concerns and trends. Many of the sites may also provide places in the community where the newspaper can hold discussions on current issues with readers or to find "town crier" correspondents.

### THE 5WS OF MAPPING CIVIC PLACES

Questions to ask in a search for "public places" and people who are catalysts for community action:

#### Who

- Do you talk with about your concerns for the community/neighborhood?
- Are the "go to" people in the community/neighborhood?
- Makes things happen?
- Should we as journalists talk with to better understand your community or neighborhood?

#### What

- Are the most important institutions in your community/neighborhood in terms of dealing with local problems and concerns?
- Are the institutions that make a difference? (Better/Worse)
- Are the places that most influence the quality of life? (Better/Worse)



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- What are the primary concerns of the residents as it relates to the neighborhood/community?

### When

- Was the last time you had a conversation about the neighborhood?
- Has this neighborhood united in an effort to solve a local problem or discuss an issue?

### Where

- Do you usually find out about local issues?
- Are the places in your community/neighborhood where you go to talk about local issues?
- Should we go as journalists to stay in touch with your community?
- Was the last place you had a conversation about the neighborhood?
- Do people gather to talk about their civic (or local ) concerns?

### Why

- Do you live here?
- Do things get done?
- Don't things get done?

### How

- Do you find out what's going on around here?
- Do things get done around here?

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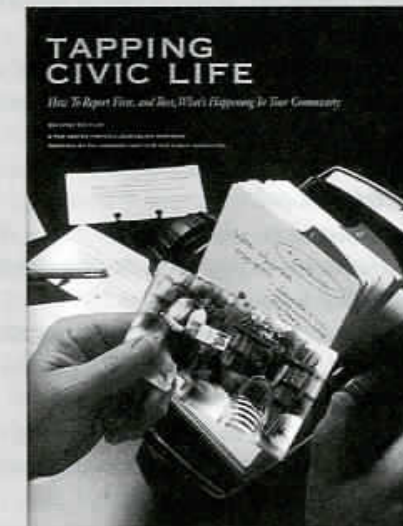
### COMMUNITY MAPPING II — THE HARWOOD APPROACH

The Harwood Group, in studies in Wichita, defined four levels or layers of community leadership. Each see issues from a different perspective.

- Officials.
- Civic leaders.
- Catalysts — People who spark change and are seen as unofficial experts. Others within their respective communities often turn to them for guidance and help.
- Connectors — People involved in several organizations, bridging elements of the community. Others turn to them to learn what's going on.

Official and civic leaders can provide insights on policy decisions but may be disconnected from people's daily lives.

Catalysts and connectors are often the real and authentic voices of the community, with insights and advice on what people really care about, what values they wrestle with, how people talk about issues and what they don't know.



*Tapping Civic Life* (the Harwood report) is available in hard copy through:

The Pew Center for Civic Journalism,  
1101 Connecticut Ave., NW Suite 420,  
Washington, DC 20036  
(202) 331-3200

Or on its web site at  
[www.pewcenter.org](http://www.pewcenter.org)  
under publications.



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### WHAT SOME NEWSPAPERS HAVE DONE

#### What's for Dinner?

At the *Portland (Me.) Press Herald*, it's called a "community council of readers," a dozen-plus readers selected annually and asked to meet once a month on a newspaper-related topic — local news, sports, the editorial page, business, the paper's homepage.

Editor Jeannine Guttman is always there. Various other editors sit in, depending on the subject, and those most directly involved present the topic and discuss coverage. Then the readers weigh in. Afterwards, the reader feedback is circulated to others in the newsrooms.

"At the last council meeting, on the features sections, two young mothers took off on our menu planning. They were working mothers who didn't have time to fix elaborate meals. The recipes didn't connect." Shortly after, the paper started carrying a syndicated feature called Desperation Dinners.

"What's really happened is that anyone on the staff who has gone to one of the council meetings has come away with sense of awe at how much the readers know about the paper and how much they have followed certain issues," Guttman said. "They are more sophisticated than we think ... In many ways they are more sensitive and aware than some of the people who work at the paper. And they feel strongly that it is their paper."

"They have tremendous sense of ownership of the paper. That's how they talk about it. We forget how passionate they feel about their paper."

Guttman added, "They understand our mission and our ethical concepts and our values — and they wish we would carry out our mission better, be better watchdogs."

#### Reporters in the 'Hood

The *Corpus Christi Caller-Times* sent most of its newsroom — more than 50 reporters, copy editors and assigning editors — into the city's neighborhoods over a four-week period to talk with residents.

Their assignment: find out what issues and topics people care most about — and come back with specifics. Don't tell us it's schools. Is it class size or teacher competence or discipline or too much emphasis on phonics?

The result: a wealth of first-hand information about reader interests to be combined with existing survey and marketing data in profiling the community. And an important side benefit.

"It got us out of the (newsroom) bubble we were in and let us get out and listen to people who read the paper — and some who don't — and talk with them about what's important," said editor Deborah Fisher. "That's a perspec-

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tive I couldn't have taught the staff. They have to hear it from someone else."

The paper clustered the interview assignments based on neighborhood characteristics so the sample would be diverse in every way possible — race and ethnicity, income, lifestyles, age.

Staff members worked in teams, interviewing between 4 and 8 p.m. Then the teams were debriefed, their reports posted on a bulletin board in the newsroom, and the findings discussed, narrowing the topics to those most mentioned.

Education showed up as a key concern. "People wanted to know how schools are doing and how they can help their kids get ahead. They personalized the news," Fisher said. In response, the paper is looking at ways to strengthen its coverage, including a regular column on education.

People also wanted more information on entertainment and on things to do, and on local sports. So the paper has converted its TV critic to a pop culture reporter and it put detailed prep game reports online.

#### Gannett's culture shift

Gannett initiated a number of programs designed to reach into the community in the 1990s, programs that led over time to significant cultural changes in their newsrooms, according to Kathy Kozdemba, director of news development.

Editors saw that readers' ratings of their papers were going down, that people were disengaged from newspapers. "Readers were not seeing newspapers as much a part of their lives. So there was an external reality that caused us to take notice."

The programs encouraged editors and reporters to be interactive with the community, encouraged this on an ongoing basis. And then the reaction from the community was positive, and "that created all kinds of encouragement to open up the paper to the community. It was a fairly significant culture shift."

Here's an outline of some steps taken at many Gannett papers:

1. Every few years, a consulting firm conducts formal survey research.
2. Between these surveys, the paper conducts in-house surveys and does other pulse-taking on reader responses to coverage.
3. Throughout the year, the paper uses a variety of techniques to reach out to the community:
  - Newspaper managers from various departments take promotional vans and tours, holding block parties in some neighborhoods.
  - Reporters and photographer teams go into neighborhoods to talk with people, looking for "ordinary" stories.
  - The newsroom holds occasional town meetings to hear from readers.



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- The editorial board meetings are taken into the community. News meetings, too. Or community groups are invited in.
- Reporters hold "sounding board" sessions with residents of areas they cover, particularly in the suburbs and ask them about their concerns and their reactions to current issues.

Over time, Kozdemba said, the brainstorming sessions have become part of the culture. "Reporters feel as if this is an accepted and an approved part of the day and that they don't have to come back with a story for the next day. It's okay to have a notebook full of ideas for stories down the road, and some new sources."

## STRANDS THAT BIND COMMUNITY

In his 1994 essay, "Regenerating Community," Northwestern University sociologist John L. McKnight identifies six strands that hold community together:

- **Capacity.** Communities are built on the capabilities of each member; it is the sum of their abilities and skills that represents the power of the group. (He compares this with the traditional "needs" assessment, an audit of shortcomings, done by social service agencies.)
- **Collective effort.** The essence of community is people working together — shared responsibility that requires many talents and allows each person to find a place to fit in.
- **Informality.** Transactions of value take place without money or marketing. Caring replaces service. The informality of community is expressed through relationships that are not managed. There is a hidden order to community groups that is determined by the need to incorporate capacity and fallibility.
- **Stories.** In universities, people know through studies. In communities, people know by stories. These community stories allow people to reach back and understand events and issues in terms of individual experiences and common history. When communities come to believe their common knowledge is illegitimate, they lose their power.
- **Celebration.** Community groups constantly incorporate celebrations, parties, and social events in their activities. The line between work and play is blurred and the human nature of everyday life

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becomes part of the way of work. You will know that you are in community if you often hear laughter and singing.

- **Tragedy.** The surest indication of the experience of community is the explicit common knowledge of tragedy, death, and suffering.

"Knowing community is not an abstract understanding," McKnight says; "rather, it is what we each know about all of us."

McKnight is co-director of the Center for Urban Affairs and Policy Research at Northwestern. His essay is available on the Civic Practices Network website: <http://www.cpn.org/cpn.html>

## MAINTAINING THE INSTITUTIONAL KNOWLEDGE

A newsroom of carpetbaggers? Short institutional memory? Few people in the newsroom who really know the community well?

However a newspaper has developed or created broad and deep understanding of its community, that knowledge must be maintained, fed and nurtured if its value is to endure.

Here are some ideas about how to keep up the momentum:

- **Lectures or tours on local history, race and ethnicity, culture.** Staff members new to the community usually know little of the history, traditions or culture. Most veterans can learn more. And in growing communities, new waves of residents, especially minorities, bring new cultures and traditions that are foreign to even longtime staff members. Many papers have brought in local historians, sociologists, longtime community activists and other experts to talk with editors and reporters about these aspects of the community. Sometimes, these talks are done as part of neighborhood walking tours or larger community bus tours.

- **Training courses.** Multi-week training sessions, designed for newcomers but valuable refreshers for veteran staff members as well, that combine a number of these techniques and provide information on news gathering routines, policies and coverage goals. (See Chapter 8 on a 16-week course at *The Orange County Register*.)

- **New-employee packages.** Some papers have developed "welcome" packages that give new hires basic information on the community and signal the importance of getting to know more than just the new beat.

The *Lexington Herald-Leader* takes its first step before a new employee reports for work. "We want to get them thinking about the community before they arrive," says Editor Pam Luecke.



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The *Herald-Leader's* welcome package includes:

- A letter that teases with just a little about the paper, the community, the history, the economy, the lifestyle. And then lists a couple of websites that offer more information.
- A color foldout brochure on the newsroom with a section on "Our History/Our Future" and short sketches on seven staff members.
- A chamber of commerce flier that provides a short overview of the area.
- And just to get the new hire in the swing, a copy of the lyrics of "My Old Kentucky Home." (It's not clear if new staffers are required to memorize the words. But no whistling, please!)

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### ROAMING DAYS

*By Ted Haider*  
*Journal and Courier*

"What's most important in your life?"

How simple that question might seem, particularly to those of us who sit in newspaper offices and make decisions every day about which stories go on the front page, which in the Local section and which in other sections.

We make a lot of choices, but how many of them really capture what our readers want from us? Should it be the story on the city council's monthly meeting or the one about single moms raising three children on a fixed income? Should it be the story about the area plan commission considering a rezoning request or the one about a grandmother receiving her college diploma after two decades of night school?

Hard vs. soft. Straight vs. feature. News we think you should know vs. news you can use — and perhaps even enjoy.

As we see many of our circulation numbers declining, perhaps we should pay a little more attention to the decisions we are making; to the choices we always thought were best for our readers — but maybe we just didn't know.

When Gannett established its News 2000 initiative in 1991 and passed it along to each of its newspapers, there was a lot of discussion on subjects such as Consistency, Diversity, Presentation, First Amendment, Interaction, and Anticipating the Future. While each of those approaches ultimately improved our story choices and reporting skills, there was one tenet that captured the overall philosophy of News 2000 better than the others. It was labeled Community Interests, and it dealt with journalism that reflected the interests and concerns of our communities, not journalism based solely on editors' preference or whims.

At the time News 2000 was launched, I was an assistant managing editor of the Rochester (N.Y.) *Democrat and Chronicle*. It was my assignment to determine how Community Interests would become a part of our overall News 2000 plan and, most importantly, how we could ascertain exactly what those

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community interests were.

For Rochester, some things seemed obvious. Eastman Kodak was the area's largest employer, and therefore it would have to be one of the most significant community interests. Education was also important, but so were the environment, the development and care of children, health care and family issues. Still, as much as we thought we knew about our community, we weren't really sure.

During a brainstorming session on how we would build our News 2000 plan, Barbara Henry, then the executive editor, talked to us about going out and meeting people face to face, giving them the opportunity to express themselves without our influencing what they would say. This was the essence of creating a Community Interests plan and one of the cornerstones of the News 2000 philosophy.

It also was the beginning of what would become known as Rochester's Roaming Days.

With Barbara's backing, I spent three weeks that summer walking — or "roaming" — the streets of Rochester's inner city, through the suburbs where the Kodak, Xerox and Bausch & Lomb executives lived, through blue collar neighborhoods, in parks along the Genesee River, on the beaches of Lake Ontario, and in the regional towns of the New York Finger Lakes.

My plan was to meet people, a lot of people. Mostly walking, but occasionally riding my 10-speed bike, I had face-to-face encounters with people in 25 zip codes, ranging in age from 7 to 92. There was nothing scientific about this study, but in the end I had 750 voices telling me what was most important in each of their lives. From this research, the *Democrat and Chronicle* developed the foundation of its first News 2000 plan. From a personal standpoint, it was one of the most enlightening experiences of my journalism career.

I decided to start this project in Rochester's inner city and gradually spiral out through city neighborhoods, suburban towns, and finally regional areas beyond our core circulation. With this approach, though not a true representative sample, I knew it would provide a diverse mix of people from city, county and regional neighborhoods in which economic, social, cultural and ethnic demographics would differ. But perhaps it also would also present me with some similarities.

On Day One I walked into an inner city neighborhood known for its crime, drugs, and unemployment. It was not without apprehension. From the start, I decided to follow my executive editor's advice and conduct the interviews in low-pressure, relaxed environments. That meant no knocking on doors, no interrupting groups of more than 3 to 4 people, and no intrusion into what would seem to be personal or private moments.

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Around the first corner I found two men in their 30s sitting on a park bench, smoking, joking and appearing very relaxed. I introduced myself as an editor from the *Democrat and Chronicle* and explained we were attempting to improve the newspaper by gathering information from people in the community and using that feedback to consider changes for the future.

"I really wish you'd put more pictures in color in Sports," was the first response.

"How about your police report? Why do you list those misdemeanors? That's really no one's business," came response number two.

"Horse racing. Why don't you handicap the races? That's something I could really use."

"When is the city going to take unemployment more seriously?"

"And what about the police? Why do they think they have to hassle us every night? We have some rights, too."

The project was under way.

While it was important to be a sounding board for reader (or potential reader) complaints and suggestions, I eventually got around to the question I was determined to ask. I explained to my now captive participants that I would be willing to answer any question they had, but first they had to answer one for me.

"What's most important in your life?"

I told them they could interpret that question anyone they wanted and that I would not attempt to lead them in anyway.

Silence.

I fought an instinct to ask a follow-up question, but kept quiet.

More silence.

But finally they delivered. Surprisingly, their responses didn't have anything to do with color photographs or police reports or the inside scoop on a sure bet at the Finger Lakes Race Track. Instead they talked about health care, availability of insurance, a higher quality of education for their children and job opportunities.

That first conversation lasted almost an hour, more time than I had planned to spend on any one interview, but certainly time well spent. During the next three weeks, most interviews were 10 to 15 minutes, but they ranged from less than five minutes to an hour. Most importantly, of all the people I met through this project, fewer than 20 told me they were too busy to talk or simply told me to "get lost" or worse.

Women doing early morning gardening. Men walking their young children through suburban neighborhoods. Teenagers watching friends on a city basketball court. Retirees playing chess and feeding ducks in a county park.



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These were among the faces and voices that gave me, and the newspaper, a new perspective on the people of our community.

These were the faces and voices to which we wrote our stories. But how many opportunities had we given them to answer back, to tell us what they really wanted from their newspaper; to tell us what was most important in their lives?

This was their chance. We wanted, and were willing, to change the *Democrat and Chronicle* to be the community's newspaper, not our newspaper. We wanted it to reflect the interests and concerns of the readers, not a product that would strictly direct coverage at its readers. It wasn't to say we would give any less emphasis to First Amendment issues, investigative reporting or watchdog responsibilities. But it was a commitment to listen a little more and to pontificate a lot less.

I think what stood out most after I had completed the 750 interviews was how often I had been told, "Thanks for asking." While our Roaming Days project had allowed us to put faces on our readers, it also gave our readers the opportunity to put faces on its newspaper. It was an end result from which everyone benefited.

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### FIVE DAYS IN THE HOT SEAT

By Janet Weaver  
*Sarasota Herald-Tribune*

We in Sarasota are gifted with a very passionate readership, people who love newspapers and provide us with lots of feedback about what we are doing.

Unfortunately, much of that feedback was being lost to us. We didn't collect it in any organized way, and we didn't set aside time to really listen to what they were saying.

We've tried to change that in two ways: through our reader advocate program, and through a reader advisory committee.

When readers called the newspaper, they most often talked with either top editors or with the news assistants who answer our phones. Rarely did they talk with assignment editors, reporters, photographers—those on our staff who most need feedback from the readers they are serving.

Diane McFarlin, our current publisher and former executive editor, and I felt both our readers and the newsroom staff were the losers when that happened. Diane created the reader advocate desk in May 1999 to serve two purposes: to give readers a central desk to call with questions and criticisms and to systematically expose our entire staff to reader feedback.

Each member of the staff serves a one-week stint on the reader advocate desk. Staffers are released from their regular duties for that week, so that they can concentrate fully on serving the reader. They answer calls, letters and e-mails from readers; they take their complaints and questions about everything from possible inaccuracy in the newspaper to misleading ads to wet newspapers.

There's an immediate benefit to the reader. They have one number to call, and they are not transferred all around the building. It doesn't have to be a newsroom matter. They get a quick response to their question.

There has been a bigger benefit to the newsroom staff. The advocates all learn a lot about other departments at the newspaper. Their advocate service causes them to have to think about the paper in a different way. Almost all say

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they had a moment, an epiphany when they saw things from the reader's perspective. They would often get immersed in the reader's issue and drop some of their defensiveness as journalists.

The advocates all file a running log of reader calls that is available to the entire newsroom. The advocate also writes a column to the readers each week, reporting on any progress made in solving reader problems that week. One reporter, who got 120 calls because of an error in the stock tables, said it made him appreciate that our credibility depends on getting little things right. A senior reporter who has done a lot of investigative work fielded a complaint from a reader who wanted to know why we ran an advertisement from a company whose business practices we'd written critically about. The reporter spent much of his week looking at the way we do things — and the paper's policy was changed as a result. We created a mechanism to alert advertising when there's an advertisement we think might be misleading readers.

Our next step is to look at our call logs more systematically and determine if there are hints about larger improvements we can make in the way the newspaper is organized or in the very methods we use to report and write the news.

The Reader Advisory Committee was a natural outgrowth of the reader advocate program. I began the committee in March 2000, after soliciting members through the column I write on newsroom decision-making and ethics. About 100 readers responded to my solicitation; I chose 15 to meet with me as a group every three weeks to critique the paper and discuss our decision-making process.

In the year that we've been meeting together, we've talked about issues such as the use of photographs in the newspaper, the role of opinion writers in news columns, anonymous sources, covering suicide, accuracy and credibility, grammatical errors in the paper and whether the paper's coverage reflects all parts of the community. I've used the group to test design and typographical changes to the newspaper; we've talked about the conversion to the 50-inch web, and I've tested some of our thinking about that change on this group.

Each reader also has spent time shadowing a newsroom staffer — a reporter, copy editor or assignment editor — to gain a deeper understanding of how we do our jobs.

I've learned from my readers that we cannot explain ourselves enough. The readers on my committee expect hard-hitting journalism, they expect investigations and they expect we will hold community leaders and institutions up for scrutiny. But they also expect that we will scrutinize our own work, and explain to readers about why we make the choices that we do. Managing Editor Rosemary Armao and I try to do that each week in the columns we write to the readers.

## LISTEN AND LEARN

The Reader Advisory Committee will make a final report to readers at the end of their year of service, explaining what they've learned about the paper and ways they think we can do a better job. I expect to solicit another group of readers to serve a year's term on the committee, and to continue using this group of readers as informal advisers on how we are doing and how we could serve the community better.



## THE EDITORIAL SECTION: A FINGER ON THE PULSE

*By Phil Haslanger  
The Capital Times*

Let's say that you are a stranger in your community. You are trying to find out quickly concerns of people in this area. You can talk to folks on the street. You can listen to talk radio. But you'd also surely want to include the editorial section of the local paper.

Why?

Because at its best, an editorial section is a place where the ideas in a community clash with each other, where ordinary citizens and opinion leaders both sketch out their visions on everything from school additions to snow removal, from tax policy to speeding cars.

Those of us in the news business may take editorial sections for granted in our communities. But travel along with Carolee Morrison, president and editor-in-chief of the CLM Global News Group. "You can see how the editorial section gives a real sense of the community, the specific place, when reading a foreign newspaper — precisely because you know nothing about the local community," she said.

She cited this example from the *Addis Tribune* in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. There is a main news story with the headline "Second Meeting of Military Coordination Commission Ends Redeployment." Not much sense of the city there. Now check out the first letter to the editor from a man Morrison described as "lamenting how overcrowded the streets in Ethiopia's capital city are ... Gives you a picture of what's going on in a big city there."

But you don't have to travel abroad to see the value of using the editorial section as one way to check the pulse of your community. Jeff Brody is now the opinion page editor of *The Sun* in Bremerton, Washington. He recalls that during his days as an assignment editor, he used the tone of the letters to the editor as a way to get a sense of whether a school levy was going to pass.

"Letters complaining about the district administration being arrogant or

Phil Haslanger, managing editor of *The Capital Times* in Madison, Wis., was editorial page editor from 1984 to 1998.



## LISTEN AND LEARN

about the superintendent's car allowance indicate a segment of the public has latched on to a specific grievance that is being spread throughout the community that sounds like a legitimate reason to vote no," Brody observed. "On the other hand, letters containing a more generic anti-levy message tend to indicate that opponents have not been able to latch on to a specific 'issue' that might resonate through the community and generate a significant 'no' vote to turn out."

Letters to the editor can be more than just a way to gauge opinion, suggests Fred Fiske, senior editorial writer at The Syracuse Newspapers in New York and the president of the National Conference of Editorial Writers in 2001. Use them also as a source of story tips. If you see several letters about the city's slowness in picking up leaves in the fall, recognize that as a clue that there may be a story under those leaf piles. Letters can also give clues about what national issues are resonating locally, which may in turn suggest stories with more local angles about those stories.

Letters are not the only window to the community in the editorial section. Fiske suggests that the editorials themselves can be useful to reporters to help them "make connections between issues, dig deeper and cover other angles." A good editorial, after all, is based on the writer's knowledge of the issue and community and draws on the writer's own reporting efforts that may offer new insights to the beat reporter. This is not to suggest that the reporter ought to follow the political line of the editorial, but simply that the editorial can be a source of information and perspective for the reporter as well as for the newspaper reader.

In Sarasota, Fla., the *Herald-Tribune* used the editorial page as part of its Celebrate Community project. Tom Tryon, the editorial page editor, reports that the paper hired a free-lance writer who provided "Q&A's with community leaders/doers, including those in the news and those who work behind the scenes or labor on important causes that don't receive a lot of attention." The people who come to the surface in a project like that can become valuable resources for reporters in the future.

Brody, of Bremerton, Wash., tells how he used his Sunday Forum section to encourage public participation in community debate. The results were also useful to reporters on the paper, he says. *The Sun* printed questionnaires in the Forum section and on its web site that were developed with city and county governments. They sought public reaction on topics such as what recreational facilities and services people wanted and were willing to pay for and what the balance should be between enforcing environmental regulations and encouraging development.

"Our partnerships on these information-gathering efforts led to our

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reporters' having access to information about public opinion that they never would have had otherwise," Brody wrote.

A number of editorial sections host public forums on community issues (more on this in Chapter 8). In addition to being a potential day-after news story, these forums can also be another vehicle for giving reporters access to a variety of views and potential new sources on topics in the news. Sometimes these forums can also provide a focal point for news stories exploring the issue either prior to the day the forum is held or in the days afterwards.

The basic message here is this: The editorial section of a paper can be much more than a place for pundits and letter writers to spout off. If news editors and reporters read the section regularly, they can mine it for story tips, discern trends in the community and find new contacts that can enrich the newspaper's reporting.



## EVALUATING YOUR LOCAL COVERAGE



## CHAPTER 4

# EXPLORING THE 10 DIMENSIONS OF LOCAL NEWS

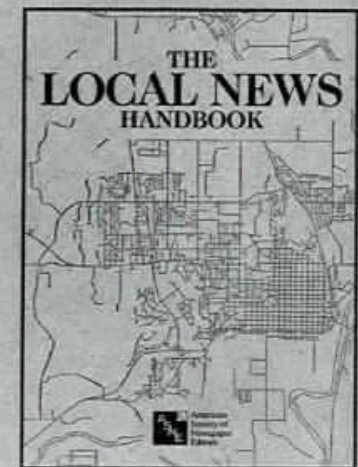
*By Frank Denton*  
*Wisconsin State Journal*

Journalism, like water, tends to seek its own level. With news, it's more like a flood, with events, developments, trends and revelations cascading over the well meaning editor trying frantically to seine some significance.

The levels sought by this incessant flow of news are determined largely by inertia. We — quite rightly — concentrate on government because of our First Amendment calling. But we naturally extend that to other traditional, and predictable, news — crime, courts, conferences, conflict, contests, commerce — because that is what we always have done. It is editing by instinct, by tradition and by training out of a simpler era. We know which buildings to go to, which meetings to attend, which records to check.

This inertia is powerful, and continuously reinforced by the flood. We try to change course, but are quickly swept back into our old, familiar, comfortable streams.

*The Local News Handbook*, published by ASNE two years ago, proposed a new flood-control system. It sought to define local news by pointing out that people consider "local" to mean community, a complex phenomenon that is the essence of American public life. By examining theory and research



*Local News Handbook*

Frank Denton, editor of the *Wisconsin State Journal* in Madison, has been a reporter and editor 35 years.



## EXPLORING THE 10 DIMENSIONS OF LOCAL NEWS

across a number of disciplines — psychology, sociology, social psychology, geography, political science, mass communication, community-building — *The Handbook* identified the 10 ways that individuals relate to their communities.

### THE 10 DIMENSIONS OF LOCAL NEWS

#### PROXIMITY

News is newswier 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. People empathize with or care more about people in their community, even if they don't know them, than they do people in other communities.

#### SAFETY

Above all, people must feel safe in their own homes and neighborhoods, and local police and fire coverage has been a mainstay of newspaper content. Evidence is mounting that 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. It could help explain why readers commonly complain that newspapers carry too much "bad news."

#### UTILITY

Utility, or usefulness, is one of newspapers' biggest assets and competitive advantages. The newspaper can provide information to help readers get through the day — holiday closings, movie listings, weather data, web sites, sale prices, deadline reminders, traffic reports and on and on. 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.

#### LOCAL 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. How can we cover local government to make it most responsive to the public and to allow, even encourage, the most citizen involvement and participation?

#### EDUCATION

Newspapers always have covered the schools, usually at the top and bottom: the school board and the classroom feature. Our opportunity lies between, in serious and useful coverage of the real educational trends and issues that are affecting what children learn in the class-

## EXPLORING THE 10 DIMENSIONS OF LOCAL NEWS

room. Journalists should examine education's reform models as critically as they do political campaigns.

#### SPIRITUALITY

Religion is a major part of American life, but many newsrooms have been uncomfortable with coverage of spirituality, relegating it to "church news" or conflict stories. Thoughtful newspapers today are giving the coverage more respect, redefining it to include values, ethics and behavior, and putting it on the front page.

#### SUPPORT

At least 40 percent of adults say they are involved in "a small group that meets regularly and provides caring and support for those who participate in it." Support groups, from self-help and recovery groups to book clubs and discussion groups, may serve as a surrogate for traditional communities and relationships that have been diluted by modern American mobility. Newspapers hardly cover this phenomenon.

#### IDENTITY

People want to be part of a community and to be identified with that community. Social psychologists long have studied what they call the "psychological sense of community," defined variously as feelings of belongingness and connectedness, reciprocal fulfilling of needs and beliefs, and shared values and influence. Sense of community and newspaper readership are mutually reinforcing.

#### RECOGNITION

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 honor, almost as if an accomplishment needs to be published to be validated. A scholar called it "democratizing prestige;" editors call it refrigerator journalism.

#### EMPOWERMENT

One definition of community is collective action, people joining together to act on common concerns. Most Americans volunteer somehow and are willing to become involved in local affairs if they believe they can make a difference. The close relationship between public involvement and newspaper readership is mutual and utilitarian: News coverage can inspire people to become involved and 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.

Please see *The Local News Handbook* for much fuller discussions.



## EXPLORING THE 10 DIMENSIONS OF LOCAL NEWS

If people are the reason for our journalism, and people care deeply about their communities, shouldn't our local journalism find ways to serve that relationship?

*The Handbook* presented the concepts and offered many examples of how some newspapers have addressed the 10 dimensions. What was missing was in between: how a newspaper editor might directly use the 10 dimensions to analyze and improve his or her local coverage.

Now, two years of use have suggested some ways to apply the framework in the newsroom. One is to use the 10 dimensions for content analysis to identify weaknesses in the depth and breadth of coverage, then make improvements. Another is to use the dimensions as one among several tools for setting priorities in your coverage.

### SETTING PRIORITIES

By no means are the 10 dimensions equal in importance. For example, the support dimension may be most important in one person's life, but for journalists, it cannot compare in priority to, say, government or utility. Almost any editor would see those dimensions as more important to the community overall, and there is so much more journalism to be done in those areas than in support.

But the priorities are not as obvious as they might appear at first, and furthermore, they seem to vary by community.

Given our First Amendment mandate, I assumed that most editors would rank government as the most important dimension for our local coverage. However, in helping with the strategic planning of a large southern daily, I had each of the 20 or so top editors individually rank-order the dimensions according to the importance he or she would give them in allocating coverage. The vote was taken after an extensive presentation of the thinking and research behind the framework. The results:

- |               |                 |
|---------------|-----------------|
| 1. Education  | 6. Identity     |
| 2. Proximity  | 7. Empowerment  |
| 3. Government | 8. Spirituality |
| 4. Safety     | 9. Recognition  |
| 5. Utility    | 10. Support     |

Education? More important than government, safety or proximity? In subsequent discussions, the editors explained that the schools in their area generally were considered very poor and cause for great community concern. While I personally would be more than reluctant to recommend de-emphasiz-

## EXPLORING THE 10 DIMENSIONS OF LOCAL NEWS

ing coverage of local government, clearly that newspaper should consider making education its "master narrative" or franchise issue (see Chapter 7).

After discussions about the 10 dimensions at a midsize daily in the Midwest, I conducted the vote among three separate groups: reporters, copy editors and top managers, mostly on the business side. Here's how their priorities stacked up (including ties):

Reporters	Copy editors	Top managers
1. Utility	1. Identity	1. Utility
2. Education	2. Government	2. Education
3. Proximity	3. Utility	3. Government
4. Government	4. Education	4. Proximity
5. Safety	Empowerment	5. Safety
Empowerment	6. Proximity	6. Identity
7. Identity	7. Recognition	7. Spirituality
8. Spirituality	8. Spirituality	Empowerment
9. Recognition	9. Safety	9. Recognition
Support	10. Support	10. Support

Again, interpretation required consideration of the immediate circumstances. The overall top rank given utility, or the usefulness of the newspaper, could have reflected the fact that the newspaper was strategizing in response to a survey showing that much of the public considered that paper nonessential to their daily lives. The strong showing of community identity among copy editors may have been a reflection of the enthusiasm of my presentation, as I find the concept fascinating and potentially very important to local coverage.

At my own newspaper, the editors rank-ordered the dimensions after a seminar on the local-news framework:

- |               |                 |
|---------------|-----------------|
| 1. Utility    | 6. Identity     |
| 2. Proximity  | 7. Recognition  |
| 3. Government | 8. Empowerment  |
| 4. Safety     | 9. Spirituality |
| 5. Education  | 10. Support     |

Here, utility may have been top of mind because our newspaper was in the midst of a branding campaign with the theme "Are you ready for today?" emphasizing the essentialness of our newspaper to living well and being active in the community. Since education has been our franchise issue and citizen empowerment our specialty, I assume (and hope!) that our editors ranked



## EXPLORING THE 10 DIMENSIONS OF LOCAL NEWS

them lower because we already have invested so much in those areas over the years.

These experiences suggest that the use of the local-news framework for priority-setting should be preceded by a full presentation of the 10 dimensions within the context of the newspaper's own community — ideally with the journalists' having read *The Local News Handbook* — and followed by a discussion of possible meanings and implications.

### MEASURING THE BREADTH OF COVERAGE

The best use of the 10 dimensions is to diagnose the breadth and depth of a newspaper's local news coverage and to provide a framework for improvement. And you might find that the best way to do that is through an R&D process structured around a graphic approach — a chart.

Construct a table on a large piece of paper, perhaps a sheet from an end roll of newsprint or a poster board. The cells need to be large, to accommodate the dominant dimensions and sufficient days of measurement. Divide the table into 11 columns. Label columns 2 to 11 with the names of the 10 dimensions identified in *The Local News Handbook*.

The breadth of your coverage can be estimated simply by daily content-analyzing your newspaper. First, decide what you will consider a "story" for purposes of evaluating local coverage. A freestanding photo? Weddings and anniversaries? Briefs? Columns? Editorials? Letters-to-the-editor? Sports?

Then take a few minutes each day, go through your newspaper cover to cover and place a mark for each "story" in the appropriate dimension of coverage. Be sure you have your own understanding of the 10 dimensions; community identity and empowerment, for example, are not obvious, simple concepts and deserve some thought. Give some extra attention to how you would define a story that should be placed in the proximity cell.

Some stories, of course, will fit in more than one category. That is, a feature about tutors in the public schools could fit in education, of course, but also in empowerment (if it helps readers get involved) and in community identity (if it reflects the spirit of voluntarism in town). Again, just decide on a protocol that will give you the information you want: You might check all dimensions that apply to a story, or you might give your newspaper the benefit of the doubt and check the neediest dimension.

What's a good sample? A week is not enough, and more than a month might not be the best use of your time. Be sure it's a "normal" period; for example, not the holidays and maybe not even the dog days.

Patterns will emerge among the marks, and they probably will not be totally surprising. A perfect spread, of course, is not only highly unlikely but even

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more undesirable. Government, utility, safety and education probably will, and should, contain the most marks, and support may very well have none.

What is optimum? Every dimension should have some marks in it, but the pattern should be skewed toward your coverage goals. That is, the pattern of marks should reflect the prioritization you established above. On the other hand, if community identity has few or no marks, you likely are not connecting with that important psychological need of your readers. If empowerment is wanting, you are not helping your readers get involved and give back to the community, as we know they want to do. Where you see bare boxes, go back and reread the appropriate chapter of *The Local News Handbook* and see what your newspaper is missing.

### AND NOW FOR DEPTH

For a richer analysis of your paper, use the first column of the table, the vertical axis, to further break down the coverage. You can categorize the dimensions in several ways:

- **Play.** Have rows for 1A, the local front, local inside, features, sports, business. Does your paper relegate community identity to features, recognition to sports, utility to business? This breakout could suggest greater breadth across the newspaper.

- **Mode.** Dissect the dimensions according to whether they are presented in briefs, news stories, features, takeouts, analyses, columns, photographs, editorials or other. This should present some intriguing opportunities for offering more dimensions in more ways.

- **Orientation.** Some of the traditional dimensions are examined in *The Local News Handbook* not by their overall worthiness for coverage, but rather by *how* they are covered. The chapter on government emphasizes citizen involvement, as opposed to the old citizen-as-spectator frame. The one on spirituality contrasts traditional "church" coverage with values and ethics approaches. Education reporters favor the school board and cute classroom features; what about the important educational theories quietly being tried in schools? These rows could compare traditional coverage to different directions or techniques you are emphasizing in certain of the dimensions.

- **Geography.** Rows might be city, county, region and, for comparison, state and national. You likely will find fuller development of the dimensions in your core area, raising the question of whether your coverage of outlying areas is too narrow and/or shallow.

- **Beat.** List the appropriate specialists — local-government reporter, regional reporter, features writer, etc. — and see if your paper is defining some



## EXPLORING THE 10 DIMENSIONS OF LOCAL NEWS

beats too one-dimensionally, or ghettoizing categories of stories. Is empowerment represented only by a volunteer column in features?

- **Day.** Sunday likely will offer the broadest representation of the framework, but you also may see other tendencies. Crime news skews toward Tuesday because of weekend-catch-up stories. Government coverage might show up midweek, as the result of meeting coverage. Aside from Sunday, the Monday paper may turn out to be the most interesting in some ways, because the lack of news allows, or requires, us to explore other dimensions of local coverage. Do readers deserve a more balanced report through the week?

You might maintain the chart on the wall of the news-meeting area, so your editors can watch as their decisions cumulatively form patterns that can be telling. If, after a week or two, the community-identity cells are largely empty, it might occur to the editors that they could find some ways to reflect the community in the paper. If empowerment is lacking, they might remember to include information to help readers become involved. Spirituality or education coverage skewed toward the traditional? The editors can reorient it.

Such a chart can be both a diagnostic and a monitor. That is, a newspaper seeking broader, deeper, richer local coverage might undergo a process like this: Have the editors, and perhaps others, read *The Local News Handbook*. In the context of that newspaper in that market, discuss and determine the depth indicators, that is, the rows to be measured as specified in the first column. Use the chart for 2 to 4 weeks to identify opportunities for improving coverage. Discuss again, rank-order priorities, set new coverage goals. Maintain the chart to measure progress. Check again after a year or so, to be sure the changes endure.

Through it all, be sure the editors talk, about the framework, the community, goals to connect them and barriers to overcome. Instincts and habits are very resilient, particularly in the newsroom, and inertia can be overpowering.

## CHAPTER 5

# WHO'S MISSING? HOW ARE THEY MISSING?

By Michele McLellan  
*The Oregonian*

**T**ake a look at the front page of your newspaper every day for a month and make a quick note of who is there — who is pictured, who is quoted, who makes news.

Chances are you'll find lots of stories centered on white men. They likely will be officials or experts. They probably will be middle-aged.

Who else makes Page One? And in what context?

You may find African-Americans most often turn up in connection with sports or civil rights. Latinos often may be portrayed as struggling immigrants putting new demands on the schools and social-service providers. Asian-Americans may rarely show up at all. Fundamentalist Christians likely will either be protesting abortion or involved in other political controversies. And young people usually will be either jocks or thugs.

Whatever you find, the exercise should give you a fresh — and perhaps startling — perspective on how your newspaper portrays people and different groups of people over time. It will tell you whether the way your newspaper defines news and experts is giving your readers an accurate reflection of your community over time. It will get you thinking about who is missing.

The exercise is called a content analysis or audit.

"We tend to remember coverage in terms of episodes. We don't think of it as something that occurs over time," said Erna Smith, interim director of programs at the Maynard Institute for Journalism Education in Oakland, Calif. "I think a content audit can give us a better idea of how readers see our coverage."

A content analysis can look in detail at multiple aspects of coverage. Or it can focus on one piece of your coverage. Overall, it is critical to look past the

Michele McLellan, special projects editor at *The Oregonian* in Portland, has been a reporter and editor 25 years.



## WHO'S MISSING? HOW ARE THEY MISSING?

raw numbers and percentages to themes.

*The Oregonian* focused on themes when it looked at its coverage of teenagers in spring 1999.

Editors went into the exercise thinking the newspaper was doing a pretty good job of covering young people, largely because it had committed a dozen reporters and editors to covering education and family services, published several pages of prep sports every week and dutifully ran briefs about student achievement on its community pages.

But complaints from readers — many of them parents of teen-agers — persisted. The newspaper, they said, was not being fair. It paid far more attention to sports and misdeeds than it did to all the good things kids were doing.

*The Oregonian* analyzed how it portrayed young people by counting and categorizing stories under major themes as part of ASNE's Journalism Credibility Project.

The newspaper found out its complaining readers were right. About 7 percent of the 10,000 stories and photos reviewed touched on, mentioned or quoted youth. Themes of those stories:

- Sports — 46 percent
- Public policy — 18 percent
- Crime — 17 percent
- Achievement, nonacademic — 6 percent
- Culture — 3 percent
- Ordinary life — 3 percent
- Personal adversity — 2 percent
- School news — 2 percent
- Demographics and trends — 2 percent
- Academic achievement — 1 percent

The analysis concluded that the newspaper needed to provide a broader range of perspectives on young people. It played a critical role in demonstrating the problem for the newsroom and in significantly reshaping the newspaper's coverage.

*The Oregonian* analysis was relatively simple, performed by one editor with help from a clerk.

An ASNE report, *Covering the Community*, devotes a section to content audits. The report includes tips on designing and conducting newspaper analysis with an eye to expanding racial, cultural and gender diversity.

The Maynard Institute for Journalism Education has developed a system that allows newspapers to look at multiple aspects of coverage. The "Reality Checks Content Analysis Kit" for newspapers recommends journalists look at the race, gender, class, age, geography and occupation of sources and people pictured in

## WHO'S MISSING? HOW ARE THEY MISSING?

### HOW THE MAYNARD INSTITUTE CAN HELP

The Maynard Institute for Journalism Education helps newspapers diversify their content, improve communications with the public and uncover new business opportunities through its Total Community Coverage (TCC) on-site training program.

TCC is based on the Fault Lines framework developed by Robert C. Maynard. He identified five enduring "fault lines" of race, class, gender, generation and geography as the prisms through which many of us see the world.

In TCC, staff members from all parts of the newspaper may train with representatives of the community, then become point-persons for continuing the training among other staffers. Over four days, Maynard's Reality Checks workshop and Content Analysis Training help participants understand their communities better and dissect their own coverage for diversity of sources and images. Participants look at their community demographics and marketing practices to identify the groups they are not serving and develop new strategies to reach these audiences.

For more information and contacts, please see Maynard's website: [www.maynardije.org](http://www.maynardije.org)

the newspaper.

The *San Antonio Express-News* hired the Maynard Institute in 2000 to coordinate and analyze an audit performed by a committee of newsroom staff members. Managing Editor Carolina Garcia said she learned the newspaper was not consistently using a wide range of sources.

"This is a very good way for the newspaper to identify how good of a job it does in its depth of sources," Garcia said. "The analysis told us that when we pay attention — on the front page and the covers — you know you're in a culturally diverse city and the newspaper reflects that. When you get into the body of the paper, the diversity falls off. We're not paying as much attention."

Other efforts have looked at coverage of specific groups to gauge how often their members appear in the newspaper and how they typically are portrayed.

*The Kansas City Star* conducts a quarterly diversity content audit looking at coverage of groups such as racial minorities, women, people with disabilities and gays and lesbians, according to Miriam Pepper, readers' representative. *The Star* expanded its diversity audits in 2000 by asking a panel of readers to conduct a similar audit. The newspaper is comparing reader results and staff



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audit findings, Pepper said.

A content analysis involves a lot of counting. But it's important to look beyond the numbers.

The mere presence of various groups of people may not be enough to give a fair picture, said Keith Woods, who focuses on racial diversity as a member of the ethics faculty at The Poynter Institute in St. Petersburg, Fla.

Woods said newspapers are showing more diversity. But he questions whether people too often are included only because of their race or ethnicity.

"I think the issue is *how* they're missing, not that they're missing," Woods said. "People are pretty much making their way into the newspaper across the board a lot more. I think the issue is the degree to which people are appearing as ordinary people rather than as related to their differentness."

Woods cited a recent features cover story in the *St. Petersburg* (Fla.) *Times* on a women's health issue. The woman pictured was African-American. In other times, an African-American woman might have been the main image only if the story was about a problem unique to African-Americans. The change, Woods said, is that more newspapers are using these images in more routine, generic settings.

It's also important to look beyond the newsroom.

Terri Fleming, editor of *The Gazette* in Colorado Springs, said public critiques and content reviews can be a valuable tool. "Use them often," she advised. "But use them for the undercurrents — not to direct the paper specifically...Hear the themes. Then think about editing the paper with less myopia."

*The Gazette* asked members of the public to conduct content analyses of the newspaper in assessing the fairness of its coverage of several demographic groups for ASNE's Journalism Credibility Project in 1999.

*The Gazette* asked members of the public to audit the newspaper's coverage of four groups: African-Americans, Latinos, young people and women. The newspaper published a report from each group and a response by the editor.

For example, the cover of *The Gazette's* Our Town section of June 28, 1999, carried a display package reporting the audit on coverage of African-Americans by local citizens who are African-American.

The citizen group, led by the Rev. Alvin Yearly, concluded: "In general, we found most of the references were tied to crime or sports. When *The Gazette* did branch out to cover the minority community, the newspaper often missed the mark."

In a response published in the same package, then-editor Steve Smith said the audit "confirmed what we already knew: that *The Gazette* does a relatively poor job of covering African-Americans and other people of color."

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Rev. Alvin Yearly, spokesman for the self-selected group that reviewed *The Gazette*, presents the African-American audit results.

The community audits prompted a series of changes in *The Gazette's* approach to covering racial minorities, including creating a new beat focusing on race and minority groups.

The content analysis may be useful in assessing other types of coverage.

Susan Gage, crime team leader at *The Oregonian*, performed an extensive analysis before reorganizing the newspaper coverage of crime. She reviewed newspapers for three two-week periods in 1997 and 1998, looking in particular at how the newspaper played crime stories. She found crime was a big part of the A section (about one-fourth of the copy). And it dominated the Metro section. Crime news made up more than 50 percent of the sample on 29 of the 84 days she reviewed; it made up 40-49 percent on 28 more days.

Gage learned that law-enforcement experts and residents thought *The Oregonian's* crime reports "lacked context."

As a result, she recommended a higher threshold for crime stories on the Metro cover — they needed to have broad community interest, they needed to be reported beyond the spot incident, and they needed to provide context.

In a column explaining the changes to readers, Executive Editor Peter Bhatia said the research, including the content analysis, would help the newspaper "redefine our crime reporting so that we do a better job covering issues and spend less time chasing sirens (and) make sure that the amount of time and space we devote to a crime story is justified by the importance or magnitude of the crime."





The following text is extremely faint and illegible, appearing to be a list or series of notes.

## IMAGINING THE FUTURE



## CHAPTER 6

# A COMMUNITY MURAL

*By Pete Weitzel*

Ask most editors what they want their local news coverage to be and they'll respond with journalistic prescriptives like smart, aggressive, thorough, in-depth, inclusive, essential, bright, engaging.

They might also tell you they want it to reflect the community.

What you probably won't get from the conversation is any real sense of what that reflection might be, of what the ideal coverage looks like over time, or why the look of the local page might differ in Butte from Boston or Miami from Madison. Most of us — even if we have a portrait in mind — have never put it into words, for ourselves or for our staffs.

Local coverage is the product of daily judgments influenced by accumulated norms, collective knowledge, instinct and habit. It's largely reactive. Even the enterprise comes in response to some news event.

Editors keep so busy responding to the news that comes at them, getting it right for the next day's newspaper, explaining and exploring it for the weekends, that they rarely have the time to step back and look at the bigger picture they are painting for readers. Nor is there a tried-and-true approach, a well accepted way to go about doing this.

But if the metaphor is valid, maybe the best way to envision coverage is to imagine what it "looks like" over time. Take the local stories and headlines and photos and graphics for a month and turn them into a giant collage — a mural of the community as seen by the paper.

Does it match up in a reasonable way with the community you know, reflecting the aspirations and cares and concerns of its residents? Or is it skewed toward one or more of the traditional areas of coverage such as cops and crime or city hall and politics? Is there a sense of place or could this be a portrait of Anywhere USA?

The editor-artist working on such a mural needs a common medium — a



## A COMMUNITY MURAL

way to compare the notions of community and reader concern with the reportorial interpretation — and his or her own vision.

None of the traditional forms of content analysis allows for that kind of match-up. None lets you put categories of concern alongside meaningful classifications of content so you can weigh and evaluate them. None gives you a mechanism for goal setting that can be measured constantly against your assessment of readers' — and community — needs and interests.

Think about values as that denominator.

Core values — the underlying principles that determine what people care about and how deeply they care — drive their concerns and their interests. Those concerns and interests, in turn, influence what people read and what they act on. Values determine what matters in our lives.

Sit around in a brainstorming session talking about what makes your town a good or not-so-good place to live, about what matters to people, and the issues that you constantly write about, and you'll have a list that can easily be sorted into core values.

Look at the frames for many of the news and feature stories on the local news pages, and you'll find those same values.

So it's possible — and damned instructive — to sort out people's concerns and interests in grid fashion and to do the same with your news content, using values as the medium, and then to compare the two.

What follows is one former editor's attempt to create such a tool. I call it The Values Index. It grew out of many failed efforts at analysis that would be helpful to my understanding and meaningful to people I wanted to persuade. It's very much a work in progress — I find myself adding or subtracting almost every time I use it — and it's clearly imperfect.

How, after all, can you have a "values" index that includes government as one of the dimensions? Well, it has to be there, at least for reference, because this is a content-analysis tool, and so much of what is reported is about government process or politics. To palliate, I've labeled the dimension Quality of Government and Governance to suggest people's expectation and the desired relationship in a participatory democracy.

The other eight dimensions comprise categories of news and feature stories separated into broad values equivalents.

The Personal Safety and Social Equity dimension groups coverage categories that relate to our desire for protection and safety and for fairness and justice when there are disputes. Crime is just one element of that much broader concern. And while some crimes make for really great storytelling, most incident reports offer little relevance for the average reader — they are at best incremental indicators of the level of public safety.

## A COMMUNITY MURAL

Personal Values, for examples, joins education and religion and family and ethical behavior because I believe they are interrelated. And School Administration is included as a category because that represents so much of news coverage — and editors need to examine the balance between the governance and the practice of education.

Quality of Life includes such disparate categories as traffic and weather. Makes a lot of sense if you've lived in Miami. Leadership and People Around Us are separate categories within Community because I found so many profiles of prominent people that were framed in terms of what they'd done, not who they were.

Yes, it's arbitrary. But if the basic idea makes sense you, and some of the categories don't, change them. Make it a tool that works for you, that helps you convey to staff the vision you have, that helps you set measurable goals toward producing a newspaper that is distinctly your town.

The nine dimensions and the story categories that fall within:

### WHAT MATTERS IN OUR LIVES

*A values-based index for community coverage*

#### 1. Working. Earning a living. Making money

- a. The job market. Jobs. Joblessness. Underemployment.
- b. Economic development. The economy.
- c. Businesses and business. Strategy. Change. Success. Failure.
- d. Management. Workplace issues.
- e. Personal success. Getting ahead.
- f. Making money. Investor information.

#### 2. The Cost of living. Consumer issues. Personal finance

- a. Products & services: Cost. Availability. Quality.
- b. Personal finance. Living costs.
- c. Other consumer information.
- d. Taxes. Fees. Tolls.

#### 3. Personal values

- a. Education: Self, family, community.
- b. Schools
- c. School administration
- d. Family, kids, pets.
- e. Religion. Churches.
- f. Ethical behavior



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### 4. Personal health

- a. Public health & prevention. Research.
- b. Wellness. Availability/quality of care/facilities
- c. Cost of care. Insurance protection

### 5. Personal safety, social equity

- a. The justice system
- b. Justice. Social equity. Civil disputes
- c. Civil courts.
- d. Criminal courts. Punishment.
- e. Crime.
- f. Prevention & protection.
- g. Fire and rescue.
- h. Accidents and disasters.

### 6. Quality of life

- a. Transportation. Traffic. Roads
- b. Growth. Development.
- c. Environment. Ecology. Nature.
- d. Flooding/water
- e. Ambiance. Open space.
- f. Weather

### 7. Leisure activities

- a. Recreation activities. Public & private facilities.
- b. Arts/culture: Theater, concerts, galleries, museums, exhibits.
- c. Entertainment: Nightlife, dining out, movies, events.
- d. Sports.
- e. Lifestyles. Hobbies. Home care.

### 8. Community/living together

- a. Leadership — people who makes things happen.
- b. People around us.
- c. Places around us.
- d. Community history.
- e. Diversity. Commonalities. Rural/urban. White/Black/Hispanic.  
Old/young. Resident/snowbird/commuter. Rich/poor.
- f. Common causes. Civic organizations and activities.
- g. Community and other shared events.

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### 9. The quality of government and governance

- a. Public works. Infrastructure.
- b. Services. Service delivery.
- c. Process. Management & operations. Efficiency. Personnel.
- d. Public officials. Politics. Elections.
- e. Regulation. Limitation.
- f. Forums. Hearings. Citizen involvement.

And here's a quick and dirty way to use the Index:

1. With the help of any of the techniques discussed in earlier chapters, pull together what you know about your community. And/or bring together a team of editors and reporters, with flip charts, to brainstorm.
  - What is Our Town like? What are its essential characteristics and character? What makes it different?
  - What do the people who live here care about? What are their concerns? What are their interests?
  - What are the major issues facing the community?
2. Sort that information into the dimensions and categories. Give each an approximate weight or depth of interest.
3. Using the Index, do an analysis of your local news coverage. Look at the dominant theme or frame of each news element — story, photo, illustration or informational graphic — over a period of several weeks and list it in the appropriate story category. A two-week review is probably the minimum to give a fair sampling; a month would be a lot better.

The quick way is by simple item count — how many news elements, whatever the length or size, on a given subject. The more accurate assessment is by space — a 60-inch story obviously has more impact than a brief; a four-column photo gets more attention than a one-column story. And you can refine the analysis by giving separate listings to those stories that make Page 1, the Local front, or inside.

The analysis will give you a reasonably accurate version of the picture you are painting day by day by day. And if it doesn't fit the portrait you and your colleagues drew when you brainstormed, you may want to consider making some changes in local coverage.

### HOW ONE NEWSPAPER REORIENTED ITS COVERAGE

The goal at the *Naples Daily News* and other Scripps-Howard papers: Find those issues so important to readers that it is imperative the newspaper be their best source of information.



## A COMMUNITY MURAL

Here's Editor Phil Lewis on how his paper changed its coverage philosophy:

About a dozen editors got together and asked ourselves: What are the most important issues to our readers? The brainstorming led to a list of possible "franchise issues" we wanted to cover best. (More on that concept in Chapter 7.)

Then a committee we called "Readers First" got involved. It included people from all parts of the paper, although it was headed by a mid-level editor and had a half dozen people from the newsroom. Its job was to hold focus groups, survey readers and otherwise gather information and develop ideas on the suggested issues.

Growth and transportation were the biggest, weightiest issues, but there were other subjects we felt we should own — like high school sports.

The focus on growth led to a 12-page special section called, simply, *Water*, which explored the critical importance of that resource on our area and how it influences virtually everything that happens in this city at the edge of the Everglades — problems and solutions.

Growth became a theme, a frame for much of the local reporting. And we created a transportation beat.

Identifying our franchise issues has helped us focus local coverage. It helps the staff understand what our mission is. But you still have to constantly preach it, and have others do so.

It helps the community understand, too. It comes in handy when I talk to community groups and when I'm writing a column. It demystifies what we're doing.

In a very different way, we focused on high school sports. When this came up in our discussions, we talked about the resources and the time we spent collecting information that the people who were most interested already knew.

We asked, "What value can we add? How can we give readers something they can't get anywhere else?" So we started reporting individual player and team statistics, like batting averages. No one was doing that. It's something readers can get only from us.

## A COMMUNITY MURAL

# REDEFINING THE NEWS

By Tom Callinan  
*Arizona Republic*

The *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle* employs a "redefining" process to continually improve its coverage.

It always starts with readers.

Last year, we redefined our business and technology coverage. The newspaper has always done well in institutional coverage of home-town corporations such as Kodak, Bausch and Lomb and Xerox's largest manufacturing complex. But readership results were showing less reader satisfaction of small business, personal finance and workplace issues — increasingly important topics in a city undergoing change from a company town to a growing high-tech, entrepreneurial base.

Karen Magnuson, who was then managing editor and now is editor, and business editor Ellen Rosen organized a series of 20 outreach meetings. They met with a wide range of people — professionals, small business owners, college students, minority groups — to hear their thoughts.

The readers helped define improved small-business coverage — more local news in general and an increased emphasis on technology. A similar redefining process is underway in features, focusing on improving things-to-do and recreational coverage, food and drink, restaurants and entertainment.

The most rewarding effort has been "Redefining Rochester." For years, many City of Rochester residents complained that there was



Karen Magnuson, then managing editor and now editor in Rochester, listens at a "redefining" session. The newspaper held these reader discussions to make improvements in its business, technology and local coverage.

Tom Callinan, editor of the *Arizona Republic*, formerly was editor of the *Rochester (N.Y.) Democrat and Chronicle*.



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nothing about their neighborhoods in the newspaper. When there was, they said, it was crime-related, or the tone conveyed a sense of people succeeding despite living in the city. The perception was that we had seldom gone into the neighborhoods to talk with residents about their communities and their interests. Meanwhile, city dwellers felt, we were always writing neighborhood stories about the suburbs.

As part of our "Redefining Rochester" campaign, the newsroom organized a series of 15 outreach meetings in each sector of the city to connect with city dwellers. We met with more than 200 residents, many of whom had never dealt with the newspaper before.

The suggestions helped us develop a plan to better cover the city in every section of the newspaper. Some of the changes:

- We reorganized our staff to better cover neighborhood issues and events.
- Instead of referring to zip codes, we asked residents what they considered their community to be and datelined those neighborhoods in the same manner we dateline suburban towns.
- We added a "Rochester Living" page to our weekly Our Towns publication. The page features short news items from city neighborhoods along with a feature story about an interesting city resident.
- We extended that approach to the daily newspaper with a "City Living" package in the Local section and city neighborhoods columns written by our neighborhoods reporter.
- We began an occasional series on the city schools called Classroom Chronicles in which schools reporter Christine Ridarsky spends a day at various city schools and writes about what students are learning and how they're learning it.

Several neighborhood newsletters applauded our outreach efforts and our improved coverage. Editors are constantly hearing from city residents with story ideas and comments. The paper has heard a tremendous amount of positive feedback about the redefining project. It's seen modest gains of 200 to 300 subscribers in two of the targeted neighborhoods. Core metro area past-week readership is in the high 80 percent range, up more than 10 percent from four years ago. Reader satisfaction scores are also very high, including among African-American readers, who represent a significant population in the core metro area.

Those numbers are impressive, but the community connections the paper has made have been equally rewarding and a long time in coming. Anecdotally, editors know from calls and e-mails that Redefining Rochester has been a hit. There have been comments about the entire effort as a welcome departure from "negative news," and people have said they are pleased by the inclusion

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of minorities' voices. They also say it is much easier to get a city brief in the newspaper today than it has been in the past.

Redefining Rochester was right for business reasons. More importantly, it was also the right thing to do for the community.

## Corn Hill reinvents itself



At home James Blount III and his wife, Melissa, play with their 17-month-old son, Brandon, at their Corn Hill neighborhood house. "It seemed to be a good spot when I saw them serious about building new homes," he says.

### Frederick Douglass Village completes revitalization of a historic neighborhood.

BY STAFF WRITER  
DAWN MARIE GRACELEY

New life is springing up on what used to be an empty lot between Clarissa and Ford streets in Rochester's Corn Hill neighborhood.

Homes are being built and families are moving into the new Frederick Douglass Village. The \$7 million village includes a 50-unit apartment complex for senior citizens and 25 single-family homes.

A goal of the project is to create housing for a mix of residents, with home prices ranging from \$88,000 to \$100,000. Another is to make Corn Hill a model of diversity of races and income levels.

Frederick Douglass Village is a unique addition to the city because it is being built through a church, said Thomas E. Argus, commissioner of community development for the city of Rochester. It's an example other neighborhoods can follow, he said.

The timing couldn't be better. Neighborhood churches are expanding. Citizens are getting involved in the future of Corn Hill. And longtime residents are finally looking ahead instead of looking back.

"This is going to be the example that can be lifted up for any part of the city of

CORN HILL, PAGE 6A



City living: Kerin and Elizabeth Jacoby, with son Wady and Irish setter Habibi, say they're happy in Corn Hill.

The Democrat and Chronicle began to write constructively about city neighborhoods as well as the suburbs.



## WEAVING YOUR COMMUNITY'S MASTER NARRATIVE

By Jan Schaffer

*Pew Center for Civic Journalism*

Whenever I ask a group of journalists to name a subject that would make their readers squirm — not call to complain, but *squirm* — they readily nod their heads and start volunteering responses: race relations, education, the haves vs. the have-nots, growth and sprawl.

Then I ask if they are covering these issues — and how? There is an embarrassed silence. They know there are stories in their communities they are not covering well — and they want to cover them. But, often, they're not sure how.

Sometimes, the topics transcend traditional journalistic conventions. They don't easily fit into standard definitions of what makes "news." And the signposts crop up in so many different areas that no team or beat reporters have clear ownership.

Usually the issues are less about obvious external conflict between two different stakeholders and more about figuring out subtler internal tensions that are manifesting themselves in a wide variety of ways in our communities. Less about covering the noise in our communities — and more about covering the silences. Often the uncomfortable silences.

These stories — many of us call them master narratives — are far more important to our readers than much of our coverage of incremental daily developments. And an increasing number of newsrooms are pioneering coverage models. The coverage goes by other names as well: franchise issues, common themes, trend stories.

"I prefer to think of such stories as 'evolving narratives,'" writes Jeannine Guttman, editor of the *Portland (Me.) Press Herald*. Guttman details in a following case study how the paper has developed narratives about a statewide alcoholism problem in its award-winning project, "The Deadliest Drug," and on

Jan Schaffer, executive director of the Pew Center for Civic Journalism, was a reporter and editor at *The Philadelphia Inquirer* for 22 years.



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teenage life in its "On the Verge" coverage.

"I understand the concept of a master narrative, but I think those words tend to limit our thinking and ultimately our reporting," she said. "The word master sounds like we have it all figured out. And I don't think we do."

Indeed, these narratives are not one-shot stories about a particular trend. Not even a big enterprise or investigative piece. Rather they consist of an ongoing, overarching, all-pervasive narrative thread that underlies daily news developments.

Put together, they are a body of work that pieces together and makes sense for readers the forces that are reshaping their world — their demographic, economic, social and cultural realities in ways it would have been hard to imagine only 10 years ago.

New demographics in San Francisco or new venture capital in Northern Virginia. An influx of Hispanics in Nebraska or senior citizens in Savannah. Growth and sprawl in Denver. Rural vs. urban tensions in Idaho.

Newfound immigrants, failing education systems, rampant alcoholism, destructive domestic violence.

Think about master narrative coverage this way: You could cover venture capitalists. Or you can cover venture capital. If you cover venture capitalists, you follow the money. But if you cover the master narrative of venture capital, you will find yourself following changing social norms, happy-hour hangouts, commercial real estate trends, even new tech language.

In Silicon Valley, covering the master narrative of high technology is more than a story of software developers or dot-coms. It is also about the price of that prosperity, as KTVU television producer Roland DeWolk sees it: The loneliness of Indian computer experts, the saga of the rich and homeless, the "hope disparity" between the have and have nots, the unparalleled new stream of waste created by new riches.

"In most communities, there are a few (and ONLY a few) vital underlying issues that will largely determine the community's future," said Joe Smyth, board chair of Independent Newspapers Inc. and author of "Newsroom Guidelines for Independent Newspapers."

"The outcome of those issues will determine whether the community becomes a better or worse place to live and work, whether it thrives or declines," he wrote in a recent challenge to his editors. "Great community newspapers put a lot of effort into meaningful coverage of those vital issues."

Identifying those issues then becomes one of the newsrooms' most important tasks. Newsrooms are using many strategies.

At the former *San Francisco Examiner*, an urban geographer at San Francisco State took staff members on tours of the city's changing neighborhoods

## WEAVING YOUR COMMUNITY'S MASTER NARRATIVE

and opened their eyes, their minds — and even their stomachs — to major a demographic narrative, a "New City" unfolding in its very backyard. New people, new neighborhoods, new languages, new foods, new music, even new sports. And the paper followed that thread through 20 major stories in 1998 alone.

At the *Columbus (Ga.) Ledger-Enquirer*, Editor Mike Burbach embarked on a "small-r reorganization" by asking his staff: "What is the master narrative of Columbus?"

"It's a fascinating exercise," he said. "Some people answer the question from 50,000 feet and some from 5,000 feet, but there are definitely common themes. It's turned out to be a very useful question."

"What I tend to find is that they want to do journalism on the master narratives, and they have thought about it. But they are looking — not for the permission — but for the mechanisms."

When a newsroom confronts hundreds of issues competing for attention daily, how do we journalists identify and focus on the ones that will really make a difference in our community? And, then, how do we stay ahead of the story?

Here are some other strategies that newsrooms have used:

### • Pay attention to micro news developments

Sometimes, they may be little more than a series of metro briefs. Maine's series on alcohol addiction arose from the realization that alcohol was turning up as a factor in a number of stories — car accidents, house fires, abused children, domestic violence — even suicides in the forest. Put together, they told an overarching story that rang vividly true to readers.

In Savannah, an influx of retirees — often wealthy retirees — not only changed the dominant age of the community, it also changed housing patterns, medical care, recreational needs, philanthropic giving — and even politics. Many of these folks now had the time, and money, to run for office.

### • Listen to your beat reporters

When the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* began to chronicle the "New Face of Minnesota," senior editor Kate Parry noted, "As usual the first symptoms of population change came from the education team. They produced a story on how non-white students outnumbered white students in the Twin Cities public schools. Then they pitched a story on the 70 different foreign languages being spoken in the schools. Agriculture reporters told of turkey processing plants...where most of the workforce was Somali refugees."



## WEAVING YOUR COMMUNITY'S MASTER NARRATIVE

### • Be counter-intuitive

Admit you don't know much about a growing segment of your community. Abandon your preconceived notions, shelve your stereotypes and venture out to report.

That's what reporters at *The New York Times* did in chronicling race relations in America. It's also what the *Portland (Me.) Press Herald* did when editors realized they didn't know much about teen life and their own teen experiences were not that useful.

### • Get interactive

People don't simply want to hear the stories journalists have to tell. They want to tell their own stories as well. Create some space — civic space, cyberspace, op-ed space, news space — to let them do that. The process always generates more reporting opportunities for the newsroom.

The *San Francisco Examiner*, for instance, published several first-person accounts as part of its "New City" narrative.

For "On the Verge," the *Portland Press Herald's* series on teen life, the paper handed out disposable cameras and asked teens to photograph what was important to them and mail the cameras back. The paper posted several photos online with captions the teens had written themselves. "The cameras helped me connect with the kids, who had great stories to tell," said reporter Barbara Walsh. "I would regularly go online to look at the photos and read the cutlines the teens had written."

### • Ask some different questions

When *The Sun News* in Myrtle Beach, S.C., began grappling with growth in a "Boom Town" project a few years ago, it distributed bright yellow postcards with a half dozen questions, including this one: "What really makes you mad right now?"

"Tacky beachwear stores!" responded a significant batch of residents, to the surprise of the newsroom. This was not a subject that usually rises to a journalistic threshold, but nevertheless it was a clue about critical tensions in that community.

### • Snowball some responses

Start with a short, diverse list of people involved in your community and ask them all the same question, suggests INI's Smyth. "What are the three most critical local issues, the outcomes of which will make a real difference in how nice our community will be in the future?"

Then ask what additional information they need on those issues and what

## WEAVING YOUR COMMUNITY'S MASTER NARRATIVE

other individuals or other communities might offer their expertise.

Finally, suggests Smyth, "Go public with the process," and let your readers respond with a feedback coupon.

### • Visit some "third places"

Stop and chat in these neighborhood gathering spots, places where people share information, and often you will see trends that you didn't see until they were pointed out. "And suddenly it's very clear," said Kathy Spurlock, editor of *The News-Star* in Monroe, La., who began to understand the frustration of neighborhoods that had no banks, no post offices.

### • Knock down some newsroom walls

Are new restaurants opening? Get your food writers involved. New businesses? Try your biz reporters. Likewise, if there are new sports or new music or a new arts scene in your community.

### • Crunch some numbers

Certainly new Census data will provide lots of new narrative clues (see Chapter 1). But don't forget to look behind the numbers. When the *Baltimore Sun* saw that nearly 90 percent of the city's third graders couldn't read, it sought out more than the numbers. In its "Reading by 9" series, reporters delved into just *how* does a kid learn to read in the first place.

All the while, you need to keep building that database of contacts and sources. Then, once you have done all of that, you need to take care to ensure that your narrative doesn't become an outdated myth, a story that is no longer true.



## WEAVING YOUR COMMUNITY'S MASTER NARRATIVE

# FOLLOWING MICRO NEWS AND COUNTER-INTUITION

*By Jeannine Guttman*

*Portland Press Herald/Maine Sunday Telegram*

I understand the concept of a master narrative, but I think those words tend to limit our thinking and ultimately our reporting. The word "master" sounds like we have it all figured out. And I don't think we do.

I prefer to think of such stories as "evolving narratives." The trick for journalists, I believe, is to keep pace and perhaps stay ahead of that evolving narrative. The danger with clinging to a master narrative is that it can quickly become a myth, an old story that no longer is true and that no longer holds any resonance for anyone but the scribe (the journalist) who insists on recounting it, over and over.

At our newspaper, we have used two techniques in two very different reporting assignments to capture the evolving narrative, or the zeitgeist, as I also like to call it.

### FIND THE CLUES IN MICRO NEWS

One technique is to use micro news developments in your community to spot overarching, developing narratives about your community, narratives that are not apparent if the individual stories are seen as isolated incidents.

One of the things that I think journalists do extremely well is to recognize connections in dissonance, to see patterns in chaos. Because of our unique perspective, as surveyors of the entire community and the various sub-cultures that make up that larger civic mosaic, we are in a position to identify and probe these emerging narratives.

We did this with our 1997 series on alcohol abuse in Maine. The eight-day series, "The Deadliest Drug: Maine's Addiction to Alcohol," was based on deep narrative reporting and computer-assisted reporting. We compiled statistics, built our own databases and showed Maine readers how the scourge of alcohol was tearing apart families, individuals, businesses and affecting the state's economy and hospital emergency services.

*Jeannine Guttman is editor & vice president of the Portland (Me.) Press Herald and Maine Sunday Telegram.*



## WEAVING YOUR COMMUNITY'S MASTER NARRATIVE

This story was truly a blockbuster series, and the repercussions of it were so profound that people in about 70 Maine communities spent the next year meeting and formulating community-based solutions to the problem of alcohol abuse.

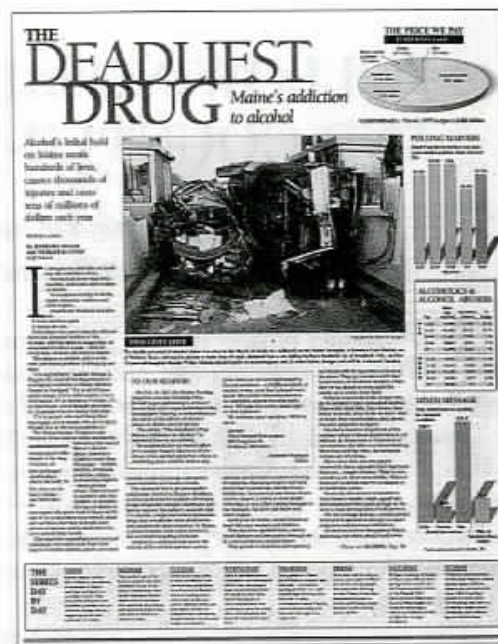
But you may be surprised at how this story began. It began when Curt Hazlett, our managing editor, began noticing a disturbing trend in seemingly unrelated spot news stories. An horrific truck accident kills a mother and her daughter; alcohol was involved. Teenagers are arrested for speeding down the interstate; alcohol was involved. A man is arrested for domestic violence after attacking his wife and child; alcohol was involved. A dispute at a local company leads to termination of troubled employee; alcohol was involved.

Many of these stories were played on Page 1. Some were just briefs inside the newspaper. But in reading through them, over a period of about a year, Curt wondered whether there was something larger to this story, something that we were not reporting, something that we were missing.

Initially, we asked one reporter to probe the question: "What is the impact of alcohol abuse in Maine?" As the answers started coming in, as the evidence began to mount, our story grew. By the end, we had assigned three reporters and a photographer to the story, which took us six months to research and write.

### BE COUNTER-INTUITIVE

The second technique is take a counter-intuitive approach to your community. What do you really know about a particular segment? Be brutally honest in your assessment. In Maine, we realized that we didn't know much at all about teenagers. We realized that, as adults, we had to abandon the notion that



The Portland Press Herald and Maine Sunday Telegram compiled statistics and built databases to show readers how alcohol affects the community.

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we are all experts because we had survived our own adolescence.

After making that assessment, we set out to record an authentic, unvarnished, uncensored and unflinching narrative of that community, one that we had been overlooking for years.

The result was an ongoing 2000 series, "On the Verge," which has showed Maine readers, through the words and lives of teenagers, what it is like to be an adolescent today. In constructing the stories, we made a firm decision to frame the narratives almost exclusively through the voices and stories of teenagers and to limit the perspectives of adults and experts, who tended to want to redefine and deconstruct what the kids were telling us.

We also made a commitment to spend months gathering information before writing a single sentence. Our reporter, Barbara Walsh, has talked to hundreds of Maine teenagers and has become a constant fixture in their lives. She has cruised in cars on the weekends, blitzed the mall, eaten far too many burgers at McDonalds, spent time with teenagers in the sanctity of their bedrooms, listened to their fears and secrets, learned more about them than their parents may have known, and found that there is nothing easy about being a teenager in 2000.

The stories that were produced were stunning because they were so honest, so true, so real. The mirror wasn't showing an uglier picture, it wasn't showing a prettier picture. It was showing how teenagers think, feel, worry, struggle, succeed and face each new day on the march to adulthood.

The community response to this story has been overwhelming. Each installment is followed by a flood of letters to the editor. Many parents tell us they are using the stories to talk with their children about difficult and uncomfortable issues. To date, we have published five installments: A powerful look at cliques and the self-esteem battle of "fitting in;" how teenagers struggle with issues of sex and sexuality in a world that uses sex as a marketing and entertainment device; a controversial examination of families splintered by divorce and the impact it has had on children; how teens deal with race in a world where kids are growing up biracial, multiracial, bilingual, multicultural; and the pressures teens face at an earlier and earlier age to excel, make high honors, and get accepted to a top-notch college that will guarantee them big salaries and instant success.

A large component of this evolving narrative has been the use of our online newspaper, MaineToday.com. The series is being carried online and continues to record a high volume of readership each month. Chat rooms and forums have been set up to capture the dialogue of teenagers reading the stories online.

In summary, I think the way to capture the evolving narrative is to use all of



## WEAVING YOUR COMMUNITY'S MASTER NARRATIVE

your journalistic skills and talents to spot the stories that no one else sees. And to use all of your journalistic skills and talents to know when you cannot fully see the story and when you need to enlist the help of the community in finding it and telling it.

### ON THE VERGE



## Families lost & found

### ABOUT THE SERIES

"On the Verge" is an occasional series about the confusing and sometimes scary lives of teenagers — kids on the verge of adulthood and big decisions. There's a whole lot of emotion, choices and pressures. Yes, the everyday lives of teenagers — their personal struggles, hopes and fears — often go unnoticed and unreported. Since last fall, we have spent some reporting time on these issues. This issue, however, which takes a look at today's families, continues on page B-12A. For previous installments, visit [22theonlinejournal.com](http://22theonlinejournal.com).

Many Maine teens feel the shock waves of broken homes. For them, family is anything but traditional.

By BARBARA WALSH  
Staff Writer

**T**hey're ordinary sisters, teen-agers who attend to their daily lives, go to school, watch MTV, and survive a family that's been torn apart. But for them, life is anything but ordinary. It's a life of confusion, choices and pressures. Yes, the everyday lives of teenagers — their personal struggles, hopes and fears — often go unnoticed and unreported. Since last fall, we have spent some reporting time on these issues. This issue, however, which takes a look at today's families, continues on page B-12A. For previous installments, visit [22theonlinejournal.com](http://22theonlinejournal.com).



The two-parent, intact family no longer prevails. In 1990, 12 out of every 100 kids grew up in a broken home. Now, five times as many children are raised in fractured families — 60 out of every 100. Half of American marriages end in divorce. Nearly one in three babies is born without a dad. And kids of divorced or single parents are twice as likely to have problems. A lot of them are stressed out, in therapy, on medication, drinking, doing drugs, hanging out, acting out, becoming angry or just really, really sad. "This is a growing, major problem," says Thomas Hefner, a pediatrician with the Children's Hospital in Portland. "It's a growing, major problem."

Photo by FAMILIES, Page 5A

The Portland project showed readers what it is like to be an adolescent today.

## WEAVING YOUR COMMUNITY'S MASTER NARRATIVE

## BUBBLES UP FROM REPORTERS AND PHOTOGRAPHERS

By David Stoeffler  
Lincoln Journal Star

Your wake-up call may come from a look at the 2000 Census data. Or maybe from a racial incident in a local school. Or just from reading the religion calendar in your own paper and noticing that a local church is now offering a Spanish-language Mass. Maybe a restaurant specializing in food from El Salvador has opened, or an ethnic grocery store has filled the spot left vacant when the old IGA closed. At the *Lincoln Journal Star*, our reporters and editors picked up on a number of similar clues — and also benefited from a good network of sources and roots in Nebraska communities affected by a major influx of Hispanics in recent years. Census estimates from 1998 (the latest available at this writing) said the state's Hispanic population more than doubled in the 1990s — to about 77,000, making them the largest minority group in the state. Hispanic leaders estimate actual numbers of more than 120,000, including some who are in the country illegally. *Journal Star* reporters and editors have set out to explore all aspects of that growth, focusing on the effects in Nebraska, but reaching across our borders to probe the causes.

Most of our coverage has evolved, bubbling up from reporters and photographers. Once editors saw the importance and potential scope of the story, we set up brainstorming sessions, culling ideas and setting priorities, including talking about how to keep previous stories alive through follow-ups.

Some highlights of our coverage:

- Veteran political reporter Don Walton spent the summer of 1999 investigating the dangers faced by a largely Hispanic work force in the meatpacking industry. The lead on his first story says it all: "Lured north of the border by the hope of a better life, a largely Hispanic work force labors in

David Stoeffler, editor of the *Lincoln (Neb.) Journal Star*, has been an editor and reporter in Wisconsin and Nebraska 22 years.



## WEAVING YOUR COMMUNITY'S MASTER NARRATIVE

Nebraska meatpacking plants under conditions some critics describe as a classic case of worker exploitation." The story prompted a state probe that later resulted in creation of a state workers bill of rights.

- In October 1999, reporter Joe Duggan and photographer Eric Gregory took a detailed look at the social and cultural impact of the influx by focusing on the central Nebraska city of Lexington, where local officials estimate Hispanics make up nearly half of the 10,000 residents. Only 10 years ago, the city was dying and population had dropped to 6,600. The opening of a meatpacking plant reversed the city's fortunes. The joint reporting project with Nebraska ETV culminated with a town hall meeting where local residents resolved to move forward to confront racial tensions.
- In February 2000, reporter Art Hovey and photographer William Lauer offered insight into the successful educational efforts in Madison, another meatpacking town, where about 60 percent of the children come from Spanish-speaking households — but where test scores are on the rise.
- Photographer Ted Kirk, who worked with Walton on the meatpacking investigation, wondered what could be so bad that would make people flee their homelands to endure that kind of work for \$8 an hour. Kirk teamed up with Spanish-speaking reporter Angela Heywood Bible and in the summer of 2000, we published "Far From Home," a four-day series of stories and photos tracing Lincoln members of the Cazun family back to the village of Nancinta, Guatemala. The report explored the hard life in Guatemala, the harrowing and costly journey to the United States and the difficult adjustment to life in Nebraska.

For an 80,000-circulation newspaper, these types of stories are a large investment of time and money. We could not afford to designate a single reporter to coverage of this area — so we involved several people with different interests and backgrounds (politics, state and regional news, even agriculture). Generally, staff members have to balance regular assignments while gathering the background material. Then editors free them up to concentrate on the story, meaning other staff members must pick up a heavier load.

As is often the case in developing any beat, it helps to start with introductions — finding folks in the local community centers or churches who are in day-to-day contact with people and issues. And the best way to develop sources often is just to write a few stories — cover a festival, write a couple of profiles, spend a day in a classroom with non-English-speakers or do a feature on that Spanish-language Mass.

Language can be a major barrier. It helps to have a staff member who speaks the language fluently, but (as was the case for our meatpacking story) you can often find a community advocate or a local official to translate. Take precau-

## WEAVING YOUR COMMUNITY'S MASTER NARRATIVE

LINCOLN  
JOURNAL STAR  
A SPECIAL REPORT ■ SUNDAY, JULY 30, 2000

FOUR IN A FOUR-DAY SERIES

### FAR FROM HOME

GUATEMALA TO THE GOOD LIFE



Reporters in Chichicastenango, Guatemala, take part in a religious procession. One of the Cazun family members who lived in Guatemala is seen in the picture. (By Ted Kirk)

### Carving out a new life

Being away from his homeland is hard for Anselmo Cazun, but he has a reason for staying in America: 'Here there is work. My entire family can live better because I'm here.'



Anselmo Cazun, who first arrived in America in 1988 and worked as a construction worker, is seen in the picture. (By Ted Kirk)

#### About this project

Lincoln Journal Star photographer Ted Kirk and reporter Angela Heywood Bible spent several months in Guatemala and the United States to develop this series. The series is a four-day series of stories and photos that trace a local family back to Guatemala.

The Lincoln Journal Star, published "Far From Home," a four-day series of photos and stories that traced a local family back to Guatemala.



## WEAVING YOUR COMMUNITY'S MASTER NARRATIVE

tions to check the work of the interpreter — maybe by using different interpreters in different settings — so you can be sure he or she is not putting a personal spin on the story.

Trust is another major barrier — especially in working with immigrants, some of whom are in the country illegally. Many sources will be reluctant to talk, but if you can gain their trust, their help in getting to the real story will be invaluable. Reporters and editors should be sure to discuss how far the paper is willing to go to protect identities of sources and whether the paper is willing to withhold certain details about sources, for instance if a person is a legal worker.

For major projects, travel can be expensive — and can take a lot of effort to set up. The Guatemala project cost us just under \$10,000 for airfares, hotels, etc. — about one-sixth of our travel budget for a year. And even with family connections in Guatemala, logistical details were complicated. Shopping for airfares, getting passports and vaccinations, exchanging money, dealing with bureaucracy — all take time. You'll also need to consider the risk of carrying expensive equipment (cameras, lenses, computers) and you'll want to talk to your staff about suitable safety precautions.

How you cover these types of major community trends can be a good barometer of the quality of your paper — and doing it well likely will energize your staff to look for similar stories deserving attention. No formula exists beyond the basic tenets of good journalism — staying in touch with your community, recognizing a good story, devoting the right resources, executing well and evaluating the results.

## WEAVING YOUR COMMUNITY'S MASTER NARRATIVE

### IDENTIFYING STRATEGIC INITIATIVES

*By Frank Scandale  
The Record*

In Denver, we called our key areas of coverage "Strategic Initiatives."

The term was born in early summer when Editor Glenn Guzzo locked the newspaper's department heads in an airless, windowless room for five hours without water or food until we listed the areas we thought would be of most interest to our readers. Okay, so I exaggerate — maybe it was four hours.

After we listed a couple dozen areas — from crime to environment, from transportation to minority communities — each of us took turns putting our allotted number of check marks next to the areas we should focus on. The idea was to concentrate our resources on the key areas on which we believed readers wanted the most critical information.

For metro, the area of the paper for which I had the most responsibility, we settled on Growth, Education and Hispanic issues. Growth is obvious as Colorado in 10 years has gone from 3 million to most likely 4.1 million people or more when the census numbers come out this year. We chose Hispanic issues, and as a by-product, other minority issues, simply because Hispanics continue to be the fastest-growing population segment in Colorado, and Denver specifically. The public schools in Denver are more than 53 percent Hispanic.

Education is a hot topic in Colorado now as the Colorado Student Assessment Program tests are the dominant measure of schools, especially poorly performing schools, as well as pay for many teachers. The governor has made this effort a priority in his administration. We at *The Denver Post* believed no greater issue exists in the state that will affect more lives, jobs, property values and discussions both in the statehouse and in boardrooms.

We officially launched the "strategic initiatives" last fall, specifically with education. We formed a team under one editor, moved the higher education reporter to the team from the state desk, and created a new position for an

Frank Scandale, editor of *The Record* in Bergen County, N.J., formerly was assistant managing editor/news for *The Denver Post*.



## WEAVING YOUR COMMUNITY'S MASTER NARRATIVE

education writer who would look at broader issues.

We also asked our suburban reporters to focus on writing at least one education-related story a week from their respective coverage areas. Some of them, who had not focused on this area before, were quite surprised to find so many good tales in the metro area's school systems.

In addition, we are publishing a quarterly report on a key area of education; technology will be our first effort this year.

To get on board everyone who is key to the success of these efforts, we had a series of meetings with higher-level editors, then the line editors, and then with individual reporters who are counted on to find and write these pieces.

I think we will know if we are successful when the bigger quarterly pieces are published and we get feedback from the readers, parents, teachers and administrators.

## WEAVING YOUR COMMUNITY'S MASTER NARRATIVE

# LISTEN TO YOUR BEAT REPORTERS, FIND PARTNERS IN THE COMMUNITY

*By Kate Parry  
St. Paul Pioneer Press*

When people think about immigration as a public issue, they tend to think of the historic immigrant enclaves on either coast. But in 1999, a wide variety of indicators suggested to editors at the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* that this issue had percolated beyond small neighborhoods confined to Midwestern cities.

As usual, the first symptoms of population change came from the Education Team. They produced a story on how non-white students outnumbered white students in the Twin Cities public schools. Then they pitched a story on the 70 different foreign languages being spoken in the schools.

Agriculture reporters told of turkey-processing plants in small out-state communities where most of the workforce was Somali refugees. Towns where for a century diversity had meant populations of both Swedes and Norwegians suddenly found a fourth of the kids in the local public school were Muslim Somalis.

The dominant culture wasn't always giving way to these changes gracefully. It seemed the right moment for the newspaper to inject high-quality information into the growing public debate, elevate its level and ensure that everyone with a stake in this issue was heard.

Just a little background research told us we weren't the only ones seeing the changes: The Minneapolis Foundation started a public relations campaign featuring billboards confronting Minnesotans with this message: "Some recent immigrants to Minnesota think it's a rather cold place. And they don't mean the weather." The League of Women Voters of Minnesota planned community discussions on immigration throughout the state.

## APPLYING CIVIC JOURNALISM TOOLS

We began to apply our usual civic journalism protocol to the issue:

Kate Parry is senior editor/politics and special reports of the *St. Paul Pioneer Press*.



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ST. PAUL PIONEER PRESS

SPECIAL REPRINT SECTION

BRIEFING

Immigrants Transforming Our State

# THE NEW FACE OF MINNESOTA

## Stepping into a State of Change

Wars, famines and a robust U.S. economy are pushing and pulling people around the globe. In Minnesota, fascination and apprehension exist as new neighbors who earlier generations' footsteps.

Rex Guckert

52, an immigrant

Two decades later, more people than ever are coming to the state, and the impact is profound and lasting.

**M**attias Larson is the director of Minnesota State — a school elementary school music teacher of Swedish descent who lives in Fridley, speaks publicly and worries about giving the wrong impression. These days, however, there's something troubling him: the increasing number of foreign-born people living in Minnesota. After retiring from teaching in 1996, Larson founded a group dedicated to reducing the number of immigrants who come to Minnesota.

Two hundred miles to the southwest, in Washington, Minn., a 13-member online police officers' union (United Washington) is meeting on its annual "band" in Boston and meeting for the first time in person. The first meeting closed in a late state emergency room area, and the police officers' union is a member of the state's police union. The police officers' union is a member of the state's police union. The police officers' union is a member of the state's police union.

The influx of new immigrants is a source of concern for many in the state. In the past, many immigrants have come to the state to work in the state's economy. In the past, many immigrants have come to the state to work in the state's economy. In the past, many immigrants have come to the state to work in the state's economy.

James the state, known for its strong tradition of public service in the working class. The state's economy is strong and growing. The state's economy is strong and growing. The state's economy is strong and growing.

For some, the influx of new immigrants is a source of concern. In the past, many immigrants have come to the state to work in the state's economy. In the past, many immigrants have come to the state to work in the state's economy. In the past, many immigrants have come to the state to work in the state's economy.

"I don't want to get the wrong idea here," Larson said in a recent interview. "I don't want to get the wrong idea here." Larson said in a recent interview. "I don't want to get the wrong idea here." Larson said in a recent interview.

Washington's economy is strong and growing. The state's economy is strong and growing. The state's economy is strong and growing. The state's economy is strong and growing. The state's economy is strong and growing.

### Dear Readers,

I am pleased to announce that the Minnesota State Police Officers' Union (MSPU) is now a member of the Minnesota State Police Officers' Union (MSPU). The MSPU is a member of the Minnesota State Police Officers' Union (MSPU). The MSPU is a member of the Minnesota State Police Officers' Union (MSPU).

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Photo by  
Jon Guckert  
for  
Pioneer Press

ILLUSTRATION BY JAMES H. HARRIS



## COVERING A WORLDLY COMMUNITY

*By Pete Weitzel*

When David Yarnold became executive editor in 1999, he broadened the *San Jose Mercury News'* master narrative to include the valley's changing demographics because "the two most powerful stories of our time have become intertwined.

"We can't write about technology without covering Asian-Indian engineers and H1-B visas. We can't cover the issues facing many in the Latino population without making reference to the absurdly high cost of housing in the Valley. And because of our understanding of these issues, we kept the faith with the Chinese-American community here by covering the Wen Ho Lee case more thoroughly and fairly than any other newspaper."

Here's some of what he told his newsroom in a memo in which he laid down the challenge to become the best newspaper in the West:

Today, Silicon Valley is a world-class story unfolding in a worldly community ... We're reporting on places as distinct as Palo Alto and Alum Rock — and we are one of the few common denominators. We are positioned exactly right to report on the two best stories around: technology and the changing demographic and cultural face of America.


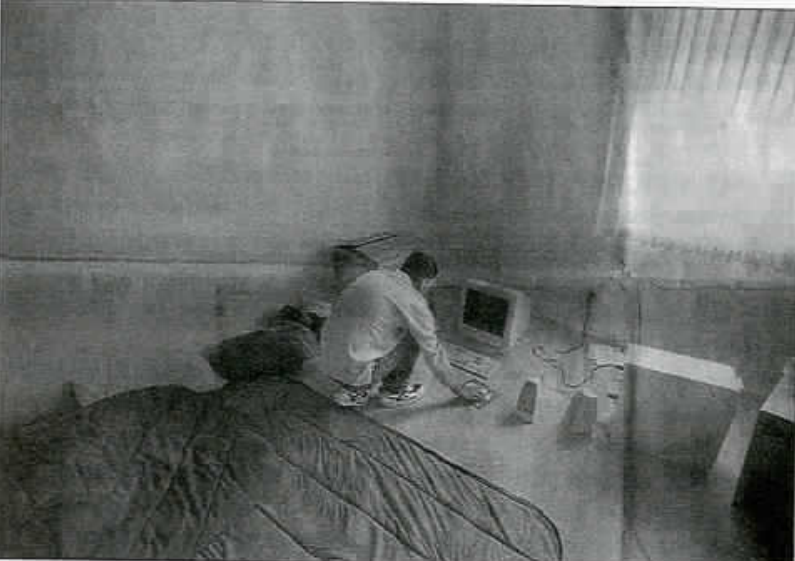
The ideas and products emanating from the Valley today are changing banking, music, real estate, romance, privacy, manufacturing, television, medicine, news, telephony — even the ability of parents to connect with their kids at college. Those ideas are building some communities and fracturing others. They are empowering day traders, leaving brokers behind and forcing stock exchanges to stay open at night. We're seeing the fault lines of change created by a tremendous disparity in wealth, and we know that nothing concerns our communities more than their troubled schools.

Our central story remains technology and its implications. The other great story at our fingertips is the demographic



# HIGH TECH'S Imported Brainpower

High-tech workers, from left, Pratap Yeware, Deepak Jiware and Sudhir Wath prepare a meal in their Sunnyvale apartment.

Contract worker Sudhir Wath, who is working in the U.S. on an H-1B visa, shares a sparsely furnished apartment with three other men.

**What is an H-1B visa?**  
The three-year visa admits to the United States foreign workers with specialized skills. This year, as in 1999, the quota is 115,000.

**Who gets them?**  
By far, the most recipients are from India. The leading countries of birth for the first half of 1999:

- India 46%
- Canada 4%
- China 10%
- Philippines 3%

■ Visa quota chart. ■ BACK PAGE

**Indians recruited by temp firms create flourishing subculture**  
BY SARAH LUBMAN  
Special to Mercury News

Sudhir Wath shares a large, two-bedroom apartment in Sunnyvale with three roommates. They sleep on the floor in cheap sleeping bags, and their living room decor consists of an ironing board, a standing lamp and a television atop a cardboard box.

But Wath and his buddies, all Indians in their mid-20s, aren't complaining. Far from it. They're contract high-tech workers brought over by temp recruiting firms, dubbed "bodyhoppers," and they're making 10 times their annual salaries back in Bangalore — although, as they quickly discover, a niggle in

India goes a lot further than a dollar in the United States.

Almost from the moment of his arrival, Wath became part of a thriving Silicon Valley subculture. Beneath the clamor over the issue of H-1B visas for skilled foreign workers, young Indian engineers are carving out a distinct lifestyle that's fueled by the region's insatiable demand for knowledge workers. In a way, they're a revved-up version of "Kelly Girls" who once filled American offices — but with engineering degrees and the ability to program in Java. Many eventually wind up as employees at the company.

See IMPORTED, Back Page

“Obviously, I want to make money. That's the main object. But I also want to learn things.” — Sudhir Wath

The San Jose Mercury News covers the valley's changing demographics.

transformation of American culture and society. One day in the next century we will all be minorities... And while this newsroom has done a good job of learning how to cover technology, we haven't put enough emphasis on the culture, the communities and the people who make up Silicon Valley.

I have often told job candidates and other editors that the two great stories here — technology and diversity — intersect at ambition. Our challenge is to capture the dynamism, the multiculturalism, the frontier mentality and the sense of possibility that define this place.

By addressing the local and regional issues of land use, assimilation, bi-culturalism, the cost of living, immigration and education, we will be telling the stories that bind us to Orange County's Westminster, to Stockton, Sacramento and San Diego — not to mention Texas, Washington, Arizona, Mexico and Indonesia...

Why should we frame our mission as being the best newspaper in the West, as opposed to being one of the best newspapers in the nation or being a great regional newspaper? Because it frames a story that captures the pivotal points of change in America.

What are the common themes in that story?

First, there's a psychographic connection: It's about sprawl, traffic, a love of the outdoors, the environment, the melding of cultures. One of every seven babies born in Santa Clara County in 1997 was of mixed race.

Second, it's about common interests: Readers who view the world primarily through that virtual reality technology headset now live in Dublin, Marin County, Hollister and San Francisco. So our coverage priorities will resonate with them, as well.

Third, there are clear geographic commonalities. When we write about water policy or land use, we're inevitably going to need a larger frame.

Let's broaden our thinking. Let's ask whether what we're writing about is part of a larger regional or Western trend. But broadening doesn't always mean getting on a plane. It might just mean more sophisticated concepts — and more sophisticated sources.



## WEAVING YOUR COMMUNITY'S MASTER NARRATIVE

How has that played out in print?

- An occasional series on the cost of living in Silicon Valley. One story looked at how each of four families, incomes from \$36,000 to \$155,000, do it.
- A story on people who rent floor space: \$180 a month gets you a corner in a living room for eight hours a night.
- A 10-part series on the 10 most significant events in the valley's history.
- A report on the recruiting of people with high-tech skills, mostly from India.
- Paired in one edition: a Vietnamese refugee's IPO is launched, the valley's last cannery closes.
- A look at Vietnamese-owned shops that serve a Mexican-American neighborhood.

## MAKING IT HAPPEN



## A PROCESS FOR CHANGE

*By Pete Weitzel*

**N**ow the heavy lifting. Nothing is more difficult than newsroom change. It's even harder than getting more FTEs from the publisher. Undaunted, we offer seven steps to a highly effective local news report.

**1. Using your new knowledge of community, engage your staff in brainstorming sessions that describe and define your town — the place and the people, its diversity and its commonalities.**

Assign editor-reporter teams to pull together all of the information you've gathered about your community — the market research and demographic data, the information from experts in various fields, the results of community listening and mapping.

Give everyone summary reports and make the accumulated data available to anyone who wants to take the time to review it.

Then schedule a series of brainstorming sessions in which staff members talk about what they have learned. As part of each session, ask the participants to describe and define the community. What is it like as a place to live and work? What are its assets? Its capacities? Its liabilities? Its uniqueness? What are its traditions and culture? Who are its people and what do they value? What are their priorities? How do they live their lives? What are their concerns and expectations? What are the problems and issues that drive public policy debate?

Involve everyone in the newsroom, because each voice that's included will add something different, because one goal should be to get everyone thinking more broadly about readers and community, and because you want the fullest possible buy-in for any coverage changes decided on.

And chances are everyone will learn something about their community they didn't know. The paper can only be better for that.

Pull together a composite — the newsroom's description of place and people. Post it.



## A PROCESS FOR CHANGE

### 2. Imagine coverage that serves the needs and interests of the total community that you and your staff have described.

Convert the descriptions and definitions to a Values Index (see Chapter 6), or some other kind of content-based assessment tool. This might be done in another brainstorming session, or by assigning a team of editors and reporters to the task.

The index provides a guide for discussions of coverage, an easy way to separate and sort through the coverage elements. You might want to set up different discussions teams for each of the nine Index dimensions.

For instance, one team might discuss health coverage. Your market research shows that 80 percent of your readers consider health care very important. And in conversations, readers tell you they worry about medical care and costs. But what, exactly, does that mean in terms of local news coverage? What are the local health care issues affecting people? Poor ambulance service? An overcrowded city hospital? Too few doctors in some specialty areas? Problems getting flu shots? Given its importance to readers, what level and what kind of local health care coverage is called for?

### 3. Analyze existing coverage.

Analyze your existing coverage over several weeks or more, counting or measuring the news elements that fit in each of the dimensions and categories, as suggested in Chapters 4-6.

This will give you a quantitative assessment of your coverage. You may wish to impose a qualitative judgment on each segment as well.

Look at the relative balances among the dimensions and the coverage within each of the dimensions. Does a third of your coverage fall within a single dimension? Are some dimensions all but ignored? Is there more coverage of the "school administration" than of "schools." Is diversity represented primarily in features on ethnic festivals?

### 4. Compare your existing coverage, your community profile, and your coverage vision.

You now have in comparable formats: (1) readers interests and concerns, (2) your vision of the ideal coverage to serve those readers and (3) your current coverage. Use it.

Differences should stand out clearly — and offer an opportunity to get everyone thinking about all aspects of your coverage and their relationships to each other.

If 80 percent of your readers say health care is a major concern, and less than five percent of the local news stories are health-related, are you doing

## A PROCESS FOR CHANGE

enough?

If people have a strong sense of community, does that come through in the stories told on your pages. Is the spirit of your community alive and well on Page 1? Or the local front? Does your reporting take them to places they care about, refresh traditions, introduce them to new people and new things?

If people rank the crime problem as very important, what do they want to know about it, and does your coverage offer that? Does the interest shift significantly based on age, gender or geography, and does the coverage reflect that? If your vision calls for keeping people up to date on personal-safety issues, are you continually monitoring the quality of law enforcement?

### 5. Where you come up short, ask why.

A. Are you staffed to cover the community you've defined?

- Does the diversity of your newsroom match the community?
- Do editors and reporters know the community they cover?

B. Are you organized to cover the community you've defined?

- Who are your sources? The people your paper talks to every day? Do they dominate your pages? How well do those voices and their concerns reflect the broad community?
- How much reporting time is on the phone vs. outside the office?
- When do you go out into the neighborhoods? Only on breaking news or is there regular coverage?
- What do you cover? What are you still missing? What percent of staff is assigned to traditional beats?
- How are the generalists and specialists used? Do they help or further the problem? Do they expand the breadth of coverage?
- Where are your readers? And where is your reporting? Not just geography, but state of mind. How do the concerns and expectations match up?

C. Are you missing the mark in some other way?

- Is there a clear mandate from management? What example is set?
- What is rewarded? By story play? By praise? By raise? By promotion?

### 6. Translate your vision and the needed coverage changes into goals.

Recognize that you won't be able to do it all at once, that great visions have distant horizons. Some changes will take longer than others.

Be specific about organizational and operational changes that must be made to reach your goals.

Will the coverage you want to achieve require new reporting approaches? New or expanded beats or reporting assignments? Additional resources?



## A PROCESS FOR CHANGE

Reallocation of resources? Restructuring of all or part of the newsroom? New Equipment? Training? A specific talent search?

Set priorities.

### 7. Set short-term goals that will move you toward the long-term goals.

- Keep your expectations in line with your resources.
- Make uncomfortable choices where you must.
- Stop every once in a while and take an inventory of your progress. Build in short-term successes that help you and your staff maintain momentum.
- Use the goals as a guide to keep you on target, so that events don't bump stories you want to do.
- Begin.

## SOME BASIC QUESTIONS

Good local news coverage starts with questions. Before the reporting even begins, the reporter/writer should ask himself/herself a series of questions about the storytelling:

- What is this story all about? What's really going on?
- Who are the stakeholders? What's at stake?
- What basic human values are involved?

That leads to a second set of questions.

- Who are the readers? What is their relationship to the story?
- Why do they care?
- What are the things they most need or want to know?

And those answers, in turn, lead to questions about the storytelling:

- How can we frame this story to help readers see it whole?
- Can any or all of this information be best presented in highlight or pullout-box form?
- What information can best be presented in graphic or photographic form?
- What information can best be presented in story text or narrative?
- How, using any one or any combination of these forms, can we best tell the story in a way that is understandable and useful to readers?

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### AND A COUPLE OF SUGGESTIONS

**Throw out those story assignments!** Actually, just get rid of the name, because it narrows the thinking.

Instead, every editor should make — and every reporter receive — “presentation assignments.”

With that simple word change, the task goes from gathering information for a text account to one of storytelling that potentially involves pictures, informational graphics, illustrations, boxes, grids and a variety of forms of narrative — whichever method or combination of methods works best in delivering the information to readers.

**Forcibly frame the story.** Just below the story slug, have the reporter note the intended story frame — the organizing idea or theme that keeps the narrative in focus and provides the reader a context for understanding the story.

That accomplishes several things:

- It forces the reporter to think about framing and reminds him or her that context and clarity are critical.
- It raises a red flag if the frame is different from what the assigning editor and the reporter talked about earlier.
- It lets the editor quickly review the story to make sure both the lead and text are consistent with the desired frame.
- It gives the copy editor a quick reference and a valuable assist in writing the headline.

## SUCCESS STORIES

### Shoe Leather and Other Basics

*The Wichita Eagle* was one of the pioneers in civic journalism, experimenting with a number of techniques designed to help the newsroom better understand its community and respond to readers with coverage.

When he arrived in 1998 as the new executive editor, Rick Thames found a staff that “knew the community well” but spent too much time in the office. He started encouraging people to get out of the newsroom, and even gave all reporters pagers so they could get phone messages while away from the office.

“It's all about one-on-one contacts,” he said. “The smartest thing you can do is to get your staff out on the street.”

Thames reinforces that constantly. “I talk it up a lot, write memos, and



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critique the paper on what we're doing right. You build or strengthen the culture step by step."

He also uses the paper's reporting teams in carrying out the mission. Each has quantifiable goals that are discussed at the beginning of each year. Priorities are set for the newsroom. Then the teams have to come up with goals to support the newsroom mission and priorities.

"That's how we push the mission through," Thames said. "Teams have to come up with goals so they have ownership."

Because it wants the reporters and editors to be more aware of what's going on in the community and how attitudes are being shaped, the paper encourages staff members to become involved themselves. Thames calls it a "relaxed policy, more relaxed than most newspapers. We have people on boards of civic and neighborhood organizations. We're still strict on conflicts of interest, but we deal with them one by one."

Thames said he rejected one staff member's request recently because it involved a high-profile issue, but that was unusual. "We're just not running into the kind of conflicts editors typically worry about."

*The Eagle* uses a variety of other techniques designed to help reporters and editors know the community better:

- A new reader panel is brought in each month for a 90-minute discussion "on what they like and don't like about the paper," moderated by the national editor.
- Reporters are given a day to go into the community and talk with people. "We hope they come back with story ideas."
- "Underrepresented groups" are brought in for brownbag sessions with reporters and editors involved in their coverage.
- A local history section was added to the recently revised stylebook. With a quiz.

Although some of the early work in identifying "public places" was done in Wichita by *The Eagle* and the Harwood group, Thames thinks newspapers will have to work even harder in the future to keep up with shifting public opinion because "it's getting harder and harder to find places where people will let down their guard and talk with reporters, or each other. The idea you can get a sense of community by going to some of these places is a myth."

He's thinking of creating an advisory panel composed of people selected because they work in or are associated with public places and are in a position to talk with people about local issues and concerns.

"We'd have a barber, a health club trainer, a pastor, a cab driver and so on. They're all good at listening. Each would have his or her own filters but it

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would be a diverse group. They'll know what people are talking about and how they feel about what's going on."

### New beats for new journalism

Concerned about too strong an institutional tilt in coverage, the *Austin American-Statesman* assigned a reporter to cover neighborhoods. *The Dallas Morning News* assigned a reporter to cover what sociologists call the third sector of community — the city's non-profit and charitable organizations, who determine the area's civic health. Many newspapers have assigned reporters to race or ethnic beats in an effort to refocus coverage of minorities. San Jose created a team to explore the cultural changes of the high tech revolution.

### Portland I: Try a Little zeitgeist

Jeannine Guttman looked at her local pages and made a judgment many editors make. *The Portland Press Herald* reflected the community's institutions, not the community, and she knew that "Our readers want to see their communities and their values and selves better reflected."

The result: a new beat focusing on people and places. It's nicknamed Portland Zeitgeist.

"I wanted us to write more about how people are living their lives, about the human condition," Guttman said. "Somehow we'd lost our frame of reference. We should be telling stories about people who live here and are raising kids."

The new beat "allows us to do a different kind of reporting." Early efforts included a series on how immigrants live their lives, the revival of some neighborhoods, a story on going to church.

The paper also added a photo portrait called Maine Faces, a photo feature inspired by a history book. Looking at the old photos, Guttman was struck by how fascinated she was looking at ordinary people doing ordinary things in everyday settings. "We needed to capture that same sense of place in our local pages." So the new feature offers readers tomorrow's history photos today.

The paper has also looked for ways to get voices from the community in the paper directly, unfiltered by the reporter or editor:

- Op ed columnists who are involved people from the community.
- In Sports, an Ask the Coach feature and local athletes writing about their sports.
- Teens writing CD reviews.

"Some days, we do a very good job of reflecting our community, some days just average," said Guttman. "We're in transition."



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### Portland II: The Forum as an Art Form

When reporters and editors at the *Press Herald* start brainstorming a new project, the conversation quickly turns to the community and what citizens need and want to know. That's part of the culture.

And quite often over the past decade, that line of inquiry has led to a public forum designed to focus expert discussion on the topic and then get public feedback. The discussions are both reported as news events and used to inform further reporting.

The use of forums to facilitate reporting began in the early '90s with a series of civic journalism projects built around political campaigns. Since then, the paper has expanded the topics to include public education, what it means to be an American, alcohol abuse, sex education in the schools and the state's fishing crisis.

On the latter, "We brought together all the stakeholders, from fishermen — and their wives — to federal regulators, from processors to sociologists, and had a roundtable discussion that went on for several hours," said editor Guttman.

One of the paper's editors moderated and opened the discussion, but then the panel took over. The forum was open to citizens, who joined in the discussion later. "We were able to really nail down the issues," Guttman said.

For some of the topics, the paper has used a study-circle format, publishing weekly background stories that become "white papers" for the subsequent citizen discussions.

That's the way they handled a series on public education, writing four broad issues stories for consecutive Sundays. These each explained an issue and offered alternative solutions that were being proposed. The background reports became working documents for the weekly forums, which drew about 175 people each. The paper reported on the discussions.

When the *Press Herald* decided to do a series on teenagers and teen problems, it began with forums in the form of pizza parties of about 150 teenagers, who were then asked to talk about issues that mattered to them. The paper also set up a website and used it to facilitate chatroom conversations, although the paper followed a rule of not using any online quotes, always calling the teenager and re-interviewing before quoting someone.

One highlight that drew teens to the site: The paper gave teenagers disposable cameras and asked them to chronicle their lives with pictures, write outlines and post them at the site.

"It was all a matter of helping us understand their lives and explain what was important to them," Guttman said. One of the topics initiated by the kids was the impact of divorce on the children. "The kids wanted to talk about the hurt,

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the damage. Not the parents; they called and complained."

The pizza-party forums and chatroom conversations were just starting points. The reporter went into the classrooms and to the malls and dances and pep rallies and anywhere else the kids gathered.

"You have to go deep into that community before you can write about it," said Guttman.

## TEMPTED and TORMENTED



Poland High School student Dave Collin, who plays in a Christian rock band called Barium, listens to his girlfriend, Stephanie Brown, during a break in rehearsal. The pressures of sex and dating are confronting teenagers earlier than ever, often causing a clash of values and temptations.

Teens struggle with growing pressure to have sex sooner

By BARBARA WALSH  
Staff Writer

They're 16, virginal and tormented. Sean Martin, Nick Noble and Dave Collin are the first three...



ON THE VERGE  
"On the Verge" is an occasional series about the confusing and tumultuous lives of teenagers — kids on the verge of adulthood and big decisions. Our first story was about the pressure to fit in. For our second report, we've...

The Portland project reflected the lives of teens on print and on the Internet. The paper gave teenagers disposable cameras and asked them to chronicle their lives with pictures, write outlines and post them on the Web.



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### Targeted Sections

New suburban sections to enable coverage to keep up with growth are common now, but the *Rochester (N.Y.) Democrat and Chronicle* has had success looking inward with a city life page. And sections aimed at new minorities who are more comfortable reading in another language are common. The granddaddy — *El Nuevo Herald* in Miami — is now 25 years old and a successful stand-alone newspaper. San Jose's newer once-a week supplement in Vietnamese runs 150 tabloid pages.

### Teaching the Vision

Editors at *The Orange County Register*, working with the Harwood Group, developed a 16-week training course for the newsroom to engage staff in thinking about the paper's goals and to "take a look at how we do our jobs — how deeply and fully we understand the communities we cover; how we plan, report, frame and package our coverage; what reflexes and practices we used daily," Executive Editor Ken Brusie said.

More directly, he added, "We want to make sure we're asking the right questions."

The eight sessions include exploring and understanding the community, reporting and writing techniques, interviewing and photographing newsmakers, bias, beat reporting and storytelling.

Both early and late in the training, the participants are sent in teams into the community. In one such exercise, each team is asked to talk with people at different levels of community life (officials, civic leaders, connectors, catalysts — see page 47) about growth, then return to the paper to discuss what they learned and how it might be different from what you learn when you are going out on a specific story. They're challenged to think about how using this more open-ended interviewing might lead to different stories or different ways of telling a story, how it might help explore a beat, and how it might influence coverage changes.

In another exercise, beat reporters were asked to discuss the "civic profile" of their coverage area: Who is part of the community? How do things work? And to then write a story on a recent issue showing how it engaged different layers within that community.

The work with Harwood also resulted in an expanded set of reporting and writing concepts and new terminology.

What some call focus or theme or the angle, the Register now refers to as the "essence," defined as the heart and soul of the story or the news package.

And reporters and editors are urged to ask themselves four questions to keep the story on track:

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- What is this story really about?
- What is the main thing that drives this story and how did it come about?
- What makes the story important, interesting or challenging to the community?
- What do we want readers to take away from this story?

Reporters are reminded that stories need a frame, a context for telling the story. They are told, as well, that every story has parameters — a "fence" — to indicate what information should be kept in a story and what should be kept out.

"Because it is impossible to know and/or include everything ... we must build a fence tightly around what we're including and what we're saving for future coverage," says the training manual for the course. "Readers are not looking for quantity, but for clarity, something that gives them meaning and coherence. Too much information, even if it is interesting, can make a story muddled or inaccessible or both."

Harwood's studies have shown that people routinely make connections among issues even while journalists are separating and dissecting. So editors and reporters at the Register are urged to think about and use "navigation tools" that link individual stories or packages to other information the reader might seek:

- **Connective tissue** shows the story in relation to other issues or earlier or subsequent stories in a series. That might be an "about the series" box that explains the objective and lists past and future stories.
- **User guides** for large packages that explain what readers will find in each piece and the connections between pieces. They explain the essence of stories rather than simply give headlines and page numbers.
- **Judgment tools** that enable people to sort through the issue. Example: questions parents can think about on education issues.
- **Links that connect people** to ideas, other people, organizations and sources beyond the paper. Example: Education stories might link to tutors and books on child development.



## THE LAST-MINUTE CHECKLIST

Here's a check list used by *Orange County Register* editors and reporters. It was developed in conjunction with The Harwood Group.

### The Last-Minute Checklist

1. What's this story really about?
2. What makes it important?
3. Important to whom?
4. What's the best way to tell it?
5. Is there a better way to tell it? Graphics? Photos? Text? New Media?
6. Since we don't know everything, where do we draw the line?
7. Whom do we talk to?
8. Where do we talk to them?
9. Whom are we missing?
10. What's my baggage here?
11. Connective tissue?
12. Where can someone go to act?

### TECHNOLOGY, PLUS

Even though one of his predecessors knocked down the traditional departmental walls and reorganized the newsroom a decade ago, Executive Editor Brusie still thought *The Register* was operating much as newsrooms had a century and a half ago. "We were organized around a 150-year-old production technology," he said.

Brusie's thinking was prompted by the newsroom's need to replace its editing system: "We had spent a lot of time defining our goals for coverage. Chris Anderson had dropped the newsroom walls. We worked with Rich Harwood to learn to ask the right questions. Now we had the opportunity to ask ourselves, How can we use technology to support those goals?"

And so the specifications that went to vendors called for equipment and software that would provide an integrated suite of *Register* newsroom systems similar to the way Microsoft Office comprises a series of office functions. The suite applications will be available on all terminals.

It means that reporters, graphic artists, photo editors and designers will all have the same equipment and the same software capabilities. And everyone will be encouraged to think about the ultimate presentation to the reader. "We

won't dump on the presentation person at the end."

"Anyone can see what an article may look like, see the whole page. Even try a little layout. It should help everyone to think visually," Brusie said. "We have the idea that, in the future, the news budgets will have a sketch of what the story should look like in the paper."

The "newsroom suite" technology approach fits with the newsroom's team structure — called "neighborhoods" to reinforce the paper's emphasis on strong community-based coverage. The assigning editor, reporters, photographers and designers are grouped by topic and encouraged to think about the reader first. "It allows people to think in a compartmentalized way about the whole," said Brusie.

Like other newsrooms that have reorganized around content reporting teams, *The Register* has retained the traditional section organization. But that too may change.

"We thinking about organizing by topic rather than geography, that is all medical news together no matter where it originates, and so on," Brusie said. "And we are talking about dynamic dummieing, where the newsroom sits down with advertising layout and you work through newspaper and move things around so they make sense to the readers."

Perhaps the most important element of the new technology is its flexibility. Coverage, said Brusie, "is not something you fix and you're done. You've got to keep listening to the community, learning and implementing. It's an ongoing process."

"Think about how the community has changed over the last five years. The newsroom needs to evolve too."

### AND MORE MODERN TOOLS OF THE TRADE

Want to get your reporting staff out of the office, using some shoe leather, talking to sources, working their beats and listening to what people are concerned about?

Take away their excuses.

"The smartest thing you can do is to get your staff out on the street," said Rick Thames, editor of *The Wichita Eagle*. "It's all about one-on-one contacts. We tell folks to spend as much time as possible outside."

And so when many reporters explained their continuing presence in the newsroom as "waiting for a source to call back," Thames provided a solution — pagers.

Brusie, of *The Register*, set a similar goal of getting reporters to spend more time in the community — and found an important ally in the newspaper's chief financial officer, who wanted advertising sales people to spend more time with



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clients.

Together, they convinced the publisher that the way to make it happen was to invest in laptops for reporters and ad sellers.

"It's a tool, just like a pad of paper," said Brusic.

### TOUCHSTONES FOR THE COMMUNITY

When Jan Leach became editor of the *Akron Beacon Journal* two years ago and began talking with readers, she heard two familiar refrains: "People weren't seeing things they really liked about Akron in the paper. And about the time we got bored and stopped writing about something, readers started to get interested."

The result: A reporter pulled from the paper's editorial board and assigned to focus on Akron "touchstones" — things unique to the city — and a mandate to tell stories whenever possible in a way that recognizes local character and traditions.

Akron is a city with a rich tradition, including reinventing itself from the rubber capital to a high-tech center and the revitalization of its downtown. It doesn't want to be Cleveland or anywhere else, says Leach.

People are proud of their city and have a strong sense of place, and she wanted the paper to better reflect things Akron. They are the touchstones — "those things that are completely unique to their market," Leach said, "things that are truly special and meaningful to people."

But many such things had become so traditional, so commonplace that the newsroom all but ignored them. One was the Soapbox Derby, the town's celebration of kids and cars and Americana. "It's something that Akron is all about," Leach said. "It's a wonderful family event, but we had gotten so bored with it that we were assigning interns to cover it." No longer.

The Goodyear Blimp is an Akron touchstone. "When the blimp is out, everyone looks up and waves," said Leach. So the *Beacon Journal* found a new way to write about it.

The Kent State tragedy is another touchstone, and on the May 4 30th anniversary, the paper found a more reflective way to remember it in a special section that included essays by Akron people both directly and indirectly involved.

Has the new beat resonated with readers? The reporter, in a parting editorial-page column, mentioned her new assignment, and she is still working through story suggestions from readers who loved the idea. One, for example, told her of a woman, 92, who as a child lived over a general store along the city's canal corridor, now the focus of redevelopment. It turned into a good story on history and change.

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### TEXTURE AND FABRIC

In San Jose, Calif., a few years back, then Executive Editor Jerry Ceppos came to the conclusion that his *Mercury News* was telling, and telling well, the overarching story of high technology and unprecedented growth in Silicon Valley, but it was too often missing stories of the impact on the daily lives of people.

The result: a new reporting unit assigned to cultural and social change, dubbed the "texture and fabric" team.

Ceppos' memo to staff on "texture and fabric" reporting said, in part: "Technology is the central fact running through life here and the central force transforming everyday life in America and the world. By often missing the texture of life in this very unusual place, we are minimizing the story, making it a business story or a telecommunications story, not the story of our neighbors. ... I don't think we've captured the trickle down effect of the biggest industrial and economic boom in the country today."

And he added a historical note that challenged conventional local news wisdom: "Remember the most important part of the Renaissance was the new importance of arts and literature."

So directed and energized, the new team set off to capture everyday life in the valley. The texture was titillating, the fabric fascinating. For example, early on, a story on the "nerd birds," those pre-dawn flights to high tech centers around America, began with this:

Howard J. Kendall got lucky at 30,000 feet. It was somewhere over Missouri, about halfway through American Airlines Flight 128 from San Jose to Boston, which the vice president of Eastern sales for Seagate Technology flies every month. He reached down to pick up his briefcase, and there it was: a rival company's business plan.

Kendall studied every word before pushing it back under the seat in front of him.

Said one reporter assigned to the new team: "This valley is so chocked with characters, colorful figures and amazing technologies that it is pure fun to report on its sociology."



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How can we better connect with our community?

That question was the driving force behind a dramatic change in our coverage of election issues at *The Charlotte Observer* nearly a decade ago, shifting the focus from partisan politics to the reader's perspective, seeking to learn more about their interests and information needs as a guide to coverage planning and story telling.

It was the start of deep cultural change in the Observer newsroom, first in campaign coverage, then more broadly.

Where once we talked with "official" sources about candidates and community issues, we now routinely talk with readers. Where we once allowed the candidates to define the issues, we now use extensive polling to find out what are the issues voters want candidates to talk about. Few stories rely solely on "official" sources, and many stories also feature a "solutions" component because readers told us over and over that they want the newspaper to guide them in ways big and small — they don't want to hear about problems without solutions.

Some examples:

**Question:** Mass transit and traffic are two big Charlotte-area issues. How do we tap into commuters' heads?

**What we did:** We created a mass transit/commuter reporting slot. Reporter Diane Whitacre has based her beat on readers' comments and questions. She solicits questions from readers, then she takes those questions to appropriate transit officials for answers. Her Sunday column, "Dr. Traffic," is one of our most popular reader services. In addition, Diane's stories on traffic and transit

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are a regular 1A presence. We also run maps showing where road construction is planned, and alternative routes.

**Question:** When it was announced that the Pulitzer Prize-winning play "Angels in America" would appear in Charlotte, a small but vocal group of ministers derided it for its strong homosexual theme. They effectively played their case for the media and insisted they carried the mandate of the people in requesting the City Council to forbid its presentation at the city-owned auditorium. Did the ministers indeed have the majority of community support?

**What we did:** We conducted a one-day poll and found out most of those surveyed wanted the play to appear in Charlotte. The play ran as scheduled. With this package, we ran a box — by then a routine feature of issues stories — on "How to Contact" your city council member. We included phone numbers, e-mail addresses and districts. The council voted not to intervene.

**Question:** Should Charlotte-Mecklenburg taxpayers finance a new arena for the Charlotte Hornets? City officials and team owners were reticent at best, and residents wanted more stories and more answers.

**What we did:** As one element of our reporting, we solicited questions for readers, then put those questions to the appropriate officials — the mayor, the team owners, city administrators. It's a very effective way of getting answers to tough questions. While officials may blow off a reporter with a "no comment," it's more difficult to refuse to answer a citizen's question. That's a lesson we learned in our election coverage.

We also used this technique to draw out answers from Charlotte-Mecklenburg School Superintendent Eric Smith during a huge school-desegregation suit. Unflattering anecdotes came out in court about how system officials allowed inequities in the schools to continue. Parents were confused about where their children would be going to school and even the condition of the school.

Parents sent in questions our reporters presented to Smith. The Q & A became a regular, well-read feature during the height of the long desegregation case.

While the desegregation controversy was going on, we held regular meetings with readers, coffees where randomly picked readers would come in to discuss the desegregation case and the media coverage.

**Question:** How can we better use the Internet to connect with readers?

**What we did:** On the last day of a three-day series on how to keep your home safe from burglars, we invited two burglary investigators from the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police Department to "chat" with readers. We ran notices telling readers that the investigators would be available for "real time" chat with readers who submitted questions. Everyone who logged on to a special

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message board was able to see answers. It was a hit with readers and we've held some similar chats on other subjects since.

The story package in the paper was heavy on solutions. We ran a large graphic of a "bad" house — one that's easy prey for burglars. It featured overgrown bushes, an open garage, etc. Next to it, we ran a graphic of a "good" house, the same house with simple security measures in place. A surprising number of readers called to thank us for running such a simple, but informative graphic.

The package also included a Q&A with a burglar who talked about how he selected houses to burglarize, another with a homeowner who had been burglarized, and third with a homeowner who is extra cautious.



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## MAKING YOUR EDITORIAL PAGE A "THIRD PLACE"

By Thomas W. Still  
*Wisconsin State Journal*

A few years back, researcher Richard Harwood described the layers of civic life that exist in every American community. The most visible layers are routinely covered by journalists: the "official" layer of elected and appointed public officials, the "quasi-official" layer of business and civic leaders who keep themselves and their institutions in the public eye, and a "private" level of citizens who more or less navigate life on their own, sometimes engaging the official and quasi-official layers, but mostly not.

Another layer is less apparent to many journalists, but it may be the most important when it comes to truly understanding what makes a community tick. It's called "third places."

Most of journalism, including the opinion realm, operates within the official, quasi-official and private layers of civic life. We don't often do a good job of tapping into Harwood's "third places," which is the layer of civic conversations and spaces where ordinary people gather to talk, swap opinions and accomplish things together. These are places that can range from churches and synagogues to barber shops and bowling alleys, from community socials and child care centers to, increasingly, Internet chat rooms and social clubs or associations.

By failing to tap into the conversations that take place in "third places," journalists can miss important stories that are taking place in their communities. At a minimum, they can miss a chance to enrich those stories that may begin in the official or quasi-official layers before disappearing into the seemingly trackless swamp of public opinion.

Newspaper editorial pages can, and should, become "third places" for civic life. The most effective editorial pages are those that offer readers a place to connect with their communities. The editorial page of the 21st century must

Thomas W. Still, associate editor of the *Wisconsin State Journal*, has been its editorial page editor since 1985.



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be more than a soapbox, where competing voices shout out the gripe of the day. They must be places where readers can expect to find perspective, analysis and the ingredients for solving civic problems. Editorial pages should be pathways through the civic swamp, allowing those who travel it to see that their community is not an incomprehensible and dangerous wilderness, but a diverse and stimulating place that is teeming with life.

How can newspaper editorial pages become effective "third places?" Here are some ideas:

**1. Embrace your role as community convener.** There are few institutions in modern life that have both the ability and the responsibility to reach citizens from all walks of life. Newspapers are one such institution, thanks to their mass circulation, credibility and historical focus on public life. Newspaper editorial pages have a particular duty to help readers and citizens sort through the "info-clutter" of modern life. It is on the editorial page where readers and citizens may gain insight into the thinking of the newspaper's editorial board, which typically is made up of some of the paper's senior policy leaders. It is on the editorial page where readers and citizens may catch a glimpse of what other readers are thinking about the issues of the day. Finally, it is on the editorial page where all layers of civic life — from official to private — are most likely to intersect. An editorial by the newspaper's editorial board reacting to a proposal by the mayor is likely to touch off a debate on all sides of the issue, even prompting a solution that may have been different from what had been proposed by the mayor or envisioned by the editorial board.

**2. Convene people in fact as well as in print.** At the *Wisconsin State Journal*, our nine-year-old "We the People/Wisconsin" project began on the editorial page as a strategy to engage citizens directly. Techniques have evolved over the years, and "We the People" is now just as much a project of our newsroom as the editorial page, but the core mission has not changed. That is to reconnect citizens with public life by opening up the doors to their own government and community. We do that quite literally. Citizens in our multimedia projects can take over a legislative hearing room, the state Senate or the state Supreme Court chamber — a process of "trading places" that empowers people to ask sharp questions and get specific answers. In response to a citizen question in 1994, both candidates for governor at a "We the People" forum promised a written plan for property tax relief two weeks in advance of an election. Those candidates dared not fail to deliver. Over time, there have been many similar examples of people in the "official" and "quasi-official" layers of civic life responding to citizen concerns because our project created a "third place" for the conversation.

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**3. Treat reader and citizen opinion with respect.** Readers are quick to recognize if their opinions are newsprint filler to be wrapped around a cartoon or syndicated column and published as an obligation or, worse yet, a marketing ploy. They are also quick to notice if a newspaper editorial page makes the readers' voice a top priority. Make sure there is ample space every day for letters to the editor and guest columns. Give readers options for how to communicate with you — including "call-in" lines that can serve as early warning systems on big stories and major issues. Tell people everyday how they can contact you by mail, by e-mail and by telephone. Consider turning over your editorial page once a week (a Saturday or Monday, perhaps) to reader opinion. In newspapers where that is the practice, editors rarely complain they're not hearing from readers. In fact, the problem is quite often the opposite; they are receiving so much mail from readers that they run the risk of disappointing those whose letters aren't printed. At some papers, the solution to that problem is to run unpublished letters on the newspaper's web site and call attention to that site in print.

**4. Don't be afraid to demonstrate leadership.** Newspaper editorial pages must dare to be bold without being a community scold. They must stand up for the newspaper editorial board's core principles but not be so predictable that they aren't read. They must be as timely as the news pages, when possible, but not afraid to refrain from commenting until facts and events sort themselves out. On the editorial page, it's always better to be right than first. Consistent leadership on the editorial page will help keep the newspaper informed of news before it's made — and put the newspaper in the position of being a "third place" for further discussions.

**5. Write less about the Middle East and more about Main Street.** Newspaper editorial writers tend to be an educated, worldly lot who enjoy commenting on the trials and tribulations of the world. However, they are better prepared and uniquely situated to help solve problems closer to home. Readers have multiple sources of information about news in the Middle East, for example, but they've often got only one credible source of news and information close to home — and that's their local newspaper. Admittedly, writing an editorial about a local zoning controversy can be more difficult (and less fun) than banging out an off-the-cuff review of the latest Israeli election. Also, you're much less likely to get angry phone calls from offended Israelis than you are from miffed local planners. But the role of a community newspaper — even if that community is defined as broadly as an entire state or region — is to cover that community. The editorial page is no exception.

A good editorial page is one that readers and citizens view as a lively, fair forum for discussion of problems that matter to them. It is a place to sort



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through conflicting news and opinions. And it is a place where journalists can live up to the responsibility of the First Amendment, as well as the right, by replenishing civic life. Journalists must do more than harvest facts and quotes from their communities — they must plant the seeds of civic engagement. The editorial page is as old as the American newspaper itself, but it is only now realizing its full potential as a “third place” for our society.

## CHAPTER 9

# HOW TO CUT THROUGH THE LAYERS OF LOCALNESS

*By Frank Denton  
Wisconsin State Journal*

**W**e tend to talk about “community” as if it were a finite grouping, like an athletic team, with specific members of a certain kind and number with clear roles, a common goal and strong similarity to other teams.

Community, in fact, is a much more complex and varied phenomenon, and a person is likely to be a member of many communities, some long-distance, some virtual, but most geographic and social — and in need of journalism.

*The Local News Handbook* points out that, even in the big city, people naturally form communities on a smaller, human scale. And of course, such common terms as “neighborhood,” “metro” and “the larger community” suggest communities of diverse size, complexity and relationship to the individual. Sociologists have identified various levels of community organization.

This concept of neighborhood-within-a-community-within-a-city has resulted in Americans’ seeing themselves as holding sort of dual, or really multiple, residencies, I wrote in that chapter. Most people think of themselves as members of a neighborhood as well as of a bigger community or city. Some are more interested in the former, some in the latter; one study discussed in *The Handbook* found that 13 percent of people identified primarily with the metro area, 21 percent primarily with their immediate community — but 48 percent with both, presumably according to how each affected them.

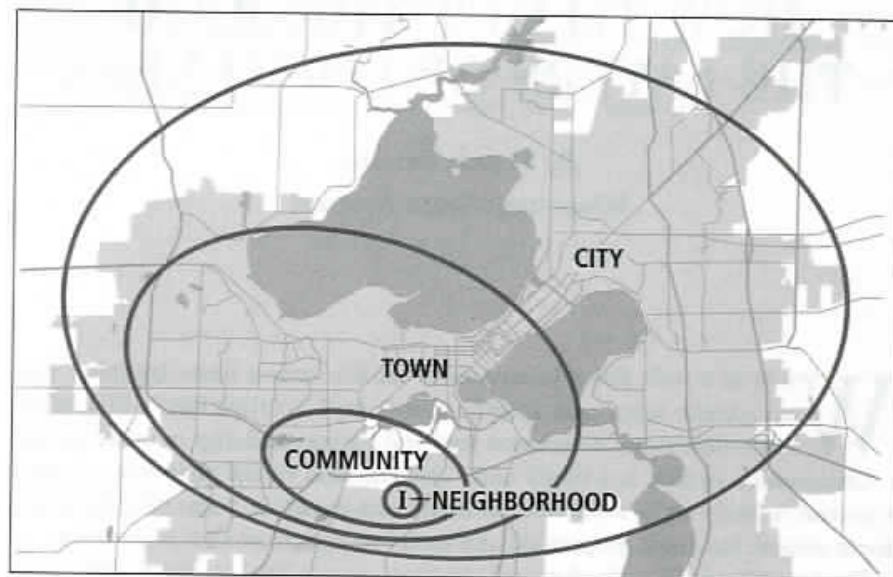
For the purposes of local journalism, this suggests the notion of “layers of localness,” that is, the idea that the community/journalism relationship functions in ever-widening circles of interest and intensity centered on the individual and his or her needs and interests. In presenting this concept to reporters and editors as part of the local-news framework, I have referred to this system as concentric “circles of caring.”

In fact, they are not perfect circles, of course, but they are concentric, figuratively if not geometrically — and the center is the individual whom we are



## HOW TO CUT THROUGH THE LAYERS OF LOCALNESS

asking to use our journalism because we can facilitate and enrich her or his relationship with many of the surrounding communities.



The typical American lives in a neighborhood within a community within a city.

### A SIMPLIFIED ILLUSTRATION

I live in the neighborhood of Arbor Hills, which is part of the south side of Madison, Wisconsin. That "I" within the smallest figure on the map above is me, the most important person in my close relationship with my community and the journalism I need. (From a personal perspective, of course, "I" am immediately surrounded by my family and close friends, but that is not very relevant in this context of my need for local journalism.)

The smallest figure, labeled **Neighborhood**, is Arbor Hills, a family-oriented middle- to upper-middle-income neighborhood of 1,800 people, 357 acres, 319 single-family homes and 32 duplexes. Those of us who live in Arbor Hills care — deeply — about the public schools our kids attend, the nearby stores on which we rely, our park, our streets and neighborhood friendliness, peace and safety. We are not a remarkably cohesive neighborhood, until one of the above is threatened. When the feds tried to put a halfway house for felons in Arbor Hills, the neighbors quickly organized and sent it packing. They had less success, but no less effort, with a nearby video store featuring X-rated wares. Many of us volunteered labor so the city could devote more money to new equipment for our park. The current controversy is over two new stop signs

## HOW TO CUT THROUGH THE LAYERS OF LOCALNESS

which, depending on which side you're on: (a) slow down traffic, increase safety and discourage outside commuters on our main thoroughfare or (b) clog traffic flow and violate the city policy against using stop signs to slow traffic. It is a very hot topic, but because it doesn't affect people in the other 76 defined neighborhoods of Madison, it is unworthy of coverage in the *Wisconsin State Journal*, by our traditional standards, unless someone gets violent, sues the city or does something else aberrant. I would buy and read any journalism about Arbor Hills, because it is where I live, but I have to rely on the occasional neighborhood newsletter and word-of-mouth.

The area labeled **Community** on the map encompasses my Neighborhood but also other parts of the south and near-west sides of Madison, generally surrounding the University of Wisconsin Arboretum. Within that area, I work, shop, exercise, play golf, volunteer in my kid's school and socialize. It is the geography in which I spend the great majority of my time, including sleeping and working. It isn't as important to me as Arbor Hills, but almost: I know many people in the Community, and if something good or bad happens there — worsening traffic, a new store, major construction, a new principal in the middle school, some tragedy — it affects me, my family and my quality of life. Because the Community includes thousands of people, the Arboretum, some major businesses and a piece of our major expressway, it appears often in the *State Journal*.

Madison's unique geography is defined largely by our lakes, and the two biggest ones essentially divide the city into east and west sides, functionally separated by the difficulty of transportation between them, requiring either a stop-and-go trek through the isthmus or a circuitous route around a lake. So I am of geographic necessity a west-sider, and for purposes here, I will refer to that as my **Town**, defined as an area larger than a village or neighborhood but smaller than a city. This Town (including downtown Madison and the University of Wisconsin) is my broader community comprising most of my friends and acquaintances, major shopping, entertainment and recreation. News of this area is a major part of the *State Journal* and important to me personally — overall less important than news of my Community, but considerably more important than news from the east side or beyond.

The next larger area is the **City** of Madison and, roughly, the Madison Metropolitan School District. This is too big an area to be a true community in the social sense of the word, and news of the City, which probably dominates the *State Journal's* local report, interests me primarily because of city or metro-area services, taxes, policies and politics — the stuff we know how to cover and cover well. But, referring back to my Neighborhood, a new stop sign on the east side of the City interests neither the *State Journal* nor me a bit. It may



## HOW TO CUT THROUGH THE LAYERS OF LOCALNESS

as well be in Tuscaloosa.

While this analysis is specific to me, obviously the same thing could be done for any reader. A Neighborhood in Manhattan might consist of an apartment building or floor of a building, while in Montana it might cover hundreds of square miles. And the number of layers of localness varies, perhaps between two and six.

The figures continue, ever larger, of course: **Metropolis** (which interests me because so many issues are metro-wide), **County** (governance, especially taxes and services) and — venturing now beyond the realm of local news — **State** (governance, especially taxes and services), **Region** (like most states, Wisconsin shares issues with its immediate neighbors), **Nation** and **World** (and beyond, if you want to be galactic or spiritual).

### THE PARADOX OF LOCAL JOURNALISM

But you see the pattern here, as well as the problem. As the definition of community expands, its news value to the newspaper increases — but my interest as a reader diffuses. The larger and more populous the community, the more cost-justified the journalism, but the less personal impact on the individual reader.

It is the paradox of local news.

### SOME POSSIBLE STRATEGIES

The common solution to this problem is zoning, that is, covering the larger communities for general interest, but then segmenting some part of the paper for specific smaller areas, with each area getting only its news. Zoning has a chapter in *The Local News Handbook*, with results of a national survey of editors and publishers. It includes a discussion of “what sociologists might suggest about zoning,” that zones might be designed around “natural areas,” not circulation routes, zip codes or advertisers, and that the ideal zone might be designed for a community of fewer than 8,000 people.

A problem with zoning is that it does not recognize the complexity of community. Many people have substantial interest in more than one Neighborhood or Community. They may have moved from one to another in the same metro area, but retain some interest in the old neighborhood. They may have relatives or close friends in nearby communities and want to keep up with those areas. Commuters might like to know the news from the area where they work, as well as the areas through which they travel to work. To many people, being part of the whole community means having a feel for the parts.

A second solution to the paradox of local news has been suggested by USA

## HOW TO CUT THROUGH THE LAYERS OF LOCALNESS

Today and pioneered by the *Kalamazoo* (Mich.) *Gazette*. That is the idea of widespread and specific, if very shallow, coverage. It is the local version of *USA Today's* Across the USA page on which there is news in brief from every state. In a readership R&D project, the *Gazette* took that to the local level and committed in October 1999 to having at least a bit of news every day from every one of the 37 communities in its circulation area. Its Local Roundup page, which has appeared every day since, includes the kind of news briefs that traditional reporters and editors disparage but that readers love to root through, in search of news nuggets from communities they care about.

“It provides a structure we can rely on to have constant contact with these communities,” said Rebecca Pierce, editor of the *Gazette*. “It’s not arbitrary; it’s every day, dictated by geography, and we have to be in contact with people every day.”

“It’s a go-to page for a lot of people who live outside the core city, particularly when you realize that people don’t stay in one place anymore. So you don’t feed them with news from just one place. If they don’t live there, they may have family there or children there or friends there. When you zone, people get mad because they know you had a story in the east zone and they didn’t get it and they want to know what happened in the east. The Local

AS KALAMAZOO GAZETTE, TUESDAY, DECEMBER 14, 2000

Gazette

# LOCAL ROUNDUP

News from Allegan, Barry, Cass, Calhoun, Kalamazoo, St. Joseph and Van Buren counties

**Allegan**  
• The Allegan County Board of Commissioners has given its OK to giving Robert A. Champion, an assistant prosecuting attorney, starting today his pay will be \$6,000 a year. Champion will replace Mike Bush, who was recently started to leave court judge.

**Bangor**  
• The Bangor Friends of the Library raised \$200 at its annual fall book sale and recently had their first art exhibit, a wonderful display by Bangor High School art teacher Jacqueline Sawyer.

**Battle Creek**  
• Auditions for “Sho-Du” will be held at 8 p.m. Jan. 12 and 14 at The Church at Bridge Hills, 1200 S. Durand off the Highway 22 exit. 100 Players, who will produce the play, would like junior and senior high school student auditions to have a song prepared a couple, sheet music or an accompaniment track. A community meeting also will be required. Production dates are March 22, 24, and 25. If more information, call Mark Krenn at 634-9741.

**Bloomington/Grand Junction**  
• The Bloomington Township Board of Trustees has contracted with local resident Gary Thompson

questions such as school construction because of weather and the trash men for the week. The hotline is updated regularly and gives editors a mass of choices, including information on all the schools and the libraries for Employment program.

**Constantine**  
• The Constantine Village Council voted last week to authorize construction proceedings for an outdoor structure at 400 Cass St. after officials and the owner had failed to make any progress on the vacant structure even after receiving a 60-day extension.

**Decatur**  
• Decatur Police Chief Terry Layman says he is pleased with the response of the public in keeping their vehicles off roads that need to be plowed. Protesters, however, are walking in the roadway and causing safety hazards. Layman says village sidewalks are regularly cleared of snow and asked protesters to use sidewalks when available.

**Hartford**  
has been made available to the church for purchase. Future missionary issues hinge on the property expansion out of the present facility. The church is developing a four-year ministry and building plan called the Jakes project.

**Oshtemo/Alamo**  
• Allegan County’s new plan book has sold 1,200 copies since it came out last June. “Clearer in our history here we sold 1,000 plan books in a year,” Larry Johnson, director of the Allegan County Michigan State University Extension, told the county commission during his annual report. The county had produced the book, which has a compact disk version, to the county’s Geographical Information Service Department. The GIS is a new unit, part of the Extension, made \$1,000 to add more to this edition. The group also will get 12 percent of sales, with the rest going to the county in per capita years, when it had the book printed and sold, it raised about \$4,000 a year.

**Parchment**  
• Kalamazoo County Recycling #42 provides curbside pickup of bulky items Jan. 9 and 11. See

The Kalamazoo Gazette gets news from every one of its 37 communities every day.



## HOW TO CUT THROUGH THE LAYERS OF LOCALNESS

Roundup is helping readership in the region, the outlying communities, though some people who live in the city say 'give me more news about Kalamazoo.' But this is the fairest way to provide news for all, on a daily basis."

But there has been another, and pleasantly surprising, benefit from the Local Roundup. Sometimes, the reporters or stringers who make the calls to the 37 communities uncover a tip that becomes more important news than a brief. One, about the closing of a VFW hall in a little town, turned into a trend story about VFW closings due to the dwindling numbers of World War II veterans who were not being replaced by veterans from later eras. That story emerged because the *Gazette* digs out news from every one of its 37 towns every day. And there always is some.

"It was hard to start up, get into a system, but now it is in place and there is staff-wide ownership," Pierce said. "It is a huge burden, to do this every day, but it's definitely worth it."

### REACHING THROUGH THE CIRCLES OF CARING

All journalism, done well, is local.

That means that the walls between the layers of localness are not impenetrable but can be traversed by focused and purposeful reporting, writing and editing. Stories can be made more and more local.

Consider again the circles of caring. A goal for effective local journalism is finding ways to collapse or cross the circles, so that stories are not seen merely as "state" or "county" or "west-side" stories or stories so narrow that too few would care.

How can we develop each story so that it reaches as deeply as possible into the core of the circle, as close as possible to the "I"?

Consider this hypothetical but very typical story: Congress passes an education bill, and the AP or Washington bureau story mentions that it includes federal aid to the states, with the general goals of lowering class size and improving academic achievement, particularly among low-income children. Because "localizing wire stories" is standard practice in our newsrooms, we try to find out how much money will come to our state and for what purpose. Usually, that's where the story ends, and the money and purpose disappear into our vast education systems.

A better approach would be to assume that Congress had done something important, that this bill, program and money are significant enough that they have a chance to affect education where it happens, in your neighborhood classroom. So an effective story would take it directly to the state level and find how the bill relates to state priorities and how it will be integrated into state programs and funding structures. But states don't deliver primary and

## HOW TO CUT THROUGH THE LAYERS OF LOCALNESS

secondary education either, so how can the journalism pull this story through the state layer and to the action level, the local school district? Bureaucrats exist for reasons, though, and they include obfuscating the processes so that there cannot be clear accountability for outcomes lost or overhead spent along the way. But reporters accustomed to challenging cops and Congress members should, if motivated, be able to force this story through the state education department and carry it to the community.

Deeper and deeper we dig into the circle of caring, now at the City level, and "I" am starting to pay attention, because this is no longer just a distant federal program among many, but something that might actually mean something to my community. The reporting examines how the program meshes with school-district priorities and programs. So by virtue of the preponderance of low-income students, which local schools will be qualified for money to lower class sizes? The story adds a list of such schools and more questions: Do they have the necessary classroom space and teachers? Are the principals committed? Suddenly, the story leaps across Town and to my child's school, 1.4 miles from my home in Arbor Hills.

Can it go even deeper? Whether the specific reporting is at my kid's school or at others in the City, the reporter can examine why lower class size is expected to improve academic achievement. The answer might be because lower-achieving students and those who are disruptive can get more direct attention in smaller classes. And by the way, this also should help ordinary kids because they will be learning in smaller, more disciplined classes with fewer needy or misbehaving kids occupying the teacher. Quote my kid's teacher, and I am yours.

Now the story has entered my home, and I care deeply. Through smart and stubborn reporting, the journalism has cut through the layers of localness, from Washington to the state Capitol to my local district, my kid's school and, finally, her own education. And at each step, my interest in the story has intensified.

(This hypothetical situation is not to suggest that such a program would have that direct effect, but please note how this approach accepts the challenge of Linda Grist Cunningham in Chapter 8 of *The Local News Handbook*, to dig below school-board politics and rise above cute classroom features and find the real education stories — the classroom teaching.)

This protocol for local journalism can be used in story conferences or idea sessions to take general stories — of all kinds — and make them personal journalism, in as many ways as your imagination allows. The goal, always, should be to see how far you can take the story into the center of the circle. Remember: The more layers you cover, the more "I" care.



## AUDITING CONTENT, MEASURING PROGRESS

By Carolyn G. Kingcade  
*St. Louis Post-Dispatch*

Newsrooms are good at setting goals to do things differently. But measuring progress toward those goals usually is less clearly defined. This is especially true of coverage goals. It's a lot like trying to follow a road map when there are no direction signs on the road: You usually fail to reach your destination.

In 1999, the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* reorganized to a team-based newsroom from a more traditional hierarchical structure. At the heart of the reorganization has been the effort to help our journalists write, report and present stories that are most meaningful to readers.

To that end, we are developing a training program called Reaching the Readers. The program will look at concrete steps we can take to tie our stories more strongly to readers' interests and concerns (see page 155).

In addition, we have standard goals that newsrooms always try to reach: accuracy and fairness, balance and wholeness, diversity and depth. How can we gauge how well we are doing on both sets of goals?

The paper's market-research department will provide useful feedback to the newsroom on how readers react to Reaching the Readers. But I think it's important for reporters, coverage team leaders and section editors to learn how to track their progress on these goals.

For one, it puts the responsibility where it's most effective — with the journalists who actually will do the reporting, writing and editing. Second, it gets everyone more involved in the new effort and helps dissolve the mystique.

Journalists are professional skeptics. It's to their advantage to question everything. While skepticism is great in newsgathering, it can be somewhat painful in a newsroom trying to change. More often than not, frustration fuels

Carolyn G. Kingcade, senior editor for readership at the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, has been a reporter and editor 31 years, the last 22 at the *Post-Dispatch*.



## AUDITING CONTENT, MEASURING PROGRESS

the skepticism about new undertakings. And much of the frustration springs from an unclear sense of progress.

Reaching the Readers will incorporate the methods of social scientist and newsroom trainer Richard Harwood and of Cheskin Research, a California market-research firm specializing in intercultural expertise. Harwood has developed a civic mapping model to help journalists tap different layers of civic life to try to produce better journalism (see page 47). Cheskin Research studies why people read a news story and how it affects them. As newsroom consultants, both speak in a language foreign to the typical frontline journalist. So, one thing's certain: Reporters will go through culture shock, even if only a mild dose.

I believe that content audits — coupled with more deliberate story planning — will help keep us grounded and focused on the goal of providing more meaningful stories to our readers.

Reporters and editors will document what they are doing so that they don't have to rely on memory to assess their progress. At the Post-Dispatch, we have designed an standard audit form to reinforce the goals throughout the reporting and writing process for the reporter and line editor.

The audit, to be completed by either the coverage team leader or senior editor, will measure success. Just as important, the audit should help to assess whether the goals are realistic.

The key to newsroom auditing is simplicity. The form and the information sought must be easy to visualize as well as document. Long term, the value to the newsroom in an effort such as Reaching the Readers is the cumulative data from such audits. So, be sure it can be archived and accessed easily. An electronic database probably works best.

On page 153 is a sample of a Reaching the Readers audit form designed for coverage teams. The form is designed to audit one story, to help keep it in focus. But the idea is to keep track of all stories written to a specific objective, so the forms can be used to track patterns over time.

The top section provides basic information about the story: publication date, slug, the section in which it appeared and length. How the story was presented also is useful information. It helps assess whether we planned well in determining the necessary elements to best tell the story. Is the photo appropriate? Did the graphic complement the text or duplicate it?

The most useful data comes from answers to questions about the reporting and writing of the story. The questions are based on the goals of Reaching the Readers: story type, the frame for the story and reader connectors, which are identifying characteristics such as age, race, gender.

The voice and information about the characters help readers think about

## AUDITING CONTENT, MEASURING PROGRESS

### Post-Dispatch Content Audit Form

Page Number:		Section:	
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Publication Day:                      Slug:                      Story Length:  
Coverage Team:

### Presentation

Photo size:		Graphic size:	
Headline size:		Page placement:	

### Reporting and Writing

Story type:		Cheskin type:	
Frame:		Character race:	
Character age:		Character status:	
Role:		Voice:	
Clarity:			

A sample Reaching the Readers audit form.

who's telling the story, which is important in connecting readers to the story. Clarity provides an opportunity to assess whether the point of the story and points in the story come across.

Of course, this form can be adjusted to your needs. You shouldn't struggle to find measurable qualities for every story or endeavor. Sometimes goals are intuitive guideposts, and sometimes they are very specific and measurable



## AUDITING CONTENT, MEASURING PROGRESS

checklists. Consider the following experiences of reporters Barbara Walsh at the *Portland Press Herald* and Richard Weiss at the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*.

When Walsh set out to write "On the Verge," a series about teen life in Maine (see Chapter 7), her editor Jeannine Guttman envisioned having the paper "record an authentic, unvarnished, uncensored and unflinching narrative of the community, one that we had been overlooking for years." She wanted the voices of teenagers to come through in the narratives. She didn't want experts and adults "to redefine and deconstruct what the kids were telling us."

Walsh understood that she had to pull back to the middle. She did not want to write about the extremes: kids who had somehow failed or kids who had excelled. Still, the topic was broad. Walsh said she found some direction in Guttman's advice: "Pretend you're an archaeologist discovering this new type of being."

Walsh also knew she wanted to write with authority. She has been a reporter for 20 years, so her own teen years are not a recent memory. Consequently, she spent months talking to hundreds of teens in their environment. When it came time to write the first segment, Walsh knew which of the interviews best told the story. She didn't need a checklist to know when the narrative was effective.

But some writers, like the *Post-Dispatch's* Weiss, approach a narrative with more specific and measurable goals in mind. Weiss spent a school year in a depressed St. Louis neighborhood, where a developer was determined to turn things around, including the schools. His special report, "A better place to grow up," told the story of the Murphy Park-O'Fallon Place Neighborhood in the city's near north side (see page 157).

Weiss didn't keep a written checklist, but he had several specific goals to keep him on track during the several months of reporting.

He knew that he wanted a diverse cast of characters to tell the story. He also wanted to describe scenes that allowed readers to feel that they were in a Murphy Park classroom or home. He also identified several points of tension that provided the glue to hold the narrative together and gave depth to the characters. He wrote chronological chapters using scenes to advance the points of tension and the characters.

"In a real newsroom, all things won't be in perfect alignment. So you have to make it work. You improvise," Weiss said. "Whether it's a mental checklist or a database, a checklist tells you how far off you are."

## AUDITING CONTENT, MEASURING PROGRESS

### GOALS OF "REACHING THE READER"

"For more than a century, the *Post-Dispatch* has been the primary source for news for St. Louis readers. We've stayed on top by anticipating the needs of our readers and meeting them day after day. At various times, we've stopped, taken stock and changed the way we've written and presented our stories so that it better suits our readership. That's the purpose of our program for staff members, called *Reaching the Readers*. This is a home-grown program designed for our particular needs."

— Richard Weiss, Senior Editor,  
Director of Writing Programs

#### The Goals:

- Learning to write for meaning
- Knowing who's reading our stories
- Understanding how readers benefit from our stories
- Avoiding the victims-villains trap
- Writing with authenticity
- Changing the way we do business



## SETTING GOALS IN CRAFTING A NARRATIVE

*By Richard H. Weiss  
St. Louis Post-Dispatch*

I'd like to say I saw a story right outside our newsroom window, one that had been developing for 20 years. But I didn't. It took an outsider to show me what was going on under our noses, just blocks from the newspaper.

When he did, I knew I had a huge project on my hands — the largest I had ever undertaken. This mere notion that I started out with would eventually involve 25 people at our company in one way or another — from top editors, to photographers, to designers, to the folks in marketing. The writing itself would have to be exquisitely orchestrated because it would roll on for about 350 inches over four days. So as my colleague Carolyn Kingcade notes in the companion piece here, I needed goals, benchmarks, a checklist.

What I could see outside the newsroom window was Murphy Park, a neighborhood that in the 1960s and 1970s was as crime-ridden, decrepit and hopeless as any you might imagine. A couple of public housing projects stood there. One, Pruitt-Igoe, once was a symbol of how the government had failed inner city residents. Pruitt-Igoe had been so poorly managed, had fallen so far into disrepair that the government decided to simply blow it up and start over again. The implosion made the national news. That was the good news. The bad news was that it remains a vacant weed-besotted lot.

But someone did move into the neighborhood to improve the lot of residents there. Actually several people. The main force was a developer, Richard Baron, who once had been a legal-aid attorney helping people in this disadvantaged neighborhood. About 20 years ago, he went into private business as a homebuilder and developer.

Instead of doing business in the suburbs as most homebuilders do, Baron focused on the city. He specialized at going into the most depressed areas where land was cheap and eligible for federal assistance and tax credits. There he built affordable housing. Not just affordable, but very attractive. His devel-

Richard H. Weiss, who has worked at the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* for 25 years, now is senior editor and writing coach.



## AUDITING CONTENT, MEASURING PROGRESS

opments featured spacious townhouses with spiffy kitchens, patios and a nice community swimming pool.

Baron's idea was to make these communities so nice that middle income people would want to live there right alongside with those who were disadvantaged. And so far he has been successful in attracting a nice mix of tenants.

Even so, there were problems. The school that sat in the middle of his Murphy Park complex was one of the worst in the city. Most children who attended the school were reading far below grade level. Baron knew he'd have trouble sustaining his development if he couldn't somehow fix the school. So he went to the St. Louis School Board and said he would raise millions in philanthropic support for the school if they would revamp it from top to bottom. In a matter of a couple of years, the district, with Baron's help, has been able to:

- Air-condition the school so that it can be used year round for a variety of community activities.
- Wire it for the Internet and put computers in every classroom.
- Hire reading specialists and talented new teachers.

So here we had a profound story right outside our window. And I would've missed it except for a brief conversation I had with Baron when I ran into him in the winter of 1999. "What are you up to these days," I said.

Instead of saying not much, Baron grew quite animated in describing his project.

"Well, how about giving me a tour," I said.

The result was a quite lengthy four-part series in June of 2000 called "A Better Place to Grow Up."

It drew a warm reader response, I believe, because so many people had written off the inner city and suddenly discovered that something could be done to change's people's lives for the better. Many readers said the series had left them sobbing because they identified so strongly with the people portrayed in the story and the hope it gave them for our city's future.

### HOW WE DID IT

When Baron took me on the tour of his neighborhood and described what he was trying to accomplish, I decided almost immediately that I wanted our story to be as ambitious as his dream. And his dream was large. Baron believed he had a template not just for this neighborhood, not just for St. Louis, but for urban America. And his track record was impressive. He had put together 73 affordable-housing projects in 24 cities across the nation. None had gone belly up. The Murphy Park effort, he said, was the one that combined the best of all he had done.

## AUDITING CONTENT, MEASURING PROGRESS

If he was aiming high, then so could we.

Instead of marching into the neighborhood, doing a bunch of interviews and writing a story, I decided that we should instead spend an entire school year watching the neighborhood be a neighborhood. So photographer Jim Forbes and I went to school, attended neighborhood meetings, hung out with moms and dads, and kids. We aimed for a narrative — a story with a beginning, middle and an end.

Attached to narrative writing are a set of principles that I tried to follow. Among them, the story must have:

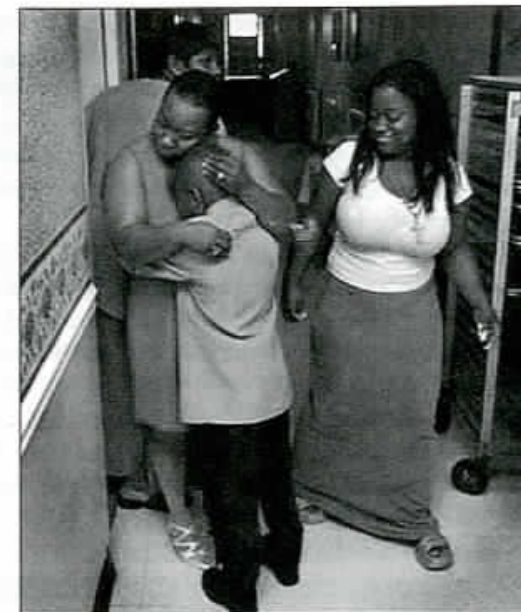
- An intriguing set of characters with something vital at stake.
- A timeline that's easy to follow.
- Points of tension or obstacles that the characters face.
- Scenes that show instead of tell.

Many of these principles are articulated quite well in Jon Franklin's *Writing for Story*, my holy bible.

As Jim and I hung out, we picked out particular people to follow:

- Anne Meese, the new principal who was charged with turning reading scores around.
- Mary Spencer, a proud teacher on the cusp of retirement.
- Marlene Hodges, a neighborhood organizer just a couple of years removed from welfare.
- Howard Small, a bright but not particularly motivated 10-year-old.
- Baron himself.

We followed each of these individuals throughout the year, and lo and behold, they ran into a lot of obstacles. Meese faced a staff revolt. Spencer got depressed over all the new-fangled reading curriculum she had to implement.



The *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* went to schools, neighborhood meetings, and events where stories occurred such as this emotional moment between mother and son after a fifth-grade graduation.



## AUDITING CONTENT, MEASURING PROGRESS

Hodges despaired over her efforts to get residents to help each other out. Baron couldn't get his plan to redevelop the Pruitt-Igoe land off the launch pad. And little Howard kept finding new ways to get into trouble.

I went through my own bouts of depression because I'd go days or weeks without seeing or hearing anything particularly revealing. But Forbes and I kept returning to the neighborhood as we tried to fit the story in among our other responsibilities.

About halfway through the school year, we put on a dog and pony show for the top editors, a narrated PowerPoint presentation. We want a lot of space, we told them. We've got some good stuff. We tried to sound very sure of ourselves. The editors gave us their trust and, more importantly, the time of some top editors and designers.

By the end of the year, thank God, enough had happened in all our characters' lives to bring each of their stories to closure. And the combination of all their stories added up to a substantial and moving story about the rebirth of a neighborhood.

You can read the series online at:

<http://www.postnet.com/postnet/specialreports/murhypark.nsf>.

Or if you'd like a hard copy, e-mail me at [rweiss@post-dispatch.com](mailto:rweiss@post-dispatch.com).

## AUDITING CONTENT, MEASURING PROGRESS

# KEEPING TRACK: A LOCAL NEWS SCORECARD

*By John Humenik*

*Quad-City Times*

Simple in design, yet loaded with detail, scorecards show success and failure on the same page. Scorecards also illustrate trends you might not recognize at first glance. And how often do you hear "You can't tell the players without a scorecard?"

By keeping score, high-performing teams reach goals faster, work from a single strategy, promote sharper focus and encourage forward-looking vision. So, at newspapers where quality and achievement are important outcomes, putting numbers to local news performance makes sense.

A local news scorecard will improve your coverage of news and bolster your staff's efforts to improve optimum quality in key workmanship areas. Without any advanced math degrees, you can take pencil to paper and get started. Be creative. You can count anything from local news stories in a competitive readership area to letters to the editor to replates due to production errors.

A local news scorecard is much more than keeping traditional byline counts. It's a tool that is used in the business sector to guide progress toward principles. Once thought of as "extra work" by editors, scorecarding is more useful than ever. And when your newsroom is meeting goals to improve the quality of its local news report, winning is everything.

By sharing statistics that show errors are down, zone stories up, and reader interaction on the rise, it keeps everyone tracking shared goals. It's not enough to say your staff and you are on the same page. You need to show them and continue to plot a course toward lasting improvements.

Now, more than ever, newsrooms also need to celebrate continuous improvement victories — victories that readers also will value.

## SCORECARDS ARE NOT REPORT CARDS

Before you establish a local news scorecard, know what you are measuring

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and why it's important to collect specific data. Scorecards also can dispel unsubstantiated beliefs. A good rule to live by: Speak with data. Here are five key principles to consider before setting up a scorecard:

- 1. Establish performance goals that reinforce positive outcomes and can be measured easily.** For example, tracking consecutive on-time press starts will motivate a copy desk. Action plans to increase the number of local news stories on your front page also can be easily tracked month-to-month.
- 2. Define what success looks like.** How many errors are acceptable each month? If you have a limit, show the staff how well it's doing staying within the boundaries.
- 3. Identify goals that stretch the staff's abilities.** Sometimes narrowing a performance gap in a key area can be slow work. By rallying the staff to push higher each day, each month or each year, data from a scorecard eventually will pay great dividends.
- 4. Benchmarking will help the staff stay focused on the next level of achievement.** If you grade as a "B" newspaper, for example, what performance boost is needed to leap to the next level? Set numerical goals to reach each day.
- 5. Celebrate each success.** A no-status-quo mindset will keep the staff energized and thinking about continuous improvement.

### ALIGNING THE STAFF

At times, a news staff can come out of alignment. Without a scorecard, realigning the staff might be a daunting task. Where do you start?

To improve performance, you may need to change staffers' behaviors. Use the scorecard system to refocus them. Isolate an area of weakness and set a number the staff can shoot at. Without a target that can be easily measured, your staff will continue to drift.

A local news scorecard has to be useful. Although it plots the past, you need to design your scorecard with forward-looking vision.

### LOCAL NEWS SCORECARD IN PRACTICE

At the *Quad-City Times*, we set a daily content goal of having three of our five front-page stories be local news stories. We also set a standard of including one story from the nation or world and one from a key readership interest area.

It wasn't enough to leave those content goals as guidelines. We wanted to change the content focus and overall quality of the newspaper, and starting

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### Quad-City Times local news scorecard

Quad-City Times final edition													
SCORECARD CATEGORY	FY2000 month-by-month												FY2000
	DAYS MONTH	31 OCT	30 NOV	31 DEC	31 JAN	29 FEB	31 MAR	30 APR	31 MAY	30 JUNE	31 JULY	31 AUG	30 SEPT
FRONT PAGE LOCAL AVERAGE		3.3548	3.1333	3.2258	3.5484	3.3448	3.5800	3.1687	3.3226	3.4333	3.3548	3.5181	3.3
All locally-written stories		81	87	87	88	86	86	82	97	91	95	98	89
Lee Enterprises state bureau stories		13	7	13	22	11	15	13	5	12	8	11	13
TOTAL LOCAL-INTEREST STORIES		164	94	100	116	97	111	95	103	103	104	109	99
Wire stories, includes state, nation, world		49	60	57	48	50	51	53	47	46	35	43	48
ALL PAGE A1 STORIES		153	154	157	158	147	162	148	150	149	143	152	147
FRONT PAGE ALL STORIES		4.8355	5.1333	5.0645	5.0568	5.0689	5.2258	4.5333	4.8387	4.9687	4.6129	4.9032	4.9
FRONT PAGE SLICES													
Slices to staff-written stories		37	35	48	38	28	39	35	36	35	35	35	29
Slices to wire-written stories		20	19	19	18	27	20	18	14	24	14	20	25
TOTAL PAGE A1 SLICES		57	55	65	56	55	59	53	50	59	50	55	54
AVE. SLICES PER A1 MONTH		1.8337	1.8333	2.0968	1.8065	1.8276	1.8995	1.5	1.6129	1.9687	1.6129	1.7742	1.8333
TYPE OF CORRECTION		OCT.	NOV.	DEC.	JAN.	FEB.	MAR.	APR.	MAY	JUNE	JULY	AUG.	SEPT.
Fact error		14	4	13	5	8	7	5	8	8	3	7	18
Time/date/place		2	7	2	2	4	4	5	2	8	2	6	0
Identification/name/title		4	3	3	1	9	5	4	5	4	2	3	1
Headline		1	0	0	3	2	1	2	1	3	0	0	2
Photo caption		1	0	1	0	0	0	1	3	3	2	1	1
Information omitted		0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	5	1	0	0
Other (pagination, typos, puzzles)		1	1	2	1	2	2	0	5	2	0	1	0
Wire Services		0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
TOTAL CORRECTIONS/MONTH		23	19	21	13	25	19	17	24	31	19	18	20
PER STAFF MEMBER (82 FTE)		0.271	0.2419	0.2387	0.2097	0.4032	0.3065	0.2742	0.3871	0.5	0.1813	0.2903	0.3226
EDITORIALS		OCT.	NOV.	DEC.	JAN.	FEB.	MAR.	APR.	MAY	JUNE	JULY	AUG.	SEPT.
PUBLISHING DATES		27	26	27	27	25	27	26	27	26	26	27	25
Staff-written local topic edits		26	16	17	22	22	26	19	16	13	25	19	14
Staff-written national topic edits		NA	12	10	9	4	4	7	11	7	4	3	4
TOTAL STAFF-WRITTEN EDITS		26	28	27	31	26	30	26	27	20	30	22	18

The *Quad-City Times* uses an electronic scorecard to track its coverage.

with the front page made the most sense. We set standards that could be documented by using scorecard data.

By tracking the local news story average on the front page, and reporting it in monthly reports, we set a high bar to achieve.

For example, the city desk understands that three front-page-worthy stories are needed each day. That goal prompts editors to plan better, work more closely together, and develop stronger local news coverage plans. Therefore, the quality of the local news section also improves. After a while, producing a strong local news report each day is routine.

We also wanted to improve our accuracy and credibility. The acceptable limit for each staffer is three correctable errors annually, and we still want that standard to be reduced. We established a scorecard to track errors by month, type of error, originating staff and employee. Scorecarding errors is less a punitive exercise and more of a tool for the editors.

By scorecarding errors, we also can spot and, in some cases, predict trends in the types of errors we'll make. For example, we noticed that a majority of



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our fact errors were wrong phone numbers. We focused on the problem and cut the overall number of errors through greater attention in that specific area. Without the scorecard we might not have picked that up.

The accuracy scorecard also showed us ways to help the most habitual offenders improve. We locate flaws in their newsgathering skills, and set up plans for improvement. Having the data available also helps eliminate any unnecessary debates.

Finally, we wanted to improve the number of replates needed because of errors. Until we used a scorecard, we didn't realize how much time was lost fixing pages we already had produced. By zeroing in on the numbers, we isolated the production delays and held each other more accountable for workmanship.

Over the two years we've used the local news scoreboard, we've found that quantifying our progress has been much more effective than merely hoping for and assuming improvement.