

When the Weekly Leaves Town: The Impact of One Newsroom's Relocation on Sense of Community

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In December 2008, the Laurel Leader, a weekly newspaper serving Laurel, Maryland, moved its newsroom 10 miles north of town to a consolidated newsroom in Columbia, Maryland as a result of corporate financial constraints and real estate consolidation. This study, which utilizes ethnographic interviewing, examines the perspectives of a variety of stakeholders including journalists, readers, city officials, and advertisers on this relocation. James Carey's (1989) ritual theory is used as a theoretical framework to explain the community's reaction to this change. Findings suggest newsroom location contributes to stakeholders' sense of community, which is largely influenced by readers' sense of place. Findings also suggest the move impacted key stakeholders' — journalists, readers and advertisers — perceptions of the newspaper's ability to cover the community.

Key Words: ritual communication, community, community journalism, newsroom relocation, ethnography

Community journalism has been regarded as occurring within the context of a particular geographic community and is often represented by daily or weekly newspapers, short-reach radio and television stations, or local magazines serving small towns and villages across the globe. Community journalism also has been regarded as different from metro, or big-city, journalism.

One popular form of community journalism can be found in the community newspaper. According to the National Newspaper Association (2012), “the distinguishing characteristic of a community newspaper is its commitment to serving the information needs of a particular community.” Whether printed in newspapers or published online, the news that community newspaper reporters produce usually highlights a particular place. Place, then, becomes a central component to the practice of community newspaper reporting and publishing.

But, as more independently-owned or chain-owned newspapers feel the financial pressures of a changing market, some have made questionable modifications to their practices to

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stay afloat. In December 2008, as a result of corporate financial constraints and real estate consolidation, the *Laurel Leader*, a weekly newspaper serving Laurel, Maryland, for more than 100 years, moved its newsroom from Laurel's historic Main Street 10 miles north to a consolidated newsroom in Columbia, Maryland. While this move may have produced the positive financial results corporate executives desired, it created significant challenges on the ground for the other stakeholders, including journalists, readers, and advertisers. This study examines the aftermath of the move from the perspective of those key stakeholders. James Carey's (1989) ritual theory is used to explain what happens to these key stakeholders' sense of community when the newspaper moves out of town.

Literature Review

In 2009, *Editor & Publisher* listed 6,055 community/weekly newspapers and 1,408 daily papers circulating in the United States. According to *Editor & Publisher*, a "weekly" is defined as "any publication printing at least once a week, but less than four times a week" (Maddux, 2009, ii). Although daily metro newspapers have continued decreasing circulation, the same could not be said of community newspapers. The popularity and necessity of community journalism is undeniable; communities everywhere need newspapers committed to the towns they serve. As a result, circulation of weekly papers (paid and free) is nearly on par with dailies, at a total of 45.5 million (Maddux, 2009). Not much current literature exists on the numbers of paid versus free weekly newspapers circulating in the United States. Research has shown paid circulation weeklies far outnumber free circulation weeklies, though free weeklies tend to circulate more copies than paid weeklies. Furthermore, Coulson, Lacy, and Wilson (2001), who used a random stratified sample of weekly newspapers, found ownership of weeklies was fairly equally divided between independents and groups, 50.3 percent to 49.7 percent respectively, and suburban weeklies outnumbered central city and rural publications.

A number of earlier studies interrogated the role news media play in connecting people, finding newspaper reading is linked to both sense of community and community involvement (Park, 1922; Janowitz, 1952; Stamm, 1985; Rothenbuhler, Mullen, DeLaurell, & Ryu, 1996; Stamm, Emig & Hesse, 1997; Yamamoto, 2011). When compared to big city dailies, Lauterer, long-time community journalist turned journalism professor and scholar, said that there is a "philosophical difference" in the way community newspapers approach readers, advertisers, and news in general, because often community journalists know intimately or at least through acquaintance the people and places on which they are reporting (1995, p. xiv). Community journalists, he argued, need to understand the essence of community, the importance of place, of the relationships people maintain, and of the values and goals they share. They also realize they cannot hide behind a masthead. Their readers are their neighbors, their fellow church members, and the people they see in line at the local grocery store or at a table in the coffee shop.

Likewise, readers tend to value community news. This exchange of news between journalists and readers becomes an ongoing conversation people count on engaging in each day or each week. The exchange of news centers on Carey's (1989) idea of ritual communication, which he "conceives [of] communication as a process through which a shared culture is created, modified, and transformed" (p.43). The notion of ritual communication provides the theoretical grounds for a discussion of the purposes of and possibilities for community journalism. Carey's ritual view of communication suggests that communication, both interpersonal and mediated, is not simply a means to transmit information, but rather a ritual that draws "persons together in

fellowship and commonality” (p. 43). But, even more than that, communication allows people to create and sustain the communities through the sharing of common values. He added, “A ritual view of communication is directed not toward the extension of messages in space but toward the maintenance of society in time; not the act of imparting information but the representation of shared beliefs” (p. 18).

Carey’s ritual theory makes clear that conversation and communication are the elements to make community possible. A sense of community is created and is sustained through the process of communicating whether face-to-face or through media. Anderson (1983) made a similar argument about the role newspapers play in creating community in his book on nationalism. Like Carey, he viewed newspaper reading as a “mass ceremony” that contributes to a sense of imagined community. He posits “the newspaper reader, observing exact replicas of his own paper being consumed by his subway, barbershop, or residential neighbours, is continually reassured that the imagined world is visibly rooted in everyday life” (p. 36).

In an age when new technologies allow people to maintain connections with other people and places via the Internet rather than being physically present for conversations or even special events, place remains an essential starting point for a discussion on the requirements of community journalism. Clearly, place or physical proximity is no longer necessary for people to interact, to form relationships, and to stay connected. The Internet affords opportunities for meeting new people and for sharing experiences easily and across virtual space (Evans, 2004).

While it might not be necessary, place still holds importance in an understanding of community insofar as it grounds people and provides them with a sense of identity and a sense of belonging, which serves as an important foundation to build community. After all, people live in some place. Because people’s need to connect with others is so strong, when meeting new acquaintances one of the first questions they tend to ask is “where are you from?” (Frantz, 2003, p. 1). Place serves as an important way for people to establish something in common. Hummon (1990) said conversations about hometowns or places of residence are not merely ways to pass time, but instead represent a distinctly important way in American culture for people to make sense of reality. Debates about small towns, suburbs, and cities characterize contending values, theories of social structure, and even serve to define people. Hummon added that “questions about where one lives become queries about who one is” (p. xiv).

As Hummon (1990) pointed out, place is important for both personal and communal identity. Meyrowitz (1985) highlighted the specialness of place in his treatise on the impact of electronic media, like the television, which he believed were eroding the importance of the physicality of place. Additionally, those who value face-to-face conversation, like Dewey (1927), Carey (1997), and even Habermas (1991), argued that place, or rather social space, is important for fostering social relationships and community. Carey’s (1997) notion of a republican community “is organized around the principle of common social space in which people mingle and become aware of one another as inhabiting a common place” (p. 10). These common places could include a town or neighborhood, but also what Oldenburg (1999) described as third places or “a generic designation for a great variety of public places that host the regular, voluntary, informal, and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals beyond the realms of home and work” (p. 16).

Yet, journalists tend to disregard the need to be involved with, or live in, the community on which they report. Gaziano and McGrath’s (1987) survey of 100 journalists demonstrated the discomfort many journalists feel when living within or getting involved within the communities they cover. While “nearly 9 in 10 agreed that ‘it’s important to know a lot of people in the

community’ ... fewer than 3 in 10 agreed that ‘it’s important for people who work for newspapers to be involved in community organizations’” (p. 320). Overall, Gaziano and McGrath concluded community journalists seek to keep distance between themselves and their readers to maintain a level of credibility for their newspaper (p. 325). This belief likely stems from journalistic codes of ethics, like that of the Society of Professional Journalists’, which is “voluntarily embraced by thousands of journalists” and states that journalists should act independently and “remain free of associations and activities that may compromise integrity or damage credibility” (Society of Professional Journalists, 2000).

This trend identified by Gaziano and McGrath in 1987 has not waned. Mayer (2011) found “journalists still foster and celebrate otherness more than they do connection. Ever mindful of conflicts of interest — actual or perceived — they hold themselves apart from influence and are wary of being swayed by sources or vocal readers” (p. 12). So, community journalism, which Janowitz (1952) argued required human interest and historical perspective, is being done in many places by journalists with little or no connection or intimate knowledge of the towns and communities they cover. As Lauterer (1995) argued, this lack of connection has the potential to diminish the quality of community news. In Laurel, this problem is now exacerbated by the fact that the *Leader’s* newsroom is no longer physically located within the town limits.

Method

Background

On December 11, 2008, at the height of the recent recession, the *Leader* announced its newsroom would relocate to Columbia on December 15, 2008. Trish M. Carroll, president of Patuxent Publishing, and Timothy E. Ryan, president of The Baltimore Sun Media Group, which is owned by the Tribune Company and publishes the *Leader*, announced in a letter to readers the Tribune Company had “filed to restructure debt obligations under the protection of Chapter 11 of the U.S. Bankruptcy Code” (“Note From Company President,” 2008). On December 10, Melanie Dzwonchyk, 53-year-old editor of the *Leader*, posted a brief article online announcing that the *Leader* would relocate its office to the Patuxent Publishing headquarters in Columbia (“New Location,” 2008). The same article appeared in the print edition the next day. In another article published December 11, Dzwonchyk said though the mailing address and production facilities would be changing, the process of covering the community would remain the same; reporters, photographers and editors would be in the community on a daily basis, covering the news. She concluded, “We know how important it is to keep a connection with the community and we pledge to continue it (“Leader Office Relocating,” 2008).

Case Study

Laurel is an appropriate location to study the intersection of community and journalism for a variety of reasons. Laurel is a suburb of two major metropolitan areas, Baltimore and Washington, D.C. Although *The Baltimore Sun* and *The Washington Post* can be found on doorsteps in Laurel, neither newspaper regularly covers with any depth the news of the surrounding suburbs. Besides these national media that are in a sense local, Laurel does not support its own news radio or television stations. The Laurel Cable Network Foundation, Inc. has served Laurel with public access television for the past 22 years, but the television station

has little news. Because of these factors, Laurel news often only can be found in the weekly newspapers including The *Laurel Leader* and the Laurel edition of *The Gazette*, the competing Laurel weekly produced by the Washington Post Co. These two newspapers play a vital role in informing residents about their town. In particular, the *Leader's* move to Columbia had significant impact on local stakeholders, many of whom regarded the newspaper as the “hometown paper” because of its longevity in serving the town.

Because of the case study, the researcher decided to do ethnography to determine how the move of the newspaper impacted people’s feelings toward community. Berg (2007) called for ethnography in case studies because “community case studies may specifically focus on some particular aspect of the community or even some phenomenon that occurs within that community” (p. 297).

The researcher interviewed 40 participants, including journalists and executives at the *Laurel Leader*, city government officials, business owners who advertised in the newspaper, and readers and citizens in Laurel, where the population nears 108,000. Interviews were conducted with individuals, with pairs, and with small groups of three to four people. A different set of questions was devised for participants in each of the constituent groups listed above (see Appendix 1). All participants, depending on the category within which they fell, were asked questions from the appropriate list. Most questions were open-ended and all interviews were semi-structured and conversational.

The participants represented “exemplars of a wide range of characteristics” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 123) and were located through snowball sampling. All interviews were conducted face-to-face at various locations in and around Laurel. Interviews ranged from 30 minutes to two hours. Though the study had a set of pre-determined questions, interviews were conversational and sometimes took unexpected, yet interesting turns. Participants were asked several questions about Laurel, some which allowed them to describe Laurel as if doing so to an outsider; these questions provided insights into how the participants understood Laurel as a place. Then, participants were asked a set of questions related to their consumption, use and/or production of news in Laurel, depending upon the category into which they fell; these questions got at the participants’ perceptions of the state of community news in Laurel. All participants were eager to discuss the status of the newspaper industry in Laurel, including the *Leader's* recent relocation.

According to the most recent census figures available at the time of the data collection (2000), the study’s sample fairly closely matched the racial make-up of Laurel. While Laurel is 55% white, 65% of the participants identified themselves as white. Blacks in Laurel account for 34% of the population, while 13% of the participants identified themselves as black. Asians and “other” account for 7% and 4% of Laurel’s population, respectively, while the participants identified themselves as 1% and 10%, respectively.[†] Obviously, the sample of participants impacted the finding in this research. Those interested in participating in community research were those who felt invested in the community in some way, regardless of their age, race or gender.

All those considered public figures, those whose names are known to the public because of their role in the community, including journalists, city officials and business owners, are

[†] Percentages do not add up to 100 because four participants provided no response to the race question on the questionnaire.

referred to by their real, full names. All other participants not considered public figures, such as citizen and readers, are referred to by a first-name pseudonym.

Upon their written consent, participants who were considered public officials (journalists, publishers, public officials) were named to maintain levels of authenticity and credibility. However, to minimize the risks to the named participants, each was allowed to view a draft of the original work to ensure they were comfortable with the information included. Following Liebow (1993), all named participants also were given an opportunity to comment on the draft, and any information they found to be damaging to their status in Laurel was discussed and was negotiated. Of the 21 named participants, 11 replied with comments. None of the participants requested any changes to their original comments, but rather often responded to the comments made by others. Relevant comments have been included and have been marked as follow-up commentary throughout the findings section. Additionally, some individuals, organizations, or businesses named by the participants in interviews were altered to protect the anonymity of people or places not directly involved in this research.

Interview transcripts were analyzed for common themes and threads. An initial reading of transcripts allowed for thematic categories to emerge; second and third readings allowed for categories to be honed and comments to be further categorized.

Findings

The Leader's Move Disrupts Status Quo

Most of the participants either voluntarily referred to the relocation or were eager to discuss it, although some had not realized the office had moved because the announcement came immediately ahead of the move. Even *Leader* journalists felt uneasy about the way the company handled the move. Pat Farmer, 65-year-old Laurel resident and part-time editorial assistant at the *Leader*, confessed she was upset by the quick announcement and wished the executives had tried to keep the newsroom in Laurel, even suggesting that the editor, Dzwonychk, should ask the mayor for office space in city hall:

The thing that bothered me the most, and I'll go out and say this, is that everything was kept so quiet and the mayor and the other government officials didn't know we were going to be moving until the paper came out.

Mike McLaughlin, 56-year-old Laurel resident and community columnist for the *Leader*, agreed that the decision came quickly, and he overtly criticized the handling of the announcement. He admitted it "wasn't like taking the Baltimore Colts in the middle of the night," but he speculated moving the *Leader* off of Main Street had "devastated a lot of people" in Laurel.

One person devastated by the move was Bob Mignon, 59-year-old Laurel resident and owner of Minuteman Press in Laurel. He was not shy about expressing his disappointment with not only the *Leader's* move, but also its performance in general and immediately following the move to Columbia. Mignon felt the editions immediately following the move were "weak" though the content had been getting stronger since. "It's really a classic destruction of a newspaper. It's horrible. Then [*Leader* editors] wonder why people are going other places [for

news] and the reason they're going other places is that these people aren't providing the content to make themselves successful," Mignon said.

Dzwonchyk acknowledged people's frustration with the newsroom relocation. Residents even had questioned whether or not the newspaper had folded altogether. She recounted a February 2009 phone call with a woman from South Carolina, formerly of Laurel, who told Dzwonchyk the *Leader* had gone out of business. When Dzwonchyk told the woman she was speaking with the editor, the woman continued to insist that they had gone "belly up," or so her friends had told her. Dzwonchyk insisted journalists still were present in Laurel—covering sporting events, schools, and city government. But the perception that the *Leader* had gone out of business since it had relocated to Columbia was real.

Physical Distance Hinders Coverage

Being located 10 miles from the place the paper aimed to cover provided challenges even readers recognized. G. Rick Wilson, 51-year-old Laurel resident and local blogger, also was upset to learn the *Leader* left town. He speculated the move must have affected the *Leader's* ability to cover Laurel:

Geography is important. Geography is terribly important because it's news. So now you're a reporter working a story here in town, and you came in to cover [a story] and normally you would have gone back to where [the restaurant] Red, Hot, and Blue is, right to their offices there [on Main Street] and you sit at your desk and you do whatever you're going to do. But now you have to drive back to Columbia. While you're driving back to Columbia another story comes up. How likely are you to be turning around and driving the 20 minutes back to Laurel to cover that story? It's got to affect it. I appreciate why they did it, but it's got to affect it.

Fredrick Smalls, 58-year-old Laurel resident and city council member, agreed, adding, "whether real or imagined...for a local paper not to be located locally, you're losing something." By the time journalists arrive to cover spot news, the newsworthy happening could have concluded. Smalls said, "in some cases, the reporters, when covering city council kinds of things, are relying more on the video tape review than actually being there at meetings."

Leader journalists Dan Schwind and Gwendolyn Glenn confirmed the challenges. In mid-March 2009, Schwind, a 26-year-old resident of nearby Rockville, Maryland, was sorting out his routine given the newspaper's move to Columbia. He decided he would spend Thursdays and Fridays in Laurel and Monday through Wednesday in Columbia. But, this plan could become complicated, he said, without access to the tools of his trade, a business cell phone and laptop computer, none of which were in place prior to the move out of town. He cited the Chapter 11 filing of the Tribune Company as explaining the lack of availability of these tools. As a result, Schwind was spending just about every day in Columbia because "that's where my email is, and that's where my voicemail is," he said.

Though the company had offered to pay him for use of his personal cell phone minutes, he said he preferred not to give his personal phone number out to sources. "As much as I love the people of Laurel, I don't want to give my cell phone out to everyone," he said. Since that time, the Tribune Company has provided *Leader* reporters with laptops, video cameras, air cards, and

business cell phones, Glenn, a resident of Silver Spring, Maryland, said. She added since the move, the journalists have been allowed more flexibility about working from Laurel or from the Columbia office. Some days, she said, she spends all of her time in Laurel:

I rarely come into the Columbia office these days, although I have a work station there. This way, we have a greater presence in the city and I've been able to be on the scene of breaking news stories and am able to observe changes in the city, such as a new restaurant opening, a business opening or closing, construction work, road closures that help commuters, etc.

But, doing her job was difficult without office space. She frequently used the Laurel Library to write and to email stories back to the newsroom, but this was not always the most efficient solution, especially in the evenings, when the library fills with teens who occupy all of the available computers. She recalled a recent instance when she had to call her editor because she had to wait 20 minutes to gain access to a computer at the library. While she waited, she wrote the story by hand, and then typed and sent it once she could use a library computer.

Being in the office, however, posed as many challenges as being away from it, Glenn said. She cited a time when she missed a deadline because a report from the Economic Development office, located in city hall, had been released, but the report could not be emailed to her at the Columbia office. Because she was on a deadline, she was unable to acquire the report in time. The story was published that week on the web and in print the following week. She said she suspected the *Leader* had missed out on potential news by not having reporters and editors in town five days a week, "especially [news about] crimes and accidents."

Like Glenn, Schwind said the move affected the way he covered the education beat in Laurel. For example, he cited the difficulty he faced when trying to contact one Laurel principal, who rarely sat behind his desk to receive phone calls. When the offices were located in Laurel, Schwind thought nothing of hopping in his car and taking the four-minute drive to the school to catch the principal in person. Schwind added, "now, it's a 20-minute ride, so that's not something I can just hop in the car and do."

For full-time reporters Schwind and Glenn, the move to Columbia meant more than just a change in location. With all Patuxent Publishing papers working under one roof, the company began pooling reporters and asking them to cover stories for several different Patuxent papers. Schwind said at first he enjoyed the hustle and bustle of being in a bigger newsroom, but he quickly realized the challenges that came with it, especially dealing with towns he knew nothing about:

The last couple of weeks I've had to help out with some Howard County stories, which I don't necessarily mind; I just feel bad because I don't know squat about Howard County outside of North Laurel. And, Gwendolyn, I know she's been working on some economic stories on Howard County. So, that's also obviously pulled me away from [reporting on Laurel].

Pat Farmer, part-time editorial assistant, had a different explanation for how the move made her job a bit more difficult. Since the pooling of editorial assistants, she was no longer part of editorial meetings as she was when the *Leader* maintained its own office in Laurel. She felt "it could be detrimental to the paper, because, you know, I have this investment in the community,

an investment in the paper.” Farmer lives in Laurel, as does Dzwonchyk, and community columnists McLaughlin and Christine Folks. As residents, they have a different relationship with Laurel and the *Leader* than do Schwind and Glenn, who do not live, and never have lived, in Laurel.

Journalists, Newspaper Perceived as Outsiders

Since moving to Columbia, some participants now consider *Leader* journalists as “outsiders,” even though some of them actually live in Laurel. But, even before the move, several participants said they perceived many of the *Leader’s* journalists to be somewhat detached from Laurel. Mignon has been upset with the *Leader’s* performance ever since it switched from independent to corporate ownership in 1980, when he said everything seemed to become about “dollars and cents.” He added:

[The newspapers] have to pay for themselves, but I expect certain content about the community in my newspaper, and the *Laurel Leader* simply doesn’t care that much about community content. They don’t send reporters; they don’t report on many of the activities that take place in the Laurel community.

Kristie Mills, 60-year-old Laurel city administrator, said the journalists were somewhat removed from the day-to-day activities of Laurel, even before the move to Columbia. She cited a recent Martin Luther King, Jr. event, held on a weekend. While Glenn wrote a personal story about her experience with Martin Luther King, Jr. day, Mills said none of the local reporters actually came to the event to cover it. Mills added that when events are held on weekends, reporters generally don’t come out, but she believed they should. Covering Laurel is an around-the-clock job, with the journalists needing to be available whenever important things are happening in town. “Like me,” she said, “they made a career choice.” However, Glenn refuted Mills’ claims when reviewing an earlier draft of this research, saying often they did not cover city events because they were not made aware of events taking place, even though Glenn has requested to be kept “in the loop.” Glenn added, “unlike the new Prince George’s County Executive, Rushern Baker, who sends out his daily itinerary, the Mayor [of Laurel] does not, even though we’ve made this request over the years I’ve been here. Often we are not informed of speeches he’s making, testimony he’s giving on legislation elsewhere, etc.”

Glenn said that she and her fellow reporters were doing the best community coverage they could with the information made available to them. Glenn came to the *Laurel Leader* after working stints at NPR, CNN, and the *Washington Post* and did not see her role as a reporter any differently working for a small, community newspaper. She found her job was “no different from anywhere else I’ve ever worked [at the] national level, international level; it’s to do the story. Do an objective story; check the validity of the story. That part I think is always the same.” Glenn, who lives in Silver Spring, Maryland, just north of Washington, D.C., said she doesn’t consider herself to be part of the community in Laurel.

I don’t live here so, no. I think if I lived here that would be different, but I’m known in the community. People know me, people say ‘hi,’ and people call me with ideas. But I just feel to be part of a community you have to live there. [...]

And that's not to say you can't do your job well. I don't think you have to live here to be a reporter.

Mills and Glenn expressed a difference of opinion on the role of the reporter in the community. Dzwonchyk said being involved in various activities and organizations in Laurel, and being neighbors with some of the city council members, puts her in a somewhat difficult position as the "friendly critic." Many of the local people referred to Dzwonchyk by her first name and knew she was the editor of the *Leader*. Several reported being friends with her and feeling very comfortable talking with her. But Donna Crary, a 50-year-old city council member, said while she feels comfortable interacting with Dzwonchyk, she found some of the other reporters from the *Leader* and *The Gazette* to be somewhat detached. She added, "I think that the reporters can go to certain people all the time for comments," but she was not one of those people. Jan Robison, 59-year-old Laurel city council member, pointed out turnover among community reporters proved challenging for the coverage, because when new reporters come to cover the city government meetings, they were not aware of the "dynamics" and "who to go to and who will talk to you if you want."

Schwind agreed that these dynamics and other intimate details about covering the community are not only difficult to learn, but take time and effort, something working directly in the community helps. He said casual, local interaction with sources helped him to learn how to time difficult questions and to know who would rather answer them first and get them out of the way, and whom he needed to talk with for a while before he hit them with a tough question. And, interacting with locals at various community events helped to integrate Schwind into the community as not only a journalist but as a participant in local life.

If you want to learn what's going on with the Laurel city council, you can't just go to the council meetings and the work sessions. You've kind of got to go to those, the barbecues they do and things like that or any of their events because that's when you get to talk to the city council members out of their element.

Such interactions were difficult to maintain for Schwind, who said being miles removed from Laurel when working in the Columbia office hindered his ability to get out and about in the Laurel community.

Readers, Advertisers Feel Abandoned

Readers and advertisers also reported feeling a sense of abandonment with the *Leader's* move to Columbia. Nate, a real estate agent who lives and works in Laurel, said he advertised homes in the *Leader* every other week instead of every week as he did in the past, "because we're not sure anybody is reading it." Nate's assistant, who is in charge of placing the ads, apparently was upset when the local advertising contact she dealt with at the *Leader* was no longer available. When the paper moved to Columbia, all of its advertising was handled by the *Sun*, the parent company of Patuxent Publishing. Because that relationship was lost and because Nate believed the *Leader* was garnering less and less interest from the people of Laurel, he and his assistant discussed stopping the advertising all together. "It's a vicious circle because the less [editorial content] you have, the less interest there is, and the less people read it. [Then] people don't want to advertise," he said.

Dr. Joan Kim, a 39-year-old Laurel resident and owner of Main Street Pharmacy, located in historic Laurel, stopped advertising her business in the *Leader* once it moved to Columbia. She was hesitant to discuss her reasoning for fear the local newspapers might boycott her business. But she felt strongly that the *Leader* made the wrong move when it relocated. She added, “I think publications have the obligation to provide for the immediate neighborhood that they provide their services to...I just felt like they jumped the ship at the wrong time and angered a lot of people in the local community.” In the past, Kim advertised fairly regularly in both the *Leader* and *The Gazette*, but has, since the *Leader*’s move, changed her advertising strategy altogether. Kim became frustrated with the fact that the *Leader* published advertisements for businesses operating outside of Laurel. This coupled with the fact several local physicians had recently relocated their practices to Columbia, left a bad taste in her mouth:

A lot of the practices and businesses that [the *Leader*] advertise are all Columbia-based, which leads me to think that, as a Laurel business owner, you are driving people to go to Columbia to buy their shoes or get their MRI’s and go to the doctor’s offices. [...] If you want to be a local paper, you better support the local community. You cannot just use our name and say you’re the *Laurel Leader* and suck everybody out into Columbia.

Kim said that she was very happy with the *Leader* until it decided to “skip town.” She actually found its content and local focus superior to that of *The Gazette*. She pointed out her pharmacy business hinged on local customers, relationships, and trust. She said, “I really doubt that people would drive 10, 20 miles to come to get their services from me.” She decided to start sponsoring local events to get her name out in the community via word of mouth while giving back to it at the same time rather than advertising in the weekly papers.

Dzwonchyk argued with Kim’s assertion after she reviewed an earlier draft, adding that while she still received occasional complaints about not being located on Main Street, the initial uproar from readers and advertisers largely had ceased. She also said with the new laptops and cell phones provided by the company, she and her team are better able to work more frequently in the community “without much regard for bricks and mortar to define our workspace.” She added, “I think our readers, if asked now, would be more sympathetic to our forced move and would also agree that it hasn’t affected our coverage of news and events in Laurel.”

However, many of the participants disagreed. Doug, a 76-year-old resident of Laurel, said, “[The newspaper] brings the community together, but I think...they have to be very careful and make sure that they stick with the community and know what’s going on in the community. If they don’t do that, then I think people will stop reading.” The *Leader*, though, has attempted to remain an integral part of the community. Paul Milton, executive editor of Patuxent Publishing, said that the *Leader* is not “a product that we thought was ever in any danger of not being here,” though he admitted it is struggling “like every other newspaper is,” adding:

This is sort of a perfect storm right now for newspapers. The economy is bad. It’s getting better, but since the size of our papers are determined by the number of ads that are sold, that’s why it’s getting smaller. Between the website and the newspaper, I think we’re probably providing as hyperlocal of content as we ever have.

However, many participants expressed real fears about the *Leader's* future and about their ability to get quality local news from and about their hometown. Losing the *Leader* altogether was of real concern to many of the readers and city officials. Many discussed the consequences of losing the newspaper, which were succinctly summarized by Frederick Smalls, a member of the Laurel City Council. He said, "Despite all the criticism we may have about the papers, not having it there truly would be a void; there wouldn't be any other resource for us to get local news."

Discussion

The many excerpts gathered here demonstrate the people in Laurel have a need for and care a great deal about community journalism. This look at one weekly's relocation highlights the importance of place to the practice of community journalism and serves as a cautionary tale for other newspapers considering similar moves in the wake of financial distress or consolidation.

Certainly, the move was not the only factor contributing to the community's perceptions of the paper. Attrition and overall consolidation coupled with the move likely contributed to the change in perception. However, the community's strong reactions to the newspaper's physical relocation showed that readers' sense of community was strongly tied to their sense of place. And, the journalists' discussion of the challenges created by not "being there" in the community further validates the role place plays in the practice of community journalism. "Being there," as Meyrowitz (1985) pointed out, contributes to the specialness of place and, as Hummon (1990) argued, to the formation of community identity. Much of covering a community is wrapped up in the day-to-day observations and interactions with a place and its people, something hindered when the *Leader* moved 10 miles away from its readers.

Furthermore, the journalists interacted in a shared office with less frequency thanks to the move and the new media technologies that allowed them to work from anywhere. This means journalists had fewer conversations around the water cooler with each other and had fewer debates at daily editorial meetings about what readers in the community both need and want to read. This has the potential to weaken the journalists' sense of newsroom community, as well.

As for advertisers, the move was indicative not only of a physical distancing from the community, but also a commercial one. Because the *Leader* operates within a group of community newspapers under Patuxent Publishing, advertising bundles mean less hyperlocal advertising and more regional advertising, which erodes the focus on and perceived value of the goods and services provided in Laurel. Such bundling could have adverse effects on hyperlocal publications claiming to serve a very specific town or location through editorial and advertising content.

The fact the community was so engaged in discussing the newspaper's move is an indication the relocation had an impact on its members' sense of community. Carey's (1989) ritual theory helps to explain this phenomenon. The members of the Laurel community had, over time, grown accustomed to a kind and quality of newspaper reporting provided by the *Leader*, which they regarded as their hometown newspaper. Their expectation for this kind and quality became part of their newspaper reading and community ritual. Even the editor acknowledged this idea in her initial letter announcing the move. When the paper's everyday practices, which involved reporting "from the trenches" and doing so from a Main Street newsroom, were altered, so too were the stakeholders' rituals; as a result, their sense of community was shaken. The local

newsroom, a more than 100-year-old institution, had become a significant part of the community's identity. The newspaper was part of the town's history and served as its primary recorder of local history. It had become the primary means for residents to learn about the comings and goings of their neighbors, leaders, and friends. Even for those community members who may never have visited the *Leader's* office, knowing it was located on Main Street for the past 100 years shaped their community reality. As Anderson's (1983) phenomenon of newspaper reading served to create a sense of imagined community, so too did the location of the Main Street newsroom, which became a piece of the community reality.

The *Leader's* location on Main Street was tied to the community's communication ritual, which Carey said was not about "the extension of messages in space but toward the maintenance of society in time; not the act of imparting information but the representation of shared beliefs" (1989, p. 18). Key to any ritual, like attending Mass each week, is consistency. The move from Main Street disrupted more than 100 years of consistency experienced by the community and in many ways negatively impacted the perceptions as well as the sense of community held not only the key stakeholders, but also the community as a whole.

Conclusion

This study is not without limitations. The data was collected in late 2008 and early 2009, and likely much has changed in the community and at the *Laurel Leader* since that time. However, the study does provide a cautionary tale for newspaper executives looking to make decisions regarding relocation and for editors and reporters who must deal with the day-to-day realities of such situations. Furthermore, though many of the interviewees were key stakeholders in the community, they represented only a very small slice of the Laurel community. A larger, more quantitative approach, like surveying the population at large, could paint a more comprehensive picture of the community's perceptions of the newspaper's relocation.

However, this study provides a starting point for important research on the significance of place in community journalism as a new economy has forced news organizations to downsize, to consolidate, and to force budget cuts. While such consolidation, which in this case was also coupled with relocation, is an attractive option for improving the overall bottom line, such decisions could prove to be detrimental if the community responds negatively to the change. Carey's ritual theory has provided a helpful framework for examining peoples' understanding of community journalism as connected to place, especially as we enter the uncharted new media landscape in the 21st century.

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Appendix 1: Interview Data

Interview List	Master	Date	Time (h:mm)	Location
Laurel City Government				
Craig A. Moe, 49, mayor, government employee		2/26/2009	0:43	Mayor's Office, Laurel City Hall
Fredrick Smalls, 58, councilmember, financial director		2/26/2009	1:15	Council Chambers, Laurel City Hall
Michael R. Leszcz, 63, councilmember, manager		3/17/2009	1:05	Council Chambers, Laurel City Hall
Donna Crary, 50, councilmember, attorney		3/19/2009	0:39	Law Offices of Donna Crary, Laurel
Jan Robison, 59, councilmember		3/26/2009	0:42	Council Chambers, Laurel City Hall
Kristie Mills, 60, city administrator		6/9/2009	1:10	City Administrator's Office, Laurel City Hall
Laurel Leader				
Melanie Dzwonchyk, 53, editor		2/27/2009	1:22	Conference Room, Patuxent Publishing Co., Columbia, MD
Daniel Schwind, 26, education reporter		3/13/2009	1:04	Einstein Bagels, Route 1, Laurel, MD
Patricia Farmer, 65, editorial assistant		3/17/2009	1:02	Conference Room, Patuxent Publishing Co., Columbia, MD
David Driver, 47, sports reporter		3/25/2009	0:44	Lunch Room, Patuxent Publishing Co., Columbia, MD
Michael McLaughlin, 56, neighborhood columnist		4/20/2009	1:07	Einstein Bagels, Route 1, Laurel, MD
Christine B. Folks, 52, neighborhood columnist, administrative assistant		4/29/2009	1:18	Christine Folks' West Laurel Home
Gwendolyn Glenn,		5/1/2009	1:01	Conference Room,

city government reporter			Patuxent Publishing Co., Columbia, MD
Paul Milton, 49, executive director of news operations	5/15/2009	0:42	Conference Room, Patuxent Publishing Co., Columbia, MD
Laurel Gazette			
Frank Abbott, publisher	4/28/2009	0:32	Conference Room, Gazette Co, Laurel, MD
West County Gazette			
Elizabeth Ysla Leight, 54, Russet/Laurel columnist, attorney	6/10/2009	1:01	Panera Bread, Route 198, Laurel, MD

Businesses			
Anne, 62, administrative assistant and Nate,64, real estate agent*	3/18/2009	1:30	Real Estate Office, Laurel, MD
Ginger Reeves, 46, owner, Toucan Taco	4/21/2009	0:30	Toucan Taco, Route 198, Laurel, MD
Joan Kim, 39, pharmacist/owner, Main Street Pharmacy	5/4/2009	0:22	Main Street Pharmacy Office, Main Street, Laurel, MD
Robert J. Mignon, 59, owner, Minutemen Press	5/27/2009	0:51	Minutemen Press, Beltsville Office, Beltsville, MD
Residents			
Hannah, 40, registered nurse*	2/22/2009	1:01	St. Mark's Baptist Church, Route 198, Laurel, MD
Paula, 54, paralegal*	2/22/2009	1:01	St. Mark's Baptist Church, Route 198, Laurel, MD
Sam, 44, salesman*	2/22/2009	1:01	St. Mark's Baptist Church, Route 198, Laurel, MD
Olivia, 84, retired teacher's aide*	3/26/2009	0:46	St. Mark's Baptist Church, Route 198, Laurel, MD
Fran, 88, retired*	3/26/2009	0:46	St. Mark's Baptist Church, Route 198, Laurel, MD
Ellen, 80, retired*	3/26/2009	0:46	St. Mark's Baptist Church,

			Route 198, Laurel, MD
Kathy, 60, retired teacher*	3/26/2009	0:46	St. Mark's Baptist Church, Route 198, Laurel, MD
Melissa, 25, museum professional*	4/6/2009	1:35	Laurel Museum, Main Street, Laurel, MD
Irene, 78, retired*	4/6/2009	1:35	Laurel Museum, Main Street, Laurel, MD
Theresa, 59, public relations*	4/6/2009	1:35	Laurel Museum, Main Street, Laurel, MD
Doug, 76, retired*	4/15/2009	1:32	Participants' West Laurel Home
Carol, 75, retired*	4/15/2009	1:32	Participants' West Laurel Home
G. Rick Wilson, 51, blogger, government employee	4/29/2009	1:54	Silver Diner, Route 1, Laurel MD
Segundo Mir, pastor	4/30/2009	1:04	Pastor's Office, First Baptist Church, Laurel, MD
Ray, 76, retired*	5/1/2009	0:38	Participant's Old Town Laurel Home
Lara, 67, retired teacher/counselor*	5/4/2009	0:50	Einstein Bagels, Route 1, Laurel, MD
Gina, 20, college student, part-time leasing agent*	5/17/2009	1:48	Researcher's Apartment, Main Street, Laurel, MD
Julie, 22, unemployed, recent college graduate*	5/17/2009	1:48	Researcher's Apartment, Main Street, Laurel, MD
Brian, 21, police officer*	5/17/2009	1:48	Researcher's Apartment, Main Street, Laurel, MD