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Key Works: Some Connections Between Journalism and Community

Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, here is the chapter's first paragraph:

The literature of journalism and community is broad and deep, with roots in pioneering sociological investigations of how media institutions relate to the world around them. Two themes that run throughout that literature are (a) that the defining characteristic of community journalism is the intimacy that the organizations and the people who practice it share with the institutions and individuals they cover, especially as reflected in content selections, and (b) the interaction of community journalism organizations with the institutions and imperatives of the local community structure. Those themes pervade the historical key works reviewed in this chapter, which largely focused on community newspapers in their local geographic areas, as well as more contemporary investigations that include various forms of media and address community in ways that go beyond sheer geography.

Disciplines

Communication

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Key Works

Some Connections Between Journalism and Community

Jack Rosenberry

The literature of journalism and community is broad and deep, with roots in pioneering sociological investigations of how media institutions relate to the world around them. Two themes that run throughout that literature are (a) that the defining characteristic of community journalism is the intimacy that the organizations and the people who practice it share with the institutions and individuals they cover, especially as reflected in content selections, and (b) the interaction of community journalism organizations with the institutions and imperatives of the local community structure. Those themes pervade the historical key works reviewed in this chapter, which largely focused on community newspapers in their local geographic areas, as well as more contemporary investigations that include various forms of media and address community in ways that go beyond sheer geography.

Research into the nexus of community and journalism covers a wide range of styles and formats. Descriptions of the nuts and bolts of putting out a community newspaper that are frequently used to establish principles of the practice are textbooks such as those by Byerly (1961), Kennedy (1974), and Lauterer (2006). A common thread running through those how-to manuals is that the level of personal detail in community news stories sets them apart from other styles of journalism, and the notion that coverage decisions extend from the newspaper's being a community stakeholder. (Those distinctions are explored more fully in Chapter 1.)

The body of scholarly research about community journalism includes several methodological approaches, including case studies and qualitative interviews of community journalists that closely examine professional practices. Detailed social-scientific investigations with sophisticated statistical analyses illuminate fine-grained distinctions among variables such as media content, audience behavior, community characteristics, and measures of community attachment. Most of that research focuses on newspapers, describing and investigating small-town rural papers as well as those covering suburbs, city neighborhoods, and cultural communities defined by race, ethnicity, or interest.

But a growing body of work looks at electronic and online media, such as an investigation of how online hyperlocal news sites reflect some of the same community integration functions as weekly newspapers (Rosenberry, 2010b) and another looking at the importance of "locality" in radio broadcasting (Torosyan & Munro, 2010). This chapter will review a mix of approaches involving research that has community media as the focus of analysis, as well as historical works that are important milestones in building theories of how journalism and community relate to each other.

❖ EARLY SOCIOLOGICAL STUDIES

One characteristic of great research is its heuristic value—its ability to inspire further work that builds on its findings (Littlejohn, 1999). Perhaps nothing in the literature of community journalism has been used as a springboard for further study more frequently than Morris Janowitz's early 1950s research into neighborhood community newspapers in

Chicago. Janowitz's work, which first appeared in a 1951 article in *Public Opinion Quarterly*—and a year later in book form—established a view of the community press as both an indicator of and an impetus for social change. A second edition of the book, with a new preface and a new epilogue, was published in 1967, helping to spawn the extensive “community ties” research discussed later in this chapter.

Janowitz inherited the University of Chicago's grand tradition of using the city as a “natural laboratory for sociological investigation” (Rogers, 1994). The school had long focused on investigating communication and society, generating research such as the famous Payne Fund Studies of the 1920s (*Motion Pictures and Youth*, 1933) about the impact of movie viewership on audiences. Another noted Chicago researcher was Robert Park, a newspaper reporter turned academic whose contributions include studies of the immigrant press. Janowitz's work was a multi-methodological study of newspapers in some of Chicago's 75 recognized neighborhoods circa 1950. He analyzed neighborhood demographics, analyzed the content of three newspapers, surveyed readers, and conducted in-depth interviews with the papers' managers and residents of the neighborhoods they served. Janowitz used the urban community press as a vantage point for assessing one of the key lines of sociological inquiry of the mid 20th century: research into the impact that local institutions had within larger urban areas as the cities grew, referred to as “specialization within generalization” (1967, p. 5). The urban community press was “one of the social mechanisms through which the individual is integrated into the urban social structure” (p. 9).

Janowitz studied and wrote about—albeit in a more formal, academic style—the same relationship between newspaper and community described by Byerly, Kennedy, and Lauterer: how the contents and function of the community press are linked to the social requirements of the community. Two of the four hypotheses in Janowitz's work addressed that idea directly: (a) “The community press acts as a mechanism which seeks to *maintain local consensus through the emphasis on common values* rather than on the solution of conflicting values” (1967, p. 11, emphasis added) and (b) “At every point in the operation of the local community newspaper, its mass communication effects are *inextricably interrelated with the personal communications and social contacts which link the newspaper's personnel, the community leaders and the readership clientele*” (p. 13, emphasis added). The other two hypotheses

addressed how community newspapers developed along with satellite business districts within cities that provided advertising support, and how the community papers helped to both shape and reflect the social and political structure of a neighborhood.

Janowitz documented how local newspapers helped individuals find their way in a complicated world of organizations, institutions, and activities at the neighborhood level as they navigated the larger metropolis. The community press did that by emphasizing coverage of controversies within the local community versus larger citywide institutions. A newspaper's content maintained consensus and emphasized local values through coverage of social, religious, youth, and cultural organizations. Those findings parallel Lauterer's ideas about covering news in an "us versus them" fashion, and Byerly's and Kennedy's observations regarding the promotion of local clubs and social events. Similarly, Janowitz concluded that intimacy of coverage was key to the paper's success as a local institution: "The community newspaper's emphasis on community routines, low controversy and social ritual are the very characteristics that account for its readership" (1967, p. 130).

❖ COMMUNITY TIES

Janowitz's work led directly and indirectly to a vast body of research exploring how media use, community characteristics, and an individual's sense of community connectedness relate to one another. That came to be known as the community ties research agenda. That broad and deep agenda included demographic and psychographic research, single studies, and collected bodies of work. For example, Edelstein and Larsen (1960) used Janowitz to illustrate that people with a strong "newspaper orientation" were more likely to be longtime residents of their community, to have a positive view of it, and to engage in more social participation. A set of descriptive (nontheoretical) studies conducted by academics at the behest of a newspaper trade group, along with study of how community demographics affected newspaper readership, laid much of the groundwork.

Many of those projects were successful in showing a positive correlation between use of newspapers and individuals' ties to the community. But they were less successful in answering another important question: Which variable—community ties or newspaper use—was

dependent, and which was independent? Did greater newspaper use cause people to become more connected to their communities, or were those who had stronger community attachments (for whatever reasons) more likely to read newspapers because of those attachments? Could the relationship be iterative, and, if so, could a newspaper encourage a feedback loop by engaging in certain activities that would improve the community's general sense of itself, building stronger community attachments that could then translate into more newspaper usage?

❖ ANPA NEWS RESEARCH CENTER REPORTS

Research into the relationship between community characteristics and newspaper usage was a popular topic of study in the mid to late 1970s. Both the academy and the newspaper industry were interested in declining readership and the dwindling of multi-newspaper markets. A common subject of investigations at the time was whether structural variables such as community demographics could predict or explain the forces behind those declines. (Looking back with three decades of hindsight, it's clear that what those efforts documented were the first cracks in a dam that now has burst, in the form of plunging readership and circulation among large daily newspapers in the first decade of the 21st century.)

That body of work included a number of studies conducted under the auspices of the American Newspaper Publishers Association, through the ANPA News Research Center. That center supported administrative research designed to help editors and publishers understand their communities and markets better in the hope of building readership and circulation. Many studies were focused on metropolitan markets, but some explored the nature of small-town community newspapers.

Shaw (1978), for example, did a study based on personal interviews with 700 residents of four small towns in Tennessee and concluded that the degree to which they enjoyed their paper and how much utility it had for them helped to distinguish regular readers from occasional readers. Stephens (1978) used a telephone survey to compare reading habits with "community attachment," which he measured with a scale based on Janowitz's work. Stephens concluded that

"a strong sense of attachment to the community in which one lives is a more important determinant of reading more than one newspaper than age, years of residence in the community, socioeconomic status, family income or education" (p. 2). In a report a year later, also based on a telephone survey, Stevenson (1979) concluded that "the heart of the newspaper audience continues to be people with strong and permanent ties to the community who look for information and guidance to use in maintaining civic links" (p. 2).

In a report done for ANPA based on a meta-analysis of 50 previous academic studies, Stone (1978) evaluated the community characteristics that might predict readership and concluded that home ownership was the key variable. Around that time, Stone also investigated circulation determinants based on community demographics and content characteristics, and found, among other things, that local content was the main distinction between smaller-circulation community newspapers and larger-circulation dailies (Stone & Morrison, 1976).

❖ THEORY BUILDING OF STAMM AND ASSOCIATES

Documenting the relationship between newspaper usage and community structural variables (such as home ownership and length of residence) and psychographic ones (such as "attachment") was an area of investigation that grew from previous studies of community characteristics. As that research agenda unfolded, other researchers began asking questions about what those connections really meant in the life of the community and of the individual readers. They also began to raise the question of causal direction more explicitly. Notable among the scholars pursuing that was Keith Stamm of the University of Washington, who, along with various associates on different projects, sought to look even deeper into the concept of community ties.

The general focus of Stamm's agenda was that newspaper usage and community ties/attachments should be seen as multifaceted constructs. In his view, research needed to get beyond studying the very broad comparisons of reading or subscribing, as a dependent variable, to "attachment" or demographics, as an independent variable. The earliest appearance of that work was in an ANPA report in which Stamm and an associate broke down "community involvement" into five components, relating each of them to different aspects of subscribing to

newspapers. They concluded that the simplest form of involvement—a desire to keep up with community happenings—was the best single predictor of whether someone subscribed to more than one newspaper and how much time was spent reading those papers (Stamm & Fortini-Campbell, 1981).

A central theme of Stamm's work was that individuals' ties to their communities had various components and that those ties changed over time, making it incorrect to measure the construct as a static, unitary variable, as so many research projects attempted to do. A monograph published by Stamm and Fortini-Campbell (1983), building on their work from their 1981 ANPA report, introduced the idea that community, which traditionally had been rooted in a physical locale, should be construed on multiple dimensions of not only place but also structure (community institutions) and process (shared interests). They maintained that residents developed ties to each of those three dimensions differently, depending on how long they had lived in the community and whether they planned to stay there.

In a few journal articles (e.g., Stamm & Weis, 1982; Weis & Stamm, 1982) and a later book (Stamm, 1985), those ideas were expanded to include a notion of dynamic ties and newspaper readership behavior, meaning that both the community ties individuals had and their reading behavior could change over time. For example, an occasional newspaper reader could become a subscriber who still mostly skimmed the paper, and then later a devoted consumer of nearly everything in it. Likewise, a community newcomer eventually might become a long-time resident. In a later essay that served as a postscript to that work, Stamm (1988) returned to discussing the reciprocal nature of the relationship. He argued that certain types of ties might be the antecedents of newspaper usage and others might be the result.

❖ EXTENSIONS OF THE COMMUNITY-TIES HYPOTHESES

Other scholars have used Stamm's ideas as a starting point for even more detailed investigations of the relationship between community and media usage. Jackson (1982) used Stamm's distinctions of place, process, and structure to examine how suburban newspaper readers were more attached to the lifestyle of suburbia as a key tie than to a particular geographic community. Viswanath, Finnegan, Rooney, and

Potter (1990) used Stamm and Fortini-Campbell's four-part resident typology as a basis for investigating different forms of community ties developed through newspaper versus cable television use. Torosyan and Munro (2010) drew on Park and Stamm for the theoretical underpinning of a study of listener satisfaction for local stations given recent industry ownership consolidation.

Jeffres and Dobos (1983) used the division devised by Stamm and Fortini-Campbell for a study that also built on Janowitz's work by investigating content interests of readers of neighborhood newspapers in Cleveland. Paek, Yoon, and Shah tested seven hypotheses rooted in a mix of what Stamm identified as "place" variables and "process" variables in relation to media use and community participation. They concluded that "socially active, connected individuals become more likely to participate in public life when they live in communities with a strong local print culture" (2005, p. 597).

❖ COMMUNITY COVERAGE BY ETHNIC MEDIA

Another type of community that transcends simple geography is one rooted in ethnicity, race, or cultural heritage. The study of media serving those communities is a burgeoning field whose roots also can be traced back to the University of Chicago. Park examined the immigrant press in Chicago, primarily serving Polish and other eastern-European groups, and concluded that its popularity was rooted in various causes, including the sense of intellectual and social liberation that immigrants gained from reading native-language newspapers and the value those papers had in helping readers become oriented to their new communities (Janowitz, 1967).

In a more contemporary frame, Lauterer (2006) devotes a chapter to Spanish-language media, with six case studies of how small English-speaking newspapers sought to address the influx of Hispanic residents to their communities and one case study of a Spanish language newspaper. Coverage of the explosive growth of Latino media also can be found readily in trade publication articles (e.g., Bailon, 2005; Chepesiuk, 2007; Fitzgerald, 2002).

Research into ethnic media does have some gaps, however. Absent from Janowitz's study, for example, is any analysis of the African-American press in Chicago. That is notable because it was a vigorous

part of the city's life, as documented by scholars who have examined the operation of newspapers such as *The Chicago Defender* (e.g., Ross & McKerns, 2004; Stroman, 1981). In the preface to the second edition of his book, Janowitz (1967) notes that analysis of those papers was purposely excluded because the goal of his research was to examine community press coverage at the neighborhood level, whereas "the Negro press sought to appeal to the Negro community as a whole" (p. xii). Conceiving of community in ways that went beyond geography was not a part of the scholarly mind-set at that time.

A substantial body of research does exist on the history of the ethnic press. That work covers the African-American press (e.g., Dann, 1971; DeSantis, 1998; LaBrie, 1977; Simmons, 1998; Suggs, 1996; Thornton, 2006), as well as the Native American press (LaCourse, 1979; Littlefield & Parins, 1984; Murphy & Murphy, 1981; Riley, 1976) and the Latino press (Gutierrez, 1977; Melendez, 2005). Going beyond histories, some research in the form of content analyses, case studies, surveys, and interviews can be found about contemporary media that serve those racial and ethnic communities. Although that work has not reached the breadth and coherence of the agenda that developed around more general theories of community ties, much of it does center on construction of cultural identity. Ojo (2006), for example, completed a case study of a newspaper covering the black community in Montreal, Canada, as a way of evaluating how the ethnic media constructed cultural identity differently from the mainstream media. In a similar vein, Mayer (2001) examined how Latino media in San Antonio contributed to the development of cultural identity.

Divergent news coverage by ethnic media is another area scholars have explored. Rivas-Rodriguez (2003) examined coverage differences between online and print Latino media in San Diego, based on both a content analysis and interviews with editors. A comparison of content in native-Alaskan newspapers to content in nonnative publications found that although similar topics were addressed in both, the level of attention differed dramatically. The researchers called the level of coverage of native topics in the nonnative press "amazingly low" (Murphy & Avery, 1983, p. 320) because it amounted to about 2% of coverage even though natives comprised about 20% of the readership. Daniels (2006) analyzed how four Native American media outlets covered the shootings of 10 students in Red Lake, Minnesota, and reported that they set themselves apart from mainstream media by providing news by and

for Native Americans. Loew and Mella (2005) used a content analysis of four Native American newspapers in Wisconsin, combined with interviews and focus groups, to illustrate the impact of the papers' coverage on conceptions of tribal sovereignty. They concluded that "tribal newspapers contribute to and reflect their readers' heightened sense of tribal identity and nationhood" (p. 102). The thread running through those investigations is the contribution media make to community identity and integration, a theme that can be traced back as far as Park and Janowitz.

As powerful and significant as the many investigations of the connections between media use and community ties have been, they are not the only lenses through which scholars have sought to study journalism and community. Other research has involved application of general topics from media studies specifically to the work of community journalists, especially ethical behavior and standards of community journalists.

❖ THE JOURNALIST IN THE COMMUNITY

Although Byerly, Kennedy, and Lauterer often applauded the close relationships of community journalists with the individuals and institutions they cover, they also found those relationships have a built-in potential for ethical problems regarding conflicts of interest—a topic that has drawn some scholarly interest. As Lauterer put it in a chapter about journalistic ethics,

the work of the great community newspaper is made more complex by its difficult multiple and conflicting roles as fair and balanced reporter of the news while also serving as advocate for all that it finds good and worthwhile in the community. (2006, p. 261)

One line of that work focuses on attitudes and behaviors of editors and publishers, a topic to which even Janowitz (1967) devoted an entire chapter, is called "The Social Role of the Community Publisher." Another project addressing the same theme is a case study by Northington (1992), who explored an editor's role in helping to establish a college in a small Kentucky town. Tezon (2003) also reviewed how publishers see their roles in their communities. Akhavan-Majid (1995) found that publishers from smaller newspapers were more

likely to be active in local business and professional organizations; those who became involved in civic affairs were more likely to perceive themselves as part of the policymaking process and less likely to see their role as community "watchdogs." Reader (2006) did in-depth interviews with editors of newspapers large and small, and found that the level of accountability to the community did affect decision making. "At larger newspapers, the emphasis seems to be to preserve the reputation of the institution of the newspaper, whereas at smaller newspapers the starting point seems to be to manage journalists' individual connections with their communities" (p. 861).

Coble-Krings (2005) conducted interviews with staff at three Kansas weeklies to examine what happens when conflicts of interest arise. She specifically explored what happens when staff members serve in community positions (including an instance in which an editor also was mayor of a town in his newspaper's coverage area) and how community journalists deal with friends and relatives as sources. Bunton (1998) used in-depth content analysis and ethical imperatives derived from social responsibility theory to study how community newspapers in two neighboring towns covered the same community controversy.

"Community" and Other Areas of Journalism Studies

A deep body of literature exists in areas such as media law, media economics, implications of new technology for media and journalism, and broadcast journalism as a practice distinct from print. Numerous texts and journals are devoted to each of those areas, and within them a few investigations focused on community journalism can be found. Community journalism-based investigations are not prominent or numerous in any of those arenas, but a few that can be cited by way of example follow.

Broadcasting

Within the broadcasting arena, the emphasis of community studies has been on radio and its ties to the community. That makes intuitive sense, given the development of radio as a niche medium once television came on the scene. Television was dominated by nationwide networks, and even local television

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was limited to expansive regions around large cities. Radio, on the other hand, continued to serve small towns, and a large metro area that might have only a few TV stations often would be served by a dozen or more radio stations, some of them serving specialized communities—for example, ethnic ones. As Torosyan and Munro put it, for the radio industry “the concept of ‘localism’ has traditionally been held to be both a bedrock value and a competitive necessary” (2010, p. 33).

Recent studies tend to pursue the issues of radio localism from an economic/regulatory standpoint, especially deregulation of market structures by the U.S. Federal Communications Commission and the resultant concentration in station ownership (Hilliard & Keith, 2005). Reed and Hanson’s (2006) case study of Allegheny Mountain Radio in West Virginia sought to illustrate that radio produced by and for members of a community was a viable alternative to conglomerate-owned commercial stations. In another case study, Hood (2007) examined the impacts of news produced outside the local market when radio stations are part of large ownership groups. Hubbard (2010) used an experiment and found slight preferences for local origination and a marginal preference for local ownership.

Law and Economic Issues

Radio is not the only area in which economic theory and legal issues lay at the root of investigation of community journalism. Coulson, Lacy, and Wilson (2000) examined a number of ownership and market characteristics of weekly newspapers in what they called a baseline study of the industry, documenting variation in type of ownership, type of circulation, geographic location, and day of publication, along with the impact of those variations on advertising rates, advertising cost per thousand, and circulation. Lacy and Dalmia (1993) compared penetration data for metropolitan dailies, community dailies, and weeklies in Michigan at two different points during the 1980s. They found that penetration declined similarly for weeklies and community dailies operating under the umbrella of larger metro newspapers, which they interpreted as the audience’s seeing them as acceptable substitutes.

On the legal side, Hansen and Moore used a mailed survey of editors at weekly and small daily newspapers in Kentucky to see whether fear of libel created a chilling effect in what they published. Their work found that "respondents who had been threatened just once had a significantly higher chilling effect score than those who had never been threatened" (1990, p. 94).

Technology

Like law and economics, the role of new technology in community journalism is an area that scholars are starting to explore, with particular attention to the technology used by small-circulation newspapers. Niebauer, Abbott, Corbin, and Neibergall (2000) used the theory of diffusion of innovations (Rogers, 1983) to investigate adoption of computers for tasks across the operation at Iowa newspapers (newsroom, advertising, administrative, etc.). They found that daily papers large and small were well along in adopting new communication technology, but weeklies lagged behind. In another diffusion study, Ketterer (2003) surveyed small dailies and weeklies in Oklahoma regarding use of the Internet as a reporting tool and concluded that it had diffused to the majority of newspapers that had Internet access at that time. (It should be noted that since 2003, high-speed Internet access has increased in rural areas, making a follow-up study of particular interest.) Adams (2007) used an e-mail survey of editors to establish some of the characteristics of weekly newspapers' use of the Web for news presentation. Online editions were seen as complementary to the printed newspaper by the editors in her survey.

❖ CONCLUSION

Perhaps the key trend that stands out in reviewing more than a half century of investigation into community journalism research is the steady evolution of "community" as a concept that encompasses more than local geography. Janowitz's analysis focused on neighborhoods composed of only a few city blocks. Byerly favored the term "community" journalism over "country" journalism but still focused mostly on newspapers covering small towns and the rural countryside around them.

But over time, as Sim (1969) documented, greater mobility has loosened individuals' ties to narrow geographic locales. Individuals today commonly identify with communities that have nothing to do with their place of residence. Thus, a logical evolution of key themes from past research would investigate how those concepts of identity-building and intimacy of media and audience are articulated as the nature and definition of community evolve away from its geographic roots. An early example of that can be seen in Jackson's 1982 study that conceived of suburban community as more a "place of mind" than of locality. The idea that virtual communities can exist and reinforce the community ties of the offline world is another relevant area for research in the modern era (see, for example, Blanchard & Horan, 2000; Kling, 1996; Nip, 2004; Prell, 2003; Rosenberry, 2010a).

In this effort, Stamm's fine-grained analyses offer a theoretical basis for defining variables, especially the level of attachment (type and intensity of the "tie"), and creating definitions of community that transcend geography through "process" (shared interests) and "structure" (institutions). Although Stamm and his associates sought to hone certain concepts to new levels, at its core their research agenda sought to explain the connection between two basic variables: attachment to the local geographic community and usage of the corresponding local newspaper. The tools they created can now be applied to new ways of looking at community and social integration that go beyond that basic relationship, especially because many "communities of interest" exist and communicate online rather than through printed products.

Community media by definition serve narrow interests, first defined by geography and now by other criteria. Thus, a corollary avenue of investigation might relate to dangers inherent in narrowly focused media that inhibit community building by allowing like-minded individuals to merely reinforce one another's views without considering how their tightly knit group fits into broader communities—the process Janowitz called "specialization within generalization." As media become more fragmented, especially in the electronic and online arena, that concept seems especially ripe for deeper investigation.

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