

Our Community

The Community Journalism Interest Group Newsletter

Winter 2021

Welcome to our newsletter; now help us get better

By Dr. Jeff Riley

There's never been a better time to be involved in community journalism.

Ok, even I can admit that's probably not true.

But there's never been a more important time to be involved in community journalism, that I can say with some confidence.

Hello there. My name is Jeff Riley, and I'm the head chair of the AEJMC Community Journalism Interest Group for the 2020-2021 cycle.

The landscape of community journalism in the U.S. looks both terrifying and exciting. The COVID-19 pandemic shuttered many smaller community publications that were already on the brink, expanding news deserts and deepening the problem of people in a community feeling alienated, disconnected and disengaged.

That's where I hope that COMJIG can help. We can help by applying our academic prowess to help figure out what works and what doesn't in the growth of a new infrastructure of community news, no matter the shape it takes or platform it's on. We can help by growing a network of researchers and reporters who can work together. We can help by collectively crafting community journalism courses. We can help by reaching out and starting dialogues with successful community news outlets.

We've got big plans for COMJIG moving forward in 2021, and my deepest hope is that some of these things we're shooting for will help improve not just our interest group within AEJMC, and not just AEJMC itself, but the industry of community journalism as a whole.

Here's some of our goals:

Launch a newsletter. If you're reading this, it means we managed to figure out how to launch a newsletter, and frankly I'm going to call that a win on its own. We plan on having three issues a year: winter, which you are reading, spring, which will publish at the end of April, and summer, which we will publish in August ahead of the national



Dr. Jeff Riley

conference. To submit something for the newsletter, get in touch with our Newsletter Editor, Nick Mathews.

Host Virtual Brown Bag Lunches where we bring our members together to informally discuss research, pedagogy and industry issues in community journalism. If you're interested in helping out with these, please contact our Teaching Chair, Mimi Perreault. Thanks to everyone who attended the Virtual Brown Bag Lunches we've already hosted, and I look forward to seeing y'all at the next one.

Bring our membership up to 100 dues-paying members. We've been stuck at about 90 members for quite some time now. You can help by spreading the good news of our group and encouraging those going to the AEJMC conference to become members. All it takes is \$10 and the click of a button and you're in for the whole year.

Receive 24 research paper submissions in April for the AEJMC annual conference in New Orleans. We've been stalled at about 15-18 paper submissions for the last few years. If we can get the overall number up to 24, we can meet our goal of filling two traditional refereed sessions and a poster session, all while keeping the preferred 50% acceptance rate. The best way you can help with this goal? Well that part is easy. Submit research to COMJIG! And suggest others submit research to COMJIG!

Have a presence at the AEJMC Midwinter. If you looked at the paper call for it, you probably saw our names on the list, so we can check that one off as complete. Thank you to everyone who submitted papers and abstracts.

Even though we have an amazing board of dedicated, hard-working officers, we can't meet these goals alone. We need your help. And we probably need it in ways we don't even know. If you have ideas, suggestions or tips on how we can achieve some of our goals, please let us know. And if you have questions about getting involved in COMJIG, reach out. You can find all our contact information on the "officers" portion of this newsletter.

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ISWNE and COMJIG create a mutually beneficial partnership

By Dr. Chad Stebbins

Since H.R. Long founded the International Society of Weekly Newspaper Editors at Southern Illinois University in 1955, ISWNE has been led by a journalism educator.

I am only the fifth executive director in the group's 65-year history. The organization also elects a president every year, and that person is occasionally an academic. Dr. Deborah Givens, who recently retired as chair of the Department of Communication at Eastern Kentucky University, has been ISWNE's president since 2019.

We encourage journalism educators to become members of ISWNE. (Dues are only \$60 per year.) You will receive our newsletter, published 10 times per year, and Grassroots Editor, our biannual journal. You also can participate in our ISWNE Hotline, an email listserv where members post questions related to newspaper policy or journalism ethics and receive immediate feedback. Some of our members who are journalism educators share the questions and responses with their students, to demonstrate real-world issues.

For example, here's a recent question: "We published a couple photos of a commercial truck in collision with a passenger car. One photo shows the business logo of the truck quite clearly. No charges had been laid at the time of publishing so no one was faulted in our coverage. The trucking company owner has complained about the 'negative press' and the damage already done to his business. He noted that all other papers and TV news blur such logos in similar circumstances, so why don't we. My first reaction is that few if any do such a thing, and it's Journalism 101 to publish the photo as is, without manipulating it. Did I miss something?"

A few years ago, ISWNE began partnering with the Huck Boyd National Center for Community Media at Kansas State University on a research paper competition that benefits our membership as well as scholars of community journalism. The goal is to engage one another in productive conversations about community journalism through research papers on general issues or everyday problems that confront community papers with circulations under 10,000.

Proposals are peer-reviewed by faculty with expertise in community journalism. Final selection of the papers to be written is made by a panel of working and retired community journalists who evaluate the proposals on the basis of potential value to newsrooms. Completed papers undergo

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Teaching community journalism in the pandemic

By Dr. Mimi Perreault

On March 11, 2020, I drove from Tennessee to Florida. On March 15, I went to Palm Beach. The next week was still spring break but the beaches were closed, and the world had changed.

Like many people, I began to teach and work remotely, from the guest room of my mother-in-law's home while my kids did virtual school in the next room.

It was surreal. Students who once were in one place were in more than 60 locations. Some had solid broadband connection, others did not. Some were working extra hours, others were taking care of family. And, like me, many were teaching their children.

I was very aware of how important local news was. I was literally in the flight path of President Donald Trump's plane on its way to Mar-a-Lago and could see the planes landing at the airport. Within three days, Palm Beach International Airport went from a once-busy airport with more than 120 flights entering to reduced traffic of around 20 arriving flights a day. Parks and playgrounds closed, and some people began wearing masks.

This week in preparation for spring 2021, I went back and watched some of my Zoom videos from classes I taught in mid-March 2020 from that dark guest room. In one of the early videos, I made the statement, "It is too hard to not talk about something other than COVID."

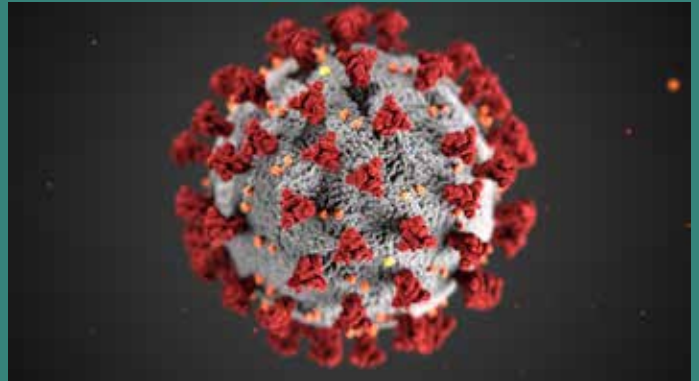
If only I had known it might still be the case January 2021.

Like all of us, even though I had taught online, I was out of my element. I was in Florida, but I was teaching at East Tennessee State University in the heart of Southern Appalachia.

I was somewhat stranded in Florida, in the very community where I had been a community journalist from 2005 to 2008 for the Palm Beach Post. There were stories about beaches being open, then beaches closing, lack of toilet paper, lack of personal protective equipment and "super spreaders." The Post changed its Facebook page for hurricane-based information to one about both hurricanes and coronavirus, made content free and posted local, state and national press conferences on COVID concerns. The Post also covered Trump and his visits to his southern retreat for rounds of golf. During that month, The Post also furloughed many reporters and even bought some of them out of contracts.

What was happening there was happening all over the country.

My early coronavirus experiences reminded me of when I was a green reporter working on general assignment and I did not know what to expect. I was able to



The now familiar coronavirus changed the way we live and teach.

bring those experiences into my classes. Those experiences covering hurricanes Katrina and Wilma made me a journalist. While I was frustrated by COVID-19 restrictions, I was grateful to have power. I was reminded how much those experiences inform my teaching and guide my research.

I remembered what it was like to have to learn everything new. The constant deluge of information, changing guidelines and fact checking. Pair all that with personal concerns for aging family members and a disconnection from students and colleagues. I saw my former colleagues learning new skills in real time, reporting from home and distancing themselves from the practices of face-to-face reporting—a practice I was taught we should always aim for in journalism. I saw students in my crisis communication course produce amazing work in their hometowns and for their campus.

Not all students have access to the tools they need without a physical classroom or "news room" and there is great value in the ability to walk into a source's place of business or meet that source in person. But many of them gained the experience of what it was like to work through a crisis. I had forgotten what that was like, and the situation was a needed reminder.

Later in that same March 25 lecture when I was talking to my students about assignments, I said, "I'm still trying to play catch up with this week and figure out exactly what's realistic in this world that we're in now."

That is a theme I will carry into this year of teaching — be realistic for the world we are in now, but don't lose sight of the value of the experience.

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.

Exciting growth opportunities for community submissions

By Dr. Burton Speakman

With the opening of the All-Academic site, the season of preparing research for AEJMC officially kicks off. The call for this year was roughly the same as it's been in the past, but my hope is that we have slightly better response this year with the vaccine providing some semblance of hope for an in-person conference.

But before we get too much into my expectations for the research as AEJMC, I want to focus on the good work coming into our interest group from being involved in the Midwinter conference. There were a solid number of submissions to the interest group and those submissions stretched the boundaries of how we might think about community.

My hope is that these submissions and working over the next few years with regional conferences will allow us to increase the number submissions we receive for the national conference. Every year I serve as a judge for other divisions, I look over the submissions and am surprised by the number of papers that talk about ideas and concepts related to community that would be good for our interest group.

Additionally, I want all of you in the interest group to consider this my initial request for you to review this year. But on top of that I hope when you're working with graduate students, you encourage them to submit to COMJIG if they have a paper that relates to community even in a broad sense.

Community media is an idea used extensively in academic research. Google Scholar shows 1,840 publications that use the topic since the start of 2020. This suggests to me that we need to do a better job of getting people that think about our interest group differently and not just as the group that researches little newspapers.

The work being done thinking about community media especially becomes important as more communities lose their local news coverage. We've all seen the changes taking place in the industry as publications of all types shrink and more begin to meet at least the quantitative definitions of community journalism.

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.

Smaller conferences offer bigger benefits

By Ivy Ashe

Just before spring break in March 2019, I woke up at 6 a.m. and drove 14 hours (flights to Birmingham are expensive!) from Austin, Texas, to Tuscaloosa, Alabama, for my first journalism research conference. I was presenting a work-in-progress at that year's AEJMC Southeast Colloquium, one of two annual run-ups to the major summer conference. I'd already heard great things about that year's Midwinter Conference from people in my cohort — their presentations went well, they had good discussants, and they'd found a good ramen spot in Norman, Okla. Everyone was right, they reported back. These conferences really are perfect for grad students.

While attendees will be choosing from their own local eats for this year's virtual Midwinter Conference and virtual Southeast Colloquium, most perks of the AEJMC smaller conferences remain the same. They're ideal spaces for new academics to dip their toes in the waters of research presentations without feeling too overwhelmed.

They're full of supportive potential collaborators who can spotlight the best parts of your work while helping you refine it. And because the scale is more intimate, it's easier to begin building your own research community by directly connecting with fellow graduate students and faculty working in your areas.

This is true for any division or interest group, but it's especially applicable to smaller groups like COMJIG, which will be represented at Midwinter this year.

Whether it's your first time participating in Midwinter or you're a veteran attendee, here are five ways to make the experience a rewarding one:

1) Meet the COMJIG community. Who else out there is doing community journalism research? Now you know! Your newest co-author might be attending the same panel as you (and you don't have to worry about forgetting your business cards — just ask for emails in the Zoom chat and follow people on Twitter as soon as their handles appear on a presentation slide*). *Always include your Twitter handle on presentation slides

2) Get feedback. Sessions are smaller, and it's easier to hear from more people about your project. Try to build your presentation with at least a minute of wiggle

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The Virtual Brown Bag Lunch Series



Join the Community Journalism Interest Group for monthly informal Zoom sessions where we discuss such topics as:

February 26: “Covering Difficult Topics at the Community Level: Race, Gender and Politics.”

March 26: “COVID a Year Out: Community Journalism and Scholarship in a Pandemic World.”

April 30: “Scholarship and Service: AEJMC, COMJIG, and Beyond.”

If you’re interested in , or have an idea for a future VBBL topic, reach out to:

**Mimi Perreault
COMJIG Teaching Chair
Perreault@mail.etsu.edu**

What does successful journalism look like in the COVID era?

Let's discuss that together

By Dr. Monica Chadha

The year of the pandemic—2020—severely challenged the local and community press across the world. COVID-19 resulted in a global economic and social shut-down of a magnitude not seen in a long time. Many industries, including news companies, were crushed financially as result of these shutdowns. Several local news outlets in the U.S were shuttered, leading to a high number of layoffs and closures. Australia also saw 200 presses shut down permanently or temporarily within the first half of 2020.

At the same time, these challenges only reinforced the importance of news in general, and community and local news in particular. Local news outlets provided not only basic information such as what COVID-19 is, how it spreads and outbreaks in the community but also listed resources people needed to know about to deal with the pandemic, explaining the pressures being put on the hospitals and medical community with the rising number of Coronavirus patients, and the steps being taken by state administrations to deal with this challenge. Similar coverage also was provided by digital native news sites to their communities where they either were the only local news outlet, or one of a handful. Most of my information regarding important issues in my community—from COVID-19 to presidential elections to the very recent winter storm that swept across Arizona— comes from the local NPR affiliate and local television channels in Phoenix. I am lucky to live in a market where I still have some choice with regard to the local news outlet I would like to follow. I know at least some of my Community Journalism Interest Group peers in other, smaller media markets are not so fortunate.

As local and community news scholars, we know that 2020 did not introduce these issues but only exacerbated the problems already faced by local and community news media. Over the years, we have lamented about how important community, weekly and local news outlets are and yet, they simply are not getting the financial help and support they need to continue doing the work they do. Through our research panels, we've promoted studies that not only highlight the important work community and local news outlets do but also how they encourage dialogue with and input from their community members. For example, at AEJMC 2020, our research panels focused papers such as "Community through Dialogue and Its Impact on Support for NPR Member Stations" by Dr. Joseph Kasko from Winthrop University and "Community Public Safety Information Seeking and the News" by Dr. Christopher

Etheridge from University of Kansas and "Journalism beyond the Command Post" by Dr. Mildred Perreault from East Tennessee State University.

We also are cognizant of the fact that there is no community or local news without community and we are trying to build and nurture ours through more active endeavors that fall within the realm of professional freedom and responsibility. AEJMC states there are five core areas that fall within this realm: (1) Free Expression; (2) Ethics; (3) Media Criticism and Accountability; (4) Diversity and Inclusion; and (5) Public Service. Thus, we have, and continue to, collaborate with ISWNE (The International Society of Weekly Newspaper Editors) and promote its internship and conference through our communication channels. Last year, we collaborated on three panels with other groups at AEJMC that specifically addressed questions related to free expression and public service. We joined hands with Law & Policy Division to co-sponsor the panel titled, Tell Me Your (Source's) Name: Leaks, Subpoenas, Search Warrants and the State of the Reporter's Privilege. We teamed with the Electronic News Division on a panel that focused on the future of public access broadcast channels. It was titled: PEG in Peril? Potential Impacts of FCC Decisions on Community Media Partnerships for Student Broadcasts and Local Coverage. We co-sponsored our third panel with the Magazine Media Division, titled, The Changing City Mag: Challenges and Opportunities for City and Regional Magazines.

While these topics and our prior efforts are useful for talking about what and where community and local journalism currently is, we really want to start pushing our conversations and efforts toward what community and local journalism can be, should be. As reporters, we are trained to talk about what was and is in very definitive ways. Academia, on the other hand, provides us with the freedom to imagine what can be, what should be. If we combine the two, we can co-create a news product that is valuable and transformative, that would continue to be of use and serve the community members, especially those who are more vulnerable and need the power of information more than others.

To that end, I would like to take the opportunity provided by my first PF&R column, in our first newsletter,

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a final peer review prior to publication in the fall issue of Grassroots Editor.

The author of the top paper each year is invited to present it at the annual ISWNE conference, held in June or July. ISWNE provides a conference registration as well as a partial subsidy for travel.

If you're still looking for reasons to join ISWNE, consider our summer internship program for your students. If selected, they work 40 hours per week for eight weeks at one of our member papers and earn \$3,200. Accommodations are sometimes provided.

Blythe Dorrian, a 2020 intern from the University of Missouri, enjoyed her time at a Wisconsin newspaper.

"I learned so much from my experience at the Washington Island Observer," Dorrian said. "I gained confidence as a journalist. I was challenged to write a personal column about something I learned every week. It made my day when people complimented my articles. The community made me realize more of why I chose journalism as my career."

ISWNE values its relationship with COMJIG and would like to find more ways that we can work together. We value the work you are doing to help students understand the importance of a small newspaper to its community and promoting community journalism as a valid career path.

Dr. Chad Stebbins is the Executive Director of the International Society of Weekly Newspaper Editors. You can reach him at stebbins-c@mssu.edu.

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room so there'll be more time for feedback at the end. It's important to offer feedback, too; conferences are all about collaboration. And of course, be sure to use the suggestions you get to shape your paper into its best self for the main AEJ conference in August.

3) Soak up knowledge. Virtual conferencing isn't perfect, but its main benefit (aside from lower costs) is watching sessions asynchronously. I packed in dozens of talks during last year's virtual AEJMC — far more than would have been possible during an in-person session, when you have to decide between presentations that happen at the same time.

4) Gain inspiration. The conferences are also a great place to turn on your own reviewer brain. What's working in other people's presentations? What theories are coming across the screen that you could also use? Who's just doing really cool stuff?

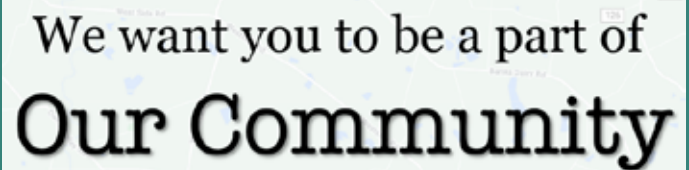
5) Connect on social media. Follow the conference hashtag on Twitter to see what other people are enjoying, and follow @AEJMCComJIG on Twitter! Academic Twitter is a delight.

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.

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to ask you, dear members, about topics you think that are important to talk about with journalism professionals and ideas that can help bridge knowledge with practice. Specifically, the question I ask is: What does successful local/community journalism look like in a pandemic/ post pandemic era? What topics must academics tackle and think about to better help the profession? I exhort you to visit our Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/COMJIG>), or tweet us @AEJMCComJIG or email me so we can write about them in our newsletter, invite professionals to talk about the issues you want discussed, create opportunities for collaborations and conversations between academics and professionals so knowledge aids practice and vice versa. It is by working together that we can not only preserve community and local journalism, but also imagine and build a great future for it.

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