WHAT DO EDITORS AND THE PUBLIC WANT FROM ONLINE COMMUNITY

NEWSPAPERS? GATEKEEPING IN SOCIAL MEDIA

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Elizabeth M. Kuhles-Heiney

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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my family, Robert, Amanda, and Janine Heiney and my brother Jim Kuhles, without whose support I could not have accomplished this endeavor and to my co-workers Melina Gilbert and Harriet McHale who provided invaluable assistance along the way.

ABSTRACT

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In this digital era, there are many channels that have opened for the creation and distribution of information, especially under the moniker of "news." This new wave of journalism is challenging the traditional gatekeeping role of media, especially at the community newspaper level. This study explores the theory of network gatekeeping in local news through social media, examining the role of editors and users in creating news in their community through the use of Facebook and Twitter. The key feature of this new genre is interaction, with editors using social media to identify and distribute stories through daily monitoring, crowdsourcing, and viral posts, and readers using these channels to read, share, and comment on the news of the day and to set an agenda for public discussion.

KEY WORDS:
Community newspapers, Network gatekeeping, Social media, News, Facebook, Twitter

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

According to a 2016 study by Pew Research Institute and the John S. and James

L. Knight Foundation, 62% of American adults procure news from social media sites,

with the most popular venues being Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, and

LinkedIn. This is up from 49% of U.S. adults who reported seeing news on social media

sites in 2012 (Gottfried & Shearer, 2016).

So what does this shift to social media mean to traditional news outlets? The Pew

study reports that half of Twitter consumers and one-third of Facebook and YouTube

customers turn to news web sites and news applications for information. Fewer people

are relying on the print edition of the newspapers, with only 15% of Facebook and

YouTube users, and 8% of Twitter users accessing print or online newspapers for the

latest information.

This change of media usage implies that people are doing much more than

reading or viewing the news; they are participating in the gatekeeping role by the news

they select to read, the comments they make, and the posts they share. In the past, editors

would use letters to the editor and phone calls to gauge public opinion about various

news topics. Today, social media and online news sources provide real time feedback on

what is important to audiences, often leading to prominent placement of stories based on

the consumers' top picks of the day.

Reader interest can now be measured instantly with software that tracks user

clicking behavior on Web sites by counting the number of times a story has been

selected by a user. This data generated by online readers can influence what

stories editors classify of news value…An interesting point about online metrics is that it measures an actual choice by a reader rather than a response to a survey about what the reader claims he or she does online. In this way, the online metrics may be a better judge of actual behavior. To make better use of this data, many news organizations choose to list the most popular or most viewed stories by readers on the homepage of their Web site. (Schaudt & Carpenter, 2009, p. 18).

MacGregor (2007) also argues that "Online journalists are seen to claim a more reasoned and evidence-based method in choosing what to publish, which is less subject to 'instinct' and whim. Tracking data are therefore directly revising the way 'news values' are implemented" (p. 280).

In a study of community newspapers in Michigan, Brost (2013) found that 80% of local newspapers in the state accepted user-generated content, and the greatest benefits were that this kind of content drove traffic to the web site, sold more papers, allowed more free content, and created greater engagement with the community. "People don't want to be passive absorbers of information, listening to a sage on stage," said Mark Ranzenberger, online editor of the *Morning Sun*, who was interviewed for the study. "They want to respond" (Brost, 2013, p. 109). Despite this willingness to accept outside content, editors expressed concern about publishing user content online because it blurred the distinction between news producers and news consumers and could tarnish the newspaper's name and reputation.

A study by Canter (2013b) found that there is more digital interaction between journalists and the public at the local level, including informal, reciprocal, and personal messages (Canter, 2013a). But while local journalists did recognize this interaction as

contributing to the democratic process, encouraging more exchanges among readers, and involving citizens in public affairs, the study also found the digital exchange is more resource intensive and might adversely affect a given newspaper's brand (Canter, 2013b).

This study therefore explores how social media is impacting the news in an increasing online and mobile world at the most local level, community newspapers. This qualitative research includes interviews with editors from five community newspapers in Texas, each with daily, paid circulations of less than 50,000, which gauges how editors use social media personally and professionally in the news process, and how they monitor and interact with social media readers. The study also includes a survey of social media users from these five papers to determine why they use social media channels generally and how they interact with the newspapers' social media sites. The results are compared to see what editors and users are seeking from the newspapers' social media sites, and the effect it is having on the gatekeeping function of community newspapers.

The study will provide insight on what social media channels users prefer, and the venues employed by newspapers to deliver their message. It will describe how editors are using social media to develop news stories, to distribute them widely, to gauge readers' interests, and to package publications both online and in print. It also will provide insight on why readers post – or don't participate – on social media, particularly on the newspaper's site, and the topics they are interested in viewing. Finally, the study will address some benefits and challenges in delivering news through social media for both editors as well as participants in these online forums.

This study provides important insights to local newspapers on the role that social media is playing in today's news climate and how interaction functions in network

gatekeeping through communication between the gatekeepers and the gated. It also raises

some larger issues circulating around this brave new world of technology and online

formats for newspapers.

CHAPTER II

Literature Review

Gatekeeping

For more than a century in the United States, media has served as the "nonpartisan gatekeeper of information important to the public" (Parmelee, 2013). Gatekeeping was first introduced by Kurt Lewin in 1951 in his Field Theory of Social Science. After World War II and his experiments on changing consumer eating habits to include little used cuts of meat as part of the war effort, Lewin examined how social change may impact food consumption. Lewin studied the process by which food got from the grocery store or garden to the family table, and he discovered a series of channels in the process. The channels were separated into sections, which included purchase, transportation, and preparation, and each was guarded by a gatekeeper, who manipulated the decision-making process at each stage in the process. That gatekeeper was usually a housewife or maid; others in the family had little input on decision-making in this process. While Lewin's study examined food, he believed this process could be applied to other areas (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009).

In 1950, David Manning White related gatekeeping to the media, defining it as the selection process employed by journalists and editors on what stories and pictures should run in the media (Ali & Fahmy, 2013). White described the process using a local wire editor who was nicknamed Mr. Gates. For every story selected, eight were rejected based on the editor's own experience, attitudes, and expectations of what was newsworthy. The wire editor acted as a linear filter through which news flowed,

controlling the news process from conception to print, deciding what was accepted or rejected at every step along the way (Bro & Wallberg, 2015).

In 1956, Gieber examined gatekeeping among telegraph editors and hypothesized the process was not dictated by the subjectivity of an individual, but rather by the traditions and routines established in the profession, including the number of news items available, the production process, and time limits (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009).

Westley and Maclean (1957) developed a new model of communication, which incorporated mass media in the transfer of information from sender to receiver. In their model, there are three ways that audiences receive information: Directly from a sender, from a sender through mass media, or through personal experience. Gatekeeping in mass media is done by rejecting or changing information based on news judgment (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). McNeely (1959) explored gatekeeping in international news and found that news goes through multiple levels of gatekeeping before being delivered to the audience, which can result in errors, bias, censorship, translation issues, transmission problems, and editorial selection and revisions.

Bass (1969) postulates that gatekeeping occurs at two levels in the news process: Among the news gathers, who collect information from various channels and turn it into stories for the public, and the news processers, who edit and translate the copy for publication. Gandy (1982) also said the public relations industry plays a role in gatekeeping by providing easy access to information for the media.

 Castells (2000) argues that society is transforming from an industrial to a network era, moving away from the mass manufacturing of goods to the production of information and knowledge using technological advances. Organized around electronic

media and communication networks, this new age is changing all aspects of society, including economic, social, political, and cultural factors. It is shifting focus from vertical, top-down approaches to more horizontal structures, creating a more equalized playing field for all users. It has advanced communication to real time and expanded access across the globe.

With the growth of new communication technologies, such as radio, television, and the internet, gatekeeping evolved as a process whereby journalists and editors considered the needs of communities in developing and distributing news stories to audiences. In the digital era, the audience now plays a critical role in the creation and distribution of the news through social media platforms; audiences are increasingly helping to define what is newsworthy for even broader networks (Bro & Wallberg, 2015).

Shoemaker and Vos (2009) theorize that traditional gatekeeping has evolved to include multiple channels for communication, including sources, media, and audiences. These channels are consumers and producers of information and all play a role in the gatekeeping function in mass media.

One of the most influential channels of information today is social media. It offers a greater number of outlets and options for news content. "Regardless of how people get news from the web, this medium has become a dominant channel of communication and has passed newspapers as a primary source of public affairs news and information" (McCombs, Holbert, Kiousis & Wanta, 2011, p. 16).

Scholars are beginning to look at new models of gatekeeping. Bruns (2008) offers the "gatewatching" model, where editors keep constant watch on citizen journalists to identify useful sources. The network gatekeeping theory (NGT) focuses not on the

traditional gatekeepers, as in the media, but on the gated, the public that creates and distributes information in the digital community. While traditional gatekeeping relies on a sender and receiver model, network gatekeeping emphasizes the production of the vast amount of information available on channels in digital media, and the many entities that control that information. Gatekeeping is no longer restricted to editors and reporters in journalism. Instead, it is shared with governments, regulators, search providers, network service providers, organizations, and individuals (Barzilai-Nahon, 2008).

NGT argues and proves that in networks the balance between gatekeepers and gated is more complex. It is indeed likely that the gatekeepers create and produce greater volumes of information than gated because of their vast resources. Nevertheless, gated can create and produce information independently, as well, without having to pass through a content gatekeeper. But when the gated create information independently, its significance is rather low because of the limited exposure it receives, compared to information disseminated by the gatekeepers that control most of the audience attention. The existence of alternative public platforms to gatekeepers is important and significant in itself because it contributes to a more pluralized cyberspace, even if it does so only to a limited degree. Another way of analyzing gated power in networks is by focusing on the production of information rather than on the creation of information. A gated can produce information in networks that was created by gatekeepers, an ability that enhances the power of the gated. (Barzilai-Nahon, 2008).

The network gatekeeping model explores the dynamics of information-transfers and information-negotiations between media gatekeepers and citizens who participate in

the media's digital offerings, including public forums, web sites, and social media (Xu & Feng, 2014).

In the past, journalism was defined by its gatekeeping function, as in the New York Times motto of "All the news that's fit to print." Today, journalists face competition on the internet in deciding what is newsworthy. Breaking news often comes directly from eyewitness accounts, leaving journalists to verify facts and put incidents in context. While traditional journalism was designed to provide information to the public as part of the democratic process, citizen journalism can set the agenda through ongoing discussions or even rumors online. Reporter blogs can blur the lines between news and opinions. The Internet put journalists on a level playing field with others in determining news (Tewskbury & Rittenberg, 2012).

Despite the growth of social media, some scholars argue the mainstream media remains in control of the gatekeeping function (Ali & Fahmy, 2013). "News organizations have a cornucopia of UGC (user generated content) to choose from. However, much information available on Twitter and status updates available on Facebook also is indirectly subject to gatekeeping by these traditional news outlets. These outlets pick and choose what information on these sites is most relevant to their routines and narratives. As a result, only a small portion of the abundant information on social networks is made available to the public through the mainstream forums" (p. 56).

Singer (2008) argued that the move toward a network society presents challenges to the traditional gatekeeping roles of journalists and their routines, roles, and norms. Therefore, journalists need to shift toward a new way of doing business to remain relevant in the new information era.

The primary loyalty of any journalist is to the public, and that public no longer occupies a distinct space or passive role within the media environment, a space and a role apart from the journalist's. We all are citizens of the network, and we all contribute to it. Serving today's public means conveying not just the 'news' itself but also as much as we can about the people, process, and products that shaped it -- including us. Because, in a networked world, there no longer is the 'journalist,' 'audience,' and source. There is only 'us'" (Singer, 2008, p. 75).

Considering the discussion of the network gatekeeping model, this study will examine the role of the public and the role of editor in shaping news in community newspapers. In this case, the network gatekeeping model will investigate the information available on the newspapers' social media sites from professional journalists and the interested public. The study will examine how editors are utilizing social media in the news process and how social media users are attempting to influence the reporting of news in a local setting.

New Journalism

Historically, the role of gatekeeping has been in the hands of the traditional news media, which select the stories that the public will see and hear. Social media presents an opportunity to break the traditional model, allowing users to share information and events not covered by journalists and to influence public opinion and debate (Lipshultz, 2015).

With the rise of digital media, traditional journalists have faced increased pressure from social media sites and new devices, such as smart phones, which have sped up the news process and allowed anyone with access to the internet to deliver information (Chao-Chen, 2013; Kolodzy, Grant, DeMars & Wilkinson, 2014).

In breaking news, such as the London Underground bombings, the Arab Spring and the Boston Marathon bombing, citizens create "random acts of journalism" (Lasica, 2003) through the use of sites like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. These stories allow social media users to create and lead the agenda-setting function, leaving traditional media behind to verify the authenticity of the story. Following this trend, in 2013, BBC Global News announced a partnership with Twitter Amplify to provide video tweets to complement its newsgathering operations. Today, there is a 24-hour news cycle, where links to user-generated content provide context to ongoing issues (Kolodzy et al., 2014). Two common examples are the use of cell phone images of planes flying into the World Trade Center, which are replayed with stories on terrorism, and images of confrontations with police after the shooting of a young black male in Ferguson, Missouri and other cities across the United States.

Chao-Chen (2013) argues that social media blurs the distinction between journalists and the public. In a study of media representatives in South Korea, Choi (2012) found nearly three-quarters of the journalists and editors interviewed said they expect to have closer and more intimate interactions with their audiences on social media, which would lead to more stories or information in traditional media or assist in gauging and reporting public opinion. In addition to allowing the audience to participate in the selection of stories for coverage, many of these media representatives credit social media with helping them to frame stories, another key journalistic function. The author concluded that while opinions expressed on social media may give the public a voice, it may not be representative of the overall public opinion on issues.

Storm (2007) found that while newspapers are using traditional one-way communication with the public in terms of the content offered, user-generated content does provide an opportunity for conversations among journalists and the public. "The impact of Web-generated user content transcends the physical amount of user content making its way into print; its importance rests in the cooperation and conversation the Web site facilitates between the newsroom and the public" (p. 2). For media, most participation by users is business driven and not to promote democratic ideas, even though online media allows more open, efficient, and accessible interaction than legacy media.

For media online, including traditional and social media, a new role is emerging: What user-generated content stays and what user content is eliminated. While online sites open all kinds of communication, journalists and editors have to balance what content may impact the quality of the news resource or the brand. If comments look too much like a story, it may be left on the cutting room floor (Braun & Gillespie, 2011). Unlike the past, where newspapers received few letters to the editor and buried those on the back page, social media generates more comments, which often are placed with the story and share center stage.

In this digital era, the daily routine of journalists has expanded to include sifting through comments on social media to keep their finger on the pulse of public opinion. Social media becomes another source of information to help select the key stories of importance to the public. In many cases, it also becomes the competition (Lipshultz, 2015).

Social Media

Social media is a fluid and evolving concept used to describe expanding opportunities to interact in online communications. In the media, social media is becoming the new front page, and it is critical to understand its basic components and how they interact in setting the agenda for media and the public alike.

According to Lipschultz (2015), social media is distinguished from other online uses because it is highly interactive, is built on user identification systems, and allows information sharing across developing communities. Kaplan and Haenlein (2009) correlate social media with user-generated content that is publicly available and created by an end user.

Social media also is described as a range of online, word-of-mouth forums or technologies that include blogs, discussion boards, chat rooms, e-mail, rating web sites, forums, microblogs, virtual worlds, and social networking web sites. (Mangold & Faulds, 2009; Staab, 2014). Kaplan and Haenlein (2009) add wikis, virtual worlds, and video-sharing sites to the list.

Fuchs (2014) concludes that social media is the convergence of personal communication and public media, creating the ability to share, cooperate, and take action outside of traditional groups and organizations. In his research, he offers a broad analysis of how social media is perceived, including user-generated content, convergence culture, participatory media, peer production, and computer program oriented Web 2.0. Similarly, other researchers indicate that social media is a new communication tool to share information, connect individuals, participate in conversation, and create community

(Bala, 2014; Correa, Hinsley & Zúñiga, 2010; Doval-Avendano, 2010; Gagnon & Sabus, 2015).

As diverse as these definitions are, these studies seem to agree on five key elements of social media– its internet base, its interactivity, its public domain, its ability to build communities, and its use for sharing information. This study will use the two most popular social media sites – Facebook and Twitter – as well as photo sharing programs, such as Instagram and SmugMug, to gauge the impact of social media on local news.

What is News and News Value?

In 1965, Galtung and Ruge were among the first to define news by examining 12 factors that made events newsworthy: frequency, intensity, meaningfulness, unambiguity, consonance, unexpectedness, cultural proximity, continuity, eliteness, composition, negativity, and personalization. Harcup and O'Neill (2001) revisited the theory and reclassified newsworthiness as power elite/celebrities, entertainment, surprise, bad news, good news, magnitude, relevance, follow-up, and agenda. Shoemaker and Reese (1996) said news values were based on prominence, human interest, conflict, oddity, timeliness, and proximity. "Understanding, identifying, and applying these criteria constitute an important component of media and journalism studies and serve as a fundamental step toward developing media literacy." (Tukachinsky, 2013, p. 147)

Schaudt and Carpenter (2009) measured news values using traditional attributes, but also categorized news by type including crime/public safety, politics, lifestyle, entertainment, oddity, education, health, religion, sports, weather, and others. Strömbäck, Karlsson, and Hopmann (2012) make a distinction between news values,

newsworthiness, news factors, and news selection. These all have a profound effect on the gatekeeping function and are influenced by such factors as advertisers, audiences, source organizations, production elements, and the elite in society. While news values and newsworthiness are what journalists believe should be news, news factors and news selection are what actually is considered for publication.

With the introduction of digital and social media, the definition of news may be evolving. No longer is news selection centralized in the journalist's domain; it is now heavily shared through ongoing conversations with the audience on social media (Revers, 2014).

With the rise of the Internet, professional journalism became enclosed, challenged and partially subsumed by a more expansive sense of news production, which blurs definitions of what constitutes news and its producers. The jurisdictional struggles of journalism broadened and diversified as a consequence. Journalism sees itself as confronted by its usual rivals, not least those it covers, who now participate on media platforms as equal participants. Journalism also feels challenged by other opponents (e.g. blogger, net activism, citizen journalists)…What is important is that these external threats manifest themselves as internal disagreements about how to adapt to new conditions: To draw sharp boundaries and asserting journalism autonomy from other types of news production, according to its own distinct logic; or to make boundaries more fluid and permeable for practices, norms and identities, which are more adequate for the new news environment. The latter does not mean giving up on journalisms'

original jurisdiction and its operating principals entirely. It is rather an impetus to

diversify practices (pp. 809-810).

Social media is allowing users to redefine what news is by creating, sharing, and

consuming content on the internet. News is now a social experience because of multiple

outlets for production and distribution of information. No longer are consumers passive

spectators in the process; they are active participants who interact with the paper and each

other. Users influence news by creating content for newspapers, sharing information from

various news sources, and commenting on items posted by the paper. (Lim, 2016). Social

media has contributed to an "affective news stream," where news is based not only on the

tenets of journalism, but also on experiences, opinions, and emotions of users.

(Papacharissi & de Fatima Oliveira, 2012, p. 279). Social media has changed news from a

form of mass communication to "masspersonal" communication, where interpersonal

communication between journalists and consumers plays a key role in the audiences'

perception and evaluation of what news entails (Lee, 2015). In this digital age, social

media is becoming the news agency from the users' point of view, eliminating the

newspaper's role in delivering the news of the day. However, it is important for users to

learn to discern disinformation, news credibility, partisanship, and traditional journalistic

norms when evaluating the news that is presented (Algül & Sütcü, 2015).

Community News and Social Media

Community newspapers generally are defined by circulations of less than 50,000

as well as their local focus (Carey, 2014; Hansen, 2007; Rosenberry, 2013). These

publications concentrate on events in a specific geographic area, such as sports, news,

features, and advertisements. Some community newspapers focus on distinct populations,

such as ethnic groups, religious organizations, or special interests (Hansen, 2007). Local media represents common interests, reinforces community values, and helps citizens to solve problems (Carey, 2014).

According to a 2012 survey report from the Pew Research Center, 72 per cent of American adults follow local news closely and depend on community newspapers and television as important sources of information (Paulussen & D'heer, 2013). As the circulations of large, daily newspapers began to shrink, community newspapers remained steady and even grew. One reason for their success is their community focus and lack of competition at the local level (Hansen, 2007). News is more hyperlocal, and community newspapers are the source for readers and advertisers (Lewis, Kaufhold, & Lasorsa, 2010).

In 2011, a study examined the difference between the use of print and online editions of community newspapers. While half of the people surveyed read the print edition on a regular basis, one-fifth perused the papers online (Hargrove, Miller, & Stempel, 2011). However, the authors noted that demographics may be changing, and it is important to have an online presence to reach the next generations of readers. "For community newspapers, online publication offers opportunity. The 18-34 age cohorts, who are the greatest users of the online edition now, will be the 35-54 age cohort in the years ahead and another younger cohort will appear with presumably at least the same high use of the Internet that the 18-34 age cohort has now. It also will be important for community newspapers to attract more high-income users to their online publications" (p. 89).

In this new digital world of journalism, editors approach news differently online. In a study of newspapers in Seattle and Minneapolis, Maier & Tucker (2012) discovered that readers receive different version of news between the print and online editions, with only 13 percent of stories shared between the two mediums. Editors are selecting the best venues to provide information to readers with online issues emphasizing crime, disaster, and sports, and print editions focusing on politics, the environment, and education. "If what's happening in Seattle and Minneapolis is indicative, then local online newspapers really are offering a product that is fundamentally different in content focus as well as format and delivery. Only by clicking into the depths of an online news site is an avid reader likely to find the same news stories featured online as on the front page of his or her local print newspaper" (p. 60).

In a study of 141 community newspapers, Greer and Yan (2011) investigated the most popular online delivery tools used by local papers. The most common tool used by 62.4% of the sample was the RSS feed, which had the most prominent visibility on Web sites because it was the easiest link for upkeep by staff. The second most conspicuous feature was text and mobile applications. Facebook and Twitter also showed an increase in popularity with readers over the 10-month study period, although the number of fans was relatively small and number of posts to those sites decreased over time. For the average paper with circulation of 12,500, there were 800 fans, representing less than 7% of the number of print readers. Fast-forward five years -- by 2016, 62% of Americans adults procured news from social media sites, with the most popular venues being Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, and LinkedIn (Gottfried & Shearer, 2016).

Historically, it is the media that has defined social and political reality in society, but digital media are changing that with more voices and more technology influencing what we see, hear, and share (Couldry, 2012). The internet and social media are becoming the new public sphere, where society can freely exchange ideas and develop public opinion on the important issues of the day. According to Habermas (1989), a public sphere is the great equalizer and a place for rational and critical debate, free from government interference. The internet has revived that public sphere by increasing access to information, creating forums for publication, equalizing status among users, and allowing free speech and association (Miller, 2011). Online media allows more open, efficient, and accessible interaction than traditional newspapers (Ruiz, Domingo, Micó, Díaz-Noci, Meso, & Masip, 2011). "The essential democratic relationship is not between leaders and citizens but between citizens and citizens" (Barber, 2006, p. 6).

Another key feature of online and social media is the ability to track audiences in real time, based not on what readers say in a survey, but rather by what they choose to interact with through likes, shares, or comments. Tracking data is revising news values not based on technology, but rather on social and organizational contexts (MacGregor, 2007).

Online versions of the newspaper challenge traditional norms and values, among these the participation and control of content by users. Lasorsa (2012) examined the use of social norms on Twitter in the news gathering process. He found that journalists face different communication challenges on Twitter because the medium was designed to express opinion, convey information without the need for verification, and provide hyperlinks to outside sources. This directly conflicts with journalistic norms of

objectivity, gatekeeping, and transparency. Social media also is used for citizen

journalism in the form of comments, photos, videos, blogs, and articles. This blurs the

line between news producers and news consumers and threatens the gatekeeping role of

editors. Nowhere is this more apparent than in community newspapers, which have the

power to set the agenda and the tone of the discourse by the lack of competition (Lewis et

al., 2010). In a study of 29 newspapers, editors varied widely on whether they favored or

disfavored citizen journalism. Among the concerned expressed were objectivity,

accuracy, and ethics.

> While some editors regard citizen participation in the news production process as
>
> anathema to sound journalism, other editors see it as a central component of the
>
> future of journalism; and while some editors recall with regret failed citizen
>
> journalism efforts of the past, other editors appear eager to experiment in the
>
> future with new ways to try to make citizen journalism work in the newsroom.
>
> Regardless of their position, though, one thing is clear: editors of community
>
> newspapers are thinking about citizen journalism (p. 175).

In a study on social media in an Oklahoma newspaper, the author concluded that

Facebook is a powerful news referral site that challenges the traditional gatekeeping

function of newspapers. "Editors' and managers' authority for what gets disseminated to

the masses is being altered because now, the masses are choosing what news stories they

want to disseminate to their networks of friends from the plethora of content on the

Internet" (Schmeltzer, 2011, p. 8). It also provides a cost-effective way for editors to

reach larger audiences and for audiences to share thoughts, reactions, and opinions

through a global online community.

Hess and Boyd (2015) postulates that Facebook creates a conversation between newspapers and the public, but also competes with newspapers for news and the business model to make the print medium profitable. Facebook plays a complex role in blurring the lines between friend and foe in community newspaper as well as the public and private domain. "As newspapers have struggled to identify their place in the digital realm, they have relied on Facebook – which has rapidly become part of people's daily media practices – to help them connect with audiences and define the communities they serve" (p. 26). Storm (2007) studied the impact of social media on a local newspaper, *Bluffton Today*. The author posits that while few user-generated content items made it into the print edition of the paper, the interaction between journalists and their audience had other effects. "This study found the introduction of the Web-generated user content is not evidence of convergences of content creators or citizen journalism but rather an opportunity for convergences of conversations in the *Bluffton Today's* newsroom, which results in better community journalism" (p. 24).

In the past, citizens interacted with newspapers through letters to the editor. Today, journalists, editors, and citizens regularly communicate through social media, email, discussion boards, and blogs. Citizens also are producing their own content on the web, with 44 percent of internet users indicating they have posted photos, stories, and audio and video recording online, according to a study by Pew Internet & American Life Project (2010). In this new world of convergent journalism, newspapers appear to be maintaining the gatekeeping role. In a study of a dozen British online newspapers, Hermida and Thurman (2008) found a dramatic increase in the amount of user-generated

content on the web, yet British editors maintain their traditional gatekeeping roles by moderating outside content based on reputation, trust, and legal liabilities.

Nah and Chung (2009) argue that the role of the journalist remains more important because of their experience in reporting. Journalists fulfilled four major functions, including interpreter, dissemination, adversary and mobilizer.

The interpretive role consists of investigating official claims, analyzing complex problems and discussing national and international policies. The disseminator role consists of getting information to the public quickly, avoiding unverified facts, reaching the widest possible audience and providing entertainment and relaxation. The adversarial role consists of being adversaries of businesses and government officials, and the populist mobilizer role consists of letting people express views, develop cultural interests, motivate people to get involved, point to possible solutions, and set the political agenda (Weaver and Wilhout, 1996, p. 73).

Ürper and Çevikel (2014) concluded that reader comments were a neglected and controlled feature of online news, with decisions based on journalistic norms, bias on certain issues, and the status quo in communities. Reader commentary leads to important public debate on issues that contribute to a democratic and inclusive society

So what do citizens want from their community newspapers?

Social media is an extension of traditional communication, allowing easier access to and retention of information. Facebook, which originated as a web site for social communication and online communities, generates more trust, friendships, support, and political involvement. "Publics have unparalleled reach and access to information, and practitioners can help social media publics sort through the clutter. In this way,

information sharing and interaction facilitate relationship cultivation" (Carey, 2014, p. 122). Hunt, Atkin, and Kowal (2013) also said that a newspaper's online features increase readership and make the users feel more connected to their community. In a survey of 428 undergraduate students reflecting on their college newspaper, the study showed a use of interactive features, perceptions of satisfaction, a sense of community attachment, and credibility of the news.

A study of *The Sentinel Echo* in London, Kentucky found distinct differences between the print and online readers of the paper. Those who read the online version were looking for the immediacy of the news and interaction through community forums, but did not want to submit news or pay for a subscription. (Hansen, 2007). While the community may use online message forums in newspapers to better understand their communities (Hunt et al., 2013; Rosenberry, 2010), it did not result in real-life community engagement. (Rosenberry, 2010)

> The findings of this research support the idea that cognitive understanding of community issues is positively associated with level of involvement with newspaper-sponsored community message forums for many participants. Thus the forums may be a beneficial activity that helps to improve understanding of the community—at least for those who participate. But the research does not indicate that this improved understanding leads people to get out and do more in the offline community based on their involvement in the online community (Rosenberry, p. 165.)

Social media platforms are becoming a dominant force in the newspaper industry, serving both as a potential "lifeline" for sagging circulations and competitor for

advertising revenues. Newspapers are posting stories directly to site such as Facebook and Twitter, which collect revenue from ads on their sites. With newer social media applications, many larger, legacy paper are given incentives to use the site – such as equipment or financial incentives -- an option not available at the local level. Newspapers have to decide if they want to use social media as a distributor of news or whether the newspaper site is a destination for readers. Some papers are using a "Hail Mary" approach, posting all content to social media, while others use a strategic approach to recruit new subscribers (Bell, 2016). An advertiser-based approach draws viewers to the newspaper's web site to generate revenue through ads; a subscriber-based approach seeks to bring readers to the paper's web site to become subscribers.

A study in Finland found that user-generated content in regional and community newspapers, television, and radio does not generate additional profits for the media business because the markets are too small to define an audience or lifestyle or products to be sold. Most local newspapers are replicating their print edition online and, although they may offer platforms for citizens, all activities direct the audience back to the print edition (Ojajarvi & Valtonen, 2012). Powers, Sohn, and Briggs-Bunting (2014) also caution local and family-owned businesses from venturing too far into technology in order to preserve their profile. While community newspapers have fared better in this market than many larger, legacy papers, they face increases in competition and changes in technology. The success of these papers is the locally generated content. With changing technology, online advertising is only likely to boost profits 5 to 10% above print editions. "These newspapers prided their adherence to journalism traditions; however, managers expressed concerns about their financial futures. Results indicated

they were primarily finding success in retaining print operations while migrating content to the web. Too much variation from their core business of producing a newspaper appeared to weaken financial footholds, and such innovations were eventually abandoned." (p. 89).

On the other hand, hyperlocal journalism may help transition community newspapers to successful internet use by reducing the cost of producing stories and outsourcing. Hyperlocal journalism is defined by geographic location, community orientation, original reporting, web presence, promotion of civic engagement, and complete coverage. In a study of a Belgium regional newspaper which ran user-generated content side by side with journalists' stories, Paulussen, and D'heer (2013) found that local papers contain a mix of crime, fire and accident stories as well as human interest stories. Journalists covered "bad" or "hard" news stories, while citizens were relegated to "soft," "good," or small news coverage. Most of the citizens produced firsthand accounts about clubs, culture, health, sports, and schools because they lacked access to official sources in the community.

With news content flowing on the internet from users, and the business and editorial pressure to increase revenues, it is time to embrace change; Fancher (2009) suggests that "My belief is that journalism must develop a new ethic of public trust through public engagement. This will require that the journalists let go of the sense that we have control and recognize how much better public service journalism can be when we accept the public as true partners. Instead of fearing and resisting this shift, journalists must embrace and lead the way. This fundamental change in perspective isn't just necessary for journalism to survive, it is the right thing for journalist to do" (p. 36-37).

CHAPTER III

Research Questions

The purpose of this research is to analyze the role that social media plays in the news process in community newspapers, both from the editors' and users' points of view. This study will identify the ways that editors utilize content on social media, both professionally and personally, to create and shape new stories. It also examines the contributions that citizens make in the news process through social media and their reasons for posting on social media sites. Finally, it will examine the challenges both editors and users face on social media in community newspapers and how it changes gatekeeping in digital journalism.

RQ1. How do community newspaper editors determine what should and should not be posted on their personal media pages?

RQ2. How do community newspaper editors determine what should and should not be posted on their newspaper's official social media pages?

RQ3. How do consumers determine what should and should not be posted on their personal media pages?

RQ4. How do consumers determine what should and should not be posted on the newspaper's social media pages?

CHAPTER IV

Methodology

To examine the proposed research questions, this study used a convenience sample of five community newspapers in Texas, with circulations under 50,000, a benchmark defined by Greer and Yan (2011). To begin the search, mondotimes.com was employed to provide a directory of all newspapers in Texas, and daily newspapers were selected within driving distance of Huntsville, Texas. Different corporate ownerships were targeted to offer a broader perspective on policies and practices in the industry. The editors of the newspapers were contacted by phone and by letter explaining the research project and soliciting participation (Attachment A).

The study targeted five papers simultaneously and, if an editor declined to participate or failed to respond to follow-up calls over a three-week period, a new paper was added to the search with a continued effort to get diverse ownership. As a result of this process, 14 papers were contacted, and five ultimately agreed to participate in the study. Three editors expressed interest in participating in the study personally, while one editor referred the request to the executive editor, and the second appointed the web editor to participate in the project.

This process began on March 8, 2016 and ended in July 24, 2016. The newspapers in the study represent American Consolidated Media, ASP Westward, Community Newspaper Holdings, The Hartman Newspaper Group, and a private publisher.

The editors agreed to participate in a 20-minute, in-person interview in their newspaper offices and to post a survey for users on the newspapers' social media sites

three times during the course of the three-month study. The results of the interviews and user surveys would remain confidential; no identifying information would be used in the study.

In the meantime, questions were developed for the editor interviews and user survey to explore demographics and similar issues on their personal and professional use of social media in general and on the newspapers' social media sites more specifically. The questions were organized in four sections: Personal use of social media; use of the newspapers' social media sites; benefits and challenges of social media; and demographic information. The demographic information did not collect income information from editors or users as this information may be perceived as too personal for such a survey. Instead, education levels were collected from users and years of service were used for editors to indicate status in the community. An open-ended question was included at the end of the interview/survey allowing participants to comment on any issues related to the study.

The questions were designed to elicit the social media sites used, reasons for posting or not posting to these sites, and the role that social media plays in news at the local level both from the editors' and users' perspectives. The editors' questions were developed into a script to ensure each editor was asked for the same insight in the same way to avoid researcher bias in the process. The users' survey was developed with a mix of multiple choice and open-ended questions to identify common features of social media use, such as sites visited, the frequency of interaction, and the use of features on the mediums, such as likes (hearts), shares (retweets), and comments. The open-ended questions were designed to generate narratives on reasons behind users' involvement

with social media in general and on the newspapers' sites specifically. The structure of the editor interviews and user surveys purposefully were designed with similar questions so that the results could be compared to determine what editors and users seek from social media sites.

As an incentive for users to participate in the study, participants were offered a chance to enter a raffle to win a $50 gift card to a local restaurant. One gift card was offered for each paper and was paid for by the researcher. The survey, which included an official Institutional Review Board consent form, was limited to those over 18 years of age to protect the rights of minors. The user survey was developed into an online web site by Melina Gilbert, a professional web master, and data was collected in two different Excel files to protect the privacy of participants. One file included an email address and the newspaper, which was used to identify and contact the winners of the gift certificates; the second file included data from the survey and did not include identifying information.

Once the five papers were identified, and questionnaires were developed, the study was submitted to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Sam Houston State University on January 28, 2016. The IRB office requested several revisions, including signed permission letters from the newspapers approving participation in the study; a conflict of interest disclosure regarding one of the papers; and other technical compliances with the IRB form. On the Conflict of Interest Disclosure, the researcher disclosed that she serves as the publication officer for Sam Houston State University, College of Criminal Justice and that this paper ran verbatim press releases from the institution under her byline. However, there was no financial compensation for these releases and no editorial interaction beyond sending releases to the editor.

The IRB issued its approval letter on June 16, 2016, and editors were immediately contacted to set up interviews. In-person interviews were conducted from June 20, 2016 to June 28, 2016 and took place in the editors' offices, with the exception of one paper when the editor was unable to keep the appointment because a newspaper interview ran long. That interview took place by phone. All interviews were taped with the consent of the editor, and editors were asked both for oral and written approvals for the interview. The official IRB informed consent and script that were used for these interviews can be found in Attachment B. During the time of the interview, editors also were asked to post the user survey to their newspaper social media sites (Attachment C).

Following the interviews, each editor was contacted again by email and phone with proposed texts that could be used on their social media sites, along with a graphic image of a raffle ticket that could be used as art. The editors were given the option of developing their own post as long as it contained the link to the survey. Editors were reminded by email and phone every month to post the invitation to participate in the study. The proposed social media texts included:

Participate in a SHSU study on community newspapers & social media for a chance to win a $50 gift card! http://www.shsu.edu/exk005

Take SHSU online survey on community newspapers & social media for chance to win a $50 gift card! http://www.shsu.edu/exk005

SHSU sponsored study on community newspapers & society media! Take online survey for chance to win $50 gift card! http://www.shsu.edu/exk005

Last chance to win $50 gift card by taking a research survey on community newspapers and social media. http://www.shsu.edu/exk005

Give us 15 minutes for a chance to win a $50 gift card! Take SHSU online survey

on local newspapers & social media http://www.shsu.edu/exk005

The main research method used for this investigation is the qualitative analysis of

editor interviews and user surveys regarding their public and private use of social media

in the news process. This approach advances knowledge in mass communication by

combining both editors' and readers' uses of social media in community newspapers to

see if it relates to what appears in online or print editions (Maier & Tucker, 2012). While

many studies use content analysis, a qualitative study can add a broader, more personal

examination of why editors and readers in some community newspapers in Texas use

social media and how that impacts local news and civic engagement.

To guide the evaluation of social media in the news process, several previous

studies offered useful methodologies or strategies. Storm (2007) studied the impact of

social media on a local newspaper, including information used in news stories as well as

the interaction between journalists and their audience. Schwalbe, Silcock and Candello

(2015) investigated the gatekeeping function of visuals in newspaper and social media.

Other studies provided insight on the use of interviews and surveys with editors,

journalists, and readers to determine perceptions of social media. Many studies are based

on Facebook and Twitter because they are among the top social networking sites on the

web (Nah & Chung, 2009). Brost (2013) tested editors' thoughts about user-generated

content, while Cantor (2013a, b) examined the interaction between editors and social

media users. Lewis et al. (2011) chronicled the philosophical and practical challenges of

user-generated contact in online newspapers. Hunt et al. (2013) explored how interactive

features in online news led to attachment to the community.

To advance this qualitative research, editor interviews were transcribed and analyzed. Demographic information was compared first to provide a snapshot of the editors of community newspapers (Table 1). Data on use of social media sites, both personally and professionally, such as sites visited and frequency of visits, were evaluated next to get an idea of the editors' interactions with the mediums. Finally, narrative responses were explored for common themes as well as unique responses to gauge how social media is used in their decision-making process.

The reader survey was posted three times at each paper during the study period, with the exception of one paper, which switched editors in the middle of the process. The new editor declined to participate in the study, despite repeated requests by the researcher. An invitation to participate in the survey was posted in the reader section of the paper's social media site, but was quickly removed by management. As a result, only one reader participated from that paper.

The survey was open and available from June 20, 2016 to September 20, 2016. Results were collected on September 21, 2016. The data file that included emails and newspapers was sorted, and winners were selected from a collection of participants from each paper. The participants were notified by email that they won the raffle for their paper, and a request was sent for a mailing address. Participants also were notified that they had three weeks to claim the prize or another drawing would be held. A letter thanking participants and the gift cards were sent by certified mail. Four of the five participants responded immediately; one did not respond. On the last day of eligibility, a follow-up email was sent to the last participant allowing them 24 hours to claim the prize.

The recipient immediately contacted the researcher, and the gift card and letter were sent by certified mail.

The user survey data was collected on an Excel spreadsheet in order to easily compare results. The participant data was evaluated with a process similar to that used for editors. Demographic information was compared first to compile a profile of the users of the newspapers' social media sites (Table 2). Data on use of the newspaper and social media sites were evaluated next to get an idea of the users' interaction with the print and online mediums. Finally, narrative responses were explored for common themes as well as unique response to gauge how social media is used in their decision-making process. The results were color-coded based on the use of similar words or concepts, such as like, share, comment, photo, video, hyperlinks; themes, such as family and friends, fun, business, ads, learning, sports, and personal interaction; and topics, such pet/animal issues, education, religion, family, relationships, health, entertainment, and other individual responses. The survey also captured information on why participants post – or don't post – on social media sites.

Because interaction was a common theme with both editors and participants and that issue is at the heart of the gatekeeping function, it was intensely explored between the samples to gain a better understanding of how the audience and editors influence one another in the decision-making process in news. The study also examined personal interactions between the readers and editors from both perspectives, as well as interactions among participants on the newspapers' sites.

The results of this qualitative analysis are explained on the following pages.

CHAPTER V

Results

The editors were all white males, ranging in age from 28 to 55, with an average age of 47.6 years old and a median experience of 18.1 years as an editor. The daily papers represented several of the major media companies in Texas, including American Consolidated Media, ASP Westward, Community Newspaper Holdings, The Hartman Newspaper Group, and a private publisher. According to mondotimes.com, circulations for the print editions of these papers ranged from 4,235 to 26,531, compared to 5,212 to 35,693 "likes" on the newspapers' Facebook accounts, the most popular social media channel for newspapers. Editorial staffs at the newspapers also varied from 3 to 27.

For newspapers, the number of users who "like" their social media pages exceeds the number of subscribers in all but one paper. "We have more likes on social media than paid subscribers, which is an interesting phenomenon over the last few years," said the editor of paper owned by an independent publishing group.

All of the papers offer Facebook and Twitter social media accounts. One of the papers had separate Twitter accounts for sports and news. One of the papers had an Instagram account, and another a SmugMug application, mainly for the storage and sale of photos that had run in the paper.

Table 1

Community Newspaper Editor Profile

Newspaper	Circulation[a]	Facebook Likes	Twitter Fans	Editor Age	Editor Sex	Editor Ethnicity	Years Served As Editor	Editorial Staff
1	26,531	35,693	8,128	55	M	White	23	7
2	10,621	14,505	2,446/1,161[b]	46	M	White	15	15
3	7,280	5,412	1,047	55	M	White	21	3ft, 4pt
4	4,787	20,654	3,839	54	M	White	30	4
5	4,235	11,749	3,050	28	M	White	1.5	6ft, 1 pt

Note. [a]Paid daily circulations provided by Mondo Times as of 9/25/16. [b]One paper offered Twitter accounts for both news and sports.

RQ1: How do community newspaper editors determine what should and should not be posted on their personal media pages?

Several of the editors do not have personal social media accounts, instead using their professional pages for work and home. Only one had separate accounts. "This paper is owned by someone else, and I don't think they care or want to know or care what I post. I don't think they care what my kids are doing," an editor said. One editor joked that he plans to launch a personal Facebook page, but is too busy keeping up with social media for the chain. He wants more of his staff to share the newspaper's social media on their personal sites. As one editor noted:

> To me there is no distinction between personal and professional. I wake up in the morning, I'm a journalist. I go to bed at night, I'm a journalist. So there is no distinction. I'll post to someone I go to Rotary with who broke their leg and is in the hospital to get well soon. I'll post Happy Birthday -- that's the biggest thing I do every morning. I get the birthday list and make sure that I send birthday greeting out to everyone…Nearly everyone on my professional was on my personal one and I don't have time to mess with two, so I just got rid of one and kept my personal one… I catch the feed, what's going on, respond where appropriate, like sorry to hear about that. A lot of people send their posts directly to me, questions like hey my church has this event coming up, can you get something in the paper or our school has this, can you come out and cover it. I get quite a few of those kinds of posts, and I will respond to those."

Another editor said:

I have 5,000 friends on my personal Facebook page and that's the max that

Facebook allows on your personal page. You can have a public figure page and

have as many followers as you want, but the personal page works better for

interactions with people. You can share pictures, and you have a lot more ability

to communicate with readers that way so I've been a big believer in doing that. I

don't technically have 5,000 friends, but they know how to reach the editor.

RQ2: How do community newspaper editors determine what should and should not be posted on their newspaper's official social media pages?

The common theme that emerged with all of the editors was that social media was

a way to engage and interact with their audience in an effort to drive users to the print or

online editions of the newspaper for content and advertisers. "Whatever form of

participation we get is value to our products," said one editor, noting that the use of social

media has been successful throughout his chain of papers. Another editor said "our

overall goal is actually to get them to read our newspaper or our web site. After all, that's

how we make money." A third editor commented "we use both of them (Facebook and

Twitter) to help raise awareness for the paper, to let people know what's in it, cross

market, reader interaction – we do a lot of reader interaction – and we found that's the

best way to engage with reader interaction, through social media."

For editors, one of the key benefits of social media is the ability to engage the

community.

From the journalist's perspective, I think the greatest tool from

social media is the reader interaction. We have the ability through

social media to engage in a one-on-one conversation with each and

every one of our readers on a minute-by-minute basis if we choose

to do that. We can reach out to our sources, we can identify

sources, we can encourage people that hey if you're driving

through the flood or tornado damaged part of town, take a picture

and share it with us and they do. So it has brought us closer

together with our readers and that perhaps is the best part of social

media.

Another editor said he sees a "domino effect," where one comment

or like can launch a viral post. "We have less than 5,000 in print, (but) we

have the ability to reach hundreds of thousands of people with a single

post, and the benefit of that is easily viewable," said the editor. "It's a

great tool for us, it definitely is. It is always changing, there are new

features, there are new ways for us to engage with our audience."

Social media is particularly valuable with breaking news – both in getting

important information out to readers quickly or to have users participate in the

newsgathering operation. During a recent wave of severe weather throughout Texas,

many editors turned to their users for weather photos. "We actually received quite a bit of

reader submitted photos on severe weather events…Now everybody that has a cell phone

is a professional photographer or at least they think so anyway. I've actually been amazed

at the photos our readers share with us," an editor said. Another editor commented:

Social media also has been beneficial for breaking news and for story ideas and

tips. We emphasize posting breaking news, and in that respect we act like a

broadcaster, and there are no time constraints on publishing. We will publish

online and to social media before print. The more we communicate with the audience through social media, the more they communicate with us. We regularly get many, many news tips and story suggestions through social media. When I was starting in the business 34 years ago, we would hear from people by phone or in person by stopping by the office, but now it is much more likely that we will hear from them through social media.

Another use for social media is for crowdsourcing. One paper employed it to identify people in methadone recovery programs and to gauge public opinion on a school bond issue. Another was seeking sources for a story on changes in the rental market in their area. "We also use it for crowdsourcing, so if we are looking for or trying to develop a story angle, we will post it to our social media that we are looking for or trying to develop a story and have people suggest ideas or leads for good stories," an editor said.

Publishing online first also allows editors to get the story right before it goes to print. One editor noted: "We also get feedback from people about stories they like or don't like or corrections and if we see somebody said there is something wrong with the story, we will check it out and if it's wrong, we'll say it's wrong and correct it. That works out for print. We publish our stories on social media before publication, and we are able to fix something before it goes into press."

The majority of community newspapers in the study allowed user comments on social media sites, although one had comments turned off over fear of libel and other issues. Instead, that paper allows users to comment on their web site, but reported little interaction with its constituents. In fact, this was the only paper where print circulation outpaced Facebook users. "We don't get commentary through our web site on our

stories," the editor said. "We get some, but not much, like some papers do. We don't have that vibrant sense of community that other newspaper sites do. We just don't have people that comment."

Some papers noted a positive change when moving from website comments to Facebook. On the website, people were allowed to comment anonymously, which led to more vicious attacks online. On social media, there is an identity affiliated with each account, which can be tracked, editors said.

> Facebook is primarily the way we communicate (with readers) and
> in the last five years, we started using Facebook commenting on
> our stories and before that we posted to our own system and the
> comments largely were anonymous. That was a chore for the
> moderators to handle. People who are anonymous were often out
> of hand and since we went to Facebook commenting, the
> comments are more manageable as we do require verified
> Facebook accounts…People still do get out of line at times, but it's
> much, much better than when we had anonymous commenting.

Editors say they rarely quote content from Facebook or Twitter, but rather use social media to contact and quote sources. One paper occasional runs a "Sound Off Column" featuring verified posts from social media. Another newspaper said it would quote social media without verification if there is a personal picture posted on the individual person's Facebook or Twitter pages.

With the propensity for readers to comment freely on content on Facebook and Twitter, most of the newspapers in the study appointed staff watchdogs to monitor and

respond to readers. "Even on the day when I am supposed to be off or other journalists are supposed to be off, someone's checking, someone's on there, someone's looking. That engagement that we just talked about, allowing readers to comment and response, is good, but it can provide a problem as well when things get a little rough on Facebook. So we want to have a watchful eye and maintain civility and order in the posts as well."

Several papers have enabled a feature on the social media sites to catch vulgar words and replace them with symbols. Editors said they do not generally delete or edit posts, although they will do so in instances of personal attacks, vulgar tirades, or racist comments. "We're very much into the First Amendment, everyone has an opinion, everyone has a right," one editor said. "I think twice in the last 10 years we had to delete somebody for personally attacking someone else, and it started to get out of hand and scary real fast, so we had to kick them off."

Several editors have used video available on Facebook to enhance their social media offerings. One editor urged reporters to take 10 second videos on their personal phones to include in the story. "Pretty much everyone can take a video on their phone these days and post it, and we have to do it because it promotes traffic. And again, our job is to bring in an audience. We're the eyes and where's the revenue? It is our web sites that sell ads for social media. Our job is to bring those viewers to the web site not only to read our content, but to read the ads."

Another paper incorporates video by live streaming its daily news meetings.

We are trying to be transparent about the process of how we decide what goes on the front page, and we encourage our readers to participate in that. Our philosophy is that people have this I think misguided perception of the media as

we are some evil empire deciding some kind of conspiracy, then we want to show

them that we are their neighbors, we talk about this just like our neighbors would

…we care about the news and the community in the same way that they do."

While social media has many benefits, it creates many challenges, editors note.

The immediacy of news often goes awry. One case among the papers studied included a

rumor of an attempted abduction of a child on the way home from school, which included

a description of a white van. The rumor was rampant on social media to the point where

a "suspect" – a known sex offender -- was identified and vilified instantly. The paper

checked out the rumor to find it wasn't true. Some said the need to be first with the news

is leading to diminished standards in journalism. "I think that some of our standards,

whether it is social standards or journalistic standards, have really gone downhill," one

editor said. Another noted that with the expanse of "news sites" available on social

media, it is hard for the consumers to identify reliable news sources. "I fear that people

are going to think that way, that there is no credible information anymore, so whatever

anyone says the loudest and the longest sticks," another editor explained. Another editor

noted:

> One of the things to me that is tragic is the shift in reading habits in
>
> America has gone from my generation, when everybody read the
>
> paper cover to cover, and they were very informed and wanted to
>
> know more. There were 1,500 word stories, if it was well-written,
>
> they wanted to read it because they wanted the depth and breadth
>
> of all the information that was included. We have become a society

of 140 characters. If you read the headline on a Facebook post or

Twitter feed, you consider yourself informed.

A plaguing problem with social media in the industry is how to monetize it. While

several papers have a paywall on their newspaper web sites, where readers need a

subscription to view contents, content is still "given away" on social media. One editor

said:

> To me, the biggest challenge is that we are giving away our
>
> content for free, and it is being controlled more and more by
>
> outside sources – Facebook. Facebook is not the publisher, but
>
> they are getting all the benefits, everything we create. All the
>
> content we create, and they make a ton of money off that. I think
>
> we have to figure that one out. For me, it is more a metered
>
> paywall, but it's always concerning when your content is not under
>
> your control. Again, how do you fund journalism that needs to
>
> happen?

Regardless of the benefits and challenges of social media, it appears it is the wave

of the future in community newspapers. "We are no longer a daily newspaper, we are a

daily media group, and social media and web sites are a huge part of that," one editor

observed. "If we were posting hourly, I would say that would be great."

RQ3 How do consumers determine what should and should not be posted on their

personal media pages?

The survey includes responses from 80 people. The respondents ranged in age

from 19-74, with the average age of 38.01 years old. More than 80% of the sample were

women; 18% were men. Four out of five of those who responded were White; 13% were Hispanic, 2% were African-American; and 4% identified as "other." Forty-four percent of the sample earned high school degrees; 16% had associates' degrees; 24% were college graduates; about 15% had graduate degrees; and six did not respond to the education question (Table 2).

All but two of the respondents had a Facebook page, and use of other social media sites varied. YouTube was the second most popular social media venue with 43 respondents using the site, followed by Twitter, with 31 people using the media. One in four of the respondents used a photo platform, and other sites used by the audience included Instagram, SnapChat, LinkedIn, Reddit and Sugarland.com.

Most respondents post on social media, with the most popular site identified as Facebook. Only a handful of participants post on other sites, which included Twitter, SnapChat, and Instagram. About half of respondents said they use social media to keep up with friends and family, and only five people specifically indicated they went to social media for news. However, social media is a popular place to share information and photos and to a lesser extent to comment. The sample used social media for fun, business, ads, learning, sports, and personal interaction, such as encouragement, birthdays, and recipes. Although most respondents did not indicate an aversion to posting, six people cited privacy concerns for not interacting on social networking sites.

Table 2

Community Newspaper Participant Profile

Age	Quantity
Mean	38.01 years old
Median	38 years old
Mode	31 years old
Range	53
N/A	5
Sex	
Male	18%
Female	80%
N/A	2%
Race/Ethnicity	
White	80%
Hispanic	13%
Other	4%
N/A	3%
Education	
High School	44%
Associate's Degree	16%
Bachelor's Degree	24%
Graduate Degree	15%
N/A	1%

The survey found that individuals post on social media for many reasons, especially personal interests, although some use it to follow public concerns, such as politics, social events, and current issues. The audience surveyed have a plethora of

topics on which they regularly post, which are frequently the topics of news stories in the media: Several cited pet/animal issues, education, religion, family, relationships, health, entertainment, and recipes; other individual interests included breastfeeding, veterans, friendships, vegan issues, women's rights, creative ideas, gun rights, funny or inspirational offerings, kid's activities, weather, fishing, autism, psychology, health, and business.

Although 70 respondents readily participate on social media – and do so frequently with all but one posting entries at least once a week – 12.5% of those surveyed expressed concern over interaction with the medium. Six cited privacy issues, and two others were cautious because of their jobs and the impact social media could have on their positions. As an example, one of those expressing this concern was a teacher in the community. Three others who did not post indicated no interest in interaction, with one participant saying the sites were used for fun only and another wanting to avoid arguments. Another said they restrict social media use to friends and family only.

RQ 4 How do consumers determine what should and should not be posted on the newspaper's social media pages?

The local newspapers appear to have a loyal following, with 50% of the respondents reading the paper for more than 10 years, and most reading the paper more than four days a week. Half of those surveyed read the paper online only, and another 38% read a combination of online and print issues of the paper. Only 12% of the sample read the print edition of the paper only.

Most of the respondents visit the newspapers' social media sites and use the features to interact, with 53 using likes, 45 using shares, 37 commenting, 30 perusing

photos, 17 watching videos, and 14 using hyperlinks. This demonstrates significant interaction and feedback from the audience at a local level, which allows the paper to gauge what stories, photos, and videos are of importance to readers of community newspapers. Often this unofficial poll of reader engagement is used to create the RSS fed of news on the paper's web or to prioritize what is prominently displayed on the web site.

Forty percent of those surveyed provided insight for why they post on the newspaper's social media sites. One in five of this subsample said they were interested in participating with comments, opinions, or responses to the paper. One reader said his comments were designed "to give my opinion on what's going in the community," and another indicated it was "to be a part of the stories & articles." Some of the responses – often consisted of one-word answers, such as "comments" – which also may be construed to indicate the audience wants to read the comments and opinions of others.

Another 6% of respondents said the newspaper's social media sites were used to share online stories, such as one reader that indicated that she posted "to share articles with others that are part of my 'friends' in the social media world that either live down the road from me or several states away." Another 6% use the newspaper's social media sites to read, either for "fun" or to "keep up with what's going on in my city." The survey also indicated other reasons for posting likes, shares, or comments, including responding to articles about themselves, community events, real-time traffic reports, or encouraging staff at the paper "so they know that they are reaching people and to show appreciation for their work." Another 6% said they don't comment or rarely provide any feedback.

Half of respondents indicated why they do not post on the newspaper's social media sites, with 30% of this subsample signifying they are simply not interested or do

not want to share their opinions with others. Another 8% did not want to get involved with the heated debates that occur on the pages of the paper, with one reader citing "to many hateful people." Another 8% who did not post on the newspaper's social media sites were concerned with privacy issues because of the public nature of the sites. Others said the accessibility of articles and a lack of a subscription prevented their participation, while a few called the practice of posting a "waste of time" or "silly."

The survey also found minimal personal interaction between respondents and editors or among readers of the paper on the newspaper's social media sites. Very few participants were ever quoted in the newspapers, although when it did occur, they were generally quoted by name, with an indication that quotes came from social media.

Participants also revealed what they believe are the benefits and challenges of social media for today's newspapers. Half of those surveyed said social media is a good way to keep informed and is a quicker, easier, and more convenient way to get information. Others praised the immediacy of the news, saying social media sites provide more current information than the print edition. "The benefits of social media posts to me are that I can receive current updates on news that is occurring," a reader said. "When I receive Twitter updates from those that I follow, I know that someone has already sifted through and made recommendations as to what they believe might meet my interest."

Others said social media is a good vehicle for sharing information with others or to provide comments on what is happening in their community. "[It] gauges local attitudes," one reader wrote. Another reader saw social media as a way to correction misinformation, but others see no value in the medium. For some, social media allows a personal connection to family, friends, former colleagues or students.

More than 50% of those surveyed responded to a question asking about the challenges posed by social media. One in four of this subsample said they no issues with the medium, but another 20% said that the comment sections get out of hand. "Some people who are extremely ignorant and opinionated post too often," one said. Fifteen percent expressed concern about false or misleading information or reporter bias on social media pages. Five respondents said technical issues plagued newspaper's social media sites, including internet outages, pop-up ads, limited views, or spam. Two others repeated concerns over privacy issues, and two discussed the addictive nature of social media. Finally, one reader ponders whether older people were being left out of the news because of online mediums.

In summation, those surveyed seemed to enjoy their local newspapers, although they take issue with comments on social media by the public. "There seems to be a select group of people who comment on articles on a regular basis and tend to be familiar with each other," said one reader. "Oftentimes the comment sections seem to act more like a local chat room and tend to take a very personal note very quickly," said a second reader. Another respondent mused, "I believe it's ok for everyone to have their own opinion, that's what makes us individuals. I also believe that you don't have to like someone else's opinion but you have to respect it, just like they have to respect your opinion. Never bash someone because they have a different opinion or view than you, it's just not worth it."

Another reader bemoaned the adoption of paywalls to access information from the local press. "With the onset of social media, and more importantly, the social media presence of the Newspaper, itself, there should be no charge for an online edition. This is the day, and age, of instant news. If people are limited to 4 free pages per month, on the

official website, it forces them to find another source for their news and discard the need

for the Newspaper, at all," one reader observed.

CHAPTER VI

Conclusion and Discussion

Castells (2000) argues that society has transitioned to the Information Age, which is based on digital media and communication networks. This brave new world replaces the top-down structure of the industrial age and interchanges it with a more horizontal playing field, which equalizes the ability to participate for all users of the system. Digital media is creating a new public sphere, a place for open and rational public debate free from government interference, and these new interactions and technology are changing what the public sees, hears, and shares (Couldry, 2012; Habermas, 1989; Miller, 2011).

This revolution can be witnessed in the ongoing use of social media by local newspapers, where sites like Facebook and Twitter are altering the way traditional media selects and distributes news stories to the public. No longer is gatekeeping a linear process, where individuals monopolize decisions on what is newsworthy (Lewin, 1951; Manning, 1950), but rather a shared and interactive process whereby editors and users have a role in the gatekeeping function of news (Barzilai-Nahon, 2008; Bro & Wallberg, 2015; McCombs et al, 2011; Shoemaker & Vos, 2009; Tewskbury & Rittenberg, 2012). For better or worse, social media is the new public sphere for debate on local issues, although few are participating in the process. That sentiment is echoed in comments by users of five local newspapers in Texas. "I want to be a part of the stories and articles," said a 35-year-old woman. "I want to share online stories with others," said a 22-year-old woman. "[It] keeps me up to date with issues," said a 41-year-old female participant.

This study explores what editors and users are seeking in social media, both generally and on the local newspaper sites, and its impact on news. The resounding

answer is interaction, whether on a personal or professional level, and it is having an impact on the gatekeeping function in community newspapers in deciding what is newsworthy and how news is published in the digital age.

This new public sphere is demonstrated in one of the smallest papers in the survey, which has five times the following on its official Facebook site than it does in its paid, print circulation. The editor of that paper said:

> From a journalist's perspective, I think the greatest tool from social media is the reader interaction. We have the ability through social media to engage in a one-on-one conversation with each and every one of our readers on a minute by minute basis if we so choose to do that. We can reach out to our sources, we can identify sources, we can encourage people that hey if you're driving through the flood or tornado damaged part of town, take a picture, and share it with us, and they do. So it has brought us closer together with our readers and that perhaps the best part of social media.

Fuchs (2014) concludes that social media is the convergence of personal communication and public media, creating the ability to share, cooperate, and take action outside of traditional groups and organizations. Respondents in this study indicate they use social media channels mostly to keep up with friends and family, but many of the topics they discuss are of public interest and debate in the newspaper. When asked why they post on social media, respondents echoed some of the same sentiments: "Commentary on news and events, sharing photos and keeping up with family and friends," said a 22-year-old Hispanic woman and "To stay connected to friends and the world," said a 25-year-old woman.

Editors are using social media to monitor conversations, employing their personal or professional social media pages to keep tabs on their readers for ideas and information. The editor of the largest paper in the study uses his personal social media page to keep track of his audience. He said:

> I have 5,000 friends on my personal Facebook page and that's the max that Facebook allows on your personal page. You can have a public figure page and have as many followers as you want, but the personal page works better for interaction with people. You have a lot more features, I guess, and you have the ability to communicate with readers that way so I've been a big believer in doing that. I don't technically have 5,000 friends, but everyone wants to know how to reach the editor, and I am happy to do that.

Recent studies found a shift in news mediums from traditional outlets, such as newspapers and television, to more digital formats, such as web sites and social media networks. In fact, McCombs et al. (2011) argues that social media has surpassed newspapers as the primary sources of public affairs news. This trend is evidence in this study of Texas newspapers. Facebook "likes" outpace the circulations of the print editions in four of the five papers, expanding coverage to more people in the community and around the world. The only paper that doesn't allow interaction on social media has a higher print circulation.

One paper with a paid print circulation of 10,000 gets one million page views a month on the newspaper's social media sites. The editor of the paper said:

> Studies have shown when you talk about people who want to get news and read about news who are making that shift to digital, a growing percentage are getting

that news from Facebook and so Facebook is important, and we really put a focus

on that over the last couple of years. We had some real progress and growth not

only with the [sic], but some of our other products as well. Tremendous growth.

Mainly, that is where people are going to get their news.

All five papers use Facebook and Twitter to deliver ongoing news to their

audiences, often every hour during the day, and Facebook was the top site identified by

users in the survey as their social media channel of choice. Readers said they generally do

not use other channels for news, although when they do, it is YouTube, Instagram, and

Twitter. The newspapers in this study concentrate on Facebook to engage readers,

although Twitter has provided a venue to entice the audience back to stories in print or on

the newspapers' web sites. The newspapers also use video on Facebook, but do not have

YouTube pages. Their photo and video content are limited to Facebook.

This heavy interaction between editors and users on social media is leading to

network gatekeeping, where the focus is no longer on the sender and receiver of

information, but rather the complex interaction between the gatekeepers and the gated in

creating and distributing information (Barzilai-Nahon, 2008). On social media, the gated

can be the gatekeeper by information they contribute or by information they share on

their personal network sites. One reader, a 27-year-old White female, said she

participates on the newspaper's social media page "to share our articles with others that

are part of my 'friends' in the social media world that either live down the road from me

or several states away."

Barilai-Nahon (2008) used the Network Gatekeeping Model to analyze four key

attributes for the gatekeeping role – the political power, the power to produce

information, the relationships between gated and gatekeeper, and alternatives in the context of gatekeeping. In this model, however, she said that although the relationship between the gated and gatekeepers is dynamic, the individual has little power because of his or her limited ability to produce information.

This study demonstrates the power of the gated at community newspapers, and the influence that individuals have on the gatekeeping of news at the local level by what they read, what they share, and the comments they make on social media. This interaction frequently usurps the ability of the editor to determine what is newsworthy and to remain fair, accurate, and objective in the process because stories and user comments are interwoven. Here are some examples of how individuals break through traditional gatekeeping boundaries.

Editors are monitoring social media, both for comments as well as likes and shares, and use this information in their daily newsgathering operations. The interaction between editors and social media users are allowing the audience to participate in news and to determine what is newsworthy. Editors are relying on readers' input to decide what it the most important news, using it as the basis of the RSS news fed on the front page of their online sites. One paper even invited the public to attend its daily news meeting in an effort to be more transparent, which would allow the audience to have input on the news that would be covered on a daily basis. Breaking news often comes from the audience, as demonstrated by photos and comments contributed by users during recent floods in the state, with the paper acting as a public conduit for information. Editors depend on their readers to make their stories "viral" to expand their audience on the web. Editors are using social media to identify stories or for crowdsourcing to find

people willing to participate in topical articles. Editors are engaged to track down rumors and weed out fact from fiction in breaking news. Sometimes social media is serving as the editor to correct misinformation before it is printed. All of these actions are evidence of a complex, shared approach to determine what is newsworthy and how it is presented in the pages of the local press.

Digital media blurs the lines between consumers and producers of online news and challenges the traditional roles, norms, and routines of journalists in the gatekeeping process. This allows the audience to help frame stories in the local newspaper (Chao-Chen, 2013). Social media is a vehicle for public debate on issues of importance to the community and serves to distribute information to a much broader audience. But it also becomes a cauldron of emotions and public attacks, which contribute to an "affective news stream," based not on the tenets of journalism, but rather on the experiences, opinions, and emotions of the audience (Papacharissi & de Fatima Oliveira, 2012). It is becoming news from the user's point of view (Lee, 2015). One participant in the study noted public input in local media is monopolized by a few, acting more as a local bulletin board than an editorial product. A 25-year old female reader responded:

> There seems to be a select group of people who comment on articles on a regular basis and tend to be familiar with each other. Oftentimes the comment sections seem to act more like a local chat room and tend to take a very personal note very quickly.

In sharing the gatekeeping role for the local press, both editors and their audiences have input on local news. The role of the editor and the journalism profession are to ensure that the news is delivered fairly, accurately, and objectively. This study examines

several ways that editors are straying from these critical norms in the profession, such as

comingling personal and professional social media sites, utilizing breaking news from

social media users without verification, and allowing social media to dictate how news is

displayed on web sites and RSS feeds. It also demonstrates the need to educate the

public on how to evaluate the newsworthiness of information as they juggle more and

more channels in their daily lives. One editor said:

> To me it is more important than ever that people become educated news
>
> consumers…There is a news literacy project out there that I am interest in but I
>
> haven't followed that closely. Because you go to Facebook and there is a link to
>
> anything and people often are linked to ridiculous web sites with no validity to
>
> them, and it worries me that people are not educated enough about news literacy
>
> to discern what's a credible site and what's not. And then I have a fear that
>
> especially with some of the rhetoric in the presidential campaign that basically all
>
> sources of information are being thrown out as credible, so there is no credible
>
> news organization, there is no credible anything, so what is the truth anymore? I
>
> fear that people are going to think that way, that there is no credible information
>
> anymore, so whatever anybody says the loudest and the longest is what sticks.

For readers of social media, it is often difficult to identify false or misleading

information both in general social media and on the newspaper's social media channels.

"News sites that purposely misinform or lie are rampant on [F]acebook and it causes

major issues in society," said a 45-year-old woman. Another 37-year old woman also

expressed concern about reporter bias: "Knowing if it is true or false. Is the reporter

biased."

Nowhere is this more apparent than in breaking news, when the rush to get the information out fast overshadows journalistic standards of accuracy and timeliness (Lasica, 2003). Editors are relying on readers to provide photos or story leads, with facts and verification left by the wayside. One editor said, "We had quite a bit of bad weather. We actually received quite a bit of reader submitted photos on severe weather events. Those types of breaking news stories are because now everybody that has a cell phone is a professional photographer or at least they think so anyway." Also, in this new world of immediacy, it is the editor's constant job to keep a finger on the pulse of the community to track down rumors and misinformation to avoid bias or disaster, such as the case of a rumor about child abduction leading to vigilantism at one of the papers. An editor recalled:

> Someone posted that they saw a white van trying to abduct a kid and then people started crowding around and people start posting actually who they thought was the suspect and was he on the sexual registry list and all this stuff. It was becoming this social media vigilante that was going on and we get a hold of the school district and the police and really nothing had happened. They had blown this entirely out of proportion, the people, and there was no attempted child abduction and the person's picture they had posted has nothing to do with anything and they were ready to lynch him and his kids went to school in that school district and so there was concern about what was happening to them and it was all through social media.

One of the editors noted that news is being boiled down to 140 characters on Twitter, an argument advanced by Revers (2014), and that the audience has lost its ability

to examine the depth and breadth of issues. He said: "We don't want to know the context behind the information, society just wants the headlines. What happened, ok, that's all I care about, and I find that very frustrating and heartbreaking at the same time." Readers, on the other hand, do not trust local news. "Sometimes the stories aren't accurate or up to date like major news stations. Other times, the articles are sometimes posted days after the incident," said a White male.

Social media also creates competition for the news, both from an editorial and business point of view (Bell, 2016; Lipshultz, 2015; Ojajarvi & Valtonen, 2012; Powers, Sohn, & Briggs-Bunting, 2014). With the introduction of the internet and social media, many newspapers are struggling to survive. Editors in this study also bemoaned the ongoing challenge of how to monetize social media to drive traffic and revenue to the newspaper's web site or print editions. While some in the study use the "Hail Mary" approach, making all content available on the internet, some have introduced a paywall that limits the number of stories readers can see without a subscription. "To me, the biggest challenge is that we are giving away our content for free, and it is being controlled more and more by an outside source – Facebook. Facebook is not the publisher but they get the benefits of everything we create," said one editor.

A few readers weighed in on paywalls, saying they limit their ability to see and participate in news at the local level. Readers also expressed annoyance with other issues affiliated with revenue sources, such as pop-up ads, limited views, and spam. There is a delicate balance between access to news and paying for it in the digital age, and it is worth continuing investigation for a workable solution, especially at the local level that

cannot rely on large, national advertiser to carry the load. One man in the survey commented:

> The Newspaper's online site limits readers to 4 free pages per month. I believe this is due to the decline in demand for newsprint editions. I can understand the need to charge for newsprint editions. However, with the onset of social media, and more importantly, the social media presence of the Newspaper, itself, there should be no charge for an online edition. This is the day, and age, of instant news. If people are limited to 4 free pages per month, on the official website, it forces them to find another source for their news and discard the need for the Newspaper, at all.

In conclusion, social media is the new front page for newspapers in the digital era, and editors and users share responsibility for the content. Both determine what is newsworthy by monitoring social media and comments and sharing information with friends, family, and the broader community. Social media also drives the information that is available in the newspaper's online and print editions. However, there are many players involved in the decision-making process of networked gatekeeping, which also include governments, regulators, search providers, network service providers, and organizations, and this study only investigates a limited part of that spectrum. Further investigation may reveal the influence of other entities in the complex process of network gatekeeping and determining news values in local newspapers.

CHAPTER VII

Limitations

Due to the narrow nature of this study, this investigation has significant limitations for both internal and external validity. The internal and external validity are influenced heavily by the convenience sample of newspapers and readers who participated in the study. The newspapers, which vary widely in size from 4,200 to 26,000, were all based in Texas and do not represent all community papers in the state, much less those across the nation or world. The readers were solicited only on the newspaper's social media sites and volunteered for participation, and their responses cannot be generalized either for participants on social media or those that use newspaper social media sites.

The study also has significant challenges for external validity. The study is based on a very limited sample of Texas papers and editors, and only 80 readers participated in the online survey. This is a very small sample compared to the general circulations of the paper as well as their social media sites. In addition, one of the papers did not participate in the online survey, as the original editor interviewed was replaced midway through the study, and the new editor did not wish to continue with the research project. While the study did include opened-ended questions, it required interpretation by the investigator, which may or may not have been valid and accurate. For example, when asked what participants like to do on social media, did the term "Comments" mean they liked to comment or to read comments of others?

The study relied on a qualitative approach to research by analyzing the responses of editors and social media users to draw conclusions about how these mediums are used

in gatekeeping to determine news values and newsworthiness. The study did not use any quantitative data, other than demographics, which subject the results to bias of the investigator. Even the demographics were not representative of the populations in the communities that were served. The study also did not include content analysis of editor and reader responses, which may provide more accurate and verifiable information for the study, as it would be based on the analysis of several, independent reviewers.

The study focused solely on social media and its users to determine their influence on gatekeeping in news and did not take into account other avenues that might have an impact of reporting and publishing, including the papers' web sites or those who view the paper in print. As a study of network gatekeeping, the study did not investigate other players that might influence the news, including governments, regulators, search providers, network service providers, and organizations.

In the future, these broader audiences of community newspapers should be taken into account, with surveys of users of the newspaper's web sites as well as the print edition. Future studies also could investigate the role of other networks that affect newsgathering in the paper, including advertisers, governments, organizations, and service providers, to name a few. These studies would provide a more comprehensive look at the influences on news in today's media.

Content analysis of social media posts and newspaper stories would provide a beneficial overview of what information is being used in the paper from social media. It would be interesting to find out specifically how social media is influencing community news and what types of information are crossing the line between news consumers and news producer. For example, how much of a role do social media play in reporting and

distributing breaking news? Or do newspapers tend to use facts or opinions from social media in stories? These are just two of many questions that could guide a discussion on the interaction between the audience and media in the formation of stories.

While the study does have significant limitations, it offers broad insight into the influence of social media in today's local newspapers. This study, I hope, can contribute to research efforts to track and assess the evolving nature of local news and serve as a guide to practitioners in the field on the benefits and challenges of social media at the local level. In this new genre of network gatekeeping, it offers valuable lessons on the interactions between the gated and gatekeepers, and the contributions each make in creating a new public sphere for open debate, moderated by fair, accurate and objective reporting.

CHAPTER VIII

Future Studies

This investigation into the gatekeeping role in community newspapers through social media generated several avenues for future studies.

Because this study relies heavily on a survey of social media users and what they seek from social media sites, especially on the newspaper's Facebook and Twitter offerings, it provides insight into the uses and gratifications theory. While the purpose of this study was to investigate how social media is used to determine news at the local level, this approach also would be valuable to examine the functions that social media serve for the audience in local media. Does social media meet the cognitive (knowledge), affective (emotional), personal integrative (confidence) or social integrative (relationship) needs of individuals suggested by Katz, Gurevitch and Hatch (1973)? Or is media use by individuals driven more by habits or routines (Elliott & Rosenberg, 1987; Stone & Stone, 1990)? With the movement of information to more digital formats with multiple channels, this is an important area of study for understanding media in the Information Age.

In this study, some readers expressed concern over privacy issues on social media and the newspapers' social media networks. It would be interesting to see the impact privacy is having on participation with public sites, such as a newspaper. Readers also noted that the newspaper social media sites are dominated by a few, causing people not to post their opinions on the site. What does this mean for the democratization of the internet? Another issue raised by readers and editors was the impact of paywalls, and the

influence they have on local newspaper readership. It would be informative to the field to investigate several options to see how different models affect media sales.

Editors raised some very interesting issues for study. One editor said that news has been reduced to 140 characters, and the audience no longer is reading or understanding keys issues. Is this true? In addition, both readers and editors questioned journalistic standards online and whether newspapers are verifying the accuracy of information in the race to publish news first. As journalism evolves in the digital age, it is important to examine how it is impacting journalism standards or the influence of outside content on the news.

In this era of digital media, it is crucial to step back and to see how news is evolving and changing in the online world and to find new and innovative ways to promote the Fourth Estate. Without careful evaluation and consideration, the new public sphere many not have a guide for democratization, and people may lose faith in the profession created to be fair, objective, and accurate. Without journalism, there is no news; there is only information.

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    Electronic Media, *58*(3), 420-437. doi:10.1080/08838151.2014.935853

APPENDIX A

87 N. Deerfoot Circle
The Woodlands, Texas
March 8, 2016

Dear Editor,

My name is Beth Kuhles, and I am a graduate student in Digital Media Studies at Sam Houston State University. I am currently working on my thesis and would like to explore how editors and readers use social media in community newspapers, and the impact it has on the news.

The study will include five community newspapers in Texas, and I would like to include your paper because of its use of Facebook and Twitter. The study would include an in-depth interview with the editor of the paper, which is expected to take 20 minutes on a non-deadline day in your office.

I also would like to survey readers by including a link on your social media pages to a Survey Monkey questionnaire. Readers will be given a chance to enter a drawing to win a $50 gift certificate to a local restaurant for participating in the survey. I was hoping to post the survey link on the paper's social media sites three times during the three-month study period.

Among the questions I hope to explore with you are how you use social media in your editorial process, how you interpret or use the results, and the benefits and challenges of social media in your newspaper. I hope to pose similar questions to your audience.

I would be glad to share the results of my thesis with you upon its completion in December 2016. As a lifelong journalist with 30 years of experience in the field, I hope my research will provide some insight as to what readers are seeking from newspapers' social media sites and what editors are delivering to their customers.

Please let me know if you are interested in participating, and I will contact you next week to set up a day and time that is convenient for an interview. I also would like to send you a copy of the survey to post on your social media sites beginning April 15.

Thank you for considering my request. I would happy to discuss any questions you may have. I look forward to working with you on this important issue for the future of local journalism.

Sincerely,

Beth Kuhles
(281) 782-5482

APPENDIX B

Informed Consent

My name is Elizabeth Kuhles-Heiney, and I am Master of Digital Media Studies Student in the Department of Mass Communications at Sam Houston State University. I would like to take this opportunity to invite you to participate in a research study of community newspapers and social media. I am conducting this research under the direction of Dr. Marcus Funk. I hope that data from this research will provide new insights into what editors and users expect from the newspapers' social media sites and how this interaction affects news in your community. You have been asked to participate in the research because your publication fits the criteria for community newspapers with circulations under 50,000.

The research is relatively straightforward, and we do not expect the research to pose any risk to any of the volunteer participants. If you consent to participate in this research, you will be interviewed in-person at your newspaper office, and the interview will be recorded. Editors will be asked to place a notice and link to the survey on the newspaper's social media sites once a month for the three-month duration of the study. Participation in the user survey is voluntary, and users will have the opportunity to enter a drawing for a $50 gift certificate to a local restaurant at each paper. Participants' emails will be collected solely for the drawing and will not be used for any other part of the study. Any data obtained from you or your newspaper's users will only be used for the purpose of understanding what editors and users expect from newspaper social media sites and how it affects news in the community. Under no circumstances will you or any other participants who participated in this research be identified. In addition, your data will remain confidential. This research will require about 20 minutes of your time. Editors and participants will not be paid or otherwise compensated for their participation in this project.

Participation is voluntary. If you decide to not participate in this research, your decision will not affect your future relations with Sam Houston State University. Also, if at any point during the research you decide to withdraw, or do not wish to, participate in the remainder of the research you are free to withdraw your consent and to discontinue participation at any time without affecting that relationship. If you have any questions, please feel free to ask me using the contact information below. If you are interested, the results of this study will be available at the conclusion of the project.

If you have any questions about this research, please feel free to contact me, Elizabeth Kuhles-Heiney, or Dr. Marcus Funk. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as research participants, please contact Sharla Miles, Office of Research and Sponsored Programs, using her contact information below.

A copy of this consent form is available for your records.

Elizabeth Kuhles-Heiney	Dr. Marcus Funk	Sharla Miles
SHSU Department of Mass Communications	SHSU Department of Mass Communications	Office of Research and Sponsored Programs
Sam Houston State University	Sam Houston State University	Sam Houston State University
Huntsville, TX 77341	Huntsville, TX 77341	Huntsville, TX 77341
Phone: (281) 782-5482	Phone: (936) 294-3553	Phone: (936) 294-4875
E-mail: kuhles@shsu.edu	E-mail: njf023@shsu.edu	Email: irb@shsu.edu

☐ I understand the above and consent to participate.

☐ I do not wish to participate in the current study.

A copy of this consent form is available for your records.

Can you please tell me about the history of your paper?

What social media avenues does your paper use?

Why does your paper use social media?

How do you plan your posts on social media?

What do you emphasize in your posts?

Are you looking for specific reactions?

Do you interact with users on social media?

How do you interact with users on social media?

What are the benefits of social media for your paper?

What are the challenges of social media in your paper?

How do you use comments on the paper's social media?

How do you decide what reader content is used online?

How do you decide what reader content not to use online?

Do you personally use social media sites?

What social media sites do you use?

Do you post on your personal media sites?

Why do you post on your social media sites?

Why do you not post on your social media sites?

What is your age?

What is your sex?

How many years have you served as editor?

APPENDIX C

Sam Houston
STATE UNIVERSITY
A Member of The Texas State University System

Informed Consent

My name is Elizabeth Kuhles-Heiney, and I am Master of Digital Media Studies student in the Department of Mass Communications at Sam Houston State University. I would like to take this opportunity to invite you to participate in a research study of community newspapers and social media. I am conducting this research under the direction of Dr. Marcus Funk. I hope that data from this research will provide new insights into what editors and users expect from the newspapers' social media sites and how this interaction affects news in your community. You have been asked to participate in the research because your publication fits the criteria for community newspapers with circulations under 50,000.

The research is relatively straightforward, and we do not expect the research to pose any risk to any of the volunteer participants. You must be at least 18 years old to participate in the study. If you consent to participate in this research, you will be directed to an online survey which includes questions on your use of social media generally and the newspapers' social media sites specifically. Once you complete the survey, you be asked for your email for a chance to win a $50 gift card to a local restaurant, and your email will remain separate from your survey responses. Your email will be used solely for the drawing, and you will be notified after the three-month study period if you are the winner of the gift card. Any data obtained from you will be used only for the purpose of understanding what users expect from newspaper social media sites and how it affects news in the community. Under no circumstances will you or any other participants who participated in this research be identified. In addition, your data will remain confidential. This research will require about 20 minutes of your time. Editors and participants will not be paid or otherwise compensated for their participation in this project.

Participation is voluntary. If you decide to not participate in this research, your decision will not affect your future relations with Sam Houston State University. Also, if at any point during the research you decide to withdraw, or do not wish to, participate in the remainder of the research you are free to withdraw your consent and to discontinue participation at any time without affecting that relationship. If you have any questions, please feel free to ask me using the contact information below. If you are interested, the results of this study will be available at the conclusion of the project.

If you have any questions about this research, please feel free to contact me, Elizabeth Kuhles-Heiney, or Dr. Marcus Funk. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as research participants, please contact Sharla Miles, Office of Research and Sponsored Programs, using her contact information below.

A copy of this consent form is available for your records.

Elizabeth Kuhles-Heiney SHSU Department of Mass Communications Sam Houston State University Huntsville, TX 77341 Phone: (281) 782-5482 E-mail: kuhles@shsu.edu	Dr. Marcus Funk SHSU Department of Mass Communications Sam Houston State University Huntsville, TX 77341 Phone: (936) 294-3553 E-mail: njf023@shsu.edu	Sharla Miles Office of Research and Sponsored Programs Sam Houston State University Huntsville, TX 77341 Phone: (936) 294-4875 Email: irb@shsu.edu

☐ I understand the above and consent to participate.

☐ I do not wish to participate in the current study.

I am at least 18 years old. ☐Yes ☐No

A copy of this consent form is available for your records.

General Newspaper Use

Which community newspaper serves your area?

Do you read the paper?
How long have you read the paper?
How many days a week do you read the newspaper's online content?
General Social Media Use

What social media sites do you use?
☐   Facebook
☐   Twitter
☐   YouTube
☐   Photo site
☐   Other: | please name |

Do you post to social media sites?
○ Yes ○ No

If so, on which sites do you post most frequently?
[   ]

How many days a week do you post on social media sites?

Why do you post on social media sites?
[   ]

Do you have special issues/topics which make you engage in social media sites?
[   ]

If not, why don't you post on social media sites?
[   ]

Newspaper Social Media Use

Do you visit the newspaper's social media site?
○ Yes ○ No

What features do you use on the social media site?
☐   Like (Heart)
☐   Share (Retweet)

☐ Comment

☐ Hyperlinks

☐ Photos

☐ Videos

☐ Other: | please explain |

How many times a week do you post to the newspaper's social media sites?

Why do you post on newspaper's social media sites?

If not, why don't you post on the newspapers social media sites?

Do you interact with newspaper staff online?

○ Yes ○ No

Do you interact with other users on the newspaper's social media sites?

○ Yes ○ No

What are the benefits of the social media posts for you?

What are the challenges of the social media posts for you?

Have your posts ever been quoted in the newspaper?

○ Yes ○ No

If so, did they use your name?

○ Yes ○ No

Have your posts ever been deleted by the paper?

○ Yes ○ No

If Yes, please explain

Demographics

Gender:

○ Male ○ Female ○ Other

Age:

| | years old

Education:

Ethnicity:
Is there anything you would like to add?

VITA

ELIZABETH M. KUHLES-HEINEY

EMPLOYMENT

Current

Publications Officer, Sam Houston State University, College of Criminal Justice, August 2010-present

- Handles media and public relations for College and affiliated professional organizations
- Produces and tracks social media, including Blog, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Linked In accounts
- Provides content for the Web sites, mass emails, and digital electronic signs
- Shoots photography and videos for the College
- Produces quarterly alumni newsletter and edits academic journal

Media in Texas and New Jersey

- Freelance Writer, *Houston Chronicle*, August 2000 to September 2010
- Editor, *New Jersey Outdoors,* October 1993 to July 1996
- Assistant Editor, *New Jersey Lawyer*, December 1991 to May 1993
- Staff Writer, *Garden State News Service* for five New Jersey dailies, May 1988 to February 1989, September to December 1991
- Associate Producer, "Right to Know," New Jersey Network/WNYC-TV, May 1986 to June 1987
- Staff Writer, *Hudson Dispatch*, July 1983 to June 1986

Public Relations, Government/Non-Profit Agencies

- Manager of Public Information, Metropolitan Transit Authority of Harris County, January 1999 to September 1999
- Public Information Officer, Juvenile Justice Commission, February 1997 to November 1999
- Communications Coordinator, Hyacinth Foundation for AIDS services, February 1991 to September 1991

Marketing, Private Firm

- Writer/Editor, D. Hilton Associates Inc., marketing firm for credit unions, October 1999 to October 2000

Teaching
- Guest Lecturer, Media and Science News, Sam Houston State University, Forensic Science, Ph.D. Program, Fall 2016, Fall 2015
- Adjunct Professor, Basic Reporting, Rutgers Newark College of Arts and Sciences, January to December 1987

EDUCATION

Master of Arts in Digital Media Studies, Sam Houston State University, December 2016
(Thesis: What do editors and the public want from online community newspapers?: Gatekeeping in social media)

Baccalaureate of Arts with Honors in English, with minor in Political Science. Rutgers Newark College of Arts and Sciences, May 1983