

Foreword: New terrain for research in community journalism

John A. Hatcher*

Bill Reader†

For the inaugural issue of Community Journalism, the publisher invited two distinguished community journalism scholars – John A. Hatcher and Bill Reader – to reflect on community journalism as a concept and important avenues of research that conceptualization should encourage. This essay is the product of their efforts.

In August of 2007, the two of us left the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication’s annual convention in Washington, D.C., perplexed by the state of research in the relatively new Community Journalism Interest Group. Although that group’s members seemed to “get it” with regard to how “community journalism” differed from other sub-disciplines (Lauterer, 2006), many of our peers in the broader fields of mass communication continued to look down at community-journalism studies as the domain of former journalism practitioners whose knowledge, skills and interests were limited to one thing: rural, weekly newspapers.

We were frustrated because there were many other scholars, like us, who saw bigger and deeper concepts, and who wanted to see the research mission of COMJIG focus less on the practical and more on the theoretical — to explore the dynamic relationships that exist in the interplay between *community* and *journalism*. One of us emailed the other just days after the convention: “This struggle to inject theory into [the Community Journalism Interest Group] is important but will take time. We need to bring theory-driven researchers into the fold, as the professionals in our midst seem to be interested and responsive to such ideas...”

Fortunately, we were not the only ones to feel that way, and this inaugural issue of *Community Journalism* is evidence of that fact. This new peer-reviewed research journal offers the ideal venue for continued exploration of the role of journalism in

* John A. Hatcher is an assistant professor at the University of Minnesota at Duluth.

† Bill Reader is an associate professor in the E.W. Scripps School of Journalism at Ohio University.

community life (and vice versa) and brings together an editorial board that embraces a diversity of backgrounds that bodes well for the journal's contributions.

The timing could not be better for this new venture. Over the past few years, *community journalism* has become *en vogue*. It is no coincidence that the theme of the 2012 International Communication Association Convention was "Communication and Community." Academic institutions around the world are creating new centers and paths of study encouraging research in community journalism:

- The home of this journal, Texas Christian University's Texas Center for Community Journalism, is one example.
- At UNC Chapel Hill, pioneer community-journalism scholar Jock Lauterer runs the Carolina Community Media Project.
- The University of Kentucky offers the Institute for Rural Journalism and Community Issues.
- The Huck Boyd National Center for Community Media at Kansas State University partners each year with the National Newspaper Association to run a research symposium.
- The University of Alabama has a master's degree program focused on community journalism, in partnership with the *Anniston Star* newspaper.
- A small group of scholars at the University of Texas-Austin recently launched what they call the Community, Journalism & Communication Research collective.
- Major publishers have begun to release entire books on the subject, including most recently *Foundations of Community Journalism* (Reader & Hatcher, 2011), which features chapters and essays written by leading scholars in the field and was compiled specifically to serve the growing number of media scholars who find community-journalism research important and rewarding.

A number of factors seem to be driving that interest. As the political scientist William Riker (1980) noted, in quiet times, the rules are fixed and human behavior is in flux; in turbulent times, institutions are challenged, shaped by social actors. For those who study mass communication, these are, indeed, turbulent times. The rules regarding all we think we know about the nature of journalism are being challenged, driven by a shift in the community/cultural landscape (Deuze, 2006).

"Community" is no longer defined exclusively in terms of proximity or social homogeneity; "journalism" is no longer defined as the work of professionals delivering "the news." Each concept is amorphous and polysemous. Naturally, studying the nexus of the two poses a great number of intellectual and philosophical challenges. But it also provides a wide-open frontier for the expansion of journalism studies.

Clearly, one aspect of the study of community journalism is the study of culture, those unseen rules that dictate so much of social life (Weber, 1958). Community-focused

journalism is not just a reflection of culture but a facilitator of it as well, a part of the ritual of cultural engagement and creation (Carey, 1992). Just as Tocqueville (1835) was interested in the role of the community newspaper in a fledgling democracy built upon the assumption of equality, current scholars of community media are interested in the profound changes in the way we perceive community and of the complete upheaval of the media ecology.

New communication technology is just part of the puzzle, but it is a very big and obvious part. That technology is accessible and adaptable; communication today is egalitarian and instantaneous. Individuals and collectives use media of all types to redefine the concept of news and the parameters of community. In physical communities from the Middle East to Eastern Europe and across Asia, the institutional rules of governance have changed. With them, the landscape in which journalism operates has changed as well. Meanwhile, entirely mediated communities — collectives of dispersed individuals who use media to come together over shared interests, goals and outcomes — appear to be taking a stronger prominence in the lives of individuals.

Today, a person can belong to a vibrant and active community without even knowing the people who live next door. Those communities still need and share news, opinions, and other bits of information that fall under the big tent of journalism. That phenomenon is the *terra nova* of community-journalism research.

Different questions. Bigger answers.

Eroded is the Tocquevillian notion of the citizen and his newspaper, or the romantic idealism of “community” as defined by Thornton Wilder’s *Our Town* or depicted in the television series “Northern Exposure.” Geographically isolated, culturally homogeneous enclaves certainly still exist, as do local news media in communities, but none exist in isolation. In the early 21st century, even Brigadoon would have a coffee shop with free Wi-Fi, and its centennial reappearance would be greeted by a phalanx of national and international news media.

The modern states of both community and journalism are extraordinarily complicated. Consider the case of Sago, W.Va., site of the 2006 coal-mine disaster in which 13 miners were trapped for nearly two days and from which only one was rescued. The community of Sago is served by a weekly newspaper and a few radio stations in nearby Buckhannon, and it is within reasonable driving distance of larger media outlets in Charleston, W.Va., and medium-sized news outlets in the West Virginia towns of Morgantown and Clarksburg.

The disaster also attracted a great number of “parachute journalists” from major national and international news media, many of whom crowded into the tiny village with little or no understanding of the local culture — or the apparent strains their superfluous presence would place on the limited resources of the community.

Late into the night, a miscommunication between rescue workers in the mine and overwhelmed state and local officials resulted in a brief, erroneous belief that the miners had survived; before officials verified the information, journalists at the scene rushed to break the news. *The New York Times* announced “12 Miners Found Alive 41 Hours After Explosion” (Dao, 2006), only to recant hours later with “False Report of 12 Survivors Was Result of Miscommunication” (Dao & Newman, 2006). One reporter at the scene,

NPR's Frank Langfitt, wrote afterward that the heartbreaking error began when rescuers in the mine radioed to the surface that they had found "12 individuals," one of whom was alive. Those on the surface who heard the garbled message quickly began calling friends and family on cell phones, and the desperate officials and family members waiting in the local Baptist church misunderstood the grim message. Langfitt (2006) described the moment:

The news of survivors sweeps through the sweltering sanctuary. In celebration, someone begins ringing the bells in the steeple. Reporters are standing down the hill, corralled by police in a small, muddy area, warming themselves by open fires. A gaggle rushes to the church. Family members say a mine foreman has told them that a dozen men have survived. West Virginia Governor Joe Manchin — apparently relying only on the families' account — gives a thumbs up. Anderson Cooper goes live on CNN.

The local thrice-weekly newspaper, *The Record Delta*, also had put the headline on its pages and went to press at 1 a.m., but a call to the editor from the field reporter about two hours later caused the editor literally to stop the presses and change the headline to "Emotional Rollercoaster Ends in Tragedy," along with an editor's note that read "Due to a devastating series of miscommunications Tuesday night and early Wednesday morning, *The Record Delta* had to be reprinted to correct grievous errors being reported at the mine site at press time." Editor Brian Bergstrom later explained to a student journalist:

We missed all the delivery deadlines, but we did what we had to do. We couldn't have something like that on the front page, almost forcing the families to look at that, if the story was wrong. ... The national media, they got their stories and left. They didn't have to worry about the lingering effects of their stories in the community. We tried to walk the line between ... covering the story and being respectful to the families (Dierkes, 2007).

When the funerals concluded about two weeks later — after the drama was over — the national media left town and discontinued coverage, with only local news media and a couple of large regional newspapers (the *Charleston Gazette* and *Pittsburg Post-Gazette*) providing regular coverage of the investigations and community recovery that followed (Kitch, 2007).

In the traditional mindset of journalism studies, the primary research questions of such a disaster would focus almost exclusively on how such an event was covered by major news media. The community journalism scholar begins by wondering why all of those major news outlets were there in the first place. Other questions to be pursued include:

- Why wasn't it sufficient to rely on news from their peers at local and regional media?

- What benefit to major-media audiences, and to society at large, was provided, considering the extraordinary expense of dispatching staffers from New York or Washington, D.C., to such a remote area, only to have those journalists all gathered together in a designated press-area and provided with the same prepared statements from local authorities?
- What were the short- and long-term effects of such journalistic excess on the miners' family members? On the community at large? On the journalists who live and work in the community every day?

The Sago mine disaster also involved other communities than the people of Upshur County. The mine was owned at the time by International Coal Group, which operated several other mining complexes in four states; the Sago disaster certainly was of interest to the communities near those other mining operations. The disaster also was of interest to the broader community of coal miners, including members of the United Mine Workers of America labor union, which reported 47 coal-mine deaths in 2006, including five that May at the Darby Mine in Harlan County, Kentucky (UMWA, 2006).

Coal-mining companies also formed a distinct community of interest, as did their investors. Mine-safety regulators and inspectors formed another community of interest. Emergency-response workers in coal-mining regions formed another community. The list goes on.

Covering that complex network of communities were all manner of media – blogs, organizational newsletters, professional newsletters, local newspapers and broadcast stations, social media, etc. – producing all manner of journalism, including breaking news, opinion and analysis pieces, informational graphics, profiles and features, investigative reporting, process articles, letters to the editor, etc. That is precisely what we meant in *Foundations of Community Journalism* when we referred to community journalism as “the bottom of the iceberg; it forms the greatest bulk of journalism produced in the world, but it goes largely unnoticed...” (Reader & Hatcher, 2011: xiv). Focusing on how cable-news and major newspapers cover such a disaster, and how society at large reacts, only scratches the surface. It leaves the vast majority of the story untold.

The community journalism scholar looks beneath the surface, and also sees variation at almost every level. We reject assumptions of homogeneity within the citizen-audience. Even communities that define themselves in extraordinarily narrow and niche terms comprise individuals who are diverse and complex. Differences in background, privilege and class must be accounted for. The individual is, as political scientist Dalton (2000) notes, inherently more complicated and more empowered than what was believed in the past.

Furthermore, we can no longer assume that members of “the public” are all being exposed to the same media messages coming through a narrow band of media channels. We have known for some time that journalism does not flow in one direction, especially in the era of interactive digital communication (Rosenberry & St. John, 2009). There are countless formal and informal ways that individual community members produce information themselves and feed information back into the media system. It's almost a stereotype now that as soon as a handful of people decide to form a community, they begin the process by launching a website.

This is where the scholar of community journalism resides. Journalism cannot be fully understood without adding the context of community. From “big N” quantitative work such as public-opinion surveys and content analyses to more close-in, qualitative studies, the opportunities to study community journalism should entice mass communication scholars from many disciplines: sociology, media effects, ethics, law, cultural studies, media and diversity, media economics, international studies, comparative studies.

Add the context of “community” to each of those areas of journalism research, and something happens. Theories get richer. Methods become more rigorous. Results become more interesting. Conclusions are more meaningful.

Essential building blocks of community-journalism research

Although the variables may be limitless, the starting points for community-journalism research are essentially fixed. It is crucial to start with a firm understanding of the concept of community itself. A great resource is Sage’s *Encyclopedia of Community* (Christensen & Levinson, 2003), which offers 500 articles addressing concepts, ideas and issues related to community, including those involving media and mass communication. One of its most valuable contributions is a clear conceptualization of community categorized in four ways: proximate, primordial, instrumental and affinity.

There is a rich body of work that sees place — whether physical or virtual — as the independent variable shaping many aspects of the journalism that is connected to a community. Although some journalists may see their role as “building” or “serving” a community and effecting change, community is seen to hold powerful sway over many aspects of news work. In communities defined by physical *proximity*, other disciplines, including urban studies and geography, offer a rich body of research to ground this kind of study. Scholars such as Jane Jacobs (1961) and Grady Clay (1980), both former journalists, have explored ways to map the community landscape and to understand what makes a community “work.” That is an area of research that is exciting scholars across disciplines.

Likewise, there is considerable work yet to be done on understanding the role of journalism in *primordial* communities — communities built around ethnicity or shared heritage much more than proximity. For example, ethnic newspapers are important factors in the lives of transnational communities, as immigrants establish new enclaves while remaining interested in their former homes, such that they have two (or more) distinct notions of “home,” and “local” can mean any number of things (Lin, Song & Ball-Rokeach, 2010).

Instrumental communities are built around common, relatively short-term goals. The intersection between instrumental communities and journalism is likely to gain much more attention as media scholars study some recent high-profile situations, such as the “Occupy” movement in North America or the “Arab Spring” revolutions of 2011. Likewise, journalism scholars may also be working at present on the role of journalism in certain *affinity* communities, such as people connected by their interests in “slow food” or Justin Bieber (or more serious topics, to be sure).

Beyond determining what kind of community is to be studied is recognizing that all communities are structured to a certain degree. Much of the work in community

journalism scholarship over the past decade is built upon the earlier works of “The Minnesota Team” of Tichenor, Donohue and Olien (1973, 1980), who developed the structural pluralism model to explore how differences in community structure predict differences in the role journalists see for themselves. They first observed how journalists in smaller, more homogeneous communities made choices that framed news in a more consensus-oriented fashion, whereas journalists in more diverse communities favored – or felt empowered to allow, some say – a more conflict-oriented discourse.

That line of research has seen a resurgence. In a summary of both the theory and ways that community structure has been measured and explored, Nah and Armstrong (2011) found research in the community-structure dynamic has mushroomed out into myriad aspects of mass communication research. Scholars have used various measures – workforce, population, income, education, ethnicity and the structures of the media system itself – as the independent variables influencing the attitudes of journalists and the content they produce.

The questions being asked by the scholar determine which aspects of the community should be measured and understood. An important effort to reconcile that is the attempt by Lowrey et. al. (2008) to develop an “index of community journalism” that accounts for numerous variables, and not just the size or geographic ranges of community media. Pollock and colleagues (Pollock, 2007; Pollock & Haake, 2010), for example, found that coverage of same sex marriage issues was influenced by community-level differences in membership in various religious organizations. Watson and Riffe (2011) found that community stressors, such as higher incidents of crime, and not community structure measures, helped to predict whether individuals are more likely to create “placeblogs,” where they write about community public affairs issues.

Like the concept of community, the concept of journalism also is multifaceted and complexly structured. The tradition in journalism research has been to study one channel of the media spectrum. That is useful but limited. There are opportunities to compare different types of community media based on the structure of the media themselves.

Unfortunately, that type of research rarely occurs because often those different styles of community journalism are researched by scholars only interested in one particular silo: *Community journalism* has long been focused only on commercial, print newspapers. *Community media* scholars seem to focus mostly on not-for-profit, citizen-owned radio. *Development journalism* seems mostly focused on NGO-sponsored media serving communities in developing nations. *Citizen journalism* has been appropriated by those who study media produced by community volunteers.

A savvy scholar will see that there is much to be learned in making comparisons across those conceptual boundaries. Traditionally, community media have been compared with and to their larger cousins at national and regional media outlets. That approach has long since outlived its relevance. News media today are hybrid models that are hard to categorize using old definitions — newspapers produce video on websites, TV channels publish ink-on-paper magazines, “mass” media push individualized information to personal, portable devices, while individual journalists working out of their homes publish news and information to thousands of people.

Some of those news media are produced and intended for broad audiences, others for very distinct communities. Community journalism therefore is not only new terrain

for journalism studies, but it also requires scholars to adopt new approaches to research in general.

Conclusion

Is there some central question or grand theme all of this builds toward? It seems that so many of these ideas tie into larger central questions of what new communication technologies mean for the concept of community and where the evolution of the new media system is taking journalism.

Part of being able to answer those questions requires looking back at how previous changes influenced community journalism. The rise of the industrial printing press, the arrival of the radio, the growth of television, the early years of the World Wide Web — each of those events brought with it considerable change to the community-journalism landscape. Each new change altered how media scholars approached the study of news media, but few scholars seemed to consider how those changes also altered the communities served by those media.

A community cannot be seen as a closed system or the individual community member as a passive recipient of information. The modern community journalist is not an autonomous outsider, objectively recording all that transpires, but a community connector who has both a professional and a personal stake in that community. The next step for community journalism research is not to define “community” or “journalism,” but to explore the new ground that exists between them.

Works cited

- Carey, J. (1992). *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society*. New York: Routledge.
- Christensen, K. & Levinson, D. (2003). *Encyclopedia of community: From the village to the virtual world*. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications.
- Clay, G. (1980). *Close-up: How to read the American city*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Dalton, R. J. (2000). Citizen attitudes and political behavior. *Comparative Political Studies*, 33 (6–7), 912–940.
- Dao, J. (2006). 12 Miners Found Alive 41 Hours After Explosion. *The New York Times*, January 4, 2006. From <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/01/04/national/04mine.html> (accessed February 7, 2012).
- Dao, J. & Newman, M. (2006). False Report of 12 Survivors Was Result of Miscommunications. *The New York Times*, January 4, 2006. From <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/01/04/national/04cnd-mine.html> (accessed February 7, 2012).

- Deuze, M. (2006). Ethnic media, community media and participatory culture. *Journalism*, 7 (3), 262-280.
- Dierkes, D. (2007). Local media coverage. Center for Working-Class Studies, Youngstown State University. From <http://cwcs.yosu.edu/about/current-projects/journalism/articles/media> (accessed February 7, 2012).
- Donohue, G. A., Olien, C. N., & Tichenor, P. J. (1980). Leader and editor views of role of press in community development. *Journalism Quarterly*, 62 (2), 367–372.
- Jacobs, J. (1993). *The death and life of great American cities*. New York: Random House. (Original work published 1961).
- Kitch, C. (2007) Mourning ‘Men Joined in Peril and Purpose’: Working-class heroism in news repair of the Sago miners’ story. *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 24 (2), 115-131.
- Langfitt, F. (2006). Covering the Sago mine disaster: How a game of ‘whisper down the coal mine’ ricocheted around the world. *Nieman Reports* 60 (2), 103-104.
- Lauterer, J. (2006). *Community journalism: Relentlessly Local*. (3rd ed.). Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Lin, W.Y, Song, H., & Ball-Rokeach, S. J. (June, 2010). Localizing the global: Exploring the transnational ties that bind in new immigrant communities. *Journal of Communication*, 60(2): 205-229.
- Lowrey, W., Brozana, A., & Mackay, J. B. (2008). Toward a measure of community journalism. *Mass Communication & Society*, 11, 275-299.
- Nah, S. & Armstrong, C. (2011). Structural pluralism in journalism and media studies: A concept explication and theory construction. *Mass Communication and Society*, 14 (6) 857–878.
- Pollock, J. C. (2007). *Tilted mirrors: Media alignment with political and social change*. New York, NY: Hampton.
- Pollock, J. C., & Haake, J. (2010). Nationwide newspaper coverage of same-sex marriage: A community structure approach. *Journal of PR*, 1(1), 13–40.
- Reader, B., & Hatcher, J. A. (2012). *Foundations of community journalism*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications.
- Riker, W. (1980). Implications for the disequilibrium of majority rule for the study of institutions. *The American Political Science Review* 74 (2) 432-446.

- Rosenberry, J. & St. John, B. (2009). *Public journalism 2.0: The promise and reality of a citizen engaged press*. New York: Routledge.
- Tichenor, P. J., Donohue, G. A., & Olien, C. N. (1973). Mass communication research: Evolution of a structural model. *Journalism Quarterly*, 50 (3), 419–425.
- Tocqueville, A. de. (2004). *Democracy in America* (A. Goldhammer, Trans.). New York: Penguin. (Original work published 1835).
- Watson B. & Riffe, D. (2011). Structural determinants of local public affairs place blogging: Structural pluralism and community stress. *Mass Communication and Society*, 14 (6), 879-904.
- Weber, M. (1958). *The Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.