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## Civic journalism and community newspapers: opportunities for social and civic connections

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CIVIC JOURNALISM AND THE COMMUNITY NEWSPAPER:  
OPPORTUNITIES FOR CIVIC AND SOCIAL CONNECTIONS

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
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by

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## **ABSTRACT**

This study sought to fill in a gap in civic journalism research by considering its implications for community newspapers, those small, locally oriented publications that serve rural and suburban communities throughout the country. In particular, this study posed the argument that such newspapers may have advantages in pursuing civic journalism, and that these approaches may especially benefit newspapers in high-growth communities. This study relied heavily on the language of theorists who describe journalism as a public conversation, the quality of which – its usefulness for readers as citizens and members of a community – the press can either help or hinder.

This study also relied on the assumption that civic journalism suggests a social imperative as well as a civic one: How well newspapers help readers, particularly newcomers, integrate into the community socially may affect how well these residents become invested, participatory citizens. Accordingly, this study sought to test whether new and long-time readers seek different kinds of information from the newspaper and whether a leaning toward civic or social interests corresponds to length of residence.

A telephone survey of subscribers of The Williamson County Sun, a semi-weekly newspaper in Georgetown, Texas, was undertaken to evaluate readers' use and perceptions of the paper as a vehicle for familiarizing newcomers with the community, facilitating community involvement and helping residents navigate changes related to growth. Results did not demonstrate a relationship between length of residence and interest in social-oriented news, although a potential relationship was suggested between interest in certain types of news and reasons for moving to Williamson County. The strongest findings of the study related to readers' perceptions of their

relationship with the community newspaper compared to the nearby metro daily, and their evaluations of the newspaper's usefulness in facilitating a public conversation through strong local news coverage.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Introduction**

Civic journalism as it pertains to community newspapers – both the country weekly and its city-oriented cousin – has been underrepresented in the research literature, even though such papers may be well suited to its objectives. Voakes found that journalists at smaller papers may be more amenable to four key values associated with civic journalism: enterprise, information for decision-making, facilitation of discourse, and attention to citizens' concerns (1999). In a study published this year, Nichols, Friedland, Rojas, Cho and Shah reviewed 651 public journalism projects and concluded that news organizations serving small or medium communities were highest on measures of improved civic competence, such as providing a problem-solving frame, inviting readers' feedback and emphasizing citizens' input. For the purpose of this study, such papers may be weeklies, semi-weeklies or small dailies, but generally are characterized by emphasis on local news, perhaps exclusively; less reliance on externally produced copy (e.g., wire services, syndication); and often local ownership.

In particular, many newspapers in small communities enjoy a more personal relationship with their readers, which puts them ahead when it comes to bridging the detachment that civic journalists say has plagued the metro dailies. Cass used the word "intimate" to describe the relationship between community papers and their readers (2005, p. 25). He also noted that several small-town newspaper editors say they consider themselves to be both connected to their communities and bound up in their fortunes, civic and otherwise. As for the newspaper serving as a strong public institution, McClenegham and Ragland suggested that political endorsements in small, locally-oriented papers exert more influence on their readers than those in large, metro-

politan dailies (2002). One small-town editor, writing in 1939, said the key to the community paper is a kind of “neighborliness that the metropolis cannot have” (Neal, pp. 8-9). It is this same neighborliness that civic journalism seeks to tap into and even create.

More than fifteen years after its introduction, civic journalism’s most lasting impact seems to have been providing a philosophy and language about coverage that resonate with professionals, reflecting a role for the press as a critical tool for building an informed, participatory citizenry. Civic journalism seems to have persisted and integrated, to the degree that it has, by offering practical tools for journalists seeking to create more meaning and effectiveness in their work – whether by implementing a new beat system at The Norfolk Virginian-Pilot or simply having reporters ask different kinds of interview questions. Accordingly, this study defines civic journalism by its appeal to the public service mission of the press and its emphasis on citizen-driven reporting.

In the last few years, civic journalism has become less a radical source of contention and more the origin of a renewed emphasis on citizens and voters, even though the resulting practices often are not referred to as “civic journalism.” In 2004, Strupp described a “new approach” being used by journalists across the country – going grass-roots to talk to voters – in covering the presidential election. The techniques resembled those used in an early civic journalism project at The Charlotte Observer in 1991, and they were described in the same terms: shoe-leather reporting, a person-to-person approach, going off the beaten path to learn what real people are thinking and saying. Strupp did not cite civic journalism as an inspiration for this method, instead attributing it to the closeness of the election and the belief that it would be decided along regional rather than national lines. He also noted that The Philadelphia Inquirer had gone so far as to create a citizens panel for feedback on coverage as the election approached. This is one of several recent



examples in which civic journalism's citizen emphasis has been incorporated by journalists, even as many have left the label behind. Concurrently, the proliferation of on-line news outlets, weblogs, etc., has encouraged professional introspection as the Internet has altered press form and function in response to citizens' evolving media use.

For small community newspapers, civic journalism takes on a somewhat different light. Lauterer writes that far from being merely small versions of the big dailies, community papers are "fundamentally different," with "the personal approach" being the small paper's excellence and distinction (1995, p. xiv). Such papers "satisfy a basic human craving [for] ... the sense of community, a positive and intimate reflection of the sense of place ... and our profound and interlocking connectedness" (1995, p. 9). Where it is present, this connection creates an environment that is hospitable to civic journalism, which seeks to reengage with and reinvigorate its audience.

One challenge that hits home for the community newspaper more than its metropolitan counterpart – and makes civic journalism attractive – is rapid growth of local populations, as small cities and towns grow and/or are subsumed into the sprawl of a nearby urban center. The newspaper with a long history in a once-isolated county may find itself faced, rather suddenly, with a new and potentially larger readership that, if market penetration is to be maintained, must be brought into the fold of loyal and existing readers. For the semi-weekly Williamson County Sun, the newspaper under study in this project, the county's population is expected to increase by 24.1% between 2005 and 2010, compared to 4.8% for the United States (STDBOnline, 2006). Some newcomers hail from distant regions, drawn by booming local economies or other quality-of-life measures, and do not possess the lifelong resident's personal investment in the community. Frequently, new arrivals cause a demographic shift to which the newspaper may be required

to adapt. In some cases, this trend can be favorable for the newspaper, for example, if the population trends toward an older demographic; according to one survey, such individuals are twice as likely as younger readers to take a regular interest in the news (Radio and Television News Directors Foundation, 2000).

Another change the community newspaper may confront is an influx of readers from urban areas, who may be accustomed to the broad coverage of a metro daily. The community paper, on the other hand, typically accompanies hard news with soft news of interest only to the existing readership. The Williamson County Sun, like many small papers, continues to publish such hallmarks of the “country weekly” as achievements of students, business people and other individuals, regardless of their prestige or lack thereof in a larger market; readers’ submissions for contests such as vegetable growing and amateur photography; miscellaneous “Items” called in or submitted by readers on a variety of unusual occurrences in their daily lives; and reader-driven content (letters to the editor, guest columns and Q&A columns) in which readers have an extremely high chance of being accepted for publication. Community newspapers also continue to provide what Bomann calls “refrigerator news – articles you can cut out and put on your refrigerator that will affect your family. That’s still important to a lot of people” (1999, p. 6). This study suggests that newcomers, in particular, will appreciate this information, which provides the social counterpart to civic information that helps them get acquainted with and integrate into their communities.

Another function the community newspaper can perform extremely well in growth areas is fostering a strong sense of local identity, which corresponds to civic journalism’s emphasis on community-building. In reflecting this identity, the newspaper affirms to its readership a distinct “community” to which both readers and non-readers belong. This may be especially true if

growth is perceived as a threat to what often is described as “a sense of community” or “a small-town feeling.” Growth can generate fears of losing this quality, but also can spark discussion about ways to preserve it. The ensuing conversation reflects a greater self-consciousness of “community” as people struggle to figure out what it is and how to maintain it. A variety of growth-oriented issues can spark such discussion: zoning changes to accommodate development, demographic shifts that affect community institutions such as schools, workforces and social services, the need for new buildings, etc. As the public confronts such issues, the newspaper seeking to foster community with regard to civic journalism has an advantage in that the public already is engaged in considering and discussing this quality.

As nearby metro dailies reach into the community newspaper’s market with zoned editions and county bureaus, the small paper would do best to develop its expertise in two ways in which it has an advantage: a potentially more layered understanding of the community and a focus on local, personal coverage. Both these objectives can be structured along the lines of civic journalism, and both may carve out a meaningful niche for community publications that cannot be replicated by the touch-and-go appearance of the daily’s zoned edition.

### **Evolution of Civic Journalism**

In the spring of 2006, a hopeful column appeared in the Nieman Reports, praising a “refreshing” conference titled “The Emerging Mind of Community Journalism” (Giles, p. 3). About 200 scholars and professionals convened in Alabama to discuss a more connected approach to local coverage, emphasizing that “personal relationships” and “face-to-face conversations” still comprise “the core of the continuing conversation between the newspaper and its community.” As described by Giles, attendees discussed practical techniques for developing such connectedness: “backpack journalism,” in which journalists get out of the newsroom and hit the streets,

their backpacks filled with tools of the trade, and visit community institutions – “not to do old stories but to bring back a new perspective to share with readers.” Attendees also learned about “the Wal-Mart nation,” symbolizing “those places in the community where journalists can find a diversity of values and a range of religious and economic circumstances that can broaden the thinking and understanding in newsrooms.” And they heard the metaphor of “family relationships” used to describe connectedness, which overcomes aloofness between the press and the public and instead “embraces all the emotions you have in a family,” from love and celebration to grief and challenges. These values were posited against the undesirable “industrial age of journalism,” Giles writes, in which a strong sense of detachment separates journalists from their communities. He describes the alternative presented at the conference:

... A newspaper that can create a sense of hope and belief in the possibility that communities can solve problems. This model is constructed on a central idea: A newspaper can't be independent unless it is interdependent with its community of readers. When people believe something can be done, they will re-engage in the community and remain steadfast readers of their local newspapers (2006, p. 3).

The phrase “civic journalism” appeared nowhere in the column, nor was a reference made to any particular precedent of these ideas. But the thumbprint of civic journalism clearly shows its mark. Journalists backpacking across the diverse Wal-Mart nation, seeking to more deeply understand their communities in ways that will inform reporting, echoes the “tapping civic life” strategies developed by Richard Harwood. “Family relationships” is a more informal way of illustrating the interdependent relationship between the press and the public that early civic journalism theorists described. And finally, the message conveys confidence in citizens’ ability to develop solutions, recognition that the press can help or hinder their progress, and belief that it is not compromising for the press to cover a community’s successes along with its problems. This argument, in particular, resonates with many of the observations set out by Rosen

in his 1999 discussion of civic journalism, *What Are Journalists For?*. Regardless of how they are labeled, the goal of such strategies is to reconsider and, if necessary, alter reporting norms and routines that do not encourage and may inhibit the goals of enterprise, providing citizens with information for decision making, facilitating discourse, and paying attention to citizens' concerns (Voakes, 1999). Traditional journalism, by contrast, has in many cases positioned citizens as spectators to a democratic show in which they have little hope of participating (Rosen, 1999).

Journalists who attended the conference came from what were described as community newspapers, with circulations less than 50,000, many owned by families in the communities where they are published (Giles, 2006). Fifteen or so years after civic journalists first set change in motion with vague definitions and sometimes incendiary suggestions, it is encouraging that its ideas not only persist, but have crystallized and migrated down to the community newspaper level. Professional and academic acceptance, if not support, seems to have settled around its more moderate practices, many of which resemble strong local reporting. Even some former critics of civic journalism have come to agree with the desirability of "soliciting the voice of readers and looking at different ways of covering stories" (Greenwald, 2002, p. 10).

Since civic journalism first appeared in the early 1990s, the argument has been persistent that it represents conventional, albeit high-quality, journalism of the "shoe-leather variety" (Massey and Haas, 2002). Even Richard Harwood, who has been an active ally of civic journalists in developing techniques for covering communities that he calls "tapping civic life," wrote, "Tapping civic life is another name for practicing good journalism" (2001, pp. 40-41).

Sirianni and Friedland, however, note, "This line of argument misses the larger question of framing issues through citizen deliberation and listening in ways that reveal the full complex-

ity of problems. Providing a citizens' frame does, in fact, challenge journalistic tradition" (2001, p. 228). This new direction, as Rosen explained it, stemmed from the realization that citizens had, in many cases, been left behind by a media that increasingly relied on "horserace" stories, soundbites and punditry (1999). In the 1991 study "Citizens and Politics: A View from Main Street America," citizens expressed a growing sense of alienation from the political processes at which – at least according to democratic theory – they were supposed to be at the center. Citizens perceived the media as being in an entrenched, reciprocal relationship with political players (politicians, lobbyists, special interest groups, etc.), which dominated political discourse to the extent that there was little role left for the average citizen (Rosen, 1999). In particular, Rosen said, the media did little to encourage citizens to see themselves as active agents in their own self-governance. As political coverage became less of a helpful resource for citizens and more of a venue for officials and elites, less attention was given to the issues and concerns that mattered to voters.

Civic journalism's call for improvement represented a dramatic enough jolt to the establishment, in both practice and ideology, that it effectively sparked new debate. Moreover, there was something disturbingly novel – or at least forgotten – about civic journalism's ideal. It acknowledged that in coverage of electoral politics and other community issues, journalists' public service calling – to serve as the citizen's proxy in relationship to government – had been lost along the way. Harwood noted that journalists themselves, despite habitual defensiveness of the professional standards of their work, often express a desire to better fulfill "a personal calling or the noble purpose of their craft" (2001, p. 40). Civic journalism suggested a revolutionary zeal in calling itself a "movement" to address this gap, and by several indicators, it was time for a critical look that would rouse journalists out of their routines and back to this noble purpose.

At the same time, a degree of accuracy persists in the “nothing new” argument. While civic journalism made credible critiques of traditional journalism’s failings, it does value strong enterprise reporting, as several researchers have noted. An early hallmark of civic journalism projects – then termed “experiments” – was an approach in which reporters deliberately sought out voters as “ordinary people” to learn what they wanted to ask candidates in political races (Corrigan, 1997). The common-sense aspect of this strategy also prompted questions as to whether civic journalism was as novel an approach as it claimed to be. At the same time, even some skeptics allowed room for improvement in political coverage and acknowledged that the press, as much as citizens, had gotten off course in the modern campaign landscape.

Early discussion about civic journalism was taken up with extreme positions, with some members of the media seizing the more radical practices without a strong understanding of underlying philosophy and other members, in turn, denouncing this movement and its misguided followers. But more moderate civic journalism values, in general, found broad support, often accompanied by the perception that these correlated with traditional values. One study found that journalists “generally do not see civic journalism as a drastic departure from past practice and are open to experimenting with new ways that allow the media to respond to a changing society” (Gade, Abel, Antecol, Hsueh, Hume, Morris, et al., 1998, p. 24). Voakes found that when the civic journalism values of enterprise, information for decision making, facilitation of discourse, and attention to citizens’ concerns were presented to more than 1,035 newspaper journalists nationwide, they expressed 81% mean approval (perhaps in part, he notes, because these values were not identified as civic journalism to the respondents) (1999). Enterprise and providing information for decision making, he points out, both reflect traditional standards of excellence for local coverage (1999). Similarly, Kurpius, studying local television news stations, found that sta-

tions that have integrated civic journalism into their operations have “norms and routines . . . [that] are deeply rooted in the enterprise reporting tradition” (2000, p. 351).

A managing editor at the Norfolk Virginian-Pilot, which was an enthusiastic and early adopter of civic journalism, conceded the similarities between civic journalists’ citizen emphasis and traditional journalists’ efforts to “humanize” a story by approaching it in a way that has meaning for citizens’ lives (Sirianni and Friedland, 2001, p. 207). But civic journalism goes beyond that, the editor said, by “tracing the problem back to the community.” The emphasis, in other words, is on the nature of the civic problem, not on “the news.” A more fundamental difference, according to Rosen, involves reordering the assumptions about what is required for civic participation. “Traditional journalism believes that people need to be informed so they can participate effectively. In public journalism, we believe people have to participate effectively so they’ll want to become informed” (1995, p. 7).

Several researchers have studied the norms and routines of news coverage that inadvertently suppress the usefulness of the product for reader-citizens who want to “participate effectively.” In the most general terms, the basic characteristics of the gatekeeping function – limited capacity for coverage, structural limitations on editorial staff, and financial restraints, among others – collectively shape the news product. Numerous features of the newsgathering process, from external factors such as the proximity of a news event to internal factors such as the presence or absence of accompanying photographs, may determine which news events and issues are covered and how they are presented (Lowery and DeFleur, 1995). Agenda-setting effects also influence coverage, primarily through the values and beliefs of individual reporters and editors, the nature of media themselves, the uneven flow of news, and audience interest, among other factors (Lowery and DeFleur, 1995).



Tuchman examined several aspects of routinized news production and newsroom culture that both enable and hinder the creation of the daily product called “news” (1978). As she described the newsworker’s function, it is to “transform the idiosyncratic occurrences of the everyday world into raw materials that can be subjected to routine processing and dissemination” (1978, p. 58). This transformation has several defining characteristics, such as the process by which editors determine which stories will be placed on the front page; as Tuchman notes, news value alone – which itself shifts “from moment to moment” – is determined in part by random factors such as the amount of news on any given production day (1978, p. 184). Beat structures also create an artificial framework into which real-world occurrences must be made to fit, she argues.

Among the constraints are the press of work, the omnipresence of deadlines, and the struggle to present factual accounts of events. Collectively derived typifications ... are intended to facilitate news processing. But if an occurrence does not readily present itself as news easily packaged in a known narrative form, that occurrence is either soft news . . . or nonnews (1978, p. 215).

As the press has evolved over time, industry structures and newswriters themselves have developed tendencies that are effective for reliably producing a news product, but also may produce superficial coverage. The two-sided, balanced objectivity of traditional reporting becomes, to the civic practitioner, a conflict-driven frame focusing on the extremes. The beat reporter has a need for timely, convenient access to sources; the civic journalist claims this leads to excessive reliance on officials and experts, who are easier to track down than the wandering, unaffiliated citizen. The need for clear and manageable story angles, pegged to the “newest development,” may mean that the messy, slowly developing issues underneath are left unexplored. By contrast, civic journalists encourage careful listening to stakeholders’ underlying values, providing con-

text (including positive developments), and familiarity with places where “average people” and their informal leaders gather to talk about community issues.

Along with civic journalists, readers have expressed their dissatisfaction with the news product they are receiving. In 1996, Case reported on a poll, conducted by The Washington Post for the Newspaper Association of America, in which readers gave newspapers low marks in helping them deal with their daily lives: 39% said newspapers are fairly useful, 28% said papers are not very effective and 16% said papers aren’t helpful at all. And this assessment came from people who read the newspaper, unlike the growing number of Americans who do not (Putnam, 2000).

Despite the innovation of some aspects of civic journalism, early advocates emphasized that their theoretical framework was rooted in long-standing national ideals. Civic journalism developed as its proponents “sought new ways of understanding and framing public opinion, rooted in the American tradition of reasoned and pragmatic deliberation” (Sirianni and Friedland, 2001, p. 188). Speaking to the community newspaper’s place in this democratic tradition, one stirring headline in a 1946 Saturday Evening Post proclaimed, “The Country Newspaper: Symbol of Democracy,” and went on to say that this “distinctly American institution . . . knits [the community] together” (p. 160). Dewey provided another intellectual touchstone for early civic journalists, supporting a critical place for a “genuine *public journalism* – the journalist as a social narrator/moderator, organizing a wider range of views than the community itself produces and a forum for their further discussion, that actively includes the community” (cited in Parisi, 1997, pp. 680-81).

The reformers’ criticisms also found precedent in two 20<sup>th</sup>-century studies. The 1947 Hutchins Commission report on “A Free and Responsible Press” concluded that the press was

failing its social responsibility imperative (Leigh, 1947). In 1968, the Kerner Commission, analyzing coverage of the previous year's racial riots, asserted that journalists "failed to report adequately on the causes and consequences of civil disorders and the underlying problems of race relations" (Goldstein, 1989, p. 202). Like civic journalists more than 20 years later, the latter commission also chided journalists for failing to provide adequate access to a wide range of perspectives and for skimming the surface of social conflicts, focusing on event-driven extremes without conveying the contextual causes behind social conditions (Lowery and DeFleur, 1995). Both these criticisms figure strongly in civic journalism's assessment of current shortcomings.

Yankelovich noted another weak link in the press's service to the public: its tendency to produce a surplus of information that contributes to the existence of public opinion, but does not help citizens weave these threads into reasoned, effective public judgment (1991). Traditional journalism could comfortably permit the formation of public opinion, he said, simply by taking "informing the public" as its primary function. Civic journalism, on the other hand, could go beyond this superficial presentation of disparate facts to facilitate "a more complex form of understanding public issues that all citizens can, in principle, develop" (Sirianni and Friedland, 2001, p. 193). Public judgment, they continued, represents "a practical alternative to the continuous piling of facts upon facts that most journalists themselves recognize has done little to improve public understanding of policy issues."

Over time, these conditions have shaped the news product, civic journalists believe, with serious consequences for its usefulness to citizens grappling with issues in their communities.

These criticisms matter, according to Bowers, Claflin and Walker, because media are

the means through which most members of a community come to know those parts of it with which they do not regularly interact. Since the community rarely comes together as a whole, a surrogate is needed to advance public life. Advo-

cates of civic journalism maintain that the media can be that surrogate, thus becoming the “civic sphere” through which the community can have a conversation with itself (1998, p. 3).

The metaphor of a “conversation” early on was prominent in the discussion about civic journalism. Intrinsic to this view was, first, the recognition that journalism served this dialogue-based function that could be shaped by routines and practices, and, second, that it could accommodate this conversation for better or for worse. As with other aspects of civic journalism, even this metaphor raised objections. Journalists should record the conversation, traditionalists said, but stop short of interfering with participants or attempting to shape its flow. Civic journalists believed differently. The old take on recording the conversation – presenting the facts and leaving citizens to work it out for themselves – hadn’t gotten the public very far, they argued (Rosen, 1999). In particular, as one survey after another documented declines in readership, respect for and trust of the press, and civic participation, early advocates concluded that the press was as likely to push citizens away from the democratic process as to draw them in. And that, according to Rosen, had dire consequences for the profession itself: The public service mission of journalism would be irrelevant if citizens opted out of participation in civic affairs and so ceased to have a need to be informed (1999).

### **Early Efforts and Analysis**

Two projects typically are recognized as the first civic journalism endeavors, both driven by a renewed commitment to solicit citizens’ perspectives in coverage of civic issues. A 1987 project at the Ledger-Enquirer in Columbus, Georgia, triggered by the lack of response to a series investigating city problems and potential responses, was one of the first initiatives to convene a town hall meeting to discuss issues and produce a citizens’ agenda (Sirianni and Friedland, 2001). More commonly, the Wichita Eagle’s 1990 election coverage is cited as the first

proactive effort to approach coverage differently. The Eagle followed this in 1992 with citizen-driven coverage of the presidential election, which was in turn followed by a nationally televised presidential debate in which George Bush, Bill Clinton and Ross Perot took questions from a panel of citizens. And with that, citizens were elevated to their proper place at the center of the democratic process, with candidates forced to answer to citizens rather than hide behind superficial reporting (Fouhy, 1994).

The Charlotte Observer, which later would carry out some of the most extensive civic journalism projects, took a citizen-based approach to a 1991 city council election. Driven by the perception that citizens “wanted to go back to community basics,” one political reporter at the Observer was asked to find out what election issues they were thinking about by carrying out “shoe-leather stuff, driving on the west side, stopping at garages, at a barbecue restaurant, talking to folks” (Sirianni and Friedland, 2001, p. 208). Taking the citizen and his or her concerns as the central political issue – as opposed to the money raised by campaigns, strategies, polls and other “horserace” information – has been repeatedly offered by civic journalists as a necessary improvement to political reporting. When reformers talk about strengthening the “civic culture,” they mean “the forces that bind people to their community, draw them into politics and public affairs, and cause them to see ‘the system’ as theirs . . . rather than [as] the playground of insiders or political professionals” (Bowers et al., 1998, p. 2).

The lesson learned from these early endeavors was that new reflexes could be assimilated into existing routines to provide greater breadth and depth about issues and the people dealing with them: listening to and learning more from citizens and readers; making time for the slower work of tapping into the layers of civic life; reporting information that could facilitate rather than hamper citizens’ efforts to solve problems in their communities; constructing an image of citi-

zens as active participants in their destinies; helping readers search for common ground; and expanding conceptions of accuracy and complexity (Sirianni and Friedland, 2001). In time, journalists broadened their application of these techniques beyond political coverage. Fouhy noted that while civic journalism's roots were firmly planted in issues of governance and representative democracy, it applied equally well to the full spectrum of issues that comprise the public agenda (1994).

In the beginning, missteps occurred. Several examples could be given of "experiments" that raised eyebrows in the academic and professional communities, often because of the perception they crossed a line into activism or advocacy. In one endeavor, the *Spokesman Review* bought pizza for 1,500 residents, which they were encouraged to eat while gathering in each other's backyards; their conversations were recorded by "urban consultants," who assimilated these data into a report that was provided to the newspaper (Corrigan, 1997). An editor at the *Virginian-Pilot* acknowledged that the shadow of artifice loomed when newspapers create large-scale "community conversations": "They're a necessary crutch right now. But better than that is to know your community" (Sirianni and Friedland, 2001, p. 203). (It should be noted, however, that this project did not register as representative of civic journalism in a survey of editors and professors [Corrigan, 1997].)

As civic journalism endeavors ceased to be known as "experiments" and began to be termed "projects," researchers began codifying practices, intellectual parameters, opinions and effectiveness. In 1995, Lambeth and Craig created a three-level model describing differences between projects, in part to clarify civic journalists' actual versus perceived deviation from traditional values and norms. Civic journalism work in Mode 1 emphasized better listening to the public and to experts/leaders, with little actual involvement by the news organization in commu-

nity affairs. In Mode 2, journalists emphasized initiating dialogue with and between the public and experts/leaders. Mode 3 called for participating with the public and with experts/leaders to solve public problems. Kurpius, studying organizational routines in television newsrooms, categorized integrated stations, which have incorporated civic journalism values into routine news work; special project stations, which periodically apply these values to a one-time project; and publicity stations, which claim higher levels of connection with viewers as a public relations campaign (2000).

### **Clarifying the Goals**

The lack of a clear definition of and agreement on what constituted civic journalism was a major source of concern about how far journalists could go with solutions-oriented coverage before crossing the line into advocacy. In early years, civic journalism's proponents did not always offer clarification; Rosen's statement, "We're making it up as we go along," did not sit well with those who questioned what the new movement was about and whether it was really new, necessary or even a good idea. In seeking to clarify journalists' views on these parameters, Arant and Meyer found that even newspaper journalists who support civic journalism values, such as helping people in the community and helping the community solve problems, are less supportive of doing so in an activist role (1998).

At the same time, readers have expressed a desire for journalists to broaden the news net to take in the positive along with the negative. While doing so does not necessarily require journalists to step into the activist role, "readers want newspapers to report on positive developments in their communities and explore solutions to the problems they face . . . rather than to simply concentrate on what's wrong" (Case, 1996, pp. 12-13). The call to build bridges, seek out more positive news and get involved led critics to accuse public journalists of compromising inde-

pendence and objectivity. Examples of this criticism are ample in the literature, especially in the early to mid-1990s, including trade journals, research periodicals and major newspapers such as The New York Times, where Frankel pronounced the new movement “Fix-It Journalism” (1995).

Other projects drew fire because of the perception that civic journalism sought to let citizens dictate content, to involve editorial staffs directly in public decisions, and to abandon objectivity, among others (Merritt, 1995). He attempted to clarify such misconceptions:

Public journalism . . . seeks to provide information in a way that leads to true deliberation about solutions rather than mere debate or conflict. It does not attempt to dictate what those solutions might be, for that would be not only futile but also democratically and journalistically inappropriate. In short, it cares about the process of democracy and whether or not democracy fulfills its historic promise, which is that people decide their fate through democratic deliberation, not institutions or governments or, of course, journalists (1995, pp. 80-81).

Supporting this argument, several researchers have concluded that the techniques and even the philosophy of civic journalism do not threaten the pillars of the profession. Fouhy emphasized that the most closely held values, such as accuracy and independence, did not have to be sacrificed in the effort to pay attention to citizens’ perspectives and opinions (1994). In fact, he pointed out, civic journalism offered the news media a promising opportunity to bring both information and judgment to coverage of government. Arant and Meyer determined that civic journalism was unlikely to undermine traditional values (1998). Instead, they found that newspaper staff who valued public journalism also put more importance on traditional values. They also found no clear indication that support for public journalism values would lower journalists’ sensitivity to traditional ethical dilemmas.

The findings of our study assuage fears that support for public journalism practices would undermine traditional journalism values. . . . (T)hose that have em-



braced the value of helping public life by engaging citizens in it do not agree with the critics that public journalism requires them to abandon traditional roles, such as serving as a watchdog of government, or traditional practices, such as avoiding conflicts of interests (Arant and Meyer, 1998, p. 217).

Several observers have argued that civic journalism is a natural ally of the valued watchdog role. “Indeed, civic journalism can be tough on those in power by challenging them to respond to citizens’ own agendas and real-life concerns, and to engage with integrity in presenting their views and following through on their commitments” (Sirianni and Friedland, 2001, p. 187). The ideal combination, Dzur suggests, would be to retain the values of the watchdog function – taking an adversarial stance to ensure that other public institutions do their part to promote deliberative democracy (ensuring all significant ideas are represented, revealing efforts to manipulate public opinion, drawing attention to unfair barriers to participation, etc.) – while retaining civic journalism’s communal engagement (2002).

As one tool for accomplishing these goals – more account of citizens’ perspectives and more accountability of government – the Colorado Springs Gazette contributed “multistakeholder reporting,” in which all perspectives are represented with the appropriate level of complexity (Sirianni and Friedland, 2001). The Wichita Eagle refined civic mapping, or studying a community to determine where citizens get information, where journalists can go for “grass-roots insights” into citizens’ perspectives and how to frame questions to get at what citizens really think (Fouhy, 1994). This latter approach also prompted criticism, first, that a good journalist already knows how to tap into the “grass-roots insights,” and, second, that journalists who take this approach too far will stray into market-driven journalism pandering to the lowest common denominator. That criticism also has been misdirected, according to Merritt and other civic journalism advocates (Corrigan, 1997).

Analyses of the measurable effects of civic journalism have varied, with some studies finding a dramatically different kind of product and others reporting a lack of statistical significance (Massey, 1998; Maier and Potter, 2001; Moscovitz, 2002; Kennamer and South, 2002; Kurpius, 2002). A content analysis of coverage of the 2000 U.S. Senate elections by two Virginia papers – the civic journalism *Virginian-Pilot* and the traditional *Times Dispatch* – found clear gains in enterprise stories, issues coverage and source diversity in the *Virginian-Pilot* (Kennamer and South, 2002). The *Times Dispatch*, by contrast, relied more on campaign event-driven stories, horserace coverage and a more limited pool of sources. The researchers acknowledge that other factors may have contributed to these differences, but seem to conclude that the deliberate adoption of a civic journalism approach likely had a strong effect.

Massey analyzed the use of “average” citizens as opposed to elite sources in the civic journalism *Tallahassee Democrat*, the *Democrat* before it moved to that approach and the *Gainesville Sun*. He found that non-elite and elite sources appeared with more parity in the civic journalism paper, but the former was not necessarily more frequent or prominent (1998). Kurpius, on the other hand, in a content analysis of entries submitted to the James K. Batten Civic Journalism Awards contest over a five-year period, found that diversity of sources more closely paralleled national demographic percentages, particularly reporters’ use of female and minority sources (2002).

A 2002 content analysis of *The Charlotte Observer* and the *Indianapolis Star* comparing coverage of homelessness also found differences, specifically that the *Observer* used fewer official sources and provided more “mobilizing information” (Moscovitz, p. 71). Other differences were slight, however, with almost all stories in both newspapers providing solution-oriented information; the researcher, however, points to the lack of a clear conclusion from this finding,

since the content analyzed fell around the holiday charitable season and because of the broad definition used by coders.

Maier and Potter, analyzing the effect of civic journalism on television news of the 1996 presidential campaign, found slight, but statistically insignificant, differences between a station that promoted civic journalism and one that followed traditional political reporting (2001). They also note, “This study also underscores the difficulty in distinguishing public journalism from quality, conventional political reporting” (1996, p. 332). They do concede that newspapers, as opposed to television, tended to produce content that was more measurably different.

In 2002, Greenwald considered “10 years of public journalism” and reported mixed opinions on the extent to which the approach had integrated into the mainstream. She did, however, point to a study by the Pew Center for Civic Journalism, released in 2001, that gave strong indications that integration had occurred: Two-thirds of 360 daily newspaper editors said they either identified with civic journalism or supported its tenets but did not identify with the label. Another 45 percent of editors reported that they utilized the practices and approaches of what is commonly understood to be civic journalism (2002, p. 12). Blom concluded that civic journalism is a “modified approach,” not a radical set of completely new ideas, and that “it still operates under the standards and canons of the traditional media” (2004, p. 45). Massey and Haas, examining 47 evaluative studies of civic journalism, found that projects carried out under the banner of civic journalism ranged widely in quality and in stated objectives (2002). They concluded that civic journalism represents one set of tools and practices among many that are available to the professional.

## **Conversation and Deliberation**

Dzur suggested that if civic journalism has failed in any way, it results from the fact that civic journalists set too ambitious an aim to begin with (2002). The goal of achieving the democratic ideal by using the power of the press to create a more thoughtful, active citizenry would, he said, in reality require the concerted energies of numerous industries and public institutions (2002). Frederickson also has acknowledged the complexities of deliberative democracy, suggesting that a community's effectiveness depends on the quality of three interrelated relationships: between government and citizens, citizens and media, and media and government (cited in Blom, 2004).

In addition to the full complement of institutional and professional resources that would be necessary to achieve a more deliberative society, the voluntary participation of individual citizens remains paramount. While the press can provide readers and viewers with the tools for civic participation, the problem of non-readers and non-viewers remains unaddressed. And it is those citizens who are least motivated to use a newspaper to develop an understanding of issues and to stay informed (Putnam, 2000). Nonetheless, for those citizens that it can reach, civic journalism has equipped journalists with a set of tools – practical techniques for deeper reporting, better listening and stronger sourcing – with which to carry out both familiar and refashioned objectives.

Using these tools effectively, civic journalists have argued, requires a more conscientious awareness of journalism's other "world" – that which is created each day on the pages of the newspaper and in television broadcasts. This resulting entity has been described by Habermas as a "public sphere" (cited in Rosen, 1999, p. 62); a "'town meeting,' where citizens would have increasing access to accurate and complete accounts of the events, issues, and problems that required their attention and decisions" (Lowery and DeFleur, 1995, p. 189); and "the narrative of a

community, stories it tells about itself” (Merritt, 1996, p. 26). Merritt also emphasized the importance of citizen participation: “Journalism is only half of the equation, and the journalism in a community can be no better than the civic story the community is itself producing” (1996, p. 26).

The difficulty faced by journalists is that press performance has been one factor among many in a decline in community engagement, which Putnam symbolized as “bowling alone”: a widespread decline in the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Americans’ political, civic and social engagement with institutions and with other individuals. Among other contributing factors, Putnam cites time and financial pressures, increased mobility, urban sprawl, television and the accumulated effect of generational differences (2000). Fouhy also noted that lifestyle and technological changes have begun to threaten the informal social networks that have long been a basis for developing connections among community members (1994). The practices of civic journalism, particularly in its early days, correspond specifically to these social deficits, as practitioners sought to recreate these informal social networks with community gatherings; in some cases, these conversations took place literally over the back fence, as in the *Spokesman* newspaper’s backyard pizza parties.

One way in which projects have fostered connections has been to introduce individuals and agencies to like-minded others. The *Virginian-Pilot*’s “Neighborhood Exchange” feature was described by the managing editor as a way to make such introductions: “What we find is that people are so isolated that ideas aren’t shared, and because they’re not shared, people don’t benefit from any exchanges; they don’t build a sense of community; they stay in isolation” (Sirianni and Friedland, 2001, p. 206). This connectivity can take many forms, from simply introducing newcomers to a community to augmenting the complex ties between organizations. The payoff is an increase in social capital, which Putnam describes as “connections among individuals – social

networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them” (2000, p. 19). Merritt pointed out that the community that succeeds in building such social capital needs a “repository” for it – that is, the newspaper – where “the knowledge, the people and the encouragement that success breeds – the accumulated experience of a community learning to make itself better – can be drawn upon” (1996, p. 26).

The Charlotte Observer’s “Take Back Our Neighborhoods” project also demonstrated that civic journalism could facilitate connections among civic organizations, in this case a Habitat for Humanity affiliate, a Christian ministry and the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Housing Partnership (Sirianni and Friedland, 2001). Following that project, these organizations developed better working relationships and improved coordination of shared goals. This service is important, according to Blom, because “the community builders . . . need a social-capital bridge to other community builders erected in the pages of the newspaper. They need the ‘commons’ to be a space inviting conversation among all who choose to enter” (2004, p. 47).

Sirianni and Friedland, referring to the 1991 study “Citizens and Politics: A View from Main Street America,” noted that Americans feel excluded from public life and have trouble conceptualizing their role as citizens. The extent to which they would participate depended on their sense of efficacy: “They did engage in public life in their communities and neighborhoods, but only when they believed they could actually bring about change” (2001, p. 194).

Taking all these factors into account, civic journalists have argued that just as the press has been party to citizens’ disenchantment with civic life, so can the press assist in its renewal. Several researchers, including Putnam, have pointed to the correlation between newspaper readership and civic engagement. Albers noted this relationship in 2000, finding that regular readers are generally long-term residents who feel an investment in their communities. Newspaper read-

ership also corresponds with other measures of active citizenship, such as voting and participating in organizations (Friedland, 1996). The imperative, according to Rosen, was this: “We hear often that a free press is essential to a healthy democracy, but for some reason the reverse is rarely stated . . . : On the health of our democracy the prospects for a free press depend. This is true at the national level; it is true of the local community” (1995, p. 6). Putnam, too, reconsiders the assumptions about causality between the declines in social capital and trust in government:

It is commonly assumed that cynicism toward government has caused our disengagement from politics, but the converse is just as likely: that we are disaffected because as we and our neighbors have dropped out, the real performance of government has suffered (2000, p. 347).

Putnam also invokes civic journalism as a possible source of energy for reinvigorating the citizenry. While civic-minded journalism cannot replace real participation by individuals, he writes, it can encourage active involvement rather than passive spectatorship (2000).

### **The Community’s Local News**

Civic journalism as “a public spirited orientation toward news reporting and community” has special relevance to media that focus primarily or exclusively on local news (Bowers et al., 1998, p. 2). The instruments in the civic journalist’s toolbox that correspond to better sourcing, interviewing and understanding are especially feasible for reporters covering local issues in a small community, whose stakeholders are near at hand and manageable in scope. When providing local news is the primary purpose of the newspaper, this emphasis on stakeholders becomes even more important, because the paper may be the only publication giving detailed coverage to issues that directly affect readers, from the schools their children attend to traffic planning projects that affect their driving habits (Friedland, 1996). While citizens’ daily lives typically are

confined to a few circumscribed areas of the community, Friedland notes, the newspaper provides a window beyond those horizons.

Despite its subordinate status to national media in terms of prestige and far-reaching influence, local news is of more interest to readers and more relevant to their daily lives. Surveys consistently have found that local news – information about people and occurrences in the immediate vicinity – tops the priority list for readers, often by significant margins (Radio and Television News Directors Foundation, 1996 and 2000; Case, 1996; Astor, 2000). Local news is especially important for readers of small dailies, for whom that is among the most-read elements of the paper (Griswold and Moore, 1989).

Kaniss notes that local news is critically important because it often is what determines the fate of development projects, elections, policy and budget decisions, and other municipal matters (1991). Political endorsements at the local level also tend to exert more influence on readers than state or national level endorsements, according to McClenegham and Ragland (2002). Moreover, a local news source can foster community identity, which is likely to be quite distinct from national or even regional identities (Kaniss, 1991). And in many small communities, only one metropolitan daily covers local issues, although Kaniss has found the relevancy of this coverage weakens the farther from the central city a community is located (1991). For smaller communities that do not regularly make it onto the radar of the large metro and are not covered to any degree by zoned editions or suburban bureaus, local newspapers typically are the primary sources of local news of any depth (Friedland, 1996; Cass, 2005).

A number of demographic and lifestyle factors have caused shifts, both subtle and dramatic, in the role of small, community-oriented papers (Kaniss, 1991). In some areas, they have fallen by the wayside in the face of competition and/or chain ownership. Morton, writing a col-



umn titled “Small Dailies Are Dying in California,” concluded that between zoned editions of large city papers and urban sprawl encroaching on the territory of smaller papers, more deaths are to be expected (1998). But in other areas, community newspapers have enjoyed a resurgence. Bomann cited figures from The Editor & Publisher Company that showed the circulation of community newspapers (general-interest papers published fewer than four times weekly) increased 6 percent between 1996 and 1999, while daily newspaper circulation fell (1999). In areas that are far enough removed from a nearby metropolis to maintain a distinct identity and to fall outside the metro daily’s coverage area, community newspapers have an opportunity to flourish.

In such communities, one of the newspaper’s earliest functions shows its resilience, performing a service as important today as it was in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. At that time, according to Kaniss, as small villages grew into towns and cities, the newspaper was a valuable source of information for residents:

The average urban dweller could no longer learn the town’s happenings simply by strolling the streets and squares or patronizing his favorite tavern. The newspapers began to take on the function of telling stories about the town that had once flowed directly from person to person in the form of face-to-face communication (1991, p. 15).

In addition to providing news of social or personal interest, the newspaper also was a source of basic information that would be usable in readers’ daily lives. Newcomers in particular used the newspaper as a resource for adapting to a new city, while others “were attracted by stories of a city that was no longer ‘knowable’ through a stroll in the square” (Kaniss, 1991, pp. 16 and 23). This latter function is especially important as cities grow in diversity as well as population.

For many readers, these basic functions continue to be served today. Newcomers read to acquaint themselves with an unfamiliar area, others to familiarize themselves with aspects of the

city they have not come to know in person. In the process, the business-side (i.e., advertising) concerns of the newspaper require it to somehow link these disparate groups of readers into “a common bond of local identity” (Kaniss, 1991, pp. 3-4). Kaniss also found that metropolitan dailies foster this local identity, in part, by focusing on symbolic issues of the central city that serve as a shared point of reference among far-flung residents of suburban areas (1991). A community paper, on the other hand, does not draw on a distant metropolis for its identity, but relies on the immediate, in many cases rural, area. When this area changes because of a rapid increase in population, the community paper faces a different challenge.

Haas’s analysis of the Akron Beacon Journal’s civic journalism-based “Question of Color” campaign produced an interesting result. He found that in an effort to seek out more unfiliated (i.e., citizen) perspectives, the newspaper created, in effect, two public spheres in its coverage: a “personal” sphere, filled with the voices of local residents, and a “technical” sphere peopled by experts (2001). This outcome was cited as an unintended consequence of the newspaper’s effort to draw more “regular citizens” into the conversation, while failing to integrate them with expert voices.

But this result also points to the fact that newspapers can provide multiple spheres that serve readers’ various needs. This is supported by early research in uses and gratifications theory, that media users have significant variance in their preferences, motivations and use, so the radio or newspaper must meet many different kinds of needs (Lowery and DeFleur, 1995). Coverage can emphasize the civic-minded “public sphere,” while also breathing life into the “social sphere,” the pursuit of which is what brings some readers to the newspaper. Far from being an unacceptable deviation from civic journalism, this recognition can ensure that readers get the information they need to engage with the community, at whatever stage of engagement they may

be. According to Massey, one definition of “community connectedness” is “tuning in and acting on a community’s collective concerns to deliver the kind of news that engages people in public life” (1998, p. 395). Those members of a community for whom social concerns are more pressing – for example, new arrivals – may need that “kind” of news in order to engage.

### **Community Newspapers and Civic Journalism**

A small-town newspaper editor writing in 1939 advised other editors to consider the conditions created by a city’s size. “The attitude of the little and the big town is variant because of different conditions within the community rather than because of the superiority of one point of view over another. Each fits its own environment; each does the job its circumstances demand” (Neal, p. 10). His assessment remains true for the community newspaper today. Primarily, a kind of information qualifies as “news” in a small town – generally more personal – that would be considered insignificant in a large city. “In a small community, everyone knows, or knows of, everyone else. Interest in one’s fellow residents is general and high” (Neal, 1939, pp. 8-9). His example is dated, but the essence remains applicable: “The fire doing \$30 damage to a garage is of true news interest, because many readers know the someone whose property was charred.”

Recognizing this interest – and from a competitive standpoint, a niche – the editor also points to an intangible but important result: a personal connection between the newspaper and its readers. “When subscribers see, day after day, that the concerns of their own small community are viewed as significant, the newspaper becomes to them a friendly, personal institution”; the metropolitan paper, by contrast, remains an “interesting stranger” (Neal, 1939, p. 82). By taking an interest in “the reader’s ordinary goings and comings . . . [the community newspaper] anchors the customer’s support and loyalty” (Neal, 1939, p. 82).

This personal approach, also described by Lauterer (1995), thereby provides a common space to which newcomers can turn for introduction and familiarization – precursors for belonging to a group. From this belonging are likely to follow interest, identification, investment and ultimately participation. The community newspaper figuratively and literally gives newcomers as well as established residents a central place to “gather,” a public conversation they can join through listening (i.e., reading) and/or contributing (writing letters to the editor, participating with others in events they learn about through the paper, etc.). This resource can serve to build the social capital that accompanies civic engagement.

This aspect of the newspaper-reader relationship is more feasible for the smaller publication, which relies more on the personal news that serves to build such social connections. In addition to serving the newspaper financially, this loyalty encourages a view of the paper as a community institution, a shared public entity familiar with and involved in the personal and immediate concerns of readers’ lives. In Lauterer’s view, this gives the community paper an advantage over even the nearby daily’s zoned suburban edition, which is hard-pressed to find an actual “community” to reflect among the bedroom city of commuters (1995). Most important for this discussion, this closer relationship with readers exemplifies the “engagement” espoused by civic journalism: The newspaper that successfully carries out its civic information duties (i.e., contributing effectively to the formation of public judgment) and establishes a personal connection is not likely to suffer from the undesirable “detachment.”

Partly as a result of this connection, some have suggested that community newspapers may be particularly suited to civic journalism objectives. Weaver and Wilhoit found that journalists at weeklies and small dailies may be more supportive of its practices, particularly the encouragement to talk with citizens to learn what they are thinking (cited in Voakes, 1999). They

also found similar support among those who value news about the neighborhood and the community. Other researchers have found that community newspapers are more likely to include mobilizing information – such as specific meeting information, phone numbers and addresses that enable readers to take action – which is one of the hallmarks of civic journalism’s citizen empowerment (Jeffres, Cutietta, Lee and Sekerka, 1999).

Bomann noted that community journalists may feel more imperative to be “accurate and balanced and fair” because they are more likely than a reporter at a large metro daily to encounter individuals about whom they are writing (1999, p. 6). Lauterer refers to the big dailies’ insulation as a “luxury” that shields reporters in “obscurity and anonymity” (cited in McClenegham and Ragland, 2002). But that luxury can be a double-edged sword, he notes, separating journalists from their readers to a perilous degree. Overcoming this detachment often can be accomplished by the community newspaper in the course of its usual work routines, while metro papers may have to resort to contrivances. At the Sarasota Herald-Tribune, “connection with the public” is maintained by requiring members of the editorial staff to rotate shifts on what might be described as “reader contact” duty, answering the telephone to speak directly to readers on a variety of topics (Greenwald, 2002). Such contact comes naturally to news staff at the smaller paper, which likely deals with readers every day, either as a result of lacking a central switchboard or through personal encounters.

Compared to the civic journalism strategy of “special project” forums and town halls, this interaction can provide daily, ongoing communication that keeps reporters and editors abreast of local perspectives. The “stakeholder” is not just a one-time source cultivated at a town hall meeting, but an acquaintance one sees socially (i.e., in Harwood’s “third places”). In practical terms, the smaller city offers fewer places and events to socialize and to carry out the business of daily

living; as a result the potential exists for greater familiarity with fellow residents, sources, subjects, etc. For reporting purposes, this can increase familiarity with the range of stakeholders. For the smaller paper, the attributes of its coverage area thus create the potential to use approaches suggested by civic journalism: use of third places, an emphasis on stakeholders' perspectives by representing multiple layers of community voices, and interaction between staff and reader-citizens that leads to more nuanced reporting.

On a more basic level, the area covered by the community newspaper is in almost all cases smaller, in both geography and population, which also can permit easier interaction between staff and readers. By contrast, at a large daily in a geographically dispersed urban center, staff is likely to live in neighborhoods spread across longer distances and to have personal social circles that are proportionally much smaller than the general population. Staff also has greater anonymity when interacting with the public, and proportionally less potential for direct interaction with other residents, or readers/stakeholders/citizens. The newsroom itself is likely to be separated from more readers by distance and, in some cases, building security.

The Williamson County Sun, by contrast, is located on Main Street in the center of a downtown square. Readers frequently stop in unannounced and can expect more often than not to talk with the publisher, editor, reporters and all other staff. "Having the ear of the editor" is an opportunity afforded equally to everyone, a point also noted by Lauterer (1995). Byerly, writing a 1961 textbook on community journalism, quoted several community newspaper editors on one advantage of this relationship: "Intimacy – of newspaper and community, newswriter and people – makes the newspaperman in a smaller community responsible for every word. While it is sometimes embarrassing to live with our readers, it is a challenge to do better" (p. 25).

Even the limitations of the weekly or semi-weekly can, in some cases, create opportunities for better coverage. Since breaking news remains the province of the daily, the non-daily has a more frequent need to find second-day angles; if pursued by individual journalists, this can produce reporting of more depth, a broader picture or angles beyond those that might be immediately obvious. Lauterer also makes this point, adding that a weekly or semi-weekly publishing schedule typically gives the paper a longer “shelf life” in readers’ homes (1995, p. 15).

Two factors previously noted also serve to strengthen the newspaper-community connection. First, readers of the small community paper have more access to not only editorial staff, but also to reader-driven content such as letters to the editor, an element of the newspaper that Glascock noted can offer “a glimpse into the true identity of the town” (2004, p. 31). Readers may be more able to contribute to such sections because they are not competing against thousands upon thousands of other readers’ submissions. Readers of a small weekly generally have better chances of having their letters published, for example, than readers of *The New York Times*. Second, many community newspapers continue to provide so-called “refrigerator news” (Bomann, 1999, p. 6). On the face of it, this type of news does not directly advance the democratic ideals of civic-minded journalism, but it is a necessary part of the community foundation on which these ideals depend. The small newspaper’s interest in such news can strengthen the relationship between the newspaper and the public (one of Frederickson’s three tenets of effective community) and help the paper maintain relevancy to readers’ daily lives.

### **Serving Readers in Small Communities**

When it comes to how well the community newspaper, particularly the smaller one, can replicate civic journalism successes, without question there are strikes against it. Such a paper likely has fewer staff, less collective experience and fewer resources. The same close connec-

tions that foster a “family relationship” with readers may serve to restrain critical or unpopular coverage. Moreover, the community paper, like any other member of the media, is prone to the limitations of newsgathering and production routines described by Tuchman (1978). Thus, community newspapers are not necessarily more inclined to practice civic journalism. But those that choose to avail themselves of this approach, its guiding philosophies and its practices alike, are likely to be at least as competent in doing so and may have certain advantages.

Incorporating civic journalism’s stakeholder-driven approach to dialogue is entirely feasible for the reporter at the small newspaper and is critical in communities that find themselves at the center of a high-growth area. Even residents accustomed to a lackadaisical attitude about civic engagement may find themselves jolted into opinion when growth creates issues that previously did not exist. Increasing public school enrollment, for instance, may prompt discussion about the need for a new high school. Residents with strongly held recollections of the town rallying its support around a single, unifying high school may find that this becomes a symbol of “small town community,” which the prospect of a second high school is perceived to threaten. The community newspaper may well follow the traditional reflexes and posit this dilemma in terms of residents “for” and “against” the proposal; or it can follow civic journalism’s lead in helping residents to articulate the values underneath their reactions and to find common ground, if it exists.

In taking stakeholders into account, a newspaper may need to adapt its coverage to the changing population. A high number of newcomers, for example, represents a larger pool of readers who require more background information, whereas in the past it might be fairly assumed that readers shared a common body of knowledge that formed the historical context for



people and events. If newcomers find a lacking in the newspaper in providing this information, they will be at a disadvantage in approaching local issues.

The paper also can help established residents keep a voice in the conversation, particularly if the area is changing in such a way that they are in danger of becoming marginalized. Williamson County, for example, historically was largely rural and now finds itself at the edge of growth in the capital city of Austin. These many newcomers are not arriving to augment the cotton farmer and cattle rancher population, but to design new buildings, develop condominiums, build schools, plan roads, erect billboards, etc. – reorienting economies and infrastructure to serve a new population with its own needs and desires. Yet both groups have a vested interest in the well-being of the county, as does the paper.

Community newspapers also can incorporate a citizen emphasis in coverage of local elections and other municipal matters. Journalists at the small paper can, as well as urban journalists, seek out citizens' election concerns and use these to drive campaign coverage; consciously serve as citizens' representative in questioning government decisions; and hold elected officials accountable to the needs of the community (Cass, 2005). The paper can produce reader-friendly voter guides that allow citizens to compare candidates easily on issues of importance and ensure that mobilizing information is frequently provided.

Beyond coverage of routine civic matters, small newspapers also can be meaningful participants when communities respond to events of great magnitude. In Texas, Glascock examined the role played by the 6,000-circulation weekly Jasper Newsboy in the wake of the violent killing of a black man that received worldwide media attention. Pairing an examination of civic journalism and crisis communication, he concluded, "Civic journalism seems to be particularly suited to small-town markets, such as Jasper, in which local journalists are more likely to be involved in

community organizations and have been found to be more accepting of the approach” (2004, p. 31). He adds another metaphorical function served by the newspaper, in addition to the “public stage” and the keeper of “the conversation”: The Newsboy, he said, “was the guardian of the town’s image, and as events unfolded during the crisis, made sure the community didn’t forget its priorities” (2004, p. 41). In fact, he concluded, “the local paper played a crucial role in the town’s image restoration” (2004, p. 45).

All of the above notwithstanding, it remains true that community newspapers are as likely to fall into the traps of traditional reporting as their metro counterparts. It could even be argued that journalists at smaller newspapers are more likely to develop bad habits (i.e., those that tend to produce public “opinion” rather than “judgment”) because of greater time constraints: They typically belong to small staffs that must perform a wide variety of duties and are responsible for producing content without the support of bureaus, wire services, researchers and other resources. The county reporter at The Williamson County Sun, for example, is responsible for the same beat territory as two reporters in the Austin American-Statesman’s county bureau. Moreover, the newsgathering routines and newsroom culture described by Tuchman find their way into the small newsroom as quickly as the larger one. The superficial “meeting story,” peopled with the voices of elected officials who are known to reporters and easily accessible, is easier and faster to produce than a citizen-driven consideration of “values.” The community newspaper also can be a poor-quality product that does not have the respect of its readership and carries out its duties so as to alienate readers rather than bring them in to a community of citizens. And certain civic journalism projects may be difficult to replicate in a small newsroom with limited staff and resources.

Thus, the potential advantage in pursuing civic journalism is no guarantee that it will come about. Successful achievement of these objectives still requires a conscientious effort and a constant awareness of alternative ways of pursuing routine stories. But this goal is feasible for the community newspaper that enjoys an engaged relationship with its readers and the inclination to capitalize on its strengths. The community newspaper has excellent opportunities to serve as a focal point for the issues that bind a community together, creating a shared base of knowledge about the people and events unique to the area. Like metro dailies and television stations, the community paper can benefit from civic journalism's admonishment to improve the conversation, following its emphasis on better listening, teasing out the values and emotional undercurrents that inform readers' perspectives, and reporting to clarify rather than obscure common ground.

In an area experiencing rapid growth, this goal is a necessary service to the community, as common ground becomes increasingly elusive for various stakeholders in guiding growth and development. The challenge for the community newspaper is to act as an arbiter of the civic conversation – disinterested, not uninterested in the people's well-being – able to present the increasing diversity of readers' viewpoints, while possessing the social grace to integrate each newcomer into the ongoing dialogue. If successful, this approach would ensure that even as the community changes, the newspaper remains a place for discussion that offers everyone a chance for civic participation in shaping growth.

## **METHODS**

### **Research Questions and Hypotheses**

RQ1: Do newcomers and established residents differ in their use of the newspaper to develop social engagement with the community?

RQ2: As people set down roots in the community, do they have an increasing interest in civic issues?

RQ3: Do readers believe The Williamson County Sun provides an entrée to the community that facilitates a sense of belonging and investment?

H1: Newcomers will show the most interest in social engagement, using the newspaper primarily to familiarize themselves with local people, places and activities and to seek avenues for social connection.

H2: The longer residents live in the area, the more interested they will be in civic functions of the newspaper, including local issues and how these are handled by officials.

H3: Both groups of readers will value the newspaper as an entity that helps to maintain a sense of community in a growing area.

### **Overview**

Subjects of this study were subscribers of The Williamson County Sun, a semi-weekly newspaper in Georgetown, Texas. Georgetown, the county seat, has a population of approximately 40,000. The researcher also is the editor at The Williamson County Sun.

The newspaper, established in 1877, is family-owned with a circulation around 10,000. Coverage focuses exclusively on Williamson County and all content is produced locally; the Sun

does not subscribe to any news services or syndicated material (with the exception of puzzles). The vast majority of news stories relate to events and issues within the county, with the occasional addition of local angles on state and national issues. The newspaper has seven full-time editorial staff and does not have an Internet site.

The Sun's primary competitor is the Austin American-Statesman. This daily newspaper has a Williamson County bureau, publishes a zoned edition in the county and provides a weekly section dedicated to the county.

Williamson County has seen a sharp increase in population in recent years, accompanied by numerous business, road and building developments driven by state and local initiatives. Georgetown is located about 25 miles north of Austin, the state capital, on the Interstate 35 corridor. Despite their proximity, Austin and Georgetown are culturally and politically distinct, with the latter being significantly more conservative. In some respects, the city's "small town feeling" – which embraces local traditions and support for community institutions – has a parochial flavor that resists Austin's more liberal attitudes. On the other hand, the city is home to Southwestern University, a private, selective liberal arts university that brings a wide range of scholars and artists to the city, and Sun City Texas, an age-restricted, "active adult" community that draws residents from all over the country. These institutions, together with a continuous influx of new residents from a variety of geographical areas, serve to diversify the population.

### **Data and Survey Design**

Data collected for analysis consisted of the results of a telephone survey conducted of 200 subscribers, asking about their uses of the newspaper and their perceptions of the extent to which it facilitates community involvement. The study sought to determine differences in how

readers use the newspaper, view its role in the community, and perceive the newspaper as an entity that can facilitate social ties as well as civic connections.

Because the hypotheses assumed that readers will seek different kinds of information (i.e., civic versus social) depending on their length of residency, respondents were grouped accordingly, with newcomers having no previous connections to the community on one end and lifelong residents with an established employment and/or social network on the other.

In the data analysis, residents were grouped in the following categories, primarily to have enough counts in each cell: 1 to 5 Years (including residents less than 1 year), 6 to 10 Years, and More Than 10 Years (including lifetime residents).

The survey, included herein as an Appendix, asked three questions about readers' media use and interest in local government and public affairs, to provide some context for subsequent answers. The survey also asked six questions about readers' opinions of The Williamson County Sun's local news coverage in comparison to other news sources.

Readers were asked eight questions about their involvement in the community in the past two years, with three questions focusing on social activities (church, service groups and/or social clubs, and volunteering) and five questions focusing on civic participation (writing a letter to the editor, attending a public meeting, joining a government board or group, contacting an elected official, and voting in a local election).

The survey then attempted to gauge readers' opinions about the importance of 16 possible functions of newspapers in general. These functions represented a condensed list of functions used in the 1999 study "Differences of community newspaper goals and functions in large urban areas" by Jeffres, Cutietta, Lee and Sekerka.

The Literature Review of this study argued that small community newspapers such as The Williamson County Sun are better positioned to provide strong local news coverage and to facilitate connections among readers, with the latter function representing one goal of civic journalism. Accordingly, the survey asked nine questions designed to solicit readers' opinions on how well the newspaper carries out these functions, such as "Introducing members of the community to each other" and "Helping readers feel investment and belonging in the community." For similar reasons, readers were asked how often they discuss stories they have read in the newspaper with other people.

The Literature Review also argued that editorial staffs at small community newspapers are more accessible to readers than staffs at large, metro dailies and that this serves to improve coverage by permitting: (a) better lines of communication between reporters, editors and readers and (b) a more nuanced understanding of the community by editorial staffs. To determine whether readers agree that community newspapers are more accessible, the survey asked their opinion of the accessibility of The Williamson County Sun, the Austin American-Statesman and the local television station.

A secondary aspect of the Literature Review argued that civic journalism can be especially beneficial for community newspapers dealing with rapid population growth, particularly in ensuring that the evolving set of stakeholders continues to be represented in its entirety. Accordingly, the survey asked three questions about growth, its effect on community and whether the newspaper adequately covers growth-related issues.

In seeking to address criticisms that civic journalism threatens newspapers' objectivity, credibility, news judgment and other established values of the profession, the survey also asked

readers to provide their opinions of the importance of these qualities in newspapers in general and then to rate The Williamson County Sun in the same categories.

Finally, the survey gathered demographic information including age, race, level of education and income.

### **Execution of Survey**

Because the study relied on human subjects for research, approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board at Louisiana State University, which granted permission to waive written consent from subjects in favor of oral consent.

Based on Wimmer and Dominick's assertion that a systematic random sampling method is considered by many researchers to be as effective as a simple random method, a sample of names was selected from the subscription population of approximately 10,000, using the August 2006 subscription list, with a sampling interval of every 18th name, based on a starting point selected from a table of random numbers.

Of the subscribers, those who lived outside Williamson County were not chosen for the sample on the assumption that their motivation for reading the newspaper differs from that of the reader under study, who lives in the community being covered. If such a person was chosen in the course of sampling, callers took the next name from the list.

Because the sample was chosen from the newspaper's subscriber list, no group of non-subscribers is available for comparison. Two points relevant to this study are: (a) people in this sample were assumed to have a higher level of civic and community interest than non-subscribers and (b) this research was not designed to answer the question of how to bring in non-subscribers, but rather how to address the existing readership.



Seven individuals were hired to conduct the survey; all were residents of Georgetown, with three being university students and four located through contacts at the newspaper. Each was given a general set of instructions, an explanation of the purposes of the survey, copies of the survey, a portion of the subscription list with names and telephone numbers, and instructions on selecting respondents. Callers were told not to provide any additional information to respondents other than what was in the survey and not to interpret questions for respondents, but to instruct them to answer questions based on their own best understanding. Callers also were told to record any additional remarks that respondents might volunteer. Callers marked the appropriate coding entries on the surveys, and the researcher entered these results into Excel before bringing them into SPSS for analysis. Data collection lasted about three-and-a-half weeks.

The first 10 completed interviews made by the callers were considered to be pretest calls to screen for any confusion on the part of respondents or other problems with the survey. No problems were found, and these calls constituted the first entries to the data set.

Callers asked for the individual to whom the subscription is registered. On the assumption that this often was the male head of the household, callers were asked to try to solicit a fairly even number of male and female respondents. If one target respondent was male, callers were told to ask for the female head of household on the next call, and vice versa.

If a person other than the target respondent answered the phone and said that individual was unavailable, the caller tried to determine if the person with whom they were speaking was an adult resident of the household and willing to take the survey. If the respondent said no, the caller asked to leave a message for the other individual describing the purpose of the call and providing a call-back number; this was noted as one attempt. If the respondent said no, the caller chose the next name on the subscription list. If an answering machine or voice mail picked up,

the caller left a message describing the purpose of the call and providing a call-back number, and this was noted as one attempt. A busy signal also was noted as one attempt. Any number that was disconnected was eliminated from the sample and replaced with the next number. Callers were instructed to make three attempts to contact each subscriber selected.

Callers were not asked to tally their total number of phone calls, so the response rate is not known. Callers continued working until they achieved a total sample size of 200. Almost all respondents were willing to take the survey in its entirety, with the exception of approximately 25% who were unwilling to provide information about income and a smaller percentage unwilling to provide information about level of education.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The survey results indicate that The Williamson County Sun reflects three components of a model that pairs civic journalism and community journalism: readers who are interested in civic affairs; readers who frequently talk among themselves about local issues covered in the newspaper; and readers who perceive the newspaper as accessible. This affirms that community newspapers have the potential to serve as a strong public resource for citizens who want to be civically engaged by learning about community issues, connecting with others to discuss and respond to issues, and working with the newspaper to ensure coverage meets their needs. Although the sample size is small, the results indicate that readers do consider the newspaper a helpful resource in dealing with changes related to growth, and that growth creates conditions that also affect the newspaper.

The Literature Review argued that civic journalists can be strong watchdog reporters, and that community papers can do well at civic journalism. The primary weakness of the small paper seems to be that because of limited resources, it is deficient in the watchdog role and in more time-consuming civic journalism techniques. This observation derives from the experience of the editor/researcher, but also may be suggested by some of the findings herein. Even so, the results confirm the argument that in providing strong local news, a personal connection and understanding of the community, a community newspaper like the Sun can fit well into civic journalism's approach.

### **Interest in Public Affairs**

Early civic journalism projects were triggered by journalists' observation that citizens had alarmingly low levels of interest in civic affairs. The importance of this interest for a healthy

democracy is obvious; Rosen has argued it also is critical for survival of the press. Civic interest especially is necessary for a newspaper that seeks to encourage community engagement and to capitalize on its potential for serving a community-building function, as opposed to being an impediment to citizen involvement.

As shown in Table 1, almost two-thirds, or 64.8%, of respondents in this survey reported high or very high interest in “local government and public affairs.” Only 9% described their interest as low or very low. For the purposes of this study, the finding is beneficial for gathering opinions from readers who are thoughtful and interested about the issues under study. This also suggests that even a small newspaper can reap the benefits of thoughtful, engaged readers who are far from apathetic about issues in the community.

A total of 35.1% of respondents described their interest as neutral, low or very low, raising the question of why they read the paper if not to keep up with civic issues. The survey did not try to learn what these motivations might be, but it seems likely that at least some respondents read the Sun for the “personal news” that, as Lauterer noted, is the foundation of many community newspapers. The reader who is not concerned with the outcome of the city council workshop, but whose scrapbook is filled with newspaper clippings of her children’s names in the school Honor Roll, may value the Sun just as strongly.

As noted in the Literature Review, the Sun, like other community papers, relies heavily on so-called “refrigerator news” and recognition of individual achievements. This finding also may support the argument in the Literature Review that readers’ needs go beyond the governance and problem-solving goals emphasized by civic journalism.

TABLE 1: Subscribers' Interest in Local Government and Public Affairs

Interest Level	Percent
Very Low	4.5%
Low	4.5%
Neutral	26.1%
High	41.7%
Very High	23.1%

### Talking About Issues

Presenting the newspaper's role in public affairs as facilitating a "conversation" has been the dominant metaphor employed by civic journalists. This has been emphasized in two ways. The first is attention to participants in the conversation – that is, stakeholders in issues being covered – and the extent to which their voices and perspectives are represented. In addition to diversifying sources, civic journalists believe closer attention in this area can dramatically improve the ability to convey the complexity of stakeholders' perspectives and the context surrounding events. The metaphor also speaks to civic journalists' goal of facilitating dialogue among stakeholders themselves. As editors at civic journalism newspapers have reported, improved communication and cooperation between individuals and organizations has been a beneficial outcome of their coverage. At the simplest level, conversation among citizens is a basic necessity as they seek to organize and to coordinate shared objectives.

When respondents were asked how often they talk with others about stories they have read in the Sun, 40.7% said frequently or all the time, with another 41.2% saying they did so occasionally. This means that almost 82% of the subscribers surveyed routinely use the newspaper as a source of conversation, or a means of finding common ground with fellow residents. This meets the social function described in the Literature Review (e.g., newcomers using the paper as a source of the informal "small talk" about the community that civic journalists have sought out

in coffeeshops and backyard barbecues). From a civic perspective, this means the paper helps readers increase participation from simply reading about local issues to discussing them with others.

A total of 67.4% of respondents said the Sun is good or excellent at giving people a common set of topics to talk about. More interesting would be the opinions of the 32.6% who rated the newspaper fair, poor or extremely poor in this category. In addition, a question about the Austin American-Statesman might have shed light on whether the community newspaper is perceived to be more effective in comparison. Even so, the findings support arguments in the Literature Review about the newspaper's capacity for community-building and its usefulness as a point of social entrée for newcomers.

### **Accessibility of the Newspaper**

Several writers have suggested that community newspapers are more accessible to readers who want to communicate with editorial staff, give feedback on coverage, and contribute to reader-driven content. Accessibility is an important part of the newspaper-reader relationship, and the more personal connection enjoyed by many community newspapers can be a definite advantage over metro dailies. It also demonstrates that community newspapers can be less prone to the disconnectedness that civic journalists have criticized between the media and the public.

As shown in Table 2, readers clearly perceived the Sun as being more accessible. More than half, or 53.7%, said reporters or editors would be accessible or extremely accessible at the Sun, compared to 20.1% who said this for the Statesman and 18.6% who said this for the local TV station.

TABLE 2: Subscribers' Perceptions of News Source Accessibility

<b>News Source / Accessibility</b>	<b>Percent</b>
<b>The Williamson County Sun</b>	
Inaccessible or Extremely Inaccessible	4.0%
Don't Know	42.2%
Accessible or Extremely Accessible	53.7%
<b>Austin American-Statesman</b>	
Inaccessible or Extremely Inaccessible	22.1%
Don't Know	57.8%
Accessible or Extremely Accessible	20.1%
<b>Local TV Station</b>	
Inaccessible or Extremely Inaccessible	20.1%
Don't Know	61.3%
Accessible or Extremely Accessible	18.6%

Respondents also were asked about prior attempts to contact reporters or editors, partially to establish whether they had any previous experience on which to base their answers or whether they were just guessing. Most likely, a single negative or positive experience would influence an opinion, but does not necessarily represent the norm. In this case, however, the larger objective was to measure how subscribers perceive the newspaper's stance toward them as readers, more than whether their perceptions are "accurate."

More than 60% of respondents had not tried to contact a reporter or editor at a newspaper or TV station, and many said they "did not know" how to assess the relative accessibility of staffs at The Williamson County Sun, Austin American-Statesman and local TV station. Even so, as shown in Table 3, more readers were willing to guess that the Sun would be accessible or extremely accessible: 40.2% compared to 11.5% for the Statesman. Less than 1% of readers with no previous contact guessed that the Sun would be inaccessible or extremely inaccessible, compared to almost 20% who guessed this for the Statesman.

The number of readers with previous contact also was more likely to rate the Sun as accessible or extremely accessible, at 75.4%, compared to 33.8% for the Statesman.

These findings clearly support the argument that readers perceive the community newspaper's editorial staff as more accessible. This is important because, regardless of the reality of a staff's attitude toward readers, readers' perceptions will determine the extent to which they attempt to interact with the newspaper. This interaction takes many forms, but one of the most important is that readers are willing to bring issues to the attention of editorial staff and to provide feedback on coverage.

At the Sun, readers have called to request that the newspaper publish more frequently its list of elected officials (city, county, school, state and national), along with their phone numbers and addresses. The newspaper has accommodated this request, including expanding the list in response to a reader who asked that phone numbers for the nation's president and vice-president be included. Readers approach the Sun frequently with suggestions that turn into stories and concerns about local government that the newspaper tries to address. The implications of this accessibility are broad, but it comes down to the simple act of readers feeling comfortable and having conviction in the usefulness of talking to the local newspaper about something on their minds.

Admittedly, accessibility is not the only factor at work for the small community newspaper. The pace of news generally is slower, which leaves more time and attention for the concerns of the individual. This capacity is advantageous because it is effective in helping readers feel ownership of the newspaper. This "ownership" also can increase readers' sense of efficacy as citizens if they perceive the newspaper as a resource and a partner in solving local problems. As researchers have noted, citizens who feel they have the capability to effect change are more likely to get civically involved.



TABLE 3: Subscribers’ Perceptions of Accessibility Accounting for Previous Contact

<b>News Source / Previous Contact With Media</b>	<b>Inaccessible or Extremely Inaccessible</b>	<b>Don’t Know</b>	<b>Accessible or Extremely Accessible</b>
<b>The Williamson County Sun</b>			
Have contacted editorial staff	9.1%	15.6%	75.4%
Have not contacted editorial staff	0.8%	59.0%	40.2%
<b>Austin American-Statesman</b>			
Have contacted editorial staff	26.0%	40.3%	33.8%
Have not contacted editorial staff	19.6%	68.9%	11.5%

## Media Use

Table 4 shows readers’ use of media in addition to The Williamson County Sun. “Other Sources” includes local TV news, Internet, radio and/or other.

As shown in Table 4, almost three-quarters of respondents also take the Austin American-Statesman, the nearby daily newspaper. The majority also use at least one other media source to obtain news about Williamson County (local TV news, Internet, radio and/or other). The primary advantage of this finding is that when respondents are asked to compare The Williamson County Sun’s local coverage with other news sources, most have two newspapers that cover, in part, the same territory to use for comparison. The number of respondents who do not also use the Statesman for local news was small, with just under 25% using some combination of TV, Internet, radio and/or other.

TABLE 4: Sources of Local News in Addition to The Williamson County Sun

<b>News Source</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Austin American-Statesman	11.1%
Austin American-Statesman and Other Sources	62.8%
Local TV News	7.5%
Local TV News and Other Sources	11.1%
Internet and/or Radio Only	4.5%
Other	1.5%

## Time Reading the Newspaper

The Williamson County Sun, published semi-weekly, averages between 24 and 32 pages per issue (not counting a separate real estate section). Typically, one-half is news and one-half is features and columns.

Table 5 shows readers' descriptions of the time they spend reading the newspaper. More than half said, "I usually spend enough time to read the paper thoroughly." This is a good indication for other sections of the survey, since such readers presumably are familiar with the newspaper and better equipped to assess its strengths and weaknesses. Another 29.1% said they "skim headlines and read a few articles that interest" them, which suggests at least familiarity with the paper's general contents.

This study has emphasized the personal aspect of community newspapers, a quality that affects not only the flavor of coverage but also the events that receive attention. The winner of the annual Miss Georgetown pageant, for example, will get a 15-inch profile and a full-color photo on the front of the features section. In Austin, the same accomplishment might warrant a paragraph and a black-and-white mug shot on an inside page. This finding suggests, however, that even as community papers dedicate more of the news hole to "soft news," room exists to provide enough hard news that readers – many of whom have high interest in civic affairs – would say they "spend enough time to read the paper thoroughly."

TABLE 5: Statement That Best Describes the Time Subscribers Spend Reading the Sun

Statement	Percent
I usually skim headlines and read a few articles that interest me.	29.1%
I usually spend enough time to read the paper thoroughly.	53.8%
I usually have certain sections I turn to and just read those.	17.1%

## Local News Coverage

The Literature Review relied heavily on the argument, supported by research, that community newspapers can provide more thorough, personal coverage of local issues. Lauterer suggested that the personal quality is the primary feature that differentiates community newspapers. In surveys, readers have indicated repeatedly that local news is extremely important, and Kaniss has noted that local news coverage often shapes the outcome of key municipal developments.

As shown in Table 6, readers largely agree with Lauterer's assessments as applied to the Sun's local news coverage. The statement that "The Sun pays attention to people and events that are important to people here, but wouldn't be covered in a larger paper" elicited the most agreement, at 86.4% of respondents. More than three-quarters also agreed or strongly agreed that the Sun provides exclusive local news and that its coverage is more thorough and more personal.

A more interesting finding is that 81.9% of respondents agree or strongly agree that "The Sun has a better understanding of this community than other news sources." The specter of market-driven journalism is anathema to purists, but it is inevitable that the readership in a specific market must be taken into account in configuring the news product. As Tuchman has noted, a myriad of factors – some beyond the control of individual reporters and editors, but many left to their discretion – shape news content. In Georgetown, for example, many people are strongly patriotic, valuing loyalty to national leadership and recognition of military efforts. Accordingly, the newspaper devotes significant coverage to events such as Veterans Day ceremonies that routinely draw a large attendance.

Readers' perception that the Sun has a "better understanding of the community" also may be based on a comparison with the Statesman. A columnist in the Statesman, for example, has mocked Georgetown's conservatism on more than one occasion, and news articles have reflected

an attitude that could be interpreted as condescending. The Sun's attitude toward Georgetown, on the other hand, if it does stray from neutrality, errs on the side of boosterism. As a result, readers are more likely to feel "understood" by the community newspaper, which would be less able to "get away with" insulting the readership. Presumably, such an attitude from the hometown newspaper would be more upsetting to readers than the same attitude from the metro daily.

The qualities that the majority of respondents perceive in the Sun – strong local news coverage and understanding of the community – support the civic journalism goals of representing the full range of stakeholders and providing contextual coverage to supplement spot developments and event-driven stories.

Also in Table 6, the statement that drew the least agreement from respondents was "The Sun is more likely to respond to my questions and concerns as a resident." Even so, 65.3% agreed or strongly agreed that the Sun would be more responsive. Given the above findings, it is possible that even though readers view the newspaper as a strong source of local news, they recognize its limitations. Readers who have "questions and concerns" about issues that would require investigative reporting or lengthy projects, for example, likely would not find the Sun responsive because the newspaper lacks the resources for that kind of reporting. While speculative, it is reasonable to assume that many community newspapers lack the ability to fulfill the watchdog and public service functions as competently or thoroughly as a larger paper with more expertise and more resources.

The percentage of subscribers who were unsure about these assessments of the Sun's local news coverage – and unwilling to commit to agreement – averaged 16.5% for the six questions. This number was consistently higher than the number who explicitly disagreed with these statements, which ranged from 4.5% to 8.5%.

TABLE 6: Subscribers' Assessment of The Williamson County Sun's Local News Coverage

<b>Descriptions of News Coverage</b>	<b>Agree or Strongly Agree</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Disagree or Strongly Disagree</b>
The Sun pays attention to people and events that are important to people here, but wouldn't be covered in a larger paper.	86.4%	9.0%	4.5%
The Sun has a better understanding of this community than other news sources.	81.9%	13.1%	5.0%
The Sun's approach to covering the community is more personal than other sources.	80.9%	14.1%	5.0%
The Sun provides local news I can't find anywhere else.	75.4%	16.1%	8.5%
The Sun has more thorough coverage of local news than other sources.	73.9%	17.6%	8.5%
The Sun is more likely to respond to my questions and concerns as a reader.	65.3%	29.1%	5.5%

### Local News Coverage and Civic Participation

To see how civically active subscribers view the Sun's local news coverage, a frequency count was done based on whether respondents had attended a public meeting, contacted an elected official, or voted in a city, county or school election in the past two years. These factors were chosen because they reflect the action component of the citizen empowerment encouraged by civic journalism. Leaving aside civic journalism's desire to convert passive, uninformed readers into participatory citizens, readers who already are civically active also represent an ideal audience. These measures of civic participation were considered against three measures of local news coverage: more thorough than other sources, more personal and demonstrating a better understanding of the community.

Respondents were fairly evenly divided in meeting attendance and contact with officials: 52.8% had attended a meeting and 48.7% had contacted an official. Voting was another matter, with 91.5% claiming to have voted and a mere 8.5% admitting to lack of participation.

Among those who had attended a meeting, contacted an official or voted, assessments of the Sun's local news coverage were fairly consistent. The percentage that agreed or strongly agreed the Sun was more thorough, personal and reflective of community understanding ranged from a low of 74.2% to a high of 85.3% on all nine counts. Consistency also appeared in that more readers were neutral than negative about the Sun's coverage.

A frequency count also was done for respondents who had not attended a meeting, contacted an official or voted. As shown in Table 7, the spread of responses in each category were fairly similar to those above: A substantial number generally agreed with these assessments, a small group was unsure, and a smaller group disagreed.

A comparison between civically active and inactive respondents shows that with the exception of non-voters, assessments of the Sun's coverage were quite similar. Respondents who had not attended a meeting or contacted an official were slightly less likely to agree with these statements about coverage, but differences were between only 1 and 4 percentage points.

Comparing voters to non-voters produced the most difference, although it is noted that at 8.5%, the pool of non-voters is too small to draw significant conclusions.

As shown in Table 7, the two groups were fairly similar in their assessment that the Sun's local coverage is more thorough, with slightly fewer non-voters agreeing. More strikingly, 58.8% of non-voters agreed or strongly agreed that the Sun's coverage is more personal, compared to 83.0% of voters. In addition, 70.6% of non-voters agreed the Sun has a better understanding of the community, compared to 83.0% of voters.

The implications of this result – a difference in voting behavior corresponding with a marked difference of opinion about news coverage – seem to invoke the chicken-and-egg relationship between quality of the press and public participation. Civic journalists have argued that the relationship centers on a reciprocal dynamic more driven by media performance, in which the press has the capacity to build up or diminish citizens’ participation. On the other hand, as noted in the Literature Review, Putnam argued that citizens’ disillusionment with the quality of government may stem from the detrimental effects of their having dropped out of civic participation – not that poor government performance caused them to drop out. The same dynamic might apply to readers’ opinions about local news coverage and their level of civic participation.

In this case, readers who choose not to engage by voting also may choose not to interact with the newspaper and to contribute items or ideas – as other readers have indicated they find it easy to do – that would make them judge the product as more personal, i.e., content with which they would personally identify. Non-voters also may avoid other kinds of community engagement, such as social groups or volunteering; if they did participate in these activities, they might recognize more news of personal interest in the newspaper. This seems to be supported by the fact that non-voters are fairly similar to voters in judging the paper’s news coverage as more thorough (70.5% agree, compared to 74.2% of voters), suggesting it is not a sense of being ill-informed that makes these individuals decide not to vote.

Overall, these findings suggest that for readers who use the newspaper as a resource for civic participation and who choose to participate civically, the paper generally is on the right track in its news coverage. However, it would benefit from more information from readers who did not indicate a strong opinion either way (a low of 11.3% and a high of 23.5% of respondents answered “Neutral” to the three questions). Readers also could be asked whether receiving dif-

ferent kinds of information in the newspaper would make them more likely to attend a public meeting, contact an elected official or vote.

TABLE 7: Assessment of The Williamson County Sun's Local News Coverage By Subscribers With and Without Civic Participation

<b>Assessment of Local News Coverage and Civic Participation</b>	<b>Agree or Strongly Agree</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Disagree or Strongly Disagree</b>
<b>More thorough local news coverage</b>			
Attended a public meeting	75.2%	17.1%	7.6%
- Not attended a public meeting	72.3%	18.1%	9.6%
Contacted an elected official	75.3%	16.5%	8.2%
- Not contacted an elected official	72.6%	18.6%	8.8%
Voted	74.2%	17.6%	8.2%
- Not voted	70.5%	17.6%	11.8%
<b>More personal local news coverage</b>			
Attended a public meeting	82.0%	13.3%	4.8%
- Not attended a public meeting	79.7%	14.9%	5.3%
Contacted an elected official	81.4%	13.4%	5.2%
- Not contacted an elected official	80.4%	14.7%	4.9%
Voted	83.0%	13.2%	3.8%
- Not voted	58.8%	23.5%	17.6%
<b>Coverage demonstrates better understanding of the community</b>			
Attended a public meeting	81.9%	11.4%	6.7%
- Not attended a public meeting	81.9%	14.9%	3.2%
Contacted an elected official	82.4%	11.3%	6.2%
- Not contacted an elected official	81.3%	14.7%	3.9%
Voted	83.0%	12.1%	4.9%
- Not voted	70.6%	23.5%	5.9%

## Community Problem-Solving

A major tenet of civic journalism relates to the newspaper's role in facilitating problem-solving by community members. This requires, first of all, that citizens see themselves as capable of effecting change through civic participation, since citizens who feel unable to make a difference are less likely to get involved. This tenet also reflects the view – expressed by civic journalists and by readers – that the media tend to focus on conflicts and problems to the exclusion of stories about cooperation, problem-solving and progress. When the media do include such sto-



ries, according to civic journalists, it helps the community build social capital and connect individuals and organizations that want to pool resources toward a common goal.

Respondents were asked about the importance of newspaper functions related to informing residents about problems, getting issues out in the open and getting people involved in solving problems. As shown in Table 8, readers largely agree that newspapers should be important resources as communities address issues: 85.5% said it is important or extremely important for a newspaper to “Alert residents to local problems and conflicts” and 78.4% said it is important or extremely important to “Get conflict out in the open so residents can deal with it.”

More than two-thirds, or 71.4%, said it is important or extremely important for the newspaper to “Get people involved in solving local problems.” This lower percentage mirrors ambivalence in the profession about the extent to which newspapers should be active in “getting people involved,” a function that, as noted in the Literature Review, has raised concern among professionals and academics. The lack of specificity about what exactly the newspaper would do to “get” people involved, together with the traditional view of the press as an entity at arm’s length, may have contributed to the higher number of readers unsure about this function.

The number of respondents who were neutral about the importance of these functions was the next largest group: 12.1% for alerting residents to problems, 18.1% for getting conflict out in the open, and the highest at 22.6% at getting people involved in solving local problems. The first finding may reflect, in part, some readers’ opinions that the media in general already dwell too much on the negative. The other questions address aspects of the media’s role that are not as familiar to the public and more likely to raise ambivalence. In this survey, more exploration of what readers think in this category would have been useful. The statement that a newspaper should “get people involved in solving local problems” is most likely to raise questions or

outright disagreement among readers, just as with professionals and academics, partly because they may not clearly understand what this means.

TABLE 8: Subscribers' Views of the Importance of Newspaper Functions

<b>Functions Related to Coverage of Community Problems</b>	<b>Important or Extremely Important</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Unimportant or Extremely Unimportant</b>
Alerting residents to local problems and conflicts.	85.5%	12.1%	2.5%
Getting conflict out in the open so residents can deal with it.	78.4%	18.1%	3.5%
Getting people involved in solving local problems.	71.4%	22.6%	6.0%

### **Facilitating Citizen Involvement**

Beyond reporting on civic issues, the real measure of success for civic journalism is helping citizens take the step of getting involved. Among other functions, providing mobilizing information – specific details about how readers can learn about and weigh in on local issues – has been an area of study in content analyses of civic journalism newspapers. Studies have found that such papers tend to provide more of this information, and that small to medium papers do so especially well.

As shown in Table 9, 77.8% of respondents said the Sun is good or excellent at “Giving dates and other details for participating in meetings and activities.” Some respondents volunteered the comment that the newspaper does not always give enough advance notice of events.

Improving political reporting – specifically, putting voters back at the center of election coverage – was the initial motivation for civic journalism and has remained an area of emphasis. A total of 77.4% respondents said the Sun is good or excellent at “Preparing people to vote in local elections.” In 2005, the Sun produced a comprehensive Voter’s Guide for a county election

that, in line with civic journalism objectives, sought to provide a voter-friendly comparison of candidates on numerous issues. Less extensive candidate-comparison charts also were prepared in 2004 and 2005, published before early voting and before election day. In addition to news stories and profiles, the paper also publishes sample ballots and information about candidate forums, voter registration, election dates, etc. Unlike more complex civic journalism projects, citizen-driven election coverage appears to be feasible even for community newspapers with small editorial staffs.

A total of 71.3% of respondents said the Sun is good or excellent at “Keeping readers up to date about issues and new developments,” while almost one-quarter (22.6%) rated this category as fair. This highlights two challenges facing the newspaper in a high-growth community. First is a continuous influx of new residents who lack background knowledge about developments and pick up the newspaper in the middle of the story, so to speak. One new resident called the Sun to request more frequent updates on new developments; she pointed out that newcomers do not know this information and want more of it. Unlike a newspaper whose readership remains stagnant, the paper in a growth area should be mindful of the continuously growing pool of readers who do not know such information, regardless of how often it has been reported in the past. This affects larger community issues, where civic journalists have argued that more contextual reporting is beneficial, as well as development-based updates.

The second challenge is the sheer amount of developments to track: buildings, roads, businesses, organizations, public institutions, etc. All these tend to keep pace with the population, which in Williamson County’s case is estimated to increase by 24% by 2010. At the Sun, editorial staff has not grown along with the population and the size of the newspaper. Accordingly, as at many smaller newspapers, time constraints often result in superficial coverage. This

occurs despite the argument that civic journalism – with deeper and more contextual reporting – would benefit citizens dealing with these issues and despite readers’ agreement that a newspaper like the Sun can help the community address growth-related changes. As a result, even though respondents were generally approving of how well the Sun keeps them up to date on developments, it was not surprising that this category received a lower rating than others.

Table 9 shows that even fewer respondents, or 67.8%, said the Sun is good or excellent at “Helping people develop opinions on issues important to the community.” More than one-quarter, or 26.6%, said fair. This relates to the previous question, but also to Yankelovich’s assertion that newspapers are good at creating “public opinion,” but less effective at developing “public judgment.”

In November, for example, Williamson County voters will be asked to decide on a \$250 million bond issue. So far, they have been given a list of the proposed projects, a discussion of how it would affect the tax rate, coverage of public forums that drew little citizen input, and comments from elected officials. In other words, coverage has met the criteria of keeping citizens “informed,” but has done little to help them come to meaningful conclusions. Other information would be helpful to voters, such as an analysis of how effectively the county managed the last road bond issue, but time constraints tend to prohibit such projects. Again, the primary weakness of the small community paper – limited editorial resources – hinders its ability to help readers “develop opinions on issues important to the community.” This finding may support that conclusion.

TABLE 9: Subscribers' Views of the Sun's Local News Coverage

<b>Coverage Related to Facilitating Citizen Involvement in Civic Issues</b>	<b>Good or Excellent</b>	<b>Fair</b>	<b>Poor or Very Poor</b>
Gives dates and other details for participating in meetings and activities.	77.8%	18.6%	3.5%
Prepares people to vote in local elections.	77.4%	18.6%	4.0%
Keeps readers up to date about issues and new developments.	71.3%	22.6%	6.0%
Helps people develop opinions on issues important to the community.	67.8%	26.6%	5.5%

## Community-Building

The Literature Review argued that the community newspaper could better serve the long-term goal of facilitating civic engagement if it also served readers socially, familiarizing newcomers with the area and bringing them into the public conversation. Community and civic journalists emphasize the development of social capital by creating connections among readers and helping them feel invested in local issues.

Asked about the importance of several newspaper functions, respondents agreed that “Helping newcomers learn about the community” is valuable, with 76.9% ranking this important or extremely important. As noted in the Literature Review, this is one of the newspaper’s earliest functions, which has not changed much since the 1850s.

Respondents were less certain about “Bringing people together in the community,” with 59.8% saying this is important or extremely important. Almost one-third were neutral, suggesting that many readers do not see the newspaper as a vehicle for community cohesiveness, or they are unsure how this might be achieved. If the former, this would be an interesting response to civic journalism, which puts a premium on “bringing people together” in order to solve problems, find common ground and build social capital. It may be that readers would see this newspaper function as valuable if they were educated about its potential.

In addition to rating the importance of several functions for newspapers in general, respondents also were asked how well the Sun serves functions related to community-building. As shown in Table 10, three-quarters, or 75.4%, said the Sun is good or excellent at “Giving readers a feeling of being ‘in the know’ about what’s happening.” This is important for empowering citizens to participate in local issues and shows that the newspaper is a resource for readers wanting to join the public conversation. If readers had given low marks, it would raise serious questions about how well the paper is serving as the community’s “public sphere.” Many readers seem to believe the newspaper is a good resource for keeping tabs on what’s happening. On the other hand, so many factors affect this sentiment that this question was not very useful for pinpointing any specific observation about the Sun.

According to the Literature Review, a strong suit for community newspapers is that readers find them more accepting of contributions. Respondents largely viewed the Sun as accessible, with 70.9% saying the newspaper is good or excellent at “Providing a place to submit news items to share with other readers.”

At the same time, a sizable 25.6% said the newspaper is only fair. One relevant factor may be that readers have a wide range of expectations for what kind of content the Sun should provide. Some say the paper needs more hard-hitting news; just as many, however, request more content such as photos of children’s fishing derbies and relatives’ 100<sup>th</sup>-birthday celebrations. (It is open to interpretation whether the latter requests derive from enjoyment of the personal aspect of community newspapers, or from a self-serving use of the paper as a kind of personal bulletin board.) Even as the Sun has grown, it has retained a commitment to “personal news” because the publisher mandates that anyone who takes the trouble to bring an item to the Sun should see it appear in some form, however small. At the same time, population growth has made it impossi-

ble to honor all the requests for editorial staff to appear at events, and public interest must be weighed in assigning resources. As a result, it is possible that some respondents rate the Sun as “fair” in this category because their individual requests, whether for personal stories or hard news, were not satisfied.

Table 10 shows that respondents were even less approving of how well the Sun “Helps readers feel investment and belonging in the community.” A total of 66.8% said the newspaper is good or excellent, while 28.6% said fair. This raises the question of what readers believe the newspaper could do to encourage these qualities. This finding is potentially problematic for the newspaper, since readers who feel invested are much more likely to participate civically. It appears that helping readers feel “in the know” about issues is not, by itself, enough to create a sense of investment. Perhaps some other element is lacking.

Another argument in the Literature Review was that the community newspaper could “Introduce members of the community to each other.” Almost half the respondents, 44.4%, said the Sun is only fair in this category. Almost one-third, or 30.3%, rated the paper as good and a relatively small 14.6% rated it as excellent. This finding would be clearer if readers were asked if, to begin with, they consider this an important function. However, readers showed general approval for the functions of helping newcomers learn about the community and bringing people in the community together – 76.9% and 59.8%, respectively – suggesting that the related function of introducing members of the community also would be considered a high priority. Accordingly, room seems to exist for improvement in this category, though unfortunately it is not clear what readers think the newspaper should do better.

TABLE 10: Subscribers' Views of the Sun's Community-Building Coverage

<b>Coverage Related to Developing Connections Among Residents</b>	<b>Good or Excellent</b>	<b>Fair</b>	<b>Poor or Very Poor</b>
Gives readers a feeling of being “in the know” about what’s happening.	75.4%	17.1%	7.5%
Provides a place to submit news items to share with other readers.	70.9%	25.6%	3.5%
Helps readers feel investment and belonging in the community.	66.8%	28.6%	4.5%
Introducing members of the community to each other.	44.9%	44.4%	10.6%

### Opinions About Growth

As discussed in the Literature Review, community newspapers in high-growth areas face several challenges, from adapting to changing readerships to competing with nearby dailies that step up efforts to capture growing markets. The Literature Review argued that civic journalism would be helpful for such newspapers because of its efforts to identify common ground, encourage discussion of values, and facilitate citizens’ problem-solving – all of which become more pressing as growth creates new issues and new stakeholders. The Literature Review also noted that as population increase brings in newcomers and otherwise causes an area to evolve, the newspaper can help preserve a “sense of community,” a form of social capital that often is perceived to be threatened by growth and development.

As shown in Table 11, almost three-quarters of respondents, or 72.1%, agreed or strongly agreed that “A newspaper like the Sun can help people adjust to changes that accompany growth.” This seems to be strong evidence that readers, at least, support the argument that newspapers can help community members navigate periods of change by addressing related issues. Only 5.5% said they disagreed or strongly disagreed, with the remainder neutral.



More than half the respondents, or 54.3%, agreed or strongly agreed the Sun should give more coverage to growth-related issues. About one-third were neutral, while 12.2% disagreed or strongly disagreed. Some respondents volunteered that they felt the newspaper already covered such issues adequately.

Respondents had mixed opinions on whether “It’s harder to feel part of the community when the area’s growing so fast”: 46.5% agreed or strongly agreed, 28.8% were neutral and 24.8% disagreed or strongly disagreed. Because of these varying opinions about growth, readers likely have different opinions about how they would like the newspaper to address related issues, though whether the newspaper should fulfill these desires is another question. These opinions were not revealed by this survey.

TABLE 11: Subscribers’ Assessments of Growth and the Community Newspaper

<b>Statements About Growth</b>	<b>Agree or Strongly Agree</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Disagree or Strongly Disagree</b>
A paper like the Sun can help people adjust to growth-related changes.	72.1%	22.3%	5.5%
The Sun should cover growth-related issues more.	54.3%	33.5%	12.2%
It’s harder to feel part of the community when the area’s growing so fast.	46.5%	28.8%	24.8%

The way that subscribers view the effect of growth on the community may influence the kind of news they seek from the newspaper. A cross-tabulation suggests that a relationship exists between readers’ opinion on whether growth inhibits a sense of community and the extent to which they value social-oriented newspaper functions (featuring local people; providing news of activities, events and entertainment; bringing people together in the community; telling residents about clubs and organizations; and helping newcomers learn about the community).

As shown in Table 12, among readers who strongly agree that growth threatens community, a higher percentage values these social-oriented functions. Almost 76% say that featuring local people is important, compared to 50% of readers who strongly believe that despite change, it is just as easy to feel part of the community. A similar pattern exists for “Telling people about clubs and organizations”: Among readers who strongly agree that growth threatens community, 78.8% consider this important, compared to 58.3% of readers who strongly disagree with that statement. A significant difference also exists for “Bringing people in the community together,” with 41.7% and 60.6%, respectively, ranking this important.

Regardless of their opinions about the effect of growth on the community, readers generally agreed on the importance of “Providing news of activities, events and entertainment” and “Helping newcomers learn about the community.” This makes sense in that more than the other three functions, these are straightforward, informational services that do not carry the community-building connotations of, for example, “Bringing people in the community together.”

While a cross-tabulation indicates a relationship between opinions on growth and use of the newspaper, there could be several reasons behind it. Readers who value the community connections provided by social-oriented functions presumably view them as a safeguard against those connections being threatened. Readers who feel confident that growth is not diminishing the sense of community may see less imperative for the newspaper to attend to this function, placing more value on civic functions such as covering local government, reporting on developments, etc. Other factors that may affect this relationship include the desirability of “a sense of community” to individual readers; their expectations of the extent to which the area will possess that quality; the population of readers’ previous residences, if outside Williamson County; and

length of residency (e.g., whether they arrived when the city already was in a growth spurt or they have first-hand recollections of the city as a small town).

TABLE 12: Importance of Newspaper Functions to Subscribers Based on Their Attitude About Growth's Effect on the Community

<b>Newspaper Functions Ranked Important or Very Important</b>							
	<b>Feature local people</b>	<b>News of activities, events</b>	<b>Bring people together</b>	<b>Tell about clubs, groups</b>	<b>Help newcomers</b>		
Percentage of respondents who rank functions as important based on agreement with "Growth makes it harder to feel part of the community":						Chi-Square	Sig. Level
Strongly Disagree	50.0%	83.3%	41.7%	58.3%	75.0%	14.820	.063
Disagree	56.8%	78.4%	54.1%	78.4%	75.7%	18.120	.020
Neutral	47.4%	68.4%	56.1%	59.6%	66.7%	8.755	.363
Agree	72.9%	96.6%	71.2%	89.8%	88.1%	19.178	.014
Strongly Agree	75.8%	87.9%	60.6%	78.8%	75.8%	13.489	.096

## News Values

Because some aspects of civic journalism have prompted concerns about its effect on professional values, such as objectivity and news judgment, respondents were asked to rate the importance of such values for newspapers in general and the quality of these values in the Sun.

In Accuracy, Objectivity, Credibility and News Judgment, results were not surprising, with 99%, 99%, 98.5% and 90.4% of respondents ranking these important or extremely important for newspapers in general. Interestingly, the quality of Connectedness With the Community also agreed with respondents, 91.9% of whom said this is important or extremely important – slightly higher than the value of News Judgment. Some critics of civic journalism have argued that "the proper distance" between the newspaper and its readers must be maintained if objectivity and integrity are to be preserved; however, this finding reflects the observation made by civic

journalists that readers do not want to feel estranged from their news sources and approve of a greater degree of closeness.

Questions also were asked about the Sun's performance in Accuracy, Objectivity, Credibility, News Judgment and Connectedness With the Community. If coverage at the Sun were deliberately produced in accordance with a civic journalism approach, and readers found that objectivity, etc., were not compromised by its methods, results could provide a refutation of the criticisms noted above. As it is, the Sun does not present itself as an exemplar of civic journalism. Nonetheless, the findings may shed light on whether the "close relationship" between a community newspaper and its readers leads to a perceived lack of professional standards.

Respondents rated the Sun good or excellent in Accuracy (73.2%), Objectivity (76.3%), Credibility (76.8%) and News Judgment (64.2%). The quality of Connectedness With the Community received the highest marks, with 86.4% rating the newspaper good or excellent. This finding supports arguments in the Literature Review that a strong community-newspaper connection, which is encouraged by civic journalism, can be feasible for the community newspaper and important in readers' minds for its success. It is noted that readers who use certain media tend to rate them as more credible; on the other hand, it is possible that even readers who take the newspaper for non-news purposes (e.g., calendar of events) would agree with this assessment of news coverage.

Because the survey did not ask respondents to justify their answers, it is not known what criteria they used to form their evaluations. However, it is possible that two factors contributed to the lowest rating for News Judgment, with slightly more than 64% rating the Sun good or excellent in this category. The first is the difficulty in finding the right balance between hard news and soft news, an issue that seems likely to plague the community newspaper more than its daily

counterpart, which has a larger supply of news from local, state, national and international sources. Some readers may have rated the Sun as “fair” in news judgment because they believe it contains too much soft news.

Another possibility is that journalists at smaller newspapers often have a high degree of discretion in stories they will cover. The standard set of criteria used to establish “news judgment” might be clearer with a larger set of events and issues that clearly are “hard news” of regional, state or national importance. At community papers, particularly a newspaper like the Sun that focuses exclusively on Williamson County, such stories can be in short supply on occasion. As a result, reporters may be prone to pursue stories that they find interesting, but that do not have a broad public interest. On the other hand, in a high-growth area there may be plenty of issues to cover, but, with a small staff, not enough time in which to carry them out. This also may prevent the paper from providing stories that readers would judge as having a high news value.

In addition, reporters may tend to identify so strongly with officials and other primary sources on their beats that they neglect the interests of regular citizens, a reporting habit noted by civic journalists. This tendency has been observed among Sun reporters and appears to be an outcome of beat structures as described by Tuchman, which create an artificial emphasis on “experts and officials” to the exclusion of citizens.

### **Residence Summary**

The majority of respondents (83.4%) live in Georgetown – the county seat, the primary subscriber area and the city that receives the most news coverage. The only comment of interest was volunteered by respondents who live in other cities, some of whom said the newspaper should give more coverage to other areas of the county.

As shown in Table 13, respondents represented a wide range in the length of time they have lived in Williamson County, from just a few months to an entire lifetime. More cases would have been beneficial in providing a more even distribution of each category. To have more cases in each subset for subsequent analyses, respondents were categorized by residence of 1 to 5 years, 6 to 10 years, and more than 10 years, with the latter group including lifetime residents.

TABLE 13: Subscribers' Length of Residence

<b>Length of Residence</b>	<b>Percent</b>
1 Year	5.2%
2 to 5 Years	20.2%
6 to 10 Years	23.8%
More than 10 Years	38.9%
Entire Life	11.9%

The hypotheses assumed that newcomers' need for orientation – specifically whether they had preexisting connections, such as work or family – would influence the kinds of information they wanted from the newspaper. Accordingly, respondents were asked about their reasons for relocating to Williamson County. A majority, or 63.8%, had work or family connections or both, with 36.2% choosing the area primarily for its quality of life. This latter result may derive from the high number of older respondents (71% age 56 or older), who may have chosen the area for retirement.

### **Findings by Hypotheses**

H1: Newcomers will show the most interest in social engagement, using the newspaper primarily to familiarize themselves with local people, places and activities and to seek avenues for social connection.

As noted above, respondents' length of residence was consolidated to provide enough cases in each cell. About one-quarter of respondents had lived in the county between 1 and 5 years, about one-quarter between 6 and 10 years, and about one-half more than 10 years.

A cross-tabulation was done comparing length of residence with respondents' evaluation of the importance of five newspaper functions with a social rather than civic emphasis: featuring local people; providing news of activities, events and entertainment; bringing people together in the community; telling residents about clubs and organizations; and helping newcomers learn about the community.

As shown in Table 14, the percentage of respondents who rated these functions as important or extremely important was higher among newcomers in all categories, but notably in two. The largest difference between readers' responses was 10.2% for "Bringing people together in the community": 65.3% of newer residents considered this important compared to 55.1% of long-term residents. "Featuring local people" also showed limited support for the hypothesis, with 67.3% of newer residents considering this important compared to 59.2% of long-term residents.

On the other three functions, newer residents were consistently more likely to rate these as important, although the differences were negligible. In "Providing news of activities," for example, 85.7% of newer residents rated this important, compared to 79.6% of long-term residents. This also suggests limited support for the hypothesis, but the finding would have been clearer with a larger sample.

Equally helpful would have been to more clearly differentiate between social and civic functions in the newspaper. "Providing news of activities" continues to be important to readers, regardless of length of residence. It also has as strong a civic purpose as it does a social one.

Similarly, “Featuring local people” can serve as a social introduction for newcomers, but also has interest to long-time residents, who are more likely to know the people being featured. Accordingly, designing the survey to better identify social-oriented functions that would especially serve the newcomer would be an improvement. This could be addressed by asking subscribers about types of news content in addition to more specific types of functions.

As noted previously, respondents expressed uncertainty about the function of “Bringing people together in the community”: Those rating this neutral, as opposed to unimportant, included 26.5% of 1 to 5 Year residents, 28.3% of 6 to 10 Year residents, and 34.7% of More Than 10 Year residents. The latter result seems to reflect other findings of this study, that readers are more ambivalent when it comes to the newspaper’s role in community-building. Because this concept has been discussed largely among professionals and academics, rather than the public, readers may be unfamiliar with this concept and unsure how it would translate to either newspaper coverage or community relationships.

TABLE 14: Subscribers Rating Social-Oriented Newspaper Functions as Important or Very Important Based on Length of Residence

<b>Newspaper Function</b>	<b>1 to 5 Years</b>	<b>6 to 10 Years</b>	<b>10+ Years</b>	<b>Chi-Square</b>	<b>Sig. Level</b>
Featuring local people.	67.3%	58.7%	59.2%	4.244	.374
Providing news of activities, events and entertainment.	85.7%	89.1%	79.6%	2.525	.640
Bringing people together in the community.	65.3%	65.2%	55.1%	2.197	.700
Telling residents about clubs and organizations.	79.6%	69.6%	76.5%	2.139	.710
Helping newcomers learn about the community.	77.6%	78.3%	75.5%	.708	.950



Slightly more than 12% of respondents had lived in the county their entire lives. Among the remainder, 55.8% moved to the area because of work and/or family members, while 31.7% had no such connections but liked the area's quality of life.

Cross-tabulations taking into account readers' reasons for moving to the area – and therefore the presence of family and/or work connections that might lower the need for orientation – showed limited support for the hypothesis. Table 15 shows that in every category, residents who moved to the area without any previous connection were more likely to rate these functions as important. The strongest significance level suggests that readers' lack of preexisting connections would make them more likely to value coverage that features local people, a function that reflects one of the most basic keys to success for the community newspaper: getting names and faces in the paper. However, there not enough significance for either group of residents to reject the possibility that their views resulted from chance.

TABLE 15: Subscribers' Views of the Importance of Social-Oriented Newspaper Functions Based on Reasons for Moving to Area (Previous Connections versus No Previous Connections)

<b>Newspaper Function and Previous Community Connection</b>	<b>Chi-Squares</b>	<b>Sig. Level</b>
Featuring local people		
Work and/or family connection	4.827	.306
No previous connection	7.787	.100
Providing news of activities and events		
Work and/or family connection	2.856	.582
No previous connection	6.289	.179
Bringing people together in community		
Work and/or family connection	.808	.937
No previous connection	4.984	.289
Telling residents about clubs/organizations		
Work and/or family connection	.168	.997
No previous connection	5.637	.228
Helping newcomers learn about community		
Work and/or family connection	2.225	.694
No previous connection	5.648	.227

H2: The longer residents live in the area, the more interested they will be in civic functions of the newspaper, including local issues and how these are handled by officials.

A cross-tabulation was done comparing length of residence with respondents' evaluation of the importance of four civic-oriented newspaper functions: investigating wrongdoing and corruption; informing readers about local government; discussing political issues; and alerting residents to local problems and conflicts.

This produced the opposite result than expected. As shown in Table 16, in every category, newer residents were more likely than long-term residents to rate these functions as important. The largest difference, in fact, appeared for the most straightforward civic function, "Discussing political issues": 83.7% of newer residents rated this important, compared to 67.3% of long-term residents. The smallest difference was for "Investigating wrongdoing and corruption," with 83.7% of newer residents and 77.6% of long-term residents considering this important.

Overall, this finding may reflect the fact that the readership as a whole reported a high interest in local government and public affairs. It would be unlikely to find this concentrated only among long-term residents.

TABLE 16: Subscribers Rating Civic-Oriented Newspaper Functions as Important or Very Important Based on Length of Residence

<b>Newspaper Function</b>	<b>1 to 5 Years</b>	<b>6 to 10 Years</b>	<b>10+ Years</b>	<b>Chi-Square</b>	<b>Sig. Level</b>
Investigating wrongdoing and corruption.	83.7%	67.4%	77.6%	14.181	.007
Informing readers about local government.	91.8%	91.3%	78.6%	6.996	.136
Discussing political issues.	83.7%	76.1%	67.3%	5.795	.215
Alerting residents to local problems and conflicts.	91.8%	89.1%	80.6%	4.485	.344

As suggested under Hypothesis 1, there appears to be a relationship between readers' reasons for moving to the county (presence or absence of work and/or family connections) and their

interest in types of news coverage. As shown in Table 17, for the four civic-oriented newspaper functions, residents with a previous connection were more likely to value these than readers without such a connection. The difference was most apparent for “Discussing political issues,” which was important to 75.7% of individuals with previous connections and 63.5% of individuals without connections. The latter group also showed the most uncertainty – among all four functions – about discussing political issues, with 27.0% being “neutral” about its importance.

Readers with no previous connections also were less likely to consider it important for the newspaper to “Investigate wrongdoing and corruption,” “Inform readers about local government” and “Alert residents to problems and conflicts.” A fair number of these readers also expressed neutrality: 25.4% about the importance of investigating wrongdoing, 19.0% about informing readers about local government, and 15.9% about alerting residents to problems – higher percentages across the board than residents with previous connections.

Despite these consistencies, the Chi-Squares do not indicate an unequivocal relationship between previous connections and interest in civic news. A larger sample size might have made the strength of the relationship clearer.

The results may suggest, however, that the presence of work or family ties – more than length of residency – drives readers’ interest in civic-oriented news coverage. The individual who moves to an area with these ties has more immediate access to people and institutions, while a retiree, for example, who moves solely for quality-of-life reasons must create these connections with the community. Therefore, the results seem to support the assumption that newcomers who have employment or family members in the area, regardless of length of residence, may feel more invested in civic news.

TABLE 17: Subscribers' Views of the Importance of Civic-Oriented Newspaper Functions Based on Reasons for Moving to Area (Previous Connections versus No Previous Connections)

Importance of Newspaper Function / Preexisting Connection	Important	Neutral	Unimportant	Chi-Square	Sig. Level
Investigating wrongdoing and corruption					
Work/family connection	78.4%	17.1%	4.5%	2.185	.335
No previous connection	68.3%	25.4%	6.3%		
Informing readers about local government					
Work/family connection	86.5%	10.8%	2.7%	2.437	.296
No previous connection	79.4%	19.0%	1.6%		
Discussing political issues					
Work/family connection	75.7%	17.1%	7.2%	2.996	.224
No previous connection	63.5%	27.0%	9.5%		
Alerting residents to problems/conflicts					
Work/family connection	89.2%	9.0%	1.8%	2.293	.318
No previous connection	81.0%	15.9%	3.2%		

H3: Both groups of readers will value the newspaper as an entity that helps to maintain a sense of community in a growing area.

As shown in Table 18, this hypothesis was confirmed: 72.1% of respondents said they agree or strongly agree that the newspaper can help people adjust to changes related to growth. On the other hand, 22.1% were neutral, so follow-up questions would have been useful.

TABLE 18: Subscribers' Assessment of Whether a Community Newspaper Can Help People Adjust to Growth-Related Changes

	<b>Agree or Strongly Agree</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Disagree or Strongly Disagree</b>
A paper like the Sun can help people adjust to growth-related changes.	72.1%	22.1%	5.5%

Respondents also were asked if they agreed with the statement "It's harder to feel part of the community when the area's growing so fast."

A cross-tabulation was done of the relationship between respondents' opinions on whether growth makes it harder to feel part of the community and whether the newspaper can

help people adjust to growth-related changes. As shown in Table 19, 88.1% of respondents who agree with the first statement also agree with the second, compared to 58.3% of people who strongly disagree that growth affects the sense of community. The Pearson Chi-Square for this analysis was 20.885 and the significance level was .007, suggesting there is a relationship between these opinions. This seems to indicate that readers agree with civic journalists' argument that newspapers can be a meaningful resource for citizens who are facing change in their communities and concerned about preserving social capital.

At the same time, it is notable that even among respondents who strongly disagree that growth threatens the "sense of community," more than half believe the newspaper can help navigate other growth-related changes. Among those who disagree – as opposed to strongly disagree – with the statement about growth, the percentage is even higher, at 64.9%. This indicates that readers recognize there is more to navigating growth than simply preserving a "sense of community" and, more important, they believe the newspaper can help citizens negotiate periods of change.

Respondents who were unsure about the effect of growth on the community also expressed the most uncertainty (35.7%) about the newspaper's role in helping the community address it. Readers who disagreed that growth affects the sense of community also expressed uncertainty about this role, with one-quarter saying they are neutral on this point. This suggests a limitation in these readers' minds about how much the newspaper can do to shepherd a community through a growth period.

The survey should have asked if respondents agree that "A paper like the Sun can help maintain a sense of community in a growing area." This question was not asked because it

seemed too ambiguous as to what “a sense of community” would mean, but a question along these lines would have been beneficial.

TABLE 19: Subscribers’ Assessment of Whether a Community Newspaper Can Help People Adjust to Growth-Related Changes Based on Opinion About Growth

	<b>A newspaper like the Sun can help people adjust to growth-related changes.</b>		
<b>It’s harder to feel part of the community when the area’s growing so fast.</b>	<b>Agree or Strongly Agree</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Disagree or Strongly Disagree</b>
Strongly Disagree	58.3%	25.0%	16.7%
Disagree	64.9%	24.3%	10.8%
Neutral	60.7%	35.7%	3.6%
Agree	88.1%	11.0%	0%
Strongly Agree	75.8%	15.2%	9.1%

### Demographic Summary

Respondents were heavily skewed toward an older demographic, with 71% age 56 or older. This may have been because retired residents had more free time in which to participate. As previously noted, this age group also is more likely to read newspapers, a habit that also correlates with civic involvement, and so perhaps was more inclined to see the value of taking time to share opinions about the community newspaper. Because of this extremely high number, conclusions should be generalized to the readership as a whole only with reservations. Just over 16% of respondents were in the 46 to 55 age group, with 7.4% ages 36 to 45, and the remaining 5.2% age 35 or younger.

The survey also reflected an overwhelming majority of white respondents, at 94.2%. The percentage of African-Americans in Williamson County is lower than the percentage nationwide, so it was not expected there would be many represented. The county’s Hispanic population is sizable, but it is not known whether this group is proportionately reflected among subscribers.

Respondents with higher incomes and levels of education also were heavily represented. This may not mirror the readership as a whole, but it may reflect the fact that the Williamson County population is higher in these measures than the national population: The county's average income is \$88,002 compared to \$61,553 for the U.S.; 43.9% of county households have incomes over \$75,000 compared to 27.5% for the U.S.; and 33% of county residents have a bachelor or graduate degree compared to 27.7% for the U.S. (2006, STDBOnline).

In this survey, 34% reported incomes of more than \$80,000. The next most represented income was \$40,000 to \$50,000, at 16.7%.

It should be noted that slightly more than 25% of respondents were unwilling to provide incomes and, more importantly, the question did not specify whether respondents should provide individual or household incomes, so answers may have varied. Responses about level of education also tended to be high, with 60.6% reporting a bachelor or graduate degree and another 25% reporting some college studies.

## CONCLUSIONS

This study suggests that the community newspaper, with a stronger foothold on local news and better understanding of its community, can capitalize on civic journalism imperatives: paying attention to individuals' concerns, representing the full range of stakeholders, providing contextual coverage and helping community members navigate periods of change. Community newspapers remain, as Neal described them in 1939, "a friendly, personal institution." One of civic journalism's earliest targets for improvement was detachment between the press and the public, so severe that reporters had to be reminded of grass-roots techniques for learning what citizens think. If readers perceive the newspaper's staff as accessible, on the other hand, the relationship benefits from communication, whether criticisms, questions, observations or suggestions. This is invaluable for the newspaper trying to provide a more useful public service, as well as a better news product. This study showed that readers do perceive the community paper as comparatively more accessible.

Numerous examples of feedback from Sun readers could be given, from requests for more information about city projects to complaints that events did not get enough coverage and everything in between. It is worth noting that all this commentary arrives on an informal, individual basis: phone calls, e-mails, letters and personal visits to reporters, editors and the publisher. This kind of daily interaction provides a constant dialogue between community newspapers and their readers, and does not require focus groups, meetings, consultants or polls. As argued in the Literature Review, this is an advantage for the small paper, which because of its size enjoys community interactions routinely that larger papers must create through special events.

In opening the door to feedback from readers, accessibility also can diminish the potential for isolation of journalists in the newsroom. Based on observations at the Sun, journalists at



small papers are just as susceptible to reporting habits criticized by civic journalists, such as narrowing the field of sources to officials and experts, which leads to detachment from “regular folks.” On the other hand, such reporters also have the advantages of small-town social interactions that bridge this gap and permit “tapping civic life” by using “third places” routinely. One of Harwood’s reportorial techniques was spending time in the informal places citizens gather: diners, barber shops, farmers markets, etc. Newspaper staff in a small town, such as Georgetown, may well visit these places as a matter of course.

Some critics of civic journalism have interpreted the citizen-driven emphasis as market-driven in that readers dictate what appears in the paper. But feedback from readers – more important, from citizens – is necessary information for editorial staff. Civic journalists recognized this need and tried to address it with town hall meetings, citizen panels and grass-roots interviews to ask readers what they think about the community and the newspaper. Some critics missed the point that this could bolster the newspaper’s performance of its public service role in the democracy, even by an action as simple as telling readers more frequently how to contact elected officials, because they asked the newspaper to do so. The survey results also suggest that even small newspapers can produce citizen-driven election coverage that readers will judge as helpful in preparing them to vote. Overall, the results show that accessibility and depth of local news are strong advantages of the community newspaper, especially when combined with a deep understanding of the community. All these qualities contribute to civic journalism objectives.

At the same time, the newspaper serving a rapidly growing population can be challenged by the constantly evolving set of issues and stakeholders. In this study, readers generally showed confidence in the newspaper’s ability to help them navigate periods of change related to growth, regardless of whether they perceived it as detrimental to a sense of community or not.

The results also reflected readers' uncertainty about the community-building function envisioned by civic journalists, such as bringing people in the community together and getting people involved in solving problems. For the Sun in particular, readers' evaluations also were lower in assessing the paper's news judgment and its responsiveness to questions and concerns. Several factors may contribute to these weaknesses, among them limitations on editorial staff. This study did not look at the editorial resources of any paper other than the Sun, and that was not a major area of study here. Even so, it is generally accepted that small papers have fewer editorial resources and staff members traditionally are expected to "wear several hats." The fact that many community papers, including the Sun, produce content locally without subscribing to news services also affects resources. These conditions are not necessarily detrimental, but tend to create time constraints that contribute to superficial coverage. As civic journalists have admitted, some techniques for "tapping civic life" take time.

In a high-growth community, the changes that occur raise so many issues relevant to civic journalism – representing stakeholders, weighing values, finding common ground, and helping citizens participate to shape outcomes – that superficial coverage is especially inadequate. "Superficial" refers to the usual suspects identified by civic journalists: filled with the voices of experts and officials, driven by a conflict frame, and lacking any consideration of context and values. Against all the advantages of community newspapers described herein – accessibility, strong local coverage, better understanding of the community and connection with readers – this disadvantage weighs heavily.

In many towns and small cities, the local paper is the only news source paying attention to civic issues with an immediate effect on the community and the taxpayers. When the newspaper lacks resources for deeper coverage, citizens' interests are likely to suffer. It has been argued

that civic journalism can be a strong aid to the watchdog function, which can be true at larger papers. Many small papers, however, are deficient in the watchdog role, and the Sun is no exception. As a result, this aspect of civic journalism can be more difficult.

Given that the community newspaper endeavors to achieve whatever civic goals it can, finding the right mix of hard and soft news can be a challenge. The small paper often has the capacity (based on publishing cycle, news mix, etc.) to cover quirky stories such as a 90-year-old man surviving a surprise bee attack in his backyard; but it may lack the editorial resources necessary for news coverage of depth, such as reporting on the management of taxpayer dollars in questionable municipal projects or providing context for municipal issues. The danger exists that such newspapers will lean too far in the direction of features and “small” items that may be personal or interesting, but do not serve citizens’ more serious civic needs.

Eventually, a larger and in some cases more sophisticated readership may force the community newspaper to decide whether to move decisively in the direction of a more “professional,” potentially more impersonal, product or to stay with the personal, idiosyncratic and potentially “lighter” small-town paper. The Sun, like many others, has responded to this juncture by trying to find the right balance between the two. Predictably, this creates issues. The small paper’s ability to pay attention to the individual is one quality that endears it to readers, enables it to be responsive and helps readers feel ownership. Maintaining this personal attention can become difficult when the number of individuals becomes much larger. Among other examples, small papers that once routinely covered ribbon-cuttings for new businesses may find that it becomes impossible to keep up or undesirable to have so much similar content. There is a period of adjustment as readers, who come to feel entitled to such attention, learn the newspaper no longer will be giving it.

Despite these weaknesses, the survey results, other researchers and anecdotal evidence show that community newspapers can be extremely hospitable to civic journalism tenets. It is recognized that in reality, the success of a newspaper's effort to facilitate a more engaged community is dependent on the community itself. While a newspaper can encourage engagement and provide citizens with the necessary tools, the outcome will be only as effective as members of the community permit. The Williamson County Sun has an advantage because, generally speaking, many Georgetown residents value community involvement. This is demonstrated by high levels of volunteerism, proactive efforts to create solutions to community problems, and frequent public expression of the belief that Georgetown is characterized by a "sense of community." In Georgetown, this value is affirmed by residents talking among themselves and by actions that demonstrate a desire to build up the community through positive action, as opposed to apathetic "opting out" of participation or denigrating the community by emphasizing problems.

In the mid-1980s, Georgetown residents recognized a need to help low-income residents by providing a food pantry and emergency financial assistance. Residents met that need and since have provided the resources, donations and volunteers to enable it to grow, even as demand for services has increased. A similar effort created a sliding-scale medical service that has grown to five county-wide clinics. Residents seem to feel a particular loyalty to these organizations, which were started within memory by residents in the area and because through the years, other residents have come on board to help them flourish.

The newspaper's role in this partnership, in part, is to reflect this quality – that is, foster this particular sense of local identity – by covering the city's successes as well as its struggles. This relates to civic journalism's emphasis on covering citizens' development of solutions and serving as a repository of social capital. The newspaper also makes it a priority to inform resi-

dents about these resources, potential clients and potential volunteers alike, which affirms the actions of the individuals involved. This “pat on the back” coverage serves an important function noted by Glascock, as a newspaper reflects and preserves a city’s self-image. “Success stories” about fund-raisers, growth of community services and acts of goodwill reinforce the city’s view of itself as a caring, community-oriented place. One Sun reader called to ask for a list of volunteer opportunities, which led to a feature story accompanied by a comprehensive list of organizations that seeking help. A regular reader would see many quotes in which readers express the belief that “This is a strong community” – a belief the newspaper affirms by giving it a voice. Accordingly, the newspaper has an important role in encouraging citizens to see themselves as capable of effecting positive change in their communities, a key requisite for civic engagement, and to perceive the newspaper as a partner rather than a hindrance.

As the nature of the community affects the paper’s capacity for civic journalism objectives, it is noted that in a high-growth area, the community’s nature likely will change. Demographic and even cultural shifts may challenge assumptions about the readership. Journalists would do well to question these assumptions and to guard against preconceived ideas of who “stakeholders” might be. Communities undergoing shifts from rural-agricultural to urban-professional, such as Williamson County, face a particular kind of stakeholder divide that makes civic journalism’s consideration of values especially effective. Reporting that taps into these veins is not always easy to achieve, even for small newspapers with “third places” around every corner. The Sun, like other newspapers, should make a conscientious effort to be cognizant of the effects of change on readership and on other aspects of coverage.

The community newspaper also could improve by recognizing its strengths and ensuring these do not get lost amid growth. Accessibility, as discussed previously, is a strong advantage

that can diminish gradually as the amount of developments and readers' requests increase. Making an effort to preserve this quality can help community newspapers maintain the connection with readers encouraged by civic journalists. The paper also should maintain the depth and approach of its local news coverage.

When population growth reaches a point that the one constant seems to be change, the community newspaper's editorial staff also should ensure they reconsider the ways they are "tapping into civic life." The ease of this connection has been presented as an advantage for journalists at the small-town newspaper, but not one that is guaranteed to persist. As the community changes, so will its people and places, and journalists mindful of connecting with citizens must make an effort to maintain that relationship.

The primary weakness of the community newspaper seems to be a limitation on serving as a watchdog and pursuing time-consuming projects. But there is nothing to suggest community journalists cannot utilize two civic journalism techniques that do not cost money and do not require more people, although they may take time: better sourcing and better questions when talking to stakeholders.

This study set out to evaluate the relationship between length of residency and use of the newspaper. Results suggest that other factors may be as important, such as whether residents moved to the area with preexisting work or family connections. Another factor relates to civic journalism's assertion that the press can create a product – or public sphere – that develops informed, engaged citizens, and that it can leave citizens confused and disillusioned. Both assessments are correct; at the same time, journalists' skepticism of the idealism of curing the public's apathy is understandable. A certain segment of the population does not choose to be socially or civically engaged, and their media use may say more about personal attitudes than the quality of

the news product. This is not to say room for improvement does not exist, particularly in civic journalism's first area of emphasis, political reporting, and it exists in the paper under study here.

Length of residence was assumed to be a telling factor based on the argument that small papers would be particularly adept at bringing newcomers into the conversation by facilitating social and eventually civic connections. The results do show strongly that readers consider the Sun to be a vehicle for such connections, a resource for the public that leads ultimately to a stronger sense of community. One factor that binds readers despite length of residency or community connections is the fact of living in a growth area, and many respondents agreed the newspaper can help them deal with related issues. For some professionals, civic journalism is appealing because of its democratic appeal; but for many readers, "growth and development" seem to be the pressing issues of the day. In this survey, many readers valued keeping track of developments and wanted more coverage on growth-related issues, a process, of course, that raises numerous issues related to local governance and communal decision-making. Accordingly, civic journalism tools such as improving sourcing, identifying stakeholders, providing context, etc. are helpful for covering these issues, and practicable by journalists at small newspapers.

The study had limitations, primarily a relatively small sample. Having a higher number of respondents might have made the results clearer in several areas. In addition, several questions would have benefited from open-ended, follow-up questions. This would have allowed the researcher to better understand not just "what" readers think about The Williamson County Sun and newspapers in general, but "why" they think that. One question, for example, asked readers how important it was for a newspaper to get people involved in solving local problems. Readers likely had a wide range of interpretations of this function and varied justifications for their answers, but the survey was not designed to obtain this information.

In addition, several questions produced a large number of “Neutral” or “Do Not Know” answers. Designing questions to discourage this response would have improved the survey. Even though questions were intended to be as clear as possible, the issues under study – such as how well a newspaper can facilitate goals of community-building – are subjective enough that respondents likely had different interpretations (much like professionals and academics). Better clarification also was in order.

Another factor that limits the study is that it did not seek opinions from residents who do not subscribe to the newspaper. This decision was motivated primarily by the desire to focus on readers’ opinions rather than explore the reasons why others do not subscribe. While this is not necessarily a weakness, the perspectives of non-readers would provide a useful comparison. Some of those individuals would not subscribe to the newspaper regardless of its quality, and some have little interest in civic affairs, but others may not subscribe because the newspaper does not provide something they want; knowing what could have had bearings on the subjects under study here.

Building on the findings suggested by this study, more research would be warranted into the relationship between community newspapers and civic journalism, specifically the ways that small, locally-oriented newspapers can develop strengths and adapt weaknesses to the goal of citizen-driven coverage. In addition, more research on the effects of population growth on the nature and function of community newspapers would be useful. Even as market forces may lead small, family-owned newspapers to corporate ownership, readers do value the personal coverage, emphasis on local news, and accessibility they find in the hometown newspaper. Future researchers might consider a project identifying the challenges and solutions of covering a high-growth community while retaining the hallmarks of community journalism at its best.



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## APPENDIX

### SURVEY AND CODING

- A. Do you live in Georgetown or another city in Williamson County? (END SURVEY IF NOT IN WILLIAMSON COUNTY.)
- 1 = Georgetown
  - 2 = Other
- B. How long have you lived in Williamson County?
- 1 = Less than a year
  - 0 = Entire life
  - X = Number of years
- C. (SKIP THIS QUESTION IF PREVIOUS ANSWER WAS “Entire life.”) Which of the following best describes your reason for moving to the county?
- 1 = Family members nearby.
  - 2 = Work.
  - 3 = Both work and family.
  - 4 = I had no previous connections here, but liked the quality of life.
- D. In addition to The Williamson County Sun, which of the following do you use for news about Williamson County? (CHECK ALL THAT APPLY.)
- 1 = Austin American-Statesman
  - 2 = Local television news
  - 3 = Internet
  - 4 = Radio
  - 5 = Other
- E. On a scale of 1 to 5, how would you rate your interest in local government and public affairs, with 1 being Very Low, 3 being Neutral and 5 being Very High?
- 1 = Very Low
  - 2 = Low
  - 3 = Neutral
  - 4 = High
  - 5 = Very High
- F. Which of the following best describes the time you spend reading the Sun?
- 1 = I usually skim headlines and read a few articles that interest me.
  - 2 = I usually spend enough time to read the paper thoroughly.
  - 3 = I usually have certain sections I turn to and just read those.
- G. Please tell me if you agree or disagree with the following statements, with 1 being Strongly Disagree, 3 being Neutral and 5 being Strongly Agree.

1. The Sun provides local news I can't find anywhere else.  
1 = Strongly Disagree  
2 = Disagree  
3 = Neutral  
4 = Agree  
5 = Strongly Agree
2. The Sun has more thorough coverage of local news than other sources.  
1 = Strongly Disagree  
2 = Disagree  
3 = Neutral  
4 = Agree  
5 = Strongly Agree
3. The Sun's approach to covering the community is more personal than other sources.  
1 = Strongly Disagree  
2 = Disagree  
3 = Neutral  
4 = Agree  
5 = Strongly Agree
4. The Sun pays attention to people and events that are important to people here, but wouldn't be covered in a larger paper.  
1 = Strongly Disagree  
2 = Disagree  
3 = Neutral  
4 = Agree  
5 = Strongly Agree
5. The Sun is more likely to respond to my questions and concerns as a resident.  
1 = Strongly Disagree  
2 = Disagree  
3 = Neutral  
4 = Agree  
5 = Strongly Agree
6. The Sun has a better understanding of this community than other news sources.  
1 = Strongly Disagree  
2 = Disagree  
3 = Neutral  
4 = Agree  
5 = Strongly Agree

H. We're interested in how people are involved in the community. In the last two years, tell me if you've done any of the following:

1. Participated regularly in church or other religious activities.  
1 = Yes  
2 = No
2. Participated regularly in a service group or social club.  
1 = Yes  
2 = No
3. Volunteered at a non-profit organization or community event.  
1 = Yes  
2 = No
4. Written a letter to the editor.  
1 = Yes  
2 = No
5. Attended a public meeting.  
1 = Yes  
2 = No
6. Joined a government board or group.  
1 = Yes  
2 = No
7. Contacted an elected official about an issue.  
1 = Yes  
2 = No
8. Voted in a city, county or school election.  
1 = Yes  
2 = No

I. I'm going to describe several functions that newspapers can serve. As a reader of the Sun, tell me how important each one is to you, with 1 being Extremely Unimportant, 3 being Neutral and 5 being Extremely Important:

1. Providing news of activities, events and entertainment.  
1 = Extremely Unimportant  
2 = Unimportant  
3 = Neutral  
4 = Important  
5 = Extremely Important
2. Alerting residents to local problems and conflicts.  
1 = Extremely Unimportant  
2 = Unimportant  
3 = Neutral

4 = Important  
5 = Extremely Important

3. Featuring local people.  
1 = Extremely Unimportant  
2 = Unimportant  
3 = Neutral  
4 = Important  
5 = Extremely Important
4. Covering local schools.  
1 = Extremely Unimportant  
2 = Unimportant  
3 = Neutral  
4 = Important  
5 = Extremely Important
5. Informing readers about local government.  
1 = Extremely Unimportant  
2 = Unimportant  
3 = Neutral  
4 = Important  
5 = Extremely Important
6. Telling residents about local clubs and organizations.  
1 = Extremely Unimportant  
2 = Unimportant  
3 = Neutral  
4 = Important  
5 = Extremely Important
7. Getting conflict out in the open so residents can deal with it.  
1 = Extremely Unimportant  
2 = Unimportant  
3 = Neutral  
4 = Important  
5 = Extremely Important
8. Alerting residents to programs and services.  
1 = Extremely Unimportant  
2 = Unimportant  
3 = Neutral  
4 = Important  
5 = Extremely Important



9. Getting people involved in solving local problems.

1 = Extremely Unimportant

2 = Unimportant

3 = Neutral

4 = Important

5 = Extremely Important

10. Bringing people together in the community.

1 = Extremely Unimportant

2 = Unimportant

3 = Neutral

4 = Important

5 = Extremely Important

11. Discussing political issues.

1 = Extremely Unimportant

2 = Unimportant

3 = Neutral

4 = Important

5 = Extremely Important

12. Covering crime news.

1 = Extremely Unimportant

2 = Unimportant

3 = Neutral

4 = Important

5 = Extremely Important

13. Investigating wrongdoing or corruption.

1 = Extremely Unimportant

2 = Unimportant

3 = Neutral

4 = Important

5 = Extremely Important

14. Helping newcomers learn about the community.

1 = Extremely Unimportant

2 = Unimportant

3 = Neutral

4 = Important

5 = Extremely Important

15. Covering sporting events.

1 = Extremely Unimportant

2 = Unimportant

3 = Neutral

- 4 = Important
- 5 = Extremely Important

16. Announcing personal items like weddings, births, etc.

- 1 = Extremely Unimportant
- 2 = Unimportant
- 3 = Neutral
- 4 = Important
- 5 = Extremely Important

J. Now I want to ask you how well the Sun serves readers in certain areas, with 1 being Very Poor and 5 being Excellent:

1. Keeps readers up to date about issues and new developments.
  - 1 = Very Poor
  - 2 = Poor
  - 3 = Fair
  - 4 = Good
  - 5 = Excellent
2. Introduces members of the community to each other.
  - 1 = Very Poor
  - 2 = Poor
  - 3 = Fair
  - 4 = Good
  - 5 = Excellent
3. Gives people a common set of topics to talk about.
  - 1 = Very Poor
  - 2 = Poor
  - 3 = Fair
  - 4 = Good
  - 5 = Excellent
4. Gives readers a feeling of being “in the know” about what’s happening.
  - 1 = Very Poor
  - 2 = Poor
  - 3 = Fair
  - 4 = Good
  - 5 = Excellent
5. Helps people develop opinions on issues important to the community.
  - 1 = Very Poor
  - 2 = Poor
  - 3 = Fair
  - 4 = Good
  - 5 = Excellent

6. Gives dates and other details for participating in meetings and activities.
    - 1 = Very Poor
    - 2 = Poor
    - 3 = Fair
    - 4 = Good
    - 5 = Excellent
  7. Prepares people to vote in local elections.
    - 1 = Very Poor
    - 2 = Poor
    - 3 = Fair
    - 4 = Good
    - 5 = Excellent
  8. Provides a place to submit news items to share with other readers.
    - 1 = Very Poor
    - 2 = Poor
    - 3 = Fair
    - 4 = Good
    - 5 = Excellent
  9. Helps readers feel investment and belonging in the community.
    - 1 = Very Poor
    - 2 = Poor
    - 3 = Fair
    - 4 = Good
    - 5 = Excellent
- K. How often do you talk with other people about stories you read in the Sun, with 1 being Never and 5 being All the Time?
- 1 = Never
  - 2 = Infrequently
  - 3 = Occasionally
  - 4 = Frequently
  - 5 = All the Time
- L. Have you ever tried to contact a reporter or editor at a newspaper or TV station?
- 1 = Yes
  - 2 = No
- M. If you wanted to contact a reporter or editor, how accessible do you think they would be at the following news sources, with 1 being Extremely Inaccessible and 5 being Extremely Accessible? Please answer 3 if you don't know or don't have an opinion.
1. The Sun
    - 1 = Extremely Inaccessible
    - 2 = Inaccessible

- 3 = Don't Know
- 4 = Accessible
- 5 = Extremely Accessible

2. The Austin American-Statesman

- 1 = Extremely Inaccessible
- 2 = Inaccessible
- 3 = Don't Know
- 4 = Accessible
- 5 = Extremely Accessible

3. Local TV station

- 1 = Extremely Inaccessible
- 2 = Inaccessible
- 3 = Don't Know
- 4 = Accessible
- 5 = Extremely Accessible

N. When it comes to the county's population growth, tell me if you agree with the following statements, with 1 being Strongly Disagree, 3 being Neutral and 5 being Strongly Agree:

1. It's harder to feel part of the community when the area's growing so fast.

- 1 = Strongly Disagree
- 2 = Disagree
- 3 = Neutral
- 4 = Agree
- 5 = Strongly Agree

2. A newspaper like the Sun can help people adjust to changes that accompany growth.

- 1 = Strongly Disagree
- 2 = Disagree
- 3 = Neutral
- 4 = Agree
- 5 = Strongly Agree

3. The Sun should give more coverage to growth-related issues.

- 1 = Strongly Disagree
- 2 = Disagree
- 3 = Neutral
- 4 = Agree
- 5 = Strongly Agree

O. For a newspaper in general (not necessarily the Sun), how important are the following qualities, with 1 being Extremely Unimportant and 5 being Extremely Important:

1. Accuracy

- 1 = Extremely Unimportant

- 2 = Unimportant
- 3 = Neutral
- 4 = Important
- 5 = Extremely Important

- 2. Objectivity and fairness
  - 1 = Extremely Unimportant
  - 2 = Unimportant
  - 3 = Neutral
  - 4 = Important
  - 5 = Extremely Important

- 3. Credibility
  - 1 = Extremely Unimportant
  - 2 = Unimportant
  - 3 = Neutral
  - 4 = Important
  - 5 = Extremely Important

- 4. News judgment
  - 1 = Extremely Unimportant
  - 2 = Unimportant
  - 3 = Neutral
  - 4 = Important
  - 5 = Extremely Important

- 5. Connectedness with the community
  - 1 = Extremely Unimportant
  - 2 = Unimportant
  - 3 = Neutral
  - 4 = Important
  - 5 = Extremely Important

P. How would you rate the Sun in these areas, with 1 being Extremely Poor and 5 being Excellent? Please answer 3 if you don't know or don't have an opinion.

- 1. Accuracy
  - 1 = Very Poor
  - 2 = Poor
  - 3 = Fair
  - 4 = Good
  - 5 = Excellent
- 2. Objectivity and fairness
  - 1 = Very Poor
  - 2 = Poor
  - 3 = Fair

4 = Good  
5 = Excellent

3. Credibility  
1 = Very Poor  
2 = Poor  
3 = Fair  
4 = Good  
5 = Excellent

4. News judgment  
1 = Very Poor  
2 = Poor  
3 = Fair  
4 = Good  
5 = Excellent

5. Connectedness with the community  
1 = Very Poor  
2 = Poor  
3 = Fair  
4 = Good  
5 = Excellent

- Q. Age  
1 = 18 – 25  
2 = 26 – 35  
3 = 36 – 45  
4 = 46 – 55  
5 = 56 – 65  
6 = 65+

- R. How would you describe your race or ethnicity?  
1 = White  
2 = African-American  
3 = Hispanic  
4 = Other

- S. Which of the following best describes your level of education?  
1 = Did not complete high school  
2 = Completed high school  
3 = Attended college but did not earn a degree  
4 = Obtained a bachelor's degree  
5 = Obtained a graduate degree

T. I'm going to read a range of incomes, and you tell me when I reach yours:

1 = Less than \$20,000

2 = \$20,000-\$30,000

3 = \$30,000-\$40,000

4 = \$40,000-\$50,000

5 = \$50,000-\$60,000

6 = \$60,000-\$70,000

7 = \$70,000-\$80,000

8 = More than \$80,000

## **VITA**

Amy E. Burroughs, a native of North Carolina, completed this project while working as editor of The Williamson County Sun in Georgetown, Texas. Three years into her stay in Texas, she undertook to complete the master's degree program she had started five years earlier at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge. Prior to that, Ms. Burroughs earned an honors bachelor of arts degree in English and creative writing from the University of North Carolina at Asheville, completing the undergraduate education she began at the University of Chicago. This conclusion of her studies at Louisiana State University closes a memorable chapter.