

ENGAGING RURAL MEDIA
CONSUMERS IN
ALABAMA, GEORGIA, AND MISSISSIPPI

by

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A THESIS

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ABSTRACT

There is much discussion among media practitioners and scholars concerning the inclusion or exclusion of hyperlocal content in 21st century traditional newspapers and their websites. Thirty-four newspaper websites in rural Alabama, Georgia, and Mississippi were studied using content analysis to determine the level of hyperlocal content used on the various traditional newspapers' website homepages. The analysis determined that approximately one-fifth of these newspapers' online space was devoted to hyperlocal content. The major findings from this analysis of the hyperlocal stories used on these homepages were the more heterogeneous the community in terms of geo-ethnicity, the less likely the newspaper's website will have comments, and the higher the education and income levels of the community, the higher the interactivity of the website.

This study tested engagement and interactivity using reader comments, Facebook Likes, and interactivity tools offered. However, further testing is warranted in order to validate these conclusions, as the scope of this research did not include variables such as broadband availability, computer access, or computer literacy to determine how these phenomena, as they relate to engagement or interaction, affect the outcome.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my maternal grandmother, Moree Parham Jones, who was born September 12, 1921 and died September 14, 2012, a year after I started this journey, but two years before I was able to complete it. Her support and belief in me propelled me to this destiny. It also is dedicated to my niece, Cassidy, whose bright smile and love of life allowed me to forget about my study worries; and my mother, Barbara Jones Barnes, who asked me each day for the past two years if I was working on my thesis. I could not have reached this point in life without you.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND SYMBOLS

<i>df</i>	Degrees of freedom: number of values free to vary after certain restrictions have been placed on the data
<i>M</i>	Mean: the sum of a set of measurements divided by the number of measurements in the set
<i>p</i>	Probability associated with the occurrence under the null hypothesis of a value as extreme as or more extreme than the observed value
<i>r</i>	Pearson product-moment correlation
<i>sd</i>	Standard deviation
<i>t</i>	Computed value of t test
>	Greater than
<	Less than
=	Equal to

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CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	ii
DEDICATION.....	iii
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND SYMBOLS.....	iv
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	v
1. INTRODUCTION.....	1
2. LITERATURE REVIEW.....	4
3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS.....	19
4. METHODS.....	25
5. FINDINGS.....	30
6. CONCLUSIONS.....	35
REFERENCES.....	44
APPENDIX A.....	48
APPENDIX B.....	50

1 INTRODUCTION

This study will shed light on the types of content that contribute to, or can be considered responsible for, the level of engagement among rural Alabama, Georgia, and Mississippi online newspaper readers. By studying the websites of the largest weeklies and dailies in several rural counties in these three states, this study will document how hyperlocal content engages readers or promotes interactivity between readers and the news organs in rural communities in the South.

Hansen and Hansen (2011) observed: “A vibrant, healthy community requires good communication. It is essential if community members are going to address their common concerns. It also is essential if members are going to identify with and develop ties to their community” (p. 98). With this statement in mind, this study will attempt to determine which of the studied communities are “healthy” and have the most interaction or engagement between the communities’ main news organizations and their information consumers. The study also will examine the impact of ethnic makeup on level of engagement, as some prior research has indicated that more homogeneous populations are more likely to have high levels of engagement within communities, while populations that are split ethnically or racially are more likely to have low levels of engagement (Kim & Ball-Rokeach, 2006). The impact of education and income levels in these counties on engagement and interactivity will also be explored. By conducting a content analysis, information will be gathered concerning how hyperlocal news is used, as well as the level of engagement and interactivity between readers and news producers.

A journalism professor at Idaho State University who is also the former publisher of a small chain of weekly newspapers in Illinois speaks to the importance of reader engagement for

newspapers, especially in an online context: “If the future for newspapers is cyberspace—whether driven there by the readers or economics or both—journalists must go along as well” (Terry, 2011, p. 77). Terry discusses his belief that community journalism or hyperlocal news will lead the way for newspapers in the future, especially those online:

A tsunami of change is sweeping community newspapers along with the rest of the media world and its true complexity is widely misunderstood and misinterpreted. It is ultimately driven by the media choices of readers and not by pundits, technology, demography or finances. Those trends are the byproducts of reader choice. Journalism is no longer about merely relaying information; it is about serving, building, and maintaining communities (p. 78).

Over the past 20 years, newspapers have undergone a significant transition, from print-based to Internet-based publications, and their employees from specialized jobs to multifaceted positions. As newspaper publishers and corporations work to determine best business practices for operating a sustainable, viable news medium beyond 2013, many of the large news publications have put community news or hyperlocal content on the chopping block in an effort to reduce the size and cost of producing its product. In May 2012, the largest newspaper in Alabama, *The Birmingham News*, announced it would cease printing its daily product in September and begin printing only on Wednesdays, Fridays, and Sundays (Azok, 2012). The industry is still searching for viable business models, but the trends point to movement from print to online.

It would be hard to find an area of the country in greater need of community engagement than the rural Deep South. In 2010 the Annie E. Casey Foundation, a charitable foundation that works to help economically disadvantaged children, studied poverty in 48 states. The study

ranked Mississippi highest in percentage of children living in poverty, Alabama fifth highest, Georgia ninth highest. The same study ranked Alabama 38th in percentage of young adults with a high school diploma. Georgia was 36th and Mississippi was a surprising 25th.

In an era when large newspapers are reducing distribution, this study will focus on how rural daily and weekly newspapers are managing when these publications have an economically disadvantaged readership and serve a less educated population. The study will assess engagement and interactivity levels among these newspapers and their relationship with demographic characteristics.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Community newspapers and hyperlocal content

The study of community journalism has shed significant light on the connectivity of communities to their traditional or legacy publications. Legacy and start-up newspapers alike are discovering new ways to engage readers through online tools and social media. “As newspapers keep cutting back on staff and printing skimpier editions, journalists, entrepreneurs and ordinary citizens have responded by creating websites to cover the local news they feel is going underreported...,” writes Gary Moskowitz (*Time*, 2010, p. 49). Mayer (2011) writes about how engaging communities is not just about providing more local or hyperlocal content to readers, but it is also about including them more profoundly in the story-telling network: “Editors ought to require that story pitches and budget lines include an engagement component, reflecting community conversation, collaboration and outreach” (p. 12).

Scholars and practitioners point out that, for the first time, journalists can receive instant feedback from readers and interact in ways never before possible. They suggest that journalists embrace the new technology and re-invent themselves as journalists who are open to new ideas and partnerships with readers for the good of the story and the community as a whole. As Chung (2009) observes: “Such interactive qualities of the Internet provide unique opportunities for online news publications to engage their news audiences with increased control multimedia storytelling experiences and interpersonal communication opportunities” (p. 72).

According to some researchers and industry experts, the Internet is a goldmine of opportunity for newspapers to include information they no longer have space for in the printed

product. When newspapers slashed pages to increase profitability, they eroded their credibility as a community partner, as well as their ability to support the community and engage readers. Chavez (2010) draws a connection between lack of citizen involvement in the process of producing news and declines in mainstream media credibility. “Reader dissatisfaction,” he writes, “emerges against the quality of the products being delivered—a lethal combination that caused serious impact on newspaper credibility” (p. 20). The Internet would seem to offer an opportunity for newspapers to recreate and reinvent themselves and reclaim a role now many years in decline. Social media and online feedback in a news context are seen as a response to readers’ yearnings to be included in the storytelling network.

Websites may empower everyday readers and reconnect disenfranchised journalists to the communities they serve. As Chavez (2010) writes: “The news media needs to acknowledge and respond to the simple fact that the community wants to see their issues reflected in news coverage” (p. 23).

New hyperlocal media products are being launched using online and/or printed versions. As one observer notes: “While [hyperlocal sites] vary in size, scope and sophistication, these sites share a few common traits, primarily the commitment to focusing on issues of import to people within relatively small geographical boundaries—the pothole down the street, the new restaurant opening. ... Hyperlocal sites have given readers (and advertisers) new options, and their popularity has forced mainstream outlets to adopt some of their characteristics” (Semansky, 2010, p. 21).

However, citizen-created hyperlocal sites have experienced difficulties. Semansky (2010) talked with newspaper editors in Canada and found they believe their audiences want hyperlocal content to be created by professional journalists. A statement by an online editor for

a Montreal paper sums this up: “The idea was that people would be writing stories, but unless you give people very specific directions on what you want and you have people that are already interested in writing, I think it’s really hard to get people on board with that” (p. 23). The editor also said that unless people are paid or feel they are getting something tangible from contributing content, they may not contribute consistently or reliably. This sentiment was echoed in the findings of the New Voices study, which found volunteer citizen journalists were hard to keep, and the training time involved to teach them to do the job was—at best—wasted time.

According to the study report, “Citizen journalism math is working out this way: Fewer than one in 10 of those you train will stick around to be regular contributors. And even then, they may be ‘regular’ for only a short period of time” (Schaffer, 2010, p. 18).

Kaffie Sledge (2012), a former features editor and columnist for the Columbus (Ga.) *Ledger-Enquirer*, and former adjunct journalism instructor at Auburn University agrees. She said she could count on people to submit wedding and engagement announcements because they were getting something tangible out of the transaction. Likewise, she said it was easy for her to get teachers and parents to submit information concerning school events. However, getting people to become regular community journalists, even when paid, was harder. “Even when they submitted things, we still had to rework it to get it ready for publication” (personal conversation, April 2012).

Sledge said the average citizen cannot be relied on to submit enough factual content on a regular schedule to sustain a website or printed hyperlocal news edition. “Even recipes should be tested before they are printed,” Sledge said. “I am more comfortable with people telling us about events or affairs, but we need professionals to go out and apply the journalistic standard to the content that comes in.” Semansky quoted former CNN, ABC, CBC, and CTV journalist Wilf

Dinnick, who founded a hyperlocal content site. Dinnick said information consumers want a professional touch to their hyperlocal content, and he uses a collaboration of readers and professional journalists to produce his hyperlocal content (Semansky, 2010).

As newspapers began to cut reporting staffs, the focus on hyperlocal content has intensified. Pulitzer Prize winner Jan Schaffer, executive director of J-Lab at American University released a 2012 report, “Networked Journalism: What Works.” In this study, eight legacy newspapers and one public radio station were asked to partner with at least five independent news mediums in each of their communities for one year. The study was an experiment in how to share news to combat the loss of reporting positions. “With U.S. newspapers losing more than 42,000 journalists since 2007, local news coverage has suffered. At the same time, hundreds of local blogs and news sites have launched in their markets. Some covering neighborhoods or small towns...” (Schaffer, 2012, p.3).

“Traditional newsrooms got to share with their audience stories of their communities that they no longer could cover on their own. Hyperlocal news sites got a megaphone for news that had been stuck in local silos. And news consumers were given some new ways to navigate their noisy local blogosphere” (Schaffer, 2012, p. 2-3).

In her study, research was conducted to see if nine traditional news organizations could collaborate with hyperlocal news organizations to create more content for readers. They sought to discover if “traditional news organizations” play a role “not only to expose their audience to more news than they themselves can deliver, but also to connect new sources of information rising through their communities” (Schaffer, p. 4). In the second year of the study journalists at the traditional media outlets and the hyperlocal news agencies found that by collaborating with

each other they were able to effectively provide more news to more people, although consistency at some of the nine organizations was not ideal (Schaffer, p. 28-29).

Some journalism scholars also have found that providing community news is essential to the community. As Stamm (1985), said:

Newspapers are thought to be an inextricable part of modern communities, whatever form community may take. Few truisms are firmly established in mass communications, [but it is true that] communities are necessary to newspapers and newspapers are necessary to communities (Stamm, 1985, p. 11).

Some research shows that readers want to read newspapers that employ a community-centered philosophy. When newspapers use space to highlight noteworthy people and groups from the community, produce stories that display a complete understanding of the communities' needs and problems, and offer insightful information where community problem solving is needed, newspapers can engage communities (Hansen & Hansen, 2011).

As mainstream media moved away from narrowly local content to more generalized news, many in the industry saw hyperlocal content as an increasingly unfilled niche. America Online's Patch, launched in 2007, was an attempt to create a network of hyperlocal community websites. Carl Sessions Stepp writes about these hyperlocal news websites in the 2011

American Journalism Review:

Patch wants to be everywhere, or so it seems. Perhaps the fastest-growing news operation in America, the AOL-owned Patch has exploded from its three original hyperlocals in February 2009 to a juggernaut that, as of mid-August [in 2011], deployed nearly 1,000 journalists in 857 sites in 22 states plus Washington, D.C. By year's end, it hopes to total 1,200 journalists at more than 1,000 sites (Stepp, 2011, p. 25).

America Online's stated aim was to capitalize on the Internet's ability to provide instant information to local communities, and to gain revenue from this niche coverage:

Hyperlocal sites—covering cities, towns, or just a neighborhood can deliver precision—targeted advertising to local and global businesses . . . [T]he online local-advertising market is projected to grow 5.4 percent in 2009 to \$13.3 billion, according to media research firm Borrell Associates (Gluckstadt, 2009, p.52).

Patch seemed at first to rely only on local advertisers to support its hyperlocal news content. Stivers (2012) noted that Patch changed its all-local-all-the-time concept to gain national advertisers and in an attempt to gain access to a more diverse group of followers or readers. According to Stivers, “To push this transition, we were given content mandates for the first time. This radically reshaped how we had to think about our audiences and what made our sites relevant. It wasn't about the number of eyeballs seeing local news; it was about comments and cultivating user-generated, free content” (Stivers, 2012, p. 27). However, it seems the publication lost its hyperlocal news followers in the process. According to an article published May 31, 2012, in Bloomberg Businessweek, “Patch lost \$147 million (in 2011) while generating a mere \$13 million in ad revenue—roughly \$15,000 per site.” Furthermore, the authors of the financial report stated: “We do not believe Patch is a viable business” (Gillette, 2012, p. D1).

They were right. In 2013 AOL Chairman Tim Armstrong made a deal with Hale Global, an investment company that specializes in turnarounds. After the deal, the online publication was to be owned by a new company with Hale controlling the majority interest and AOL retaining a minority stake in the firm. However, things have not turned around for Patch as of yet:

Having waited a decent interval, Patch's new owners acted today, laying off most of the hyperglobal network's employees, according to reports by Jim Romanesko and Business

Insider. The exact body count isn't known, but it almost certainly exceeds 400. That is, of course, on top of the 300 to 400 people that AOL let go last August, when it was still hoping to downsize Patch into the black by the end of the fourth quarter (Bercovici, 2014.)

However, even if Patch is currently losing money, its original form and initial success helped to turn journalism's focus to hyperlocal content again. If Patch has made a contribution to the new standards for hyperlocal news and created some friendly community competition for legacy news agencies, forcing those traditional news organizations to rethink their news decisions, then perhaps it has been successful in ways that are not financial. Furthermore, Patch helped encourage legacy media that turned away from this sort of content to now newly embrace it:

Elsewhere, local news sites are giving hometown dailies a run for their money. Take the site *The Batavian* in upstate New York, which in March 2012 racked up 23,872 unique visitors, according to Compete, a digital intelligence provider, that makes it highly competitive. Its more established rival, *The Daily News* of Batavia, has a print circulation of 13,600 and 41,858 uniques (Fitzgerald, 2012, p. 21).

A variety of factors have contributed to Patch's struggles. Some communities were attracted to the online publication, while others were not; there was variation in broadband availability, there was variation in the demographic make-up of each community, in the education level of the residents served by the product, and in how civically engaged each community was before Patch was introduced into that community (Moskowitz, 2010, p. 10).

Moskowitz (2010) writes:

Most hyperlocal sites don't have the budget for flashy graphics or searchable databases. Their content comes from observant neighbors (and local gadflies) who care about both large and small goings-on around town. Hyperlocal sites also frequently publish upbeat accounts of parades and high school sports, as well as information on which local vendors sell the best produce (p. 50).

While some journalists perceive hyperlocal newsgathering as a new phenomenon, some veteran journalists see it as the opposite. "In today's world of labels for everything, people call this 'hyperlocal' journalism and tend to act like it's something very new. Trust me, this ain't new," writes Rob Curley in a 2007 Neiman Reports article. "If anything, it's old school local journalism" (Curley, 2007, p. 54). When asked to build a hyperlocal content website for a Kansas newspaper where he worked, he said he and his colleagues simply pulled from things they associated with newspapers they grew up reading. He said hyperlocal content is simply getting back to the basics of journalism, getting back to sharing news by using a professional product instead of a group newsletter or Facebook. He and other journalism practitioners, like Sledge, seem to share the same sentiments.

"When newspapers began combining sections and eliminating content in the late '90s and early 2000s, editors and publishers . . . decided what was news based on what they thought they could present to their consumers and still make the stockholders happy. Now, because newspapers are competing with social media and blogging, they must come up with new ways to engage readers. It was trendy to cut community news; now it is trendy to bring it back, which means hyperlocal is just a new name for old news techniques" (Personal communication with Sledge, April 9, 2012).

Although thousands of hyperlocal blogs and new venues are popping up in communities across the nation, existing newspapers, even giants, such as The Washington Post and The New York Times, also have created community news products through the use of more hyperlocal content. Gluckstadt (2009) mentions that The New York Times launched a website with content that focuses on the affluent New Jersey town of Maplewood. He also cites New York University journalism Professor Jay Rosen's research concerning the desire for good information about neighborhoods. Rosen took part in a collaboration between The New York Times and New York University to cover the neighborhood of East Village. By using students to help the Times cover a 14-block area, Rosen discovered "the Times can benefit from a learning lab—and the community can gain from it because it serves that East Village well" (Lewis, 2010).

The website, Detroit143, is a collaboration with the University of Michigan and former New York Times correspondent Lynette Clemetson. The website was launched to develop a publication that would focus on recasting the Motor City in a different light (Clemetson, 2011). "Niche communities built around ideology, ethnicity and gender can feed polarization, but they also command the capacity to empower" (Clemetson, 2011, p. 30).

Likewise, Curley said The Washington Post still needs "to be journalism with a lower-case 'j' since it is still also the local newspaper for millions who live in the D.C. area" (2007, p. 54). And so under his guidance, the Post was able to create local content and multimedia for hyperlocal sites in affluent areas of the city. They were able to use video, text and audio that could be accessed by readers using virtually every device available. Additionally, the Post used community stories generated by staffers to create slice-of-life content that was featured only on its hyperlocal site. "Most telling about the local audience's reaction to the site is that often the most-read story on our site will be something that doesn't even make it into the next morning's

newspaper as a brief” (2007, p. 55). Nevertheless, the site still failed to gain enough support to survive financially. The now defunct site went into great detail about local news, such as: restaurants, religious institutions, schools, calendars, high school sports, multi-media tools, evergreen information and more. The Post hyperlocal sites also used geographic coding to direct readers to specific information relating to specific locations. The Post hoped to tap into the community news market that they had left behind for national and international stories. However, in an environment saturated with international, national, regional and local news, hyperlocal content did not seem to resonate enough with readers.

Curley and others seemed to initially define the new model for hyperlocal content as one that focuses on an affluent community. According to Fitzgerald (2009), the (Jacksonville, Fla.) Times-Union model used community-produced hyperlocal content to produce professional products using a different approach. The newspaper launched nine magazine-quality monthlies within individual communities or neighborhoods. While the Times-Union composed, printed and distributed the publications in nine gated and un-gated communities throughout the Jacksonville area and its suburbs, it produced none of its content.

Living replaced the newsletters produced by homeowners’ associations or boards of communities that were often centered around (on) a golf course or pool. Under the agreement, the communities provide all the editorial content, and the Times-Union does the rest of the work to get them to driveways, at no cost to the associations. The T-U sells advertising, and keeps all the revenue (Fitzgerald, 2009, p. 10).

The associations have not asked for proceeds because they saw the newspaper’s printing of the publication as a revenue builder, and because the associations were able to save as much as \$15,000 annually, which each group previously spent on printing and distribution of these

newsletters (Fitzgerald, 2009, p. 11). This model packaged the product as a commercial printing and advertising project, yet still managed to provide useful hyperlocal content for readers.

Research and theory on community news engagement and interactivity

Since the early 1900s, journalism scholars have studied the causes of reader engagement and interactivity by examining the changes in the way people receive and utilize information. When Robert Park (1923) at the University of Chicago studied newspapers, he theorized that there was no blueprint for the perfect or permanent newspaper, but rather he viewed the newspaper as an evolving, living medium that depended on popularity for its power: “The struggle for existence, in the case of the newspaper, has been a struggle for circulation. The newspaper that is not read ceases to be an influence in the community. The power of the press may be roughly measured by the number of people who read it” (p. 274). In studying immigrants and their attraction to the newspaper, Park noticed that people looked at the newspaper even if they could only read headlines or understand the pictures. He noted that immigrants were drawn to the newspaper in their new homeland because they were accustomed to reading newspapers in their native lands: “[The newspapers] are, for [the immigrant], a window looking out into the larger world outside the narrow circle of the immigrant community in which he has been compelled to live” (pp. 274-275). Park knew that whatever draws readers to a publication and keeps them reading is essential to a newspaper’s sustainability, and he also saw that the news was a way for individuals to connect or reconnect to community.

Like Park, Janowitz (1951) also conducted his research in Chicago, as he studied the impact community newspapers had on urban culture. In “The Imagery of the Urban Community Press,” he wrote that the community press had a different focus than traditional larger media:

As a specialized system of communication the community newspaper stands in contrast to most mass media in that it is not designed to reach the widest possible audience and/or to promote the most general identifications. In terms of its function, the community newspaper is a ready sociological index to community organization and community orientation (p. 598).

In another study, Janowitz (1967) interviewed 600 men and women from three communities with separate community newspapers. The residents of each community belonged to different socio-economic groups and therefore gave him a reference to measure engagement and to include demographic information in his findings. Janowitz (1967) later wrote that the community press was a “system.” And if you consider it as such, it “involves linking the characteristics of the producers of the community newspapers to their content and linking the content to the impact of the media on the readership” (p. 9). Although there was no Internet at the time of his book, Janowitz understood that the study of community news had to involve community members in the process. “The publisher creates communication which is intended for an audience which not only reacts to the communication, but which, in one form or another, itself initiates communication back to the original communicator” (p. 9).

Stamm (1985) studied community ties to newspapers. “One of the earliest ideas about newspaper readership,” Stamm wrote, “was that it differed according to the kind of community one was tied to—rural (folk) or urban” (p. 88). His research supports the notion that ties to a community could be the result of communication when that communication about the local community created an interest in the local area and linked community structures.

Tichenor, Olien, and Donohue (1978) studied community structures based on geographic and educational demographics to determine how the structure and make-up of communities

affected level of readership and interest in news in general. “Among different aspects of community structure, level of education is often related to media use and preference” (p. 451). This trio of researchers often focused on communities that varied in population from 1,000 to nearly 6,000, similar to the community sizes studied in the present research. In 1985, the researchers compared several counties and the role of the press in community development. They selected four counties for their degree of economic and ethnic diversity, while other counties with more ethnic homogeneity also were selected. Some of these counties had economies that were driven by agricultural and small business ventures, while others had more economically complex and diversified structures. Although their study focused on how community leaders and news managers perceived the role of news in their community, it showed that newspapers mean different things to people in different communities, and that newspapers play different roles in different communities. One of the main conclusions from their research was that the complexity of the community’s structure influences the news media within it. “These new data support the contention that structural characteristics of the larger region, within which the community exists condition the outlook of local leaders concerning both local decision-making and the role of the press within that process” (p. 372).

According to another approach for studying community media—community infrastructure theory, developed by Kim and Ball-Rokeach (2006)—neighborhoods have unique multilevel communication infrastructures that have an impact on the capacity for readers’ connectedness to a “storytelling network.” They also studied the impact of the “storytelling network” and community structures on strength of community ties, involvement and engagement. Some of the causal factors that they have studied include the “effects of ethnic heterogeneity and residential stability on civic engagement” (Kim, Ball-Rokeach, 2006, p. 412).

The theoretical framework of communication infrastructure theory “differentiates local communities in terms of whether they have a communication infrastructure that can be activated to construct community, thereby enabling collective action for common purpose” (2006, p. 413). Their research suggests that civic engagement is produced when the media provide connections to neighborhood storytelling networks. “Without being connected to such communication opportunities for constructing stories about the local community and sharing them with others, it is impossible to engage in a community” (2006, p. 413). They theorized that when communities are cut off from a viable storytelling vehicle or communication opportunities, community engagement or interactivity declines. “The vast landscape of communication flow produced by neighborhood storytellers—people talking with one another about their neighborhood, media producing neighborhood stories, and local organizations bringing people together—is the milieu of daily life requisite to civic participation” (Kim, Jung, Ball-Rokeach, 2006, p. 424). Like Stamm and Janowitz, Kim, Jung and Ball-Rokeach incorporated geo-ethnicity into their data. Geo-ethnicity refers to the patterns of ethnic groups who live in certain geographical areas (2006).

In another study by Kim and Ball-Rokeach (2006) the researchers took a closer look at the homogeneity of communities and the engagement levels of these communities. They discovered that the more ethnically diverse the community, the lower the level of engagement of the community. They hypothesized that high homogeneity would mean a high percent of the population is either white or black, and low homogeneity would mean a more even split. In fact, the researchers discovered that “ethnic heterogeneity constrains the development and sustenance of an integrated storytelling network in a local community and, therefore, negatively affects the likelihood of residents having an integrated connectedness to a neighborhood storytelling

network...” (Kim, Ball-Rokeach, 2006, p. 417). Thus, they found that predominantly white and predominantly black communities had a greater level of connectivity to a storytelling network than those more diverse communities. “Despite the pressing challenge to create diverse communities in contemporary urban and global spaces, ethnicity remains a central feature of social organization at all levels, including residential community” (Kim, p. 418). This study will, likewise, consider geo-ethnicity.

In 2009, Lee also researched the connection between education level or socioeconomic status and Internet engagement levels. The study found that in older Americans “education is positively related to Internet engagement (Lee, 2009, p. 365). Although this study rated people’s health knowledge by socioeconomic status and education levels, the findings still have implications related to Internet engagement levels and the reading habits of those of various educational levels.

3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Many studies and projects of online hyperlocal news have focused on large newspapers and experimental projects in urban areas, such as Rosen's collaboration using students at *The New York Times* (Lewis, 2010). There also has been much research on how newspapers facilitate connectedness within communities. However, there has been less research on online hyperlocal news in rural Southern areas. Therefore, this study will add to this literature by examining what happens when hyperlocal content is consumed by rural residents, in this case residents who live in traditionally poorer areas of the deep South, specifically communities in Alabama, Georgia, and Mississippi. The study will analyze the use of hyperlocal content in community newspapers in order to gain insight into how people respond to its use, how engaged it leads readers to be, and how interactive the online newspapers themselves are with their readers.

This study focuses on community journalism in simply structured, small-town rural Southern communities in Alabama, Georgia and Mississippi with populations of no more than 30,000 residents. By examining content available on free, traditional news websites, valuable information should be gained regarding community ties and hyperlocal content. Semansky and others have defined hyperlocal content as both reader-submitted and reporter-generated news that relates to neighborhoods, individual schools, churches or communities within a city. Metzgar, Kurpius, and Rowley (2011) defined hyperlocal news outlets as "geographically based, community-oriented, original-news reporting organizations indigenous to the web and intended to fill perceived gaps in coverage of an issue or region and to promote civic engagement" (p.

774). Incorporating these definitions, this study will measure how much content can be considered hyperlocal on each of the 34 websites in this study, as well as the possible impact of the degree of hyperlocal content, by answering the following research question:

RQ1: To what degree is hyperlocal content used on the newspaper's website?

America's small communities are connected by social gatherings like little league games and school events, with religious events and family gatherings peppered in between. Many of these small community newspapers thrive on providing photos and articles about exactly those types of news elements. However, do those kinds of events really draw readers? A professor at the University of California Berkeley had students launch community websites to help them practice writing stories, and they discovered something they did not expect (Calo, 2011): "One of the most unexpected highlights of our engagement with the community came about because of our coverage of high school football" (p. 44). The students found that nothing engaged area readers the way in which high school football engaged them.

Although a number of scholars found that newspapers can help to connect residents to their communities, the struggle of start-up hyperlocal content sites such as Patch makes it difficult to determine what level of interactivity and audience engagement this study will uncover. Readers are likely to show engagement with the news product by their level of feedback to the news site; therefore, this study will attempt to determine the level of engagement that hyperlocal content generates via reader comments and responses via social media (e.g., Facebook likes). Additionally, news sites are using interactivity tools such as Twitter, Facebook, Tumblr, email buttons, and others to generate engagement from readers. Therefore, this study also will include information concerning the use of these interactivity tools. The study will assess the level of engagement—in other words, the degree to which readers interact with the

news product—as well as the level of interactivity of the news product— in other words, the degree to which the news product offers readers opportunities to interact and become engaged with the news product. It is thought that the more the news product offers content that is relevant to specific areas of these communities, the more readers will engage with the news product. It is also thought that publication of hyperlocal news will correlate with the newspaper’s effort to offer interactivity with the community residents, leading us to the following research questions:

RQ2a: How does the degree to which content is hyperlocal in nature correlate with level of engagement with the community news product?

RQ2b: How does the degree to which content is hyperlocal in nature correlate with level of interactivity from the community news product?

Small towns are as diverse as the people who live in them, and it is anticipated that the demographics of communities will vary, and these may have an influence on hyperlocal news and its relationship with the communities. There will be affluent communities such as Vance, Alabama in Bibb County, which has a median income of \$43,750 and a population of 500 people, according to 2010 U.S. Census Data—and there will be communities such as Hernando, Mississippi in DeSoto County, which has a population of 6,812 people and a median household income of \$43,217, or Monroe County, Georgia, with a per capita income of \$25,883 and a population of 21,757. However, at the other end of the spectrum, there will be counties such as Wilcox County, Alabama, with a population of 11,670 in the 2000 U.S. Census, and a per capita income of \$12,573. In Mississippi, there will be counties such as Holmes County, with a population of 6,926 residents and a per capita income of \$11,585; and in Georgia there is Hancock County with a per capita income of \$11,250 and a population of 9,429 (<http://www.census.gov/2010census/>).

It is anticipated that a key demographic factor will be racial and ethnic makeup. In Gerson's study (2011), Alhambra, California, is examined for its heterogeneous make-up of residents. "Residents—about 50 percent of whom are Asian, one third Latino, and 10 percent white—tend to self-segregate along ethnic lines" (p. 25). Similarly, in their 2006 study Kim, Jung and Ball-Rokeach examined seven "geo-ethnic" communities for levels of engagement. Some of the communities had a diverse ethnic make-up, while other communities had a more homogeneous ethnic composition. Geo-ethnicity is defined as the ethnic make-up of a geographic location. Their study resulted in the following geo-ethnic outcomes: "There were mixed results with regard to interpersonal neighborhood storytelling and scope of community organization participation, and there were no significant differences for neighborhood news importance" among ethnic groups (Kim, Jung, Ball-Rokeach, 2006, p. 433). However, another 2006 study by Kim and Ball-Rokeach showed there was a significant difference when the communities were more homogeneous. The study showed the more homogeneous the community, the more trust between the reader and the journalist and the more connectivity to the storytelling network was created. Conversely, it is thought that the higher the heterogeneity (the more diverse the ethnic/racial makeup), the less readers will feel comfortable engaging (or giving feedback to) the local news outlets. Therefore, this study will attempt to discover if, as Kim and Ball-Rokeach found, there will be a greater level of engagement in homogeneous communities than in heterogeneous communities. It is not clear if this will be the case for less urban and less affluent counties, suggesting these additional research questions:

RQ3a: How does degree of ethnic homogeneity in the community affect level of engagement with the community news product?

RQ3b: How does degree of ethnic homogeneity in the community affect level of interactivity from the community news product?

Because Alabama, Georgia and Mississippi are at the bottom quarter of the education rankings according to The Annie E. Casey Foundation, this study will attempt to determine if like the ethnic make-up of the community, there is a correlation between education level and engagement or interactivity among readers. Because more highly educated people tend to read more than less educated people and because more educated people tend to be more involved with and knowledgeable about the public issues in their community, this study will attempt to determine if there is any connection between those who are more highly educated and news organizations with levels of engagement from its readers, and with levels of interactivity offered by the news outlets. Residents' level of income will also be tested, as financial resources can have an effect on availability of online news, and on online news activity.

Like the study by Chul-Joo Lee (2009), an assistant professor of communications at the University of Illinois, this study will attempt to determine if there is the same relationship between community engagement and interactivity based on education levels of the residents in each of the 34 communities used for this study. However, unlike Lee this study will not include or speculate about the reasons for these interactivity differences, such as lack of Internet access and other access issues. Instead, we ask:

RQ4a: How does level of education in the community affect level of engagement with the community news product?

RQ4b: How does level of education in the community affect level of interactivity from the community news product?

RQ5a: How does level of income in the community affect level of engagement with the community news product?

RQ5b: How does level of income in the community affect level of interactivity from the community news product?

4. METHODS

This study was conducted using a “real time” content analysis during a ten-week period in July 2013 through January 2014. For each of the daily newspapers included in the 34 websites being used in this study, a random sample of Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday website editions were selected and analyzed during the ten-week period. Likewise, for each non-daily newspaper, the researcher sampled six different randomly selected Wednesdays during the same 10-week period. Because this study attempts to quantify engagement with the presence of comments vs. no comments, and the number of responses to social media, a quantitative methodology is thought best.

Sampling

The sample consists of 34 counties in Alabama, Georgia and Mississippi. All counties have populations under 30,000 with a traditional free news website that offers the ability for readers to provide comments under stories—and thus express their engagement. After visiting the websites that met the population requirement, there were only seven traditional publications in Alabama, which offered free access and allowed readers the ability to comment underneath stories. There were six counties in Mississippi meeting the criteria, and there were 21 Georgia publications meeting the criteria (see Appendix A).

After identifying the counties for the content analysis, the website of the newspaper with the largest circulation was assessed from each of these counties. However, only homepage news content will be coded. From there, each website was checked to see if it possesses workable comment sections for reader discussion. Websites without this capability and sites with dead or

broken links were omitted. Once sites were verified, various forms of content from the website's homepage only and links from stories attached to that homepage were reviewed for the 10-week period of time. The forms of news that were recorded include: news stories, feature stories, sports stories, opinion or editorial pieces, photos with captions, information graphics, and videos. Sponsored or "house" advertisements and promotional pieces, reader comments and obituaries were not considered for the purposes of this research.

Measures

Dependent Variables: Degree of engagement. This study measured engagement by recording whether or not the site contained comments associated with news elements on each of the 34 traditional news websites, which were used for this study. A news element can be any of the following: news stories, feature stories, sports stories, opinion or editorial pieces, photos with captions, information graphics, and videos. Sponsored or "house" advertisements and promotional pieces, reader comments and obituaries were not considered news elements. For each edition being reviewed, it was recorded whether or not each website showed comments or showed no comments (Yes=1; No=0).

Dependent Variables: Degree of Site Interactivity. This study also looked at the degree to which the site is "interactive." In this study, site interactivity refers to the degree to which the website offers tools and features that allow readers to engage with the site, or in other words, to submit content and opinions. After an initial, informal analysis of community websites, it was determined that the following interactive tools/features will be counted: Email to Others, Email to Writer, Twitter, Facebook, Tumblr, Google+1, LinkedIn, Blogger, Favorites, Pinterest, WordPress, Polls, Print, Submit Story or News, and Submit Letter. The degree of interactivity was therefore measured by the existence of the abovementioned features or tools on

website homepages, or on the story pages that link directly from the homepage of the website (Yes=1; No=0). If any of the aforementioned interactivity tools were present, coders entered a value of “1” in that tool category. If a link to a tool appears more than once on a site, coders still entered only a “1” for that tool. Ultimately, all values for interactivity tools were summed for the final measure of “Degree of Interactivity” of the site.

Independent variable: Degree of “hyperlocalness”. The measure for “hyperlocalness” derives from definitions of hyperlocal news by many scholars and practitioners. For any content to be considered hyperlocal, it must be either a reader-contributed or journalist-created news element that focuses on or pertains to a “subsection” of a community, such as a “nested” community within a town, a neighborhood, district, church congregation, a “school community,” a club or association, or some other subgroup found within a larger community. For this study the emphasis was not based on how the hyperlocal content was generated, as websites may offer scant or no information on this, but rather on the content itself. This study did not consider any content with international, national, regional, statewide, or even citywide themes as hyperlocal in nature. However, high school sports scores, a particular section of town getting a new shopping center, or an individual district race for city council or school board was considered hyperlocal. Likewise, an announcement of a pastor’s anniversary or a park festival also was considered hyperlocal.

As mentioned earlier, a news element can be any of the following: news stories, feature stories, sports stories, opinion or editorial pieces, standalone photos with captions, information graphics, and videos. Sponsored or “house” advertisements and promotional pieces, reader comments and obituaries were not considered news elements.

Coders coded the total number of hyperlocal news elements on each day's homepage during a constructed week (or constructed month for non-dailies), and they also coded the total number of news elements on the homepage. This allowed the researcher to figure out a percentage of all news elements that are hyperlocal on each website's homepage. This percentage represented the degree to which the site offers hyperlocal news content.

Independent variable: Degree of Ethnic Homogeneity. Using U.S. Census Bureau data, this study included the racial make-up of each of the 34 counties in this study. For this study, high homogeneity was a high percent of the county population that is either white or black, while low homogeneity was characterized by a more even split among the residents of the county. (It is expected that residents in more homogeneous communities will feel more comfortable openly engaging with the news outlet.) For example, Butler County, Alabama, has a racial make up that is 58.38 percent white and 40.81 percent black. After subtracting the minority number (40.81 white) from the majority number (58.38 black), the level of ethnic homogeneity was found. The greater the difference, the more homogeneous the community is. The racial make-up of Butler County was 17.57 percent white, and therefore fairly heterogeneous. Likewise the racial makeup of Greene County, Alabama, was 19.09 percent white and 80.34 percent black, making this county 61.25 percent black, and more homogeneous.

Independent variable: Socioeconomic level/education level. Using U.S. Census Bureau data this study recorded the median income for socioeconomic level, and the percent of college graduates for education level, for each county in the sample locations.

Intercoder Reliability. Before conducting the content analysis, an intercoder reliability test was conducted to ensure that the findings are reliable. Intercoder reliability is a way to determine the extent to which different independent coders will evaluate a characteristic, such as

in this case hyperlocal content, and will reach the same conclusion. This is an important part of the content analysis process and without it the findings of the study cannot be considered reliable. The researcher created a content analysis protocol, and code sheet and reviewed the protocol with the second coder (See Appendix B). Then the two coders conducted an informal content analysis on several sites. Based on results from the informal analysis, the protocol was revised and/or the coders received more training. Next, the intercoder reliability test was conducted on 10% of the sites, chosen randomly from the sample. Coders reached acceptable agreement, achieving at least a .80 Cohen's Kappa coefficient for all measures.

Statistical procedures. All measures except the measure for comments are interval-level or ratio-level data, and so for these variables, tests of the research questions relationships were conducted using bivariate correlations. All tests that compared level of hyperlocal content to Facebook Likes and that compared level of hyperlocal content to level of site interactivity used bivariate correlation analysis. For the research questions asking about the relationship between hyperlocalness and reader engagement, where engagement was measured by presence/no presence of comments, t-tests were conducted. T-tests assess differences between means for two groups that are being compared. Here, the two groups were sites with comments and sites with no comments.

5. FINDINGS

To answer the nine research questions presented in this study, a combination of standard deviation, bivariate correlation, and t-tests were used. The study followed the protocol explained earlier in the Methods chapter.

RQ1: To what degree is hyperlocal content used on the newspaper's website?

The first research question focused on discovering to what degree hyperlocal content was used by the 34 traditional news websites used in this study. The percent of all stories on website homepages that were hyperlocal was calculated. Then the mean percent for all 34 sites was calculated. The mean was 18.7% with a standard deviation of 12.0%. This indicates a fairly low level of hyperlocal content across these community websites.

RQ2a: How does the degree to which content is hyperlocal in nature correlate with level of engagement with the community news product?

RQ2b: How does the degree to which content is hyperlocal in nature correlate with level of interactivity from the community news product?

The second two research questions RQ2a and RQ2b asked how the degree to which the 34 newspapers delivered hyperlocal content to its information consumers correlated to the level of engagement of those readers, as determined by the reader comments and Facebook posts (RQ2a), and how the level of hyperlocal content correlates to the level of interactivity offered by the website (RQ2b), as indicated by the number of interactivity tools provided for those readers by the websites.

Through this research, a t-test was used to measure the difference between the two mean values—the mean percent of content that is hyperlocal for sites with comments was compared with mean percent of content that is hyperlocal for sites without comments. Results showed a difference in means between the two groups; however, the difference was not statistically significant, $t(148) = -.73, p = .47$. The mean score of hyperlocalness for sites with comments was .19 ($s.d. = .13$), and the mean score for sites without comments was .16 ($s.d. = .08$).

Also, RQ2a was assessed by an analysis of the bivariate correlation between percent of homepage content that is hyperlocal and the number of Facebook Likes on the homepage. Only those 27 newspapers with Facebook pages were used. The Pearson product-moment correlation showed significant correlation between the levels of engagement of readers based on the number of Facebook Likes and degree of hyperlocalness. However, the relationship was a negative one, which was opposite to what was predicted in the hypothesis. When there is a high degree of hyperlocal content there also tends to be low numbers of Facebook Likes, resulting in an inverse relationship ($r = -.33, p < .05$).

To answer RQ2b, the researcher counted the number of interactivity tools offered to information consumers during their online homepage experience. The Pearson correlation of .08 suggests only a slight positive relationship between the two variables, indicating that the more hyperlocal content offered; the more interactivity tools were available to visitors of the website. But again, the relationship is small, and it is not statistically significant: ($r = .08, p > .05$).

RQ3a: How does degree of ethnic homogeneity in the community affect level of engagement with the community news product?

RQ3b: How does degree of ethnic homogeneity in the community affect level of interactivity from the community news product?

This research question (RQ3a) was assessed through the use of a t-test to measure the difference between two mean values: the average level of ethnic homogeneity in communities where the online publication has comments, and the level of ethnic homogeneity of the communities served by the publications that have no comments. Results showed a significant difference in means between the two groups. The mean percent of homogeneity for communities with publications that have sites with comments was .43 (*s.d.* = .28), and the mean percent for those without comments was .70 (*s.d.* = .24). This difference was statistically significant, $t(7.13) = 2.90, p = .02$. This means that websites in less homogeneous communities—in other words, communities that have a more even split between whites and minorities—are more likely to have comments. This runs counter to earlier findings from Kim & Ball-Rokeach (2006).

Also, RQ3a was assessed by a bivariate correlation analysis between level of homogeneity and the level of engagement displayed by the number of Facebook Likes. Only those 27 newspapers with Facebook pages were used. The Pearson correlation showed statistically insignificant findings for the correlation between the level of engagement with the community news product and the number of Facebook Likes. When there was a higher degree of homogeneity (mostly white, or mostly non-white) there tended to be a higher number of Facebook Likes, but the correlation was weak, ($r = .09, p > .05$), and the relationship was not considered significant.

To answer RQ3b, the researcher tested a correlation between the level of ethnic homogeneity in the community and the number of interactive items on the website. The correlation was weak, at $r = .10, p > .05$, and not considered significant.

RQ4a: How does level of education in the community affect level of engagement with the community news product?

RQ4b: How does level of education in the community affect level of interactivity from the community news product?

Research questions RQ4a asks about the relationship between college education and engagement by attempting to see if there are more likely to be comments in counties that have a more educated population. By using a t-test it was determined that in communities with websites that have no comments, the mean percent of adult residents with a college degree was 13.3%. In communities with websites that do have comments, the mean percent of adult residents with a college degree was 15.0%. However, this difference was not statistically significant, $t(12.2) = -1.84, p = .09$. Additionally, there was a positive, but weak and insignificant .01 Pearson correlation between the number of college-educated people in the community and the number of Facebook Likes. This means where there was a higher percent of college graduates, there was also a higher number of Facebook Likes, but not significantly so, ($r = .10, p > .05$).

The next question, RQ4b addresses the relationship between the level of education and the level of interactivity tools in an effort to determine if there is an indication that the more educated the community, the more likely it will be that the newspapers' website will offer interactivity tools. The Pearson correlation was .26, which is moderately high and a significant finding, ($r = .26, p > .05$). This suggests that sites have more interactive options in communities with more highly educated residents.

RQ5a: How does level of income in the community affect level of engagement with the community news product?

RQ5b: How does level of income in the community affect level of interactivity from the community news product?

Research question RQ5a asks about the relationship between average level of income and engagement, and this question was assessed by attempting to see if there are more likely to be comments in counties that have wealthier populations. In communities with websites that have no comments, the mean level of income was \$37,586. In communities with sites that do have comments, the mean level of income was \$39,777. This difference was not great, but was statistically significant, $t(105.61)=-2.29, p=.02$. Additionally, there was a positive, but weak and insignificant .06 Pearson correlation between the median income of people in the community and the number of Facebook Likes, meaning the higher the income, the higher the number of Facebook Likes—but again, not significantly so, ($r = .06, p>.05$).

The next question, RQ5b addresses the relationship between the level of income and the level of interactivity tools offered by websites in an effort to determine if there is an indication that the more affluent the community, the more likely it will be that the newspapers' website will offer interactivity tools. The Pearson correlation was .21 ($r = .21, p>.05$), which is moderately high and a significant finding. This suggests sites have more interactive options in communities with wealthier residents.

6. CONCLUSION

This study observed the use of hyperlocal news on rural southern websites in Alabama, Georgia, and Mississippi, and used comments and Facebook Likes to measure engagement and interactivity tool availability to measure interactivity. Although practitioners and scholars show that large metropolitan newspapers are launching niche hyperlocal community websites, this study found that less than 20% of the content on the traditional newspaper websites analyzed was hyperlocal, meaning small-town newspapers producers continue to offer a mix of hyperlocal content, along with city and county-wide information. This answered the first research question, which focused on discovering to what degree hyperlocal content was used by the 34 traditional news websites used in this study. The finding of 18.6% suggests that even at small-town Southern newspapers, journalists have a hard time getting community members to submit content, as Schaffer's study shows.

The study observed engagement (RQ2a, RQ3a, RQ4a, RQ5a) on these websites and also observed how the following variables affected the level of engagement: hyperlocalness, ethnic homogeneity in the community, education level, and income level. This study found few statistically significant differences with the degree of hyperlocalness of the website. However, there was a significant relationship between hyperlocalness and the number of Facebook Likes, (RQ2a) but the relationship was opposite to what was expected. The more hyperlocal the content, the fewer Facebook Likes resulted, showing an inverse relationship. Thus, based on Hansen and Hansen's research, which characterizes a "healthy" community as one driven by an abundance of hyperlocal online news, these communities might be considered "unhealthy."

These readers may be more likely to “Facebook Like” stories about a state representative race than a little league game. This could possibly indicate that sharing of information is driven by the relevance to the receiver and not the relevance to the sender.

The second statistically significant result related to the measurement of how homogeneous the community is (RQ3a). It seems there was more likely to be comments when there was a more even split ethnically of the community. Kim, Jung, Ball-Rokeach conducted research that said the more homogeneous the community, the more comfortable people were with expressing themselves through comments. Again, their research did not specifically target rural communities. Therefore, this finding contradicts what this research expected to find in the case of comments, but not in the case of Facebook Likes. In these rural communities, there were actually more comments when there was a more evenly ethnically split community, but more Facebook Likes when there was more homogeneity—however, this relationship was not statistically significant. This could suggest that in rural communities with a more even ethnic mix, the newspaper offers one of the only means to articulate concerns to the broader community; and therefore, readers are driven to write comments. However, where there is a more homogeneous community, the information provided tends to resonate more with the general populous. Thus, more people tend to Facebook “Like” the content provided by the newspapers. Results on newspaper comments may also be a consequence of the fact that most of the more homogeneous communities in the sample have a high black population, and historically, minority ethnic groups have lower newspaper readership rates than whites. In the State of the News Media’s 2013 report from 2004 to 2013, an average of 6.1% fewer African Americans than whites reported “reading a paper yesterday,” according to a national Pew

Research Center (2013) study, though African Americans have higher newspaper readership rates than Hispanics, Asians, and ethnic groups in the “other” category.

There was no statistically significant finding related to the impact of education level on engagement (RQ4a). Although both the t-test and the Pearson correlation show slightly higher comments and Facebook Likes when there was a higher level of education, the relationship was weak and proved insignificant. This slightness of the difference could be because of the proportion of people in these communities who hold degrees amounted to less than 10 percent of the population; and therefore, there was not enough variability for a significant impact on the level of engagement. Tichenor’s research showed that level of education indeed influenced level of media use and preference. Yet, these rural findings are too small to suggest this is true for the newspapers reviewed for this study.

However, there was a significant, yet small, finding where income was considered. Although, there was only a small difference (\$2,191) between the mean income of the viewers of newspaper websites with comments and those without, the findings clearly show that websites whose viewers make more money are more likely to receive comments than those who make less. Tichenor, Nnaemeka, Olien, and Donohue (1977) also found that the more economically advantaged and more complex the society, the more readers were found to be engaged. The present study seems to echo their findings, although its audiences were small Southern communities whereas their audiences were in the Midwest.

After closely looking at engagement, this research also considered interactivity between the news organ and the reader and how this exchange operates in rural Southern communities. For RQ2b, which dealt with how hyperlocal content correlated with the availability of interactive

tools, the Pearson correlation of .08 indicates that it is unclear if hyperlocal content alone played a part in the number of interactivity tools provided to readers.

This also was true for homogeneity as it relates to interactivity (RQ3a). There was a statistically insignificant finding related to the ethnic makeup of the community, showing the ethnicity of the community played no obvious role in the newspaper's decision to add interactivity components to its website or not to add these options for its readers. This suggests that regardless of the make-up of the community, journalists who produce these websites decide to add interactive tools for a different reason and could be based on reasons that are more relevant to the needs of owners, management and employees.

Where education was concerned (RQ4b), there was a moderately high and significant relationship with level of site interactivity. This could suggest that the higher the level of education of the community, the more they demand greater technological abilities in their hometown newspaper's website. People with more education tend to be more sophisticated in their reading choices and the level of interaction they want to participate with their news product. Although, this was a significant correlation, it did not run contrary to what the research expected to find. With data on advanced degrees, it would be interesting to see if these findings would continue to hold true.

Like RQ4a, the final research question (RQ5b) had a moderately high significant finding where income level was concerned. It was clear that the higher the mean income, the greater likely hood of interactivity tools being offered by the news outlet. This finding, although not a surprise, suggests that people in more affluent communities have more sophisticated news websites. It also indicates that information consumers in more affluent communities, although rural, demand more connectivity to the "storytelling network," as Kim and Ball-Rokeach

suggest. It could be possible that people who are wealthier could be more likely to be included in the newspaper for a reason related to a profitable career, social activities or civic activism. They may see themselves as prominently a part of the “storytelling network” and feel more inclined to and comfortable taking part in that conversation through interactivity tools. Furthermore, it also may suggest that Park’s research continues to ring true in that more affluent societies tend to have more newspaper readers, making them more likely to comment in any form than those who do not read the newspaper. Still, Janowitz’s (1967) research showed that more complex communities tend to have more engagement and interactivity; and because it is often the case that affluent communities tend to offer a more complex culture and society, this study advances the idea that more complex communities create more interaction. Finally, it may be that communities with higher income are more likely to have stable, profitable businesses that can advertise, which benefits local newspapers and provides them more resources for technology and for hiring people who have technological expertise.

Limitations

During the extended time frame in which the study was conducted, there were noticeable changes and challenges with several of the 34 selected websites, including some of the websites going to “paywalls” during the study period, requiring readers to purchase a subscription in order to continue to observe its content. However, to avoid paying to use these websites because the protocol required that only free traditional newspaper websites would be used, the researcher had to utilize several different desktop computers to conduct the research. Furthermore, it was realized that this study could only be conducted using a desktop computer. Tablets, mobile devices, and other Internet-ready devices often presented content in a different or mobile format;

thus, forcing the researcher to rely completely on desktop computer website display for this study.

As indicated in the methods section, all of the newspapers allowed comments when they were selected to be included in this study. However, during the course of this research, and the fact that it was a “real-time” study, it could not be foreseen that some of the websites, would discontinue allowing readers to submit comments. Additionally, there was no way to predetermine how often the comments were approved by newspaper personnel before they were posted. For instance, the Greene County Democrat’s online news organ discontinued the comment function on its website before this research could be concluded. Furthermore, there were numerous newspapers, which allowed comments to be displayed underneath the story associated with the comment, while others displayed comments for all stories in one location. To make matters more confusing, some of the websites displayed several months of comments, while other websites seemed to only post comments available for the current edition. Because of these different formats, it may have been helpful for the researcher to focused on the amount of comments rather than only if the site offered comments: The researcher could have counted the number of words in each comment related to hyperlocal content and other stories on the homepages. Moreover, this study also took into account that although newspapers made adding comments available to its readers, because commenting requires creating a trackable user account, many readers may refrain from leaving comments. Finally, a limitation for the study was the number of websites counted. The study generalizes only to rural areas of the three Southern states, and had more sites in more states been studied, the findings would have a wider scope.

Future Studies

This research shed light on a new and ever expanding area of technology and the use of hyperlocal news. However, the findings suggests that more variables should be analyzed and small rural newspaper editors, reporters and readers interviewed to gain clearer insight into what makes rural Southern readers want to engage and interact with their local newspaper. It also suggests that the future of hyperlocal content is unclear. Newspapers began to cut it from its pages more than two decades ago, but, as hyperlocal news is defined in this study, it still commands nearly 20% of small newspaper space. It would be interesting to see if this holds true for large newspaper websites. If so, this would indicate that people want hyperlocal news, but they also want it to be balanced with local, state, national, and world news. Thus, 20 years later, hyperlocal news could be still holding its own compared to other types of news stories.

Additionally, more research should be done on rural newspapers where race is concerned. In this study, the majority of the counties used were predominantly black. However, it would be interesting to see if the reverse racial makeup in other rural communities would be different. Therefore, more data should be conducted to see if there is any change in these patterns when the communities are rural, but predominantly white ethnically. Furthermore, research could be conducted to see if these findings hold true for those who live in Midwestern rural predominately black communities; such as Ohio, Illinois and Michigan—states in which much of the early study of communities was conducted. This study showed significant differences between the results of previous studies based on urban large newspapers (often in Midwestern communities) and their websites, and rural Southern traditional websites. However, in order to determine if these findings can be generalized more broadly, a larger sample should be taken and additional information concerning the topic of the hyperlocal stories should be studied. While this study

showed some significant findings, the study should be replicated using more newspapers to discover more conclusive results.

Furthermore, as super hyperlocal website, such as Patch continue to emerge and as newspaper giants continue to outsource journalistic efforts to telecommuters, it will be interesting to study if community news, like international news, can be reported on from a distance. The very nature of community news, suggest the need to be in close proximity to the storytelling network. However, in an effort to save money and expenses, this is another model, which will have to be investigated.

Conclusions

This research builds upon the research of journalism scholars dating back to the 1920s. It seems that since very early on in our modern society, there have been newspapers and a need by society to have a say in what goes into that news product. As journalism shifts to multimedia platforms, newspapers have begun to see decline in “Letters-to-the-Editor.”

In fact, the majority of the editors-in-chief interviewed consider that letters-to-the-editor are going to disappear in the near future, reflecting the emergence of these new spaces for online participation, namely reader comments, that host a substantially greater amount of audience participation (largely due to its immediacy and the almost absence of selection criteria, if the newspaper chooses a post-moderation model) (da Salva, 2012, p. 254).

Overall, news operations are continuing to define what hyperlocal news is and where it fits into society and a company’s individual news presentation. This research seems to suggest there rural newspaper consumers want the same thing as their larger city counterparts, to have hyperlocal news as one piece of the overall news product. Unlike larger city newspapers, which research shows have been prompted to create smaller hyperlocal websites to provide its readers

more community content, smaller newspaper do not have the capability to provide a sustainable network for more hyperlocal content. Instead, readers in rural communities want hyperlocal news, but they also want local, state, regional, national and international news.

As newspaper formats evolve, there seems to always be the need for readers to share their thoughts with society, and with 21st Century technology and reality television, the need for immediate reaction trumps waiting for a letter to be approved for publication after having been scrutinized and edited by newspaper executives. Yet, if journalists are to go with the technology as Terry suggests, they must lead the way rather than follow.

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APPENDIX A
SAMPLING LIST

The news websites for Alabama counties used in this study:

1. Butler County (www.greenevilleadvocate.com)
2. Cherokee County (www.cherokeeherald.com)
3. Cleburne County (www.cleburnenews.com)
4. Crenshaw County (www.luvernejournal.com)
5. Greene County (greenecountydemocrat.com)
6. Marengo County (www.demopolistimes.com)
7. Randolph County (www.therandolphleader.com)

The news websites for Georgia counties used in this study:

1. Appling County (www.baxleynewsbanner.com)
2. Bacon County (www.thealmatimes.com)
3. Brantley County (www.thealmatimes.com)
4. Bryan County (brantleyenterprise.com)
5. Butts County (www.jacksonprogress-argus.com)
6. Calhoun County (www.calhountimes.com)
7. Charlton County (www.charltoncountyherald.com)
8. Dade County (www.dadesentinel.com)
9. Dawson County (www.dawsonnews.com)
10. Dodge County (www.dodgecountynews.com)
11. Gilmer County (www.timescourier.com)
12. Heard County (www.heardcitizen.com)
13. Jones County (www.jcnews.com)
14. Long County (www.coastalcourier.com)
15. Lumpkin County (www.thedahloneganugget.com)
16. Monroe County (www.mymcr.net)
17. Pickens County (pickensprogressonline.com)
18. Pierce County (www.theblacksheartimes.com)
19. Putnam County (www.msgr.com)
20. Tattnall County (tattalljournal.com)
21. Terrell County (www.dawsonnews.com)

The news websites for Mississippi counties used in this study:

1. Attala County (starherald.com)
2. Benton County (southern-advocate.com)
3. Chickasaw County (www.chickasawjournal.com)
4. Grenada County (www.grenadastar.com)
5. Itawamba County (itawambatimes.com)
6. Kemper County (www.kempercountymessenger.com)

APPENDIX B
THESIS CONTENT ANALYSIS PROTOCOL

The following steps will be taken for each day's edition of a particular website.

1. Date on which site is coded
Write the exact date that you coded the site. Do not write the date of the publication, because many may be weekly. Use the format mm/dd/yy (for example, 08/29/13).
2. Name of coder
Write your first and last name.
3. Name of the publication
4. Website URL
5. Town the publication is in
6. State the publication is in

Degree Of Hyperlocalness

7. Count the number of news elements on the site's homepage
Go to the homepage of each newspaper website on the list, one at a time. Once each page loads completely, count the news elements that have a presence on the homepage—meaning the story is on or starts on the page, or the photo is on the page—and news elements that link from the homepage—meaning the headline or teaser is on the homepage and the actual item is one click away. If you have to click twice to find the story, it should not be counted or coded.

DO COUNT the following as news items: news articles, feature article, sports article, briefs, standalone photos with captions, opinion or editorial content, information graphics, videos or slideshows of the same event as one item. NOTE: Slideshow teasers displaying photos from multiple events should be counted as separate elements.

DO NOT COUNT the following as news items: sponsored or “house” advertising or promotional content, teasers that highlight elements already on the homepage, reader comments and obituaries should not be included. Count these elements very carefully. When you have finished, enter the total number of news elements in the appropriate column (News Elements column) on the coding spreadsheet.

8. Number of hyperlocal news elements on the site’s homepage. Having already determined which items are news elements, you must now review each of the items to see how many of them are hyperlocal in their focus.

For any news element to be considered hyperlocal it must be either a reader-contributed or journalist-created news element that focuses on or pertains significantly to a “subsection” of a community, such as a “nested” community within a town, a neighborhood, district, church congregation, a “school community,” a club or association, or some other subgroup found within a larger community.

Any content with international, national, regional, statewide, or even city-or-county-wide themes should be excluded. For example, a story about the county-wide parks system or city-wide school system would not be hyperlocal, but a story about a particular park or a particular school would be hyperlocal. Write the number of news elements that are hyperlocal in nature, which are on the homepage or linked directly from the homepage in the appropriate column (Hyperlocal News Elements) on the coding spreadsheet.

Level of Reader Engagement

9. Presence of reader comments on stories that link from the home page.

Having already determined how many news elements are on the homepage of each newspaper website, now review each news element (as defined above) to see if there are reader comments underneath it. However, there is no need to count individual comments.

The appearance of any comments associated with any stories which originate on the homepage would be coded as a “1” in that column, and any absence of comments would be coded as a “0.” If a single news element has more than one comment for that story, or if multiple stories from the homepage have comments, it is still only counted as a “1.” This means that as soon as you see a comment, you can code it as “1,” stop the search for comments, and move on to the next news website. Only record a “1” for yes, they DO have comments; and “0” for no, they DO NOT have comments.

Level of Website Interactivity

10. Number of features the website offers that allow “interactivity” with the reader.

Now that the number of hyperlocal elements has been determined, the next step is to determine the number of “interactivity features” associated with each of those stories on each of the websites. Check for the appearance of each of the following interactivity features associated with each website: Email to Others, Email to Writer, Twitter, Facebook, Tumblr, Google+1, LinkedIn, Blogger, Favorites, Pinterest, WordPress, Polls, Print, Submit Story or News, and Submit Letter.

Check the homepage for evidence of these features. Also click on each news element and check to see if the feature appears.

The appearance of any of these features on a homepage would be coded as a “1” in that column, and its absence would be coded as a “0.” If a single feature has more than one logo on the page it still only counted as a “1.” For example, if the homepage has four news stories, and each story has a Twitter icon—you would still only count this as a “1” in the Twitter column.

This means that as soon as you see a logo or text mention of a feature, you can code it as “1,” stop the search for that feature, and move on to the next feature search.