

Our Community

The Community Journalism Interest Group Newsletter

Spring 2022

Community journalism more than research for many media scholars

By Dr. Christina Smith

Community journalism scholars routinely conceptualize the small-town press as “personal journalism.” Scholars suggest this journalistic approach is personal for journalists because their professional and personal lives are intertwined. Community journalism is also thought to be personal for audiences because the content creates local identities, social cohesion and senses of place.

For some community journalism scholars, studying this media segment might also be personal. At least it is for me.

In graduate school, I was constantly reminded not to romanticize my dissertation writing of the U.S. rural, small-town weekly print newspaper. But it was hard not to. The people. The places. The issues. The schools. The clubs. The socials. The reporting. The ink. These are the reasons I fell in love with rural, weekly newspapering – long before I began studying the social phenomenon.

Lately, I find myself reflecting on my personal and professional priorities – community journalism research being one of my professional priorities. For the past decade, I’ve studied the news workers, audiences and journalistic practices of the weekly newspapering industry. But my affection for the geographically-bounded U.S. weekly newspaper didn’t start in graduate school.

My affection for the small-town weekly press began in the sixth grade. I won an essay writing contest about my favorite Christmas memory. My essay was published in the local weekly – The Nemaha County Herald. My byline was right at the top. I was an instant fan of print. I knew then I wanted to be a journalist. Everyone in town read it. I was a celebrity, even if only for a week.

Years later, during my high school summers, I worked for a community daily newspaper located about 20 miles north of my hometown – reporting on the people, places and issues in the southeast Nebraska community of



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about 7,000 residents. My first “real news story” was at the request of a local resident who wanted to know whether or not head lice could be transmitted in the public swimming pool. As a journalist in a small town, I was a real-life celebrity. I was expected to be at events and meetings. In a small town, if the paper isn’t there, people get upset.

As my journalism career evolved, I worked for several award-winning daily newspapers – some privately-owned and some corporate-owned. These papers primarily covered metropolitan communities, despite claiming they were state papers. The journalism was different. It was the Woodward and Bernstein journalism I learned in journalism school. I didn’t build personal relationships with the people, places and issues I covered. I couldn’t. The journalistic and company rules forbid it.

With time and two degrees in hand, I made my way back to community journalism and became a reporter for my hometown weekly newspaper, a family-owned publication with a circulation of about 1,200. I covered politics, schools, businesses and events. I constantly covered 4-H shows, the latest Kiwanis spotlight students, quilt clubs at the retirement homes and the annual area flea markets. I did some investigative, data-driven journalism from time-to-time, but most of the work I did would never grace the front pages of a metro daily newspaper. And that’s okay, because as most community journalism scholars understand, there is no such thing as a one-size-fits-all journalistic approach.

Now, I am an avid reader of my hometown paper – faithfully paying the annual \$50 subscription fee for the print and digital versions. It’s worth it. As many foundational community journalism scholars have suggested – reading my hometown newspaper keeps me connected to family and friends, and it gives me a sense of belonging to my community while living 1,000 miles away.

Maybe these days you find yourself reflecting on personal and professional priorities, or maybe my personal

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COMJIG sees rise in abstract submissions

By Dr. Aaron Atkins

The foundation of a strong community rests on an informed public. During the pandemic, things changed. Research expectations, formats, directions, changed. The need for information about the places in which we live, thrive, and survive, however, has not. Local journalism continued to play a vital role in how we understand the communities in which we live, offering us insight and perspective into our immediate environments. This year's research submissions to the Community Journalism Interest Group for the upcoming AEJMC '22 conference in Detroit reflects both those changes and roles.

As research chair of the community journalism interest group, I get to take a behind-the-scenes walkabout into the state of community journalism exploration. A cursory glance at the papers and extended abstracts themselves highlight thematic consistency within community journalism that mirrors some of the major themes facing journalism as a whole: Trust. Transparency. Engagement. Inform. Perception. Insight. Role. Challenge. Marginalization. Representation. Collaboration. Transformation. As these themes play out on an international stage they also play out in our communities, and this year's submissions indicate the continuing importance of addressing them at a local level.

It is also interesting to note that several submitted papers attempted to bridge the gap between academia and industry by addressing practical issues and suggesting theory-driven, yet realistic and practicable approaches to those issues.

As reported from the front office, overall AEJMC and its many divisions and interest groups had 1602 total submissions – 998 full papers and 604 extended abstracts – overall 15 less than in 2020 and 12 more than in 2021. This year COMJIG received 15 submissions – 10 full papers and five extended abstracts, one more than in 2020 and one less than 2021. This submission rate indicates a steady showing for both the conference as a whole and our interest group.

The state of journalism research is strong. See you all in Detroit!

AEJMC Paper Submissions (full papers, extended abstracts)

2022 - 1,602 (998, 604)

2021 - 1,590 (1037, 553)

2020 - 1,617 (1124, 496)



Community Thriving: Blog unites a peninsula

By Tracy Record

We produce the only remaining daily-news publication for Seattle's largest neighborhood, West Seattle, usually a short trip across a bridge to downtown (with the unfortunate wrinkle that the bridge has been closed for repairs for two years).

Bridge closure aside - we were lucky to have launched before social media's rise, and we were firmly entrenched and embraced before that started sticking its tentacles into everyone's online life. In the beginning, we embraced and evangelized it, but now we keep it mostly at arm's length. Our role is very clear. We are here to bring accurate, timely, responsible, trustable news and information to the community, with their collaboration and partnership.

From the beginning in 2007, the year in which our originally personal-blog-format website fully morphed to a commercial, professional news site, we have celebrated and invited the collaboration. Many if not most of our stories start with tips, and our writing reflects that - the lead line is often "Thanks to (reader name) for the tip that (etc.)," before we go on to report what we subsequently found out.

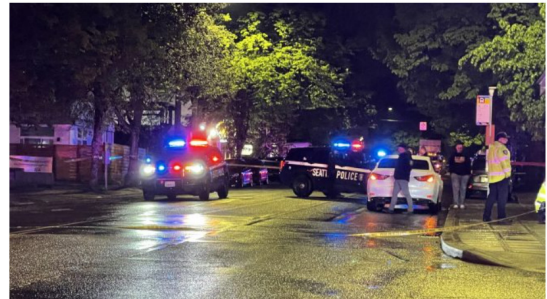
What people tell us they most value us for is answering questions like "what are all those sirens?" or "why is the police helicopter over my house?" Also, "what's going into that empty storefront," "what's going to be built in place of that house that's being torn down," "why has that park project taken so long?" etc. While both social media and government databases have moved in to provide on some of the front-line answers, they don't go in depth, and the information isn't archived in some central place you can look and expect to easily find it - it might be in one of a dozen silos (neighborhood group? neighborhood list? email list? government Twitter account?), buried under rants/raves, or hidden behind a map pin, etc.

Regional media around here - the TV stations and the city's one big daily newspaper - do get over to this community sometimes. But they have 20+ counties to worry about. Much of what we cover is too granular for them to worry about. They're never going to dig up a development plan, or a utility project that's going to tear up a mile of road.

That said, everyone does this differently. We've seen many sites that don't promise 24/7 breaking-news coverage, and we respect that, because it's a big commitment. For us, though, it's been essential. We were drafted into this, as we describe it, by a breaking story, a massive

UPDATE: Man killed by hit-run driver at California/Findlay

MAY 6, 2022 10:21 PM | 82 COMMENTS | WEST SEATTLE NEWS | WS BREAKING NEWS



(Added: WSB photos)

Scen cap of West Seattle Blog's breaking news coverage.

weather-related power outage in December 2006, because no one else, not even the longtime community newspaper, was reporting on it in real time. Then came the crime coverage, breaking and otherwise. When I left TV news to do this fulltime, I had hoped to be leaving crime coverage behind - but we soon discovered people wanted it. They didn't want it TV style, though, and we have policies such as no bodies, no blood spatters, no bothering victims/families, no identifying suspects until/unless they're charged. Much of our crime coverage comes from reader reports, and while that's something else you might find in social media, the reports there don't have the followup we

can provide - more details from police, jail and court information if a suspect is arrested, context and reference.

What we fight to continue to be is a central place for the entire community, which otherwise can easily splinter into its dozen-plus named neighborhoods (and more) - we have been adamant since the start that we are ONE peninsula, and WSB is one central place where you can find information about the entire peninsula.

For those starting out, be sure you know what you're doing, for who, and why. And don't give your traffic to social media! Make it possible for readers to easily share, but don't presume they want to discover your content on some other platform. We are very clear that our website is where we publish the news, and we're not charging you for it; we just ask that you come to our site to get it. Readers don't seem to mind.

"What we fight to continue to be is a central place for the entire community"

Member's Column: The power of face-to-face

By Dr. Jennifer Cox

I was at a local restaurant for lunch the other day when I ran into a promising student who had dropped one of my upper-level journalism classes after the first week. I was puzzled at the time, because I had worked with her in previous classes, and I knew she liked the class and me, but I shrugged it off. These things happen.

As it turns out, she approached me at the restaurant because she was eager to explain her abrupt departure. She decided to transition from her concentration in multimedia journalism to one in media studies. She assured me she still loved journalism, which is why she wanted to stay tangentially connected with media studies. She just couldn't get comfortable with the idea of conducting interviews.

Students often cite anxiety about interviewing as an excuse for not completing an assignment, turning in a poorly reported story, and for abandoning the field completely, just as this student did. It's a hurdle I understand, and I have sympathy for these students. But I don't give them any easy outs, either.

Email interviews are forbidden in my classes. There is no way around actually speaking to sources, whether over the phone, on Zoom, or in-person. My argument – you don't know who is on the other end of that email, and there is no way to get the kind of spontaneous responses you need to make your story authentic and interesting when your sources have unlimited time to craft perfect replies.

I don't know that approaching strangers and turning a camera on them or asking if you can publish what they say comes naturally to anyone. It is certainly easier to sit inconspicuously taking notes in a press room at a meeting than to chase down speakers afterward for comment.

But it's not rehearsed posturing by politicians that gives impact to a news story – it is intimate interviews with the people in the community who are affected by the decisions made by those in power. Those interviews underscore the impact community journalism can have on citizens by presenting them as stakeholders rather than passive observers, empowering them to view journalists as partners rather than enemies.

In my 2021 textbook, "Feature Writing and Reporting: Journalism in the Digital Age" (SAGE), I offer strategies to help fledgling reporters blossom as interviewers. Here are a few:

- A good interview is just a conversation where one person is taking notes. Establishing a rapport with sources – particularly citizen sources – is essential for the success of your interview. Tense, uncertain reporters make sources feel



Dr. Jennifer Cox

suspicious and uneasy. Try to engage as if you are genuinely interested in what your source has to say, which can help you both drop your inhibitions for a more meaningful interview.

- Use social media/email to break the ice. It's true, journalists should not conduct full interviews using these platforms, but there's no reason why they can't be used as an initial point of contact. You can use geographic locators on social media and search popular local tags to identify potential sources on social media platforms, whom you can reach out to using private, direct messages. This way, if a source agrees to the interview, you both know what is expected from the interaction, and you can do away with the awkwardness of an in-person approach.

- Display your press credentials on a lanyard and/or carry business cards. When you do have to approach someone in-person, having something tangible to display that indicates your position as a reporter can lend some credibility to your interview request. College students may not have an official "press pass," but there's nothing to stop you from creating a business card or small sign you can display stating your affiliation with the campus newspaper or freelancer status. I did this for students one of my beginning reporting classes, and they felt more comfortable approaching strangers because they felt more "official."

Some students may never get over the anxiety of conducting interviews, and that's a shame. But there is no way to report stories that matter without talking to the people who are intimately involved in the issues you are covering.

At its core, community journalism serves the public by seeking to understand the real lives and labors of those impacted by the news every day. To serve a community, you have to know it. And the only way to know it well is to get out there and start talking.

COMJIG is on social media!

Follow our accounts for the latest in division and industry news and information.



Facebook at "Community Journalism Interest Group at AEJMC"



Twitter @AEJMComJIG



Instagram @comjaejmc

You can also follow the Community Journalism blog at <https://comjig.blogspot.com/>

All of our social media will follow AEJMC organizational social media guidelines.

Thank you for all your engagement this year

By Dr. Mimi Perreault

It has been a privilege to work with so many extraordinary teachers, scholars, and professionals in the field of Community Journalism these past two years during my time as the COMJIG Teaching Chair. I know I have learned so much about our field and what we can do to support scholarship in community journalism.



Dr. Mimi Perreault

I am so honored to have been selected for this role in August 2020, and to have the opportunity to connect people and initiatives.

Just a glance at what we have done in the past two years!

We hosted 10 brown bags during the pandemic. We have had more than 60 unique attendees, 12 new graduate students, and 12 journalism practitioners attend our events. We hosted several collaborative brown bags with guests from other AEJMC Divisions and Interest Groups and participated in several collaborations across the organizations.

Special thanks to those who facilitated and participated in panels this year including Aaron Atkins, Shannon Scovel, Dylan McLemore, Christina Smith, Kyle Miller, Joy Jenkins, Lara Salahi, Patrick Ferrucci, Richard Watts, Burton Speakman, Al Cross, Jessica Fargen Walsh, Volha Kananovich, Earnest Perry, Nick Mathews, Alison Burns, Ivy Ashe, Jennifer Brannock Cox, and to Anna Brugmann from Report for America, Jonathan Kealing from Institute for Nonprofit News, Keegan Scott from Fulbright, and Barbara Allen from the Poynter Institute.

If you are interested in the teaching chair position or hosting brown bag in the fall, please reach out to Aaron Atkins or Christina Smith.

All our brown bags were recorded and are available to members by request. Let me know if you are interested in viewing any of them:

- “News Deserts and the Role of Local Media” COMJIG Brown Bag, Friday Nov. 6, 2020
- “Covering Difficult Topics at the Community Level: Race, Gender and Politics, Feb. 26, 2021
- “COVID a year Out: Community Journalism and Scholarship in a Pandemic World,” March 26, 2021
- “Scholarship and Service: AEJMC COMJIG and Beyond,” April 30, 2021
- “Engaging in Sports at the Local Level.” Sept. 17, 2021
- “Varied approaches to Community Based Reporting. With Author Dr. Jennifer Brannock Cox,” Oct. 22, 2021
- “Revisiting the Challenges of New Deserts at the Community Level,” Nov. 18, 2021
- “News-Academic Partnerships” Feb. 25, 2022
- Graduate Students in Community Journalism Research and Teaching, March 25, 2022
- “Rethinking Grants and Funding for Community Journalism,” April 25, 2022

We also created several documents with resources from these brown bags which we are willing to share with COMJIG members.

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story and connection to community journalism raises moments of nostalgia for you. Whatever the case might be, I, and the officers of the Community Journalism Interest Group, invite you to join us in August for the group’s annual business meeting and social dinner at AEJMC’s annual conference in Detroit.

We would love to hear about your relationship – whether it’s newly established or formed decades ago – with community journalism. What motivates your interest(s) in community journalism? As journalists often say: “Everybody has a story.” What’s yours?

See you in Detroit!

Every conversation counts for the future of local news

By Dr. Joy Jenkins

When I tell people I research local news, I can usually predict the response. “Well, that’s interesting. Local news is important.” I always agree and follow up with, “What local news sources do you follow?” I tend to hear a mix of the local newspaper, local TV stations, or a local website. But more often, I hear, “I only really follow national news.” And rarely do people say they subscribe or pay for a local news source.

These conversations are particularly interesting with my undergraduate students. Many do not follow the news at all and are still working to develop a consistent news diet. They are aware of large national TV stations, newspapers, and online news, and most say they get their news on social media (particularly Twitter). However, they discount the role local news plays in their lives.

I recently led a study-abroad group of 14 undergraduate students to Valencia, Spain. I taught a class on global communication, and we spent time discussing how global information flows are changing. One day, we focused on challenges facing local media in countries around the world. I asked my students what would be necessary for them to subscribe to their local newspaper. Their answers reinforced functions of local news organizations that have been well established in scholarship. They shared the importance of local news outlets producing truthful and credible information and their ability to report breaking news and offer access to job listings, concert and theater reviews, business openings, and comics.

They also suggested some new approaches that they thought could draw younger readers. They described creating a special edition specifically for Generation Z readers, producing a digest of selected stories offered in an audio format, featuring interviews with people in different professional fields answering questions submitted by younger readers, sending texts throughout the day with important local stories (both soft and breaking news), and publishing stories in short video (think: TikTok) formats. They also expressed an affinity for a well-designed print edition, which they said offers a “finishability” that feels impossible online.

Countless headlines over the last few years have sounded the death knell for local news, with the ringing growing louder in the economic aftermath of the pandemic. And although the threats and challenges facing local outlets are real and growing, from newspaper closures to the “unbundling” of local news to hyperpartisan sites posing as local reporting, opportunities and innovations continue to emerge.

I made this point in a February webinar hosted by the Tow Center for Digital Journalism. The webinar was the final installment of a fantastic monthly series examining

intersections between local journalism and media policy, with academics, researchers, and journalists from all over the world sharing ideas, concerns, criticisms, and other insights about the state of local news.

This panel, which was titled “Lessons learned – and a look at what happens next,” also featured Dr. Philip Napoli, James R. Shepley professor of public policy, director of the DeWitt Wallace Center for Media & Democracy, and senior associate dean for faculty and research for the Sanford School at Duke University, and Elizabeth Hansen Shapiro, CEO of the National Trust for Local News, as well as moderator Damian Radcliffe, Tow Knight News Innovation fellow and professor of practice at the University of Oregon. See the summary of this discussion by COMJIG member Nick Mathews [here](#), as well as a link to a recording.

We discussed a range of national and state-level efforts to support local news, including the Local Journalism Sustainability Act and Build Back Better provision, which reflected an energy and excitement around local news that panelists said was reassuring. The discussion also turned to the need to highlight the characteristics of successful solutions and determine what generalizable lessons can come from them. These solutions include the need for reports examining the effects of news deserts on particular states and regions, efforts to educate the public about the financial status of local media, new funding models for local news, and opportunities to bring a diversity of voices (journalists, editors, citizens, and others) into conversations about research and policy.

We also discussed opportunities to expand research on local news, considering not only the consequences of the decline or loss of local news in communities but also the importance of investigating the tangible benefits communities receive from a healthy, robust local news ecosystem.

As we enter the summer months, and many of us turn to existing or new research projects, here are a few questions about the future of local news that we can consider, as suggested by the panel discussion:

How do we define “local”? Based on content, audience, organizational mission, location? How do understandings of “local” continue to change in the digital environment?

What communities have been underserved or misrepresented by local news? How can journalists build trust with them? What new outlets are emerging to serve them?

Local news is not dying. Every day new ideas and efforts emerge to connect with communities and produce high-quality journalism that informs and empowers them. As researchers and teachers, we can play a vital role in uplifting and extending that work.