

FUTUREPROOFING THE COMMUNITY PRESS:
Exploring alternative paths for rural news dissemination
in times of technological disruption

Weekly newspapers and other local, small-town media outlets create community cohesion by documenting local history and reporting critical news and information for residents. Through this work, social capital is built (Nah & Yamamoto, 2019; Siisiainen, 2003). Putnam (2001) described social capital as a web of mutual trust and cooperation among members of a community or society. These connections break down if the information infrastructure fractures, such as when community newspapers close. This results in news deserts (Abernathy, 2018). Usher (2015) defines a news desert as “an uncovered geographical area that has few or no news outlets and receives little coverage” (para. 9).

News industry economics might be part of the reason for news deserts spreading. This is especially true if one considers how the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in financial issues and changes to journalistic routines (Finneman & Thomas, 2021a, 2021b), leading to the closure of numerous local news outlets (Hare, 2021). On the other hand, Gulyas (2022) suggested “the decline of circulation and readership of printed local newspapers” has occurred because “news production, distribution, and consumption patterns have changed due to digital technologies and online platforms” (p. 23). However, other concerns imperil the community press, and they strike at the core of local news.

Recent scholarship highlighted how the availability of printing presses may be shrinking for weekly newspapers (Vogts, 2024). This is problematic because, according to Jenkins and Nielsen (2020a), “Local newspapers have largely continued to rely on legacy printing and distribution models rather than developing new, sustainable digital revenue models and often

have fewer resources to invest in experimentation” (p. 4). Also, small-town journalists are often overworked since they frequently exist as a staff of one in producing the community’s news, which can lead to burnout (Stupart, 2021). Relatedly, it is difficult for these individuals to find other reporters and editors who are willing to work for the relatively low wages rural news outlets can pay in comparison to metropolitan and coastal media organizations (Walsh & Martin, 2021). Then, as community newspaper proprietors get older, they risk leaving an informational void in their communities if they retire and no one else is willing to take over the operation (M. F. Perreault et al., 2024), especially as the business model is built on advertising revenues generated from communities with smaller populations due to demographic shifts (Ali et al., 2020; G. Perreault et al., 2024).

Without plans for addressing these and other problems facing the community press, the future of small-town media outlets becomes jeopardized, endangering local news ecosystems and democratic society. Compounding these risks are the assumptions “that rural publishers are risk averse, skeptical of advice outside of their peers, and operate in cultures different than” other media producers (Finneman et al., 2024, p. 8). However, not all small-town journalists fit this mold. Many are doing innovative work (e.g., Jenkins & Nielsen, 2020b; Konieczna et al., 2018; Olsen & Furseth, 2023; Smethers et al., 2017; Smethers et al., 2021; Stroud & Duyn, 2023).

Research has attributed “changes in journalistic practices to technological innovation” (Ani, 2023, p. 96), but individual journalists and publications have agency to use technology as they see fit. As such, this study aims to understand how other community news outlets are futureproofing their businesses in the face of technological disruptions. Building upon previous scholarship in this area, the overarching question guiding this study is as follows: As technology

and journalistic practices evolve, how can small-town, rural media outlets continue to be crucial components of their local communities' news and information infrastructures?

To answer this, a series of semi-structured, in-depth interviews will be conducted with 20-30 small-town, rural reporters, editors, and publishers. Using the Communication Infrastructure Theory (CIT) as its frame (Kim & Ball-Rokeach, 2006; Nah et al., 2021; Smethers et al., 2017; Wenzel & Crittenden, 2023), this investigation will focus on weekly newspapers in the United States and Canada with small staffs and circulations under 10,000 readers. Potential participants will be selected from the membership list of the International Society of Weekly Newspaper Editors (ISWNE), as well as regional and state media association membership lists.

By learning directly from working journalists and media practitioners, this research will be grounded in real-world knowledge. The conclusions and recommendations derived from this exploration will be beneficial to journalists because they can develop ideas for immediately adjusting their practices to futureproof the community press so they can continue to serve their audiences. In doing so, they will improve the health of democracy and build stronger communities while bolstering the local news landscape.

Keywords: Communication Infrastructure Theory, community media, digital tools, local news, newspapers, online news, print, printing press, rural journalism, technology, weekly journalism, weekly newspapers

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