

A map of the Southeastern United States, showing various cities and states. The map is in shades of blue and green, with city names in white. The map covers parts of Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida.

Our Community

The Community Journalism Interest Group Newsletter

Summer 2021

COMJIG announces panel lineup for AJEMC 2021

By Dr. Christina Smith

From radio to student media to media economics to research ideas, community and local news remain issues of interest for media scholars.

AJEMC 2021 will be held virtually Aug. 4-7, and the official conference schedule will be posted later this summer. While times and dates have yet to be finalized, it is never too early to begin thinking about events to attend.

As is tradition, COMJIG is co-sponsoring four panels this year, and the slate of discussions is diverse.

Here are the panel details, including topics and expected panel participants:

The Adults in the Room: How student news publications are representing, and protecting, their campus community during COVID-19d

As American universities attempted to reopen face-to-face instruction during the ongoing coronavirus pandemic in fall 2020, and as the number of positive cases skyrocketed, student newspapers became the outspoken voice of reason and concern. They covered flaws in reopening plans, the lack of transparency and data, and how it was stressing students, faculty and staff. They used their editorial sections to carry the voices of concerned students, faculty and staff that felt ignored by administration. This panel will bring in those student reporters and their advisers to talk about the challenges of representing, and acting as a voice for, a college community during the pandemic.

Co-sponsored professional freedom and responsibility panel:
Community Journalism and Small Programs

Moderating/Presiding:
Jeffrey Riley, Georgia Southern

Panelists:

Jeff Gauger, Content Adviser and Professional in Residence, LSU

Jackie Incollingo, Associate Professor, Rider University
Eliza Noe, Editor-in-Chief, The Daily Mississippian, Ole Miss

Carrie Buchanan, Assistant Professor, John Carroll University

Sophia Maltese, Editor-in-Chief, The Carroll News

Building the walls: Paywalls and reduced print schedules as means to maintain profitability

This panel will explore the economic decisions of the media industry as it engages with strategies such as paywalls and reduce print schedules in order to manage economic pressures. It will include voices from both professional journalism and academia and will speak specifically to the economic decisions made by the former New Orleans Times Picayune.

Co-sponsored teaching panel:
Community Journalism and Media Management,
Economics & Entrepreneurship

Moderating/Presiding:
Burton Speakman, Kennesaw State

Panelists:
Iris Chyi, University of Texas
Dam Hee Iim, University of Arizona
Christina Smith, Georgia College
Jarvis DeBerry, Louisiana Illuminator
Jennifer Larino, LEDE New Orleans

Radio as Resistance: Aesthetics, Culture and Information Intertwined

See PANEL page 6

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Weekly paper sees subscription success amid pandemic

By Terry Beigie

I was a local news junkie long before I went to college. When I was in middle school, my father told me to read the newspaper every day (at that time it was daily) to be smarter than everyone else. Now I'm no genius, but I did read the paper and I'm pretty sure that's where my desire to be a community journalist was developed — even without my knowledge.

A weekly newspaper is the backbone in many rural communities and as daily newspapers shrink print days — or close — it might be the only access to local news for many residents. Many media outlets are switching to digital-first or digital-only platforms. However, many rural areas have no broadband so it's cutting people off from the local news they need. This is something we've seen at our weekly newspaper in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains with more than two-thirds of residents without broadband access.

As schools closed and people were forced to work from home, requiring people to visit the library to utilize its Wi-Fi to read about the planning commission or board of supervisors meetings doesn't make sense. I think it's why our subscriptions have grown in the past two years — and that included a rather sizeable increase (30%) in our annual subscription rate.

People are craving factual local news and for many smaller communities that is coming from a weekly newspaper.

However, with just two staff members it meant finding a creative way to cover the pandemic: one issue at a time. From church services to farming and from weddings to funerals, COVID-19 affected everything. As events were canceled, we also had time to get creative in our coverage.

Last summer, we ran a weekly series profiling artists and I've had time to research social history of our community, writing about moonshining, historic court days and how the Everleigh Sisters (perhaps the United States' most famous madams ever) were actually born here in Greene County.

We've had people stop us in the street to tell us our paper is the best it's been in more than 50 years, and that means the world to us. As high school sports have returned — and there's talk of festivals this fall — we hope to continue being creative as we meet the needs of information gathering for our community.

Terry Beigie is the editor of the Greene County (Va.) Record.

COMJIG brown bags present opportunities for unity across research, teaching and service

By Dr. Mimi Perreault

In COMJIG, we acknowledge that community journalism is vital to how we think about journalism moving forward, but we also seek to teach students who are often doing community journalism while learning.

“First of all, if we think about the impact that the pandemic is going to have, what kind of mark might it leave?” Dr. Tim Vos, said at our March Brown Bag. “I think it’s safe to at least think about the fact that this might be leaving a hole in our collective scholarship.”

Vos, the current AEJMC president, stated that research on community journalism is not going away, it just might just look different than it did before the pandemic. We have to consider what holes are going to present challenges and opportunities in our profession for years to come.

Discussions concerning the intersections of research, teaching and service are vital to success as a scholar-teacher. This was my goal for creating and developing the series of brown bags we have hosted this year.

As we move past this year, it is not about how we do research but rather the way the we communicate our research that is changing. In addition, we must pay attention to who is communicating that may have changed during the pandemic.

Zoom sessions have allowed us to hear from voices we might not have heard from otherwise, but have also allowed us to see our service and research in innovative ways. I am so thankful for all the members, colleagues, and even their students who have participated in our Virtual Brown Bags this year.

We started with a Fall brown bag on news deserts and local news (with Nick Mathews, Dr. Clay Carey, Ryan Wallace and myself). In the panel, we recognized how local news has become increasingly relevant to our field of community



Pictured at the April 30 COMJIG Virtual Brown Bag Lunch are, from left, Dr. Jeff Riley assistant professor at Georgia Southern University and COMJIG chair, Dr. Jan Lauren Boyles, associate professor at Iowa State University and vice chair of the AEJMC Council of Divisions and Dr. Jennifer Greer, dean of the College of Communication and Information at the University of Kentucky and former AEJMC president.

journalism in the pandemic year. Local journalists have worked in challenging circumstances, putting their health and wellbeing at risk over and over this past year. They have also had to navigate challenges concerning environmental, gender, and civil rights issues in ways that were overlooked before the pandemic.

With the Spring Brown Bags we discussed doing research successfully (Dr. Christina Smith, Dr. Monica Chadha, Dr. Gregory P. Perreault, Ivy Ashe, and Dr. Hans Meyer), diversity and challenging topics (Dr. Monica Chadha, Dr. Mia Moody-Ramirez, Emily Guajardo, Dr. Alan D. Blanchard, Dr. Bernardo H. Motta, and Dr. Hazel Cole), covering COVID-19 a year out (Dr. Aaron Atkins, Dr. Tim Vos, Dr. Katie Foss, Dr. Joy Jenkins, and Dr. Kyle Miller) and, in our final brown bag, we discussed service in our field (Dr. Jeff Riley, Dr. Jennifer Greer, and Dr. Jan Lauren Boyles).

Each panel featured established and up-and-coming teachers and scholars with valuable research and teaching applications. Recordings of past Virtual

Brown Bags are available for request.

Coming up: In June, we will host practice sessions for those interested in preparing for AEJMC. If you are interested – to either present or give feedback—please let me know. You do not have to be presenting in COMJIG to be part of the practice sessions.

We have several people interested in participating in Fall Brown Bags and have selected topics for the Fall.

September - “Public Affairs Reporting, Documents and Community Journalism?” October - “Getting it Right in Season: Sports Coverage and Local News” and November - “A Follow Up on News Deserts: Politics and Engagement at the Local Level.”

Times and dates to be determined this summer. If you are interested in participating, please email me and I will get you slated for one.

Dr. Mimi Perreault is an Assistant Professor of Media and Communication at East Tennessee State University and the current Teaching Chair for COMJIG. You can reach her at perreault@etsu.edu.

Exploring the college newsroom as a community

By Ivy Ashe

Calls to expand the scope of community journalism and local journalism often include a re-evaluation of what the terms “community” and “local” might mean in a digital era, where physical spaces become less relevant to the formation of a community. Nearness remains a core concept (see Robinson, 2014), as it encompasses proximity without necessarily relying on physicality.

It's somewhat ironic, given researchers' tendencies to rely on college students as study participants in survey- and experiment-based work, that so few academics have turned to the campus newspaper itself as a site of analysis. But college newspapers offer a promising nexus for research. They have a defined physical environment (the campus) in addition to their digital spaces and a more far-flung affective space (the alumni base). The reporters, photographers, videographers, editors, and social media managers in a college newsroom are part of the much larger journalism project.

Most research regarding college journalism tends to place it in terms of a very particular sort of professionalism associated with this larger project: What journalism majors plan to do after graduating, what technical skills they have and don't have, and what skills they value. This research begins from the idea that future journalists only come out of journalism programs. This is true, of course — that's why people are in the programs! But I'd argue that the stronger community is actually built by the newsrooms rather than by the programs themselves.

During college, I went into The Rice Thresher offices on Wednesday night to copy edit the week's articles. I read through the tennis beat reporting and the updates on the newest dorm being built, handing my pages off to the section editors, who would spend the rest of deadline night (“Whursday”) pulling together the final product, fueled mainly by Papa John's pizza and caffeine. Rice University didn't (and still does not) have a journalism program.



Ivy Ashe

The Thresher was the only way to get any sort of news experience. We had a faculty advisor, but the actual news practices we learned came from fellow students — as is the case at many campus papers, even those that at schools that do have dedicated programs. The independence of the campus paper from the university is a hallmark of this type of publication, one that students will fiercely protect. In research terms, though, we don't know why this protectiveness sets in, or what it's like to be in the newsroom during these battles.

College papers have long been initial training grounds for journalists, but as small local papers — once a starting career point for many — continue to shutter, the campus newspaper experience takes on even greater importance. More local newsrooms are directly partnering with colleges to set up shop.

I'm hopeful the lack of academic attention to college newspapers might change given the outsize role these newspapers have played during the COVID-19 pandemic. College journalists have been crucial sources of information not only for their own campus communities, but for the larger public. The newspaper staffers are also at the forefront of committed diversity and equity initiatives that many larger outlets have yet to fully engage in. In this, too, college papers push for a more inclusive definition of what community is: who gets covered, and how that coverage is shaped.

The actual people skills of journalism cultivated in college newsrooms — ins and outs of beat reporting, navigation of complicated bureaucracy, management and structuring of frequently-changing staffs — must be addressed in scholarship (however, see Farquahar and Carey (2017) for an example of student journalists and self-censorship practices). If these journalists are the future of the field, learning more about these experiences and about the journalists themselves can go a long way towards understanding what's ahead for the profession.

Ivy Ashe is a graduate student at the University of Texas and the graduate student liaison for the Community Journalism Interest Group. You can reach her at ivyashe@utexas.edu.

'How did you get here?' Here's how I got here

By Dr. Jeff Riley

One of my favorite questions to ask folks who study community journalism is "How'd you get here?"

Back when we still met for conferences in person, I'd sometimes get responses like "I drove," or "There's a hotel map on the back of the program schedule."

What I mean by it, though, is how did you decide to study community journalism as an academic pursuit? Mass communication offers such a wide array of things to get interested in enough to commit yourself to a research agenda, so how'd you end up in this specific area of study? I love knowing not just what someone's research agenda is, but also the story of how they found it.

Sometimes those stories are familiar -- like me, a lot of community journalism scholars started by earning a paycheck in community journalism at some point in their careers. Maybe it was their first journalism job. Maybe it was their only journalism job. Maybe they stumbled upon it in passing and became interested in the sociological overlap between close geospatial connections and information flow. Maybe all or none of those.

I've asked that question so many times to so many different scholars, I figured I could use this column space to share my own origin story. And in doing so, maybe lift a beacon in case anyone else is interested in the same questions I am.

Although my time as a professional journalist was spent nearly entirely within the warm embrace of community news, when I left news for academia, I didn't carry that part of my life with me initially. When I was working on my dissertation, I instead was fascinated by social media -- specifically, trying to figure out how and why misinformation spreads on social media. That became my life for a few years. I chased answers down that path until I grew burned out on the questions, which was ironically about the time the rest of the world started caring about misinformation on social media. I have nothing if not impeccable timing.

I can remember exactly where I was when the epiphany hit me: It was AEJMC 2015 at some bar in San Francisco. It was a joint happy hour between the Graduate Student Interest Group and the History Division. I had been in and out of research panels all during the conference, seeking inspiration for a new direction. A few of those panels were hosted by the Community Journalism Interest Group.

And there I was, nursing what was most likely a \$16 Miller Lite, when I realized that I had been rattling a question around in my head all day after the COMJ panels. A considerable amount of the research was about the

impacts and effects of a community losing its community news, as traditional means of community news saw their economic viability dry up and disappear, creating another sandy patch of news desert. But there was the question I had, just lingering: Where does the audience go once that happens to them?

When people are cut off from professionalized community news, do they stop having an interest in what is going on around them, or do they find different ways to satiate the innate desire to know what is going on around them? That was the question, right there, that launched me down this path I'm now on.

The freeing moment was when I realized, sitting there in that San Francisco bar, oh yeah, I can just research whatever I want to, can't I? There's no dissertation to write anymore. No more years-long 100-page monsters to slay. I get to pick which questions I want to chase the answer to.

And now, here I am, with a whole research agenda on location-based pages on the popular link aggregation website Reddit, trying to find out what motivates people to participate in the sharing of information on those pages and seeing if it is at all possible that those pages might just fulfill crucial informational needs that more traditional, centralized, professionalized community news used to. I don't know the answers quite yet, but I'm sure enjoying chasing them down.

So the next time we get a chance to meet, no matter if it's in person or via Zoom, if I ask you "How'd you get here?" You at least know what I'm asking. And if you think the questions I'm asking about Reddit and community news are interesting, or heaven forbid you have some parallel questions like that of your own, let me know too.

Dr. Jeff Riley is an Assistant Professor of Multimedia Journalism at Georgia Southern

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We want you to be a part of Our Community

To contribute essays, ideas, analysis, or
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Thanks to all COMJIG paper reviewers for AEJMC 2021

By Dr. Burton Speakman

As we head toward AEJMC, I want to take the time to note how much we appreciate those who are reviewing articles. This year, the interest group received a total of 16 submissions with 12 research papers and 4 extended abstracts.

This year, we've done things a little differently with research by adding our participation at the Midwinter conference to the mix, and, hopefully, that will continue in the future adding to our number of submissions.

While I can't speak directly about the submissions, I have looked at all of them and believe that we have a great crop of papers this year that will make for interesting presentations at the conference. Even reading the initial reviews, I am thrilled with the amount of time and attention our reviewers are giving these papers and the amount of helpful feedback authors receive.

Additionally, it seems as though ISWNE is also getting a good pool of community journalism research for their upcoming conference. It's always good to see more people considering the challenges facing community media.

The challenge for us as a group continuing as we move forward is to reach out to people. There are so many papers presented each year that talk about community in some way that could add to our interest group, and I hope each of us take the time to encourage those people to think about COMJIG for their submissions in the future.

Dr. Burton Speakman is an Assistant Professor of Communication in the School of

Communication and Media at Kennesaw State University. You can reach him at bspeakma@kennesaw.edu.

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Despite its label as "the forgotten medium," radio remains a resilient communication force, adapting to technological changes. Community radio, in particular, maintains the medium's traditional roots as a disseminator of artistic expression and political information. This panel will combine practitioners and researchers to examine radio's role in the current climate of unrest in the U.S.

Co-sponsored professional freedom and responsibility panel:

Mass Communication and Society and Community Journalism

Moderating/Presiding:

Brian J. Bowe, Western Washington /American University in Cairo

Panelists:

Garrett McQueen, Trillogy

Eugene Thomas, WWOZ

Sonja D. Williams, Howard

Kyle Miller, South Dakota

Forging a Local News Media Ecosystem Research Agenda

The goal of this panel is to forge a research agenda for the different kinds of journalistic media that are part of the 21st century news ecosystem. Two decades into the 21st century, local news ecosystems have become increasingly complex. Start-up,

digital native news organizations, including those focusing on historically underserved communities, community news initiatives, and evolving forms of public media augment and/or compete with legacy commercial news media, traditional Black and ethnic media, and longstanding alternative news sources. Although a number of researchers have examined facets of these emerging forms of local news media, more work remains to be done to understand how they support, critique, or challenge more established outlets. In this session, scholars whose work examines particular facets of news media discuss these still-unanswered questions.

Co-sponsored professional freedom and responsibility panel:

Newspaper and Online News and Community Journalism

Moderating/Presiding:

Susan Keith, Rutgers and Christina Smith, Georgia College

Panelists:

George Daniels, Alabama

Christoph Mergerson, Rutgers

Danielle Deavours, Montevallo

Nick Mathews, Minnesota

Kyle Miller, South Dakota

Dr. Christina Smith is an assistant professor of communication at George College and State University. You can reach her at christina.smith1@gcsu.edu.