

Toward a Measure of Community Journalism

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This article reports the first stage in the development of a multiple-item summated scale to measure the degree to which media outlets aid community. Through a qualitative and quantitative content analysis of scholarship on community and news media, the article develops theoretical constructs of community and community journalism as well as general items for a summated measurement scale. Findings suggest (a) community is a process of negotiating shared symbolic meaning, and (b) degree of structure, or the degree to which facilities, institutions, and spaces are structured for interaction, facilitates the process of negotiation and sharing. In light of this definition of community as process, community news media should (a) facilitate the process of negotiating and making meaning about community and (b) reveal or ensure understanding of community structure. Community media aid this process by both listening and leading and by both encouraging pluralism and offering cohesive, coherent representations of the community.

In February 2006, 120 journalists and scholars gathered in a small town in the American South to grapple with the meaning of “community journalism,” a construct that recently has gained fascination and centrality among industry analysts. After a day of discussion at the the Emerging

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Mind of Community Journalism conference, participants were unable to produce a specific, all-embracing definition, but they did compile a list of characteristics. Community journalism is intimate, caring, and personal; it reflects the community and tells its stories; and it embraces a leadership role.

These characteristics mirror normative descriptions of community journalism proposed by its proponents in recent years. Community journalism provides “a running story about the community told in the community’s voice” (Ibargüen, 2006). Community journalism is accessible, is human scale (Lauterer, 2000), is accountable to the community it serves (Hatcher, 2004), and typically takes place in “smaller newsrooms where the challenges and opportunities often are far different than in larger communities” (Community Journalism Interest Group, 2006). Community journalism is a halcyon cove “far away from the high-pressure, profit-margin-obsessed world of corporate journalism” (Cass, 2005/2006, p. 20). It is small-town journalism without “security guards at the front desks” (Hatcher, 2004) where journalists genuinely care about their audiences (Waddle, 2003).

There are a number of problems with these depictions. They tend to be conceptually reactive, more grounded in a wish to avoid being “big media” than in any intrinsic meaning; they tend to be uncritically utopian, ignoring the shortcomings of small-town journalism; and they are entangled with definitions and descriptions of civic and public journalism, which suggest journalists eschew neutrality and engage directly in civic/public life (Merritt, 1997; Perry, 2003).

They also often fail to reflect the complex and incremental nature of the construct. Scholars should discuss the degree to which a news organization practices community journalism rather than whether an organization practices community journalism. Thinking of community journalism as a continuous, multifaceted construct should help practitioners and academics account for the full complexity and range of the concept. Correlating such a construct with measures of social benefit would reveal how variability in strength and nature of community journalism affects communities. Correlation with professional, organizational, and community context variables would shed light on how factors nurture or hinder the growth of community journalism.

This article develops a theoretical construct of community journalism as well as general items for a summated measurement scale. Toward this end, the latest decade of academic literature on the relationship between news media and community has been systematically assessed. A number of thorny issues arise when examining the relationship between media and community, including the degree to which community media are dependent on, and shaped by, powerful institutions in communities; the degree to which community journalism should follow the community or lead the community; and the extent to which community journalists should value social cohesiveness or agreement on the community agenda versus pluralism and diversity.

Community journalism is not idyllic, and the concept of “community” itself can be problematic. The very act of forming community is an act of exclusion, as some are within and some are left out, and community media help draw these distinctions (Mosco, 1998). Also, news media that serve community serve power holders in a community as well. Research by Tichenor, Olien, and Donohue demonstrates that news media reflect the degree to which power is concentrated in communities (e.g., Olien, Donohue, & Tichenor, 1995; Tichenor, Olien, & Donohue, 1980), and a volume edited by Demers and Viswanath (1999) adopted this framework to show, from various perspectives, that social power structures shape the media’s capacity to foster social change. Numerous studies in the present analysis show that media content reflects the degree to which power is concentrated or diffused in communities (e.g., Griffin & Dunwoody, 2000; D. B. Hindman, 1996; Pollock & Yulis, 2004), and local journalists often frame issues in ways that reflect the interests of traditional powers (Cohen, 2000; Sakamoto, 1999).

However, problems of exclusion and power structure do not preclude the idea that community media should serve communities. Rather, an awareness of these problems should inform the conceptual and operational definitions of community journalism. Authors adopt a public interest perspective on journalism (McQuail, 2005), using empirical findings from the literature review to inform a normative construct of community journalism. This construct is developed in the article’s second half, along with a scale assessing quality of community service.

COMMUNITY JOURNALISM SCHOLARSHIP IN CONTEXT

Much of the scholarship analyzed in this article is grounded in the research that grew out of the Chicago school of sociology in the early to mid-1900s, particularly studies conducted by Robert Park and his students on the relationship between news media and community formation. This research offers no specific measures of community media, but Park did discuss the role news media play in encouraging community. According to Park, news information was critical in helping immigrant residents rethink their living habits for their new urban environment. Foreign-language newspapers, he believed, eased immigrants into American life, preserving unique and varied ethnic cultures while acclimating immigrants to new conditions (Park, 1922). Therefore, community was possible in large cities, a notion that contradicted the thought at the time that urbanization was eroding traditional community. Community growth might take time, initially struggling over the natural (almost biological) conflict and competition among groups but eventually gaining sustenance from the sharing of ideas and experiences, partly through newspapers (Park, 1923).

Park's theories have been criticized since as overly simplistic, failing to account for the complexity of assimilation and concepts of power and change (Collins & Makowsky, 2005). Yet his optimism over the role of newspapers in community formation survived. Morris Janowitz, also at Chicago, hoped media might help counteract alienation and the rigidity of status relationships in urban life. He saw this as most likely to happen in small, homogeneous urban neighborhoods. In his 1952 study of the impact of media on urban community, Janowitz included a number of integrative functions served by the small community press, including building and maintaining local consensus, building local traditions, aiding adjustment to institutions and facilities, democratizing prestige, defining rights and privileges of local communities, and helping extend personal and social contacts.

Stamm and colleagues at the University of Washington drew on Janowitz's thesis that attention to news media may aid community integration, as well as Robert Merton's view that community integration precedes newspaper readership. Stamm proposed a dynamic model to reveal how use of news media might lead to "community ties" forming at the individual level, as well as consequences of these ties for media use. He said researchers needed to better understand the variety of ways individuals use media to forge ties and bridge gaps with community. He suggested that media could help satisfy the need to reduce spatial distance, the need to connect with political decision making, the need to reduce social gaps, and the need to connect with information sources (Stamm, 1985; Stamm & Weis, 1982a, 1982b).

METHOD

Scholars like Park, Merton, and Janowitz laid the groundwork for later scholarship on community media, but recent scholarship is grounded in a variety of conceptual approaches, as our findings show. The study entails a qualitative and quantitative content analysis of the last 11 years of mass communication scholarship on the relationship between community and news media, exploring a broad array of the perceptions of the meaning of community and of the meaning of the relationship between community and journalism. The sample was broadened beyond studies that focus specifically on the concept "community journalism" as popularly understood, for example, small-town or neighborhood journalism. Breadth of definition is important for constructs measured by multiple indicators, as "failure to consider all facets of the construct will lead to an exclusion of relevant indicators and thus exclude part of the construct itself" (Diamantopoulos & Winklhofer, 2001).

The sample's time frame offers both recency and breadth, as it taps into current thought about the nature of community media while also providing

recent historical context. Findings are based directly on the content analysis, but seminal works such as those by Park, Merton, Janowitz, Stamm, and Tichenor et al. are considered in drawing implications.

Three coders searched the CIOS, Communication and Mass Media Complete, Academic Search Premier, and Communication Abstracts online databases for articles from January 1995 to December 2005. Articles were selected from journals with the terms *communication(s)*, *media*, *journalism*, or *newspaper* in the title and with the terms *community* and either *journalism*, *journalist*, *news*, or *newspaper* in the article's abstract, title, or key words.

The search yielded 113 articles, but 5 articles were eliminated, as coders agreed they did not pertain to the relationship between community and media. The 108 articles used came from the following journals: *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* (27); *Political Communication* (10); *Mass Communication and Society* (8); *Journal of Health Communication* (7); *Newspaper Research Journal* (7); *Communication Research* (5); *Journal of Mass Media Ethics* (5); *Howard Journal of Communications* (4); *Journal of Communication* (4); *Journal of Communication Inquiry* (4); *Journalism Studies* (3); *Media, Culture and Society* (3); *Communication Review* (2); *Critical Studies in Media Communication* (2); *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* (2); *Journal of Media and Cultural Studies* (2); and others (13).

After reading each article, coders recorded all conceptual definitions and descriptions and operational definitions of the terms *community journalism* and *community*. Coders also determined whether the news media were conceptualized as independent or dependent variables for the study (whether the author focused on media acting on the community or on the community acting on the media, or both). If journalism served as the independent variable, the coder described what benefits to communities or audiences were examined in the article, and what factors contributed to those benefits. If journalism served as the dependent variable, the coder specified what news media decisions, content, or activities were predicted by the article, and what factors shaped those decisions or activities. All research questions and hypotheses were recorded, as well as the results from hypothesis testing (strongly supported, moderately or weakly supported, not supported). Coders listed conceptual approaches, models, or frameworks that were mentioned in the articles. Methods used were also recorded.

Two reliability tests were conducted to ensure that coders used the same criteria to determine responses. For most items, no statistical analyses were used to determine agreement, as the most relevant coding responses took a qualitative form (narrative descriptions of concepts and findings, and quoted passages). A few items were quantified. Whether the article provided an explicit definition of community, whether the article provided an operational definition of community, whether it focused on location as

community (town, cities, etc.), and whether it gave an explicit definition of community journalism were all tested for intercoder reliability using Cohen's kappa, and all coefficients were over .70.

FINDINGS FROM THE LITERATURE REVIEW

Definitions and Descriptions of Community

As a first step toward developing a measure of community journalism, we specified the meaning of the construct "community journalism" by mapping the conceptual terrain. How have communication and media scholars conceptualized the relationship between community and news media? More fundamentally, how have scholars conceptualized "community"?

The literature analysis revealed a number of perspectives on the concept of community, but of interest, 78 of the studies (72%) provided no explicit and specific definition of the concept of community. However, in 42 of these studies, coders were able to discern what the author implied "community" meant through operational definitions provided in the description of the sampling. Thus, conceptualizations of community were gleaned from 65 studies—23 studies that provided direct definitions plus the 42 that provided implied definitions through operationalization.

Community as location. Of the 65 studies that offered direct or implied definitions of community, 30 suggested or directly stated that the notion of community is fundamentally tied to physical location. Among all 108 studies analyzed, 66 focused on towns, cities, neighborhoods or political districts, and of the 78 studies that provide no explicit definition of community, 41 focused on towns, cities, or political districts. These authors seem to assume community simply means a location demarked by political/legal boundaries. Two explicit definitions best reflect this geographic perspective. Communities can be seen as "territorially organized systems coextensive with a settlement pattern" (Taylor, Lee & Davie, 2000, p. 177) and as determined by (1) functional regions, or flow of commerce; (2) administrative regions, or legal and government boundaries and; (3) formal regions or geographic boundaries, relative to points of interest (Kang & Kwak, 2003).

A number of the studies focusing on geography also emphasize the community's role as a place to meet or connect. They describe communities as nodes of human activity (Kang & Kwak, 2003), "interconnected relationships among people" (Kurpius, 2000, p. 340), "overlapping systems that include a communication network and a social structure" (Jeffres, Atkin, &

Neuendorf, 2002, p. 391), and as “Russian nesting dolls, with families/neighborhoods inside towns, inside nations, etc.” (Coleman, 2000, p. 46). Scholars discuss the role media play in helping audiences span the gap between communities of haves and have-nots within urban settings, a gap that is geographic, economic, and cultural (Aldridge, 2003; Bro, 2004).

Community as shared meaning. Friedland (2001) suggested that though place and face-to-face interaction still matter to community formation, they are insufficient for community maintenance in an increasingly complex, fractured society. Villages, towns, neighborhoods, and other geographical communities “are [today] characterized by more complex patterns of mobility and migration, the use of communications technologies to sustain certain ties but not others over time and space, and . . . voluntary patterns of association based on personal networks” (p. 364). These challenges and changes make it increasingly necessary that individuals maintain community and its meaning through shared culture. In this view, symbolic interaction—that is, deriving the meaning of a phenomenon through social interaction and symbolic communication about it (Blumer, 1969)—has become increasingly important to community maintenance. Communities “need to tell stories about themselves if they are to emerge as distinct social entities” (Matei, Ball-Rokeach, & Qiu, 2001, p. 431), and communities are “to be distinguished . . . by the style in which they are imagined” (Feenberg & Bakardjieva, 2004, p. 37).

Media are a primary means by which stories are told and communities are imagined. Hamilton (1998) proposed that community is still “spatial,” in that geography and proximity are relevant, but that community also requires shared meaning “perpetuated by cultural forms [such as newspapers]” (p. 408). He used the example of migrant laborers in the 1930s, who perceived of their temporary work camps as geographically bounded communities but who also found community in the larger “field” of migrant labor because of the shared interest and stake in the nomadic lifestyle. Camp newspapers facilitated the imagining of community through the telling of stories about the “field” and the camps.

However, 27 of the studies portray community as a special or “imagined” community outside of geographic/locational constraints. Imagined community can be grounded in some shared physical characteristic, such as identification with ethnic group (e.g., Fraley & Lester-Roushazmir, 2004; Ganje, 1998; Gavrilos, 2002; Heinz, 2005; Mastin, 2000; Viswanath, 2000), immigrant issues (Coole, 2002; Shi, 2005; Trasciatti, 2003), sexual orientation (Hicks & Warren, 1998), and shared health problems (Hoffman-Goetz, Friedman, & Clarke, 2005; Marks, Reed, Colby, & Ibrahim, 2004).

Closely related to this “imagined” community is the interpretive community, a concept embraced in approximately 20 of the studies. Interpretive communities are not necessarily tied to common geographic boundaries or even to shared physical characteristics but are started and maintained through interactive discourse through shared symbols (Singer & Gonzalez-Velez, 2003, p. 436). Interpretive community, which “emphasizes...common endeavor and shared interest” (E. B. Hindman, 1998, p. 28), may include everyone for whom a historical event is relevant and has some meaning (Edy, 1999) and may consist of people “who share a common goal” (Kurpius, 2000, p. 340) or who are “bound by common interest” (McLeod & McKenzie, 1998). Interpretive community can serve as “a space for identity formation apart from mainstream culture” (Sakamoto, 1999) and can be embodied in cultural forms such as mass media, which reflect and promote community cohesion through shared symbols (Hamilton, 1998).

Definitions and Descriptions of the Community/Media Relationship

As with the concept of community, the concept of “community journalism” has been defined in relatively few of the examined studies. Only about 30 of the 108 studies offered explicit definitions.

Community journalism and geography. Most studies did offer at least some description or operationalization of the relationship between news media and community. Most prevalent was a vague, uncritical depiction of a news publication situated in a geographic community and producing content relevant to a particular geographic area. Exactly half of the studies focus on the relationship between news media and a city community. Almost 40% focus on the relationship between news media and either a small town or neighborhood, and 35% focus on the relationship between news media and a nongeographic community, such as ethnic communities, online communities, and communities of shared interest (some studies focus on more than one community type).

Among studies that offered explicit definitions of community journalism, most equated it with news media serving small geographic localities such as towns or neighborhoods. Community journalism “seems to be particularly suited to small-town markets, in which journalists are more likely to be involved in community organizations” (Glascok, 2004, p. 31) or are associated with small newspapers, in which “there is already a strong sense of identification with the land and the people” (Ganje, 1998, p. 43). According to Kim and Ball-Rokeach, big-city journalism has “failed to play the role of community storyteller,” in contrast to smaller media that address either

“specific geographical areas or specific populations” (p. 179). In simple homogeneous communities, opinion on issues and the nature of identities tend to be less diverse (Ryfe, 2002), and journalism in small locations is more likely to reinforce unity and homogeneity (Griffin & Dunwoody, 2000). These descriptions echo Janowitz’s (1952) observation that “the maintenance of community consensus by the community press is built on the emphasis of common values rather than on the solution of conflicting values” (p. 72).

Community journalism and civic/public journalism: listening and leading. Many of the explicit definitions of community journalism reflect civic or public journalism principles (around 20 articles), including the notions that community journalists listen to audience and community, and/or coalesce opinion and lead the community. Many of these articles are normative in tone, assuming that civic journalism principles benefit communities.

Approximately eight articles suggest community journalists are primarily “listeners of the public they serve” (Brewin, 1999 p. 222), and community journalists “seek out community input on issues and solutions to problems, and community involvement in turn shapes the newspaper’s coverage” (Glascock, 2004, p. 31). The articles propose that community media “put the public interest ahead of the maximization of profit” (Altschull, 1996, p. 172) and sponsor forums for public discourse (Hodges, 1996). A few scholars have even taken a more extreme position, suggesting community journalists should not only emphasize “substantive dialogue over official pronouncement” (Ettema & Peer, 1996, p. 837) but that they should embrace no particular view of the world, as we live in a postmodernist era in which “there is no ultimate criterion [p. 6] on which challenges can be dismissed, only contingent language” (Ettema & Glasser, as cited in Moore, 1999, p. 14).

However, most scholars who embrace public or civic journalism call for community journalists to “marshal viewpoints” (Parisi, 1997, p. 681) and encourage specific action. About 16 articles take this perspective, suggesting community journalists seek a “higher objectivity” that shows journalists are concerned about finding solutions to problems (Parisi, 1997, p. 681). Journalists should try “to set an agenda for public discourse and to sway public opinion” (Simmons, 1999, p. 82), and they should assume a leadership role in community organizations (Hodges, 1996). Local media ensure “through proactive reporting that the key issues, situations and opportunities come to the community’s attention” (McCombs, 1997, p. 439).

Nine studies in this analysis tie the term “community journalism” directly to journalism’s role in promoting civic engagement. News media can bring “citizens into informed participation in the democratic system, elevate

community needs over individual needs” and “bring about a revitalized citizenship” (Barney, 1996, p. 140). Many of the studies analyzed in this study focus on the role local news media play in fostering civic engagement in a community, though the term “community journalism” is not explicitly used (e.g., Bunton, 1998; Coleman, 2000; Emig, 1995; Kang & Kwak, 2003; Mastin, 2000; Shah, McLeod, & Yoon, 2001; Shah, Schmierbach, Hawkins, Espino, & Donovan, 2002).

Studies related to civic and public journalism were among the few offering multiple-item measures. The following measured characteristics are found in multiple studies: (a) seeking the “citizen’s voice” through feedback, questions, forums; (b) pursuing inclusiveness, representing diverse views; (c) enabling citizen involvement through mobilizing information (information about identification, location of events, and “tactical” information for modeling behavior, as described by Lemert, Mitzman, Seither, Cook & Hackett, 1977); (d) enabling involvement through stories that convey understanding of community problems; (e) helping solve community problems by offering solutions, seeking common ground; and (f) caring about community, having faith in community and its residents (Bare, 1998; Gade, Abel, Antecol & Hsueh, 1998; Heider, McCombs, & Poindexter, 2005; Massey & Haas, 2002; Meyer & Potter, 1997; Nichols, Friedland, Rojas, Cho, & Shah, 2006). Jeffres, Cuttieta, Lee, and Sekerka (1999) offered a detailed multiple-item measure of community journalism functions, drawing on Morris Janowitz’s research. Items loading on a “civic journalism” dimension included the goals of printing articles written by residents, getting residents involved in solving neighborhood problems, getting conflict out in the open, and developing community consensus.

Community journalism, social cohesion and social pluralism. Related to the leader–listener dichotomy is the social cohesion–social pluralism dichotomy. The emphasis on “leading” dovetails with an emphasis on social cohesion, whereas “listening” brings to light the diverse, hidden components of a community.

Sixteen of the 30 studies offering descriptions/definitions of community journalism emphasize social cohesion. They assume local media serve as a social glue for the community, echoing Janowitz’s (1952) conclusion that local media reinforce commonality rather than emphasize differences. In this view, news media should help create a shared understanding of what it means to be a member of a community—what the community’s values are, what is normal, and what is considered “out of bounds.” The community journalist works to help form community or heal rifts by promoting community integration (Berkowitz & TerKeurst, 1999; Jeffres, Cutieta, Sereka, & Lee, 2000; Liebes & Peri, 1998; Stamm, Emig, & Hesse, 1997),

marshalling disparate viewpoints (Parisi, 1997), maintaining consistent community “story lines” (Shi, 2005, p. 66), and helping solve problems (Altschull, 1996). Journalists “promote consensus by providing more mobilizing information to bring readers together in a common cause,” and they provide citizens with confidence to act in concert (here, “mobilizing information” fosters “collective identity and empowerment,” in addition to providing contact information; Nicodemus, 2004, p. 163). Local media may even take a communitarian perspective (Coleman, 2000), elevating “community needs over individual needs,” (Barney, 1996, p. 140) and “[bringing] about a revitalized citizenship shaped by community norms” (Christians cited in Barney, 1996, p. 140). Media may accentuate positive messages about the community so as to strengthen assimilation (Viswanath, 2000).

In contrast, eight studies suggest local news media encourage community’s pluralism and dialogue with multiple groups and perspectives within communities (Kurpius, 2000, p. 340; Waters, Lynd, & Wood, 2001). According to these scholars, media help make diverse groups visible to one another (Coole, 2002; McLeod et al., 1996) and encourage connections among diverse groups (Kurpius, 2000, p. 340), such as wealthy and disadvantaged components of a city (Aldridge, 2003; Bro, 2004). Journalists listen carefully to multiple viewpoints (Anyaeibunam & Ryan, 2003; Voakes, 1999) and help marginal groups gain identity (Forde, Foxwell, & Meadows, 2003; Sakamoto, 1999). Some scholars suggest journalists tell many different stories, embracing and promoting no particular view (Ettema & Peer, 1997; Moore, 1999).

Seven studies suggest community journalists both listen *and* lead in a community. They recognize diversity of viewpoints and aim to integrate and/or solve problems. Community journalists strive to bring different sides together but without necessarily originating the solution (Altschull, 1996); they help ordinary citizens identify ways to confront public problems but allow perspectives of ordinary citizens to guide news coverage (Haas & Steiner, 2002); they are listeners of the public and are actively helping citizens connect to their communities (Brewin, 1999; Voakes, 1999); and journalists listen to their community and potentially take an activist role in helping the community to solve problems (Anyaeibunam & Ryan, 2003).

These studies echo sociologist Robert Park’s notion that media’s recognition of community pluralism and diversity should be viewed as an important first step toward community cohesion and general agreement on social and political issues (Czitrom, 1982; Park & Burgess, 1921). According to this view, social differences and social cohesion are both necessary (for Park this reflects a biological necessity, a view that subsequent scholars have criticized

as being too functionalist, not allowing for dysfunction or social change). Difference and cohesion are separate steps in a larger process—a process in which the media play an important role. This perspective has been expressed by others since (e.g., McQuail, 2005).

Community journalism and community power. The media's efforts to listen to diverse, marginalized voices or promote community unity are themselves shaped by larger forces. Though about half of the articles analyzed focus on the impact of media on community, just under one third recognize that the media's environment—meaning the way power is structured in a community, and the nature of community demographics and cultural trends, and so on—has a strong constraining impact on journalism in that community.

The more pluralistic a power structure—that is, the more economically and structurally diverse the community is—the more editors adopt new technologies (D. B. Hindman, Ernst, & Richardson, 2001), and the more likely editors are to portray community in an unfavorable light (e.g., Griffin & Dunwoody, 2000), to report on internal community conflict (D. B. Hindman, 1996), to report on controversial issues (Pollock & Yulis, 2004), and to adopt a watchdog role (Jeffres et al., 1999). Editors in pluralistic communities are more likely to expand coverage of ethnic groups (D. B. Hindman, Littlefield, Preston, & Neumann, 1999) and to be sensitive to gender issues (Armstrong, 2002), though one study found coverage to be less favorable toward Islamic minority groups when these groups are more prevalent in communities and when residents perceive these groups as threatening (Pollock et al., 2005). Factors such as strong social connections between editors and community leaders (Griffin & Dunwoody, 2000) and high numbers of individuals and institutions that are stakeholders in particular issues (Pollock & Yulis, 2004) decrease the likelihood that conflict and controversy will be covered. Media in such communities are more likely to be boosterist, promoting community success (Viswanath & Arora, 2000).

A host of other factors influencing news decision making were also discussed in these articles, including pressures from finances and from audience (Lariscy, Tinkham, Edwards, & Jones, 2004; Waters, Lynd, & Wood, 2001), degree of local economic uncertainty and level of local competition (Beam, 1996), age of a community (Pollock & Yulis, 2004), and wider cultural and geopolitical factors (Hamilton, 1998; Kaplan, 1997; Rusciano, 1997).

A number of authors entreat journalists to challenge these constraints and pressures. In eight of the articles, community journalism is described as a force in opposition to a community's power structure, to mainstream forces (Forde et al., 2003; Haas & Steiner, 2002) and to mainstream media (Cohen, 2000; Forde et al., 2003; Sakamoto, 1999). Authors call on

community journalists to rally disenfranchised readers and to bring them together for common cause, against a dominant group (Heinz, 2005) or against an outsider (Nicodemus, 2004).

DEVELOPING A CONSTRUCT OF COMMUNITY JOURNALISM

The discussion thus far has explored findings and conclusions from studies to find key dimensions for the concepts of community and community journalism. The next step is to define community and community journalism so a measurement scale may be devised. As mentioned, the construct of community journalism proposed here is a normative one. Though scale items are not overtly prescriptive, a high score on the scale would imply social beneficence.

All types of community listed in this literature analysis, from geographic to interpretive communities, incorporate the idea of sharing, and most suggest the importance of pursuing meaning. Many others suggest the notion of common ground through such terms as “overlapping,” “nesting” “meeting,” “interaction,” “common,” and “bound.” Sharing a common entity implies give and take. It implies negotiation, an active and ongoing process. This sharing of interests, goals, and identity can take place without geographic boundaries, through communication networks using mail and phone, traditional mass media, and of course, through the Internet.

Yet, as mentioned, more than half of the articles assume “community” means a geographical location with political/legal boundaries. Geographic proximity encourages concrete face-to-face interaction (Mosco, 1988), and physical residence is “where we most sensually experience the conditions of everyday life” (Matei et al., 2001). As in Janowitz’s study, a number of studies see this “sensual” interaction taking place most intensely in geographically small communities, in which journalists are more likely to identify with community residents, organizations, and activities (Ganje, 1998; Glascock, 2004) and are therefore more likely to be effective tellers of local stories (Kim & Ball-Rokeach, 2006).

Mass communication scholarship suggests then that the notion of community is strongly tied to the concepts of negotiated shared meaning *and* geographical location. Taylor et al., (2000) blended shared symbolic interaction and physical location in their definition of community as a “territorially organized system . . . that includes an effective, operating communication network, people sharing facilities and services in the settlement, and a psychological identification with a local symbol.” Similarly, Jeffres et al. (2002) defined community as “a set of overlapping systems that include a communication network and a social structure” (p. 391) and according to

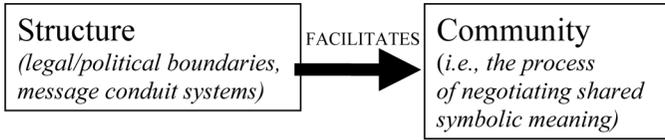


FIGURE 1 The process of community.

Ball-Rokeach, Kim & Matei (2001), residential places are “part of a much larger fabric of association and identity that merges geographic with other spaces that do not require shared locales . . .” (p. 393). In these depictions, geographic proximity encourages more than just face-to-face interaction. It encourages both the sharing of social structures, physical spaces, and cultural symbols and the communication about, and negotiation over, their use, meaning, and identity. The give and take involved in negotiation increases the perceived investment and perceived meaning that individuals have in their shared institutions, facilities, and spaces.

Based on the analysis of the mass communication literature, we propose that (a) community is a process of negotiating shared symbolic meaning and (b) degree of structure—or the degree to which facilities, institutions, and spaces are structured for interaction—facilitates the process of negotiation and sharing. In other words, structure and location are not community in and of themselves, but rather they encourage and intensify the process of community (see Figure 1). Both physical and virtual space (through, e.g., the Internet) can be considered structures, to greater and lesser degrees.

“Community news media,” then, are media capable of fostering the process of community, as depicted previously. Community journalism would (a) reveal, or make individuals aware of, spaces, institutions, resources, events, and ideas that may be shared, and encourage such sharing and (b) facilitate the process of negotiating and making meaning about community.

If community is an ongoing process, then community journalism—that is, the degree to which news media are structured for fostering the process of community—should also be ongoing. Conceptualizing community journalism as a process, as a continuing effort rather than as a static goal, resolves the seeming contradiction in the dichotomies of listening versus leading, and pluralism versus cohesion. It does this by incorporating the endpoints of these dichotomies as different steps in the larger process. If, as directly suggested by many studies in this analysis, community media should both listen to diverse viewpoints *and* lead efforts to aid the process of making sense of a community (what its values are, what’s acceptable and normal, etc.), then community journalism would be an ongoing,

interactive process of soliciting disparate, diverse views (i.e. listening through reporting, audience feedback, etc.), offering cohesive symbolic representations of the community based on these views (i.e., leading, through community-informed decisions about news content, presentation of reader feedback, etc.), soliciting and presenting feedback on these representations (listening), adjusting representations of the community and offering them again in a cohesive form (leading), and so on.

In addition, the media should help reveal and make understandable the community's structure (the left side of Figure 1) by informing residents of facilities, spaces, and events and how to use them, thus encouraging serendipitous interactivity and negotiation in the community—which should facilitate the process of working toward shared meaning.

The complex nature of this process suggests news media outlets do not simply practice community journalism or not practice it. Rather, media outlets engage in some *degree* of community journalism, as measured by the types of practices they follow and the intensity with which they follow them. A summated scale of multiple ordinal-level items would be an appropriate measure of community journalism.

Further, the analysis here suggests the construct of community journalism consists of several dimensions, or subconstructs, though empirical analysis is needed to validate these. One possible dimension of community journalism as defined here reflects the relationship between media and community “structure” from Figure 1:

- **Revealing community structure:** The degree to which a media outlet helps make a community's institutions, facilities, resources and spaces more visible, accessible, and easy to use.

Two other dimensions reflect the relationship between media and the second part of the model, the process of negotiating shared symbolic meaning, as just discussed:

- **Listening/pluralism:** The degree to which the media outlet seeks, fosters and allows diversity of viewpoints.
- **Leading/cohesiveness:** The degree to which the media outlet strives to integrate viewpoints into a cohesive representation that is intelligible to community members.

As discussed here, a community journalism scale would measure actual output, in the form of media content and/or evidence of organizational practice.

TOWARD A COMMUNITY JOURNALISM SCALE

Findings from studies assessed in this article offer empirical evidence of news practices benefiting communities and audiences. Many findings fit well with the three components of the normative model suggested in this article, and they suggest possible practices that scale measures could assess. Empirical findings of benefits are organized below by these three components.

Revealing Community Structure

- Providing clear, relevant mobilizing information (i.e., locational, definitional and tactical information, as defined by Lemert et al., 1977) reinforces identity of ethnic communities within a larger geographic community (McLeod et al., 1996; E. B. Hindman, 1998; Viswanath, 2000).
- Participation in local institutions and use of “local assets” facilitate social and civic engagement (Ettema & Peer, 1996; Mastin, 2000).
- When media solicit messages from trusted experts and community leaders, media messages have a strong impact on community members’ perception of their involvement in the life of the overall community (Griffin & Dunwoody, 2000; Liebes & Peri, 1998; Marks et al., 2004; McAlister & Johnson, 2000; Stamm et al., 1997).
- Community residents’ attention to surveillance of political and civic institutions, leaders and issues, particularly in newspapers and Web sites (less so in TV and entertainment information), leads to stronger civic engagement and increased political knowledge (Beaudoin & Thorson, 2004; Bunton, 1998; Eveland, 2004; E. B. Hindman, 1998; Kang & Kwak, 2003; Rothenbuhler, Mullen, DeLaurell, & Ryu, 1996; Shah et al., 2001).

Listening/Pluralism

- News organizations that more thoroughly research, or are more in touch with, the daily social and cultural patterns of specifically targeted audiences tend to produce messages that are better received, understood, and remembered (Mastin, 2000; Marks et al., 2004; McAlister & Johnson, 2000; Vargas & dePysller, 1999).
- The way news stories are framed can have an impact on the degree to which marginal groups in a community feel they are visible and have choices (Hicks & Warren, 1998; Hoffman-Goetz et al., 2005; Perkins & Starosta, 2001).

Leading/Cohesiveness

- News reports can help a community find solutions by connecting problems and problem solvers and by portraying events as part of a “master narrative” with a beginning and a foreseeable end (Aldridge, 2003; Bro, 2004; E. B. Hindman, 1998; Parisi, 1997).
- Repetition of messages and consistent focus on particular issues lead to a stronger perceived cohesiveness of a community’s agenda (Brewer & McCombs, 1996; Simmons, 1999).
- Framing news and issues so community members perceive themselves as distinct, and even under external threat leads to greater social cohesion of a community (Cohen, 2000; D. B. Hindman, 1996; Liebes & Peri, 1998; Sakamoto, 1999; Trasciatti, 2003; Viswanath, 2000; Viswanath & Arora, 2000), though minority groups perceived as threats within communities may be marginalized (Pollock et al., 2005).

In addition, numerous studies in this analysis suggest that any scale measure of community journalism should accommodate the impact of the community’s power structure on news decisions and should address the need for inclusion of less powerful voices.

By observing the process of community outlined in Figure 1, the three subconstructs of community journalism, and the empirical findings that relate to these subconstructs, authors suggest rough measures of news outlet practices and news content for a summated scale. Measures are segmented next into three subscales, reflecting the three subconstructs just outlined. The measures are not final polished survey items, and all require further specification. Measurement items of community, civic, and public journalism from past studies inform these measures, and measures are relevant to media that serve all types of communities—geographic, imagined, or interpretive. For the items listed next, frequency and prominence of specific practices and content would be assessed.

Preliminary Measures for a Subscale Assessing the Degree to which News Outlets Reveal Community Structure

- Media outlet provides community with contact information for community leaders, officials, experts, and community organizations.
- Media content provides information from community leaders, officials, experts, and community organizations that is usable and relevant to community members.
- Media outlet provides information on community services and institutions.

- Media outlet's content helps community understand how to use services and institutions.
- Media outlet provides information on clubs and organizations.
- Media outlet's content helps community understand how to get involved with local or relevant clubs and organizations.
- Media outlet provides information that helps community take advantage of local or relevant events and festivities.

Preliminary Measures for a Subscale Assessing the Degree to Which News Outlets Listen and Encourage Diversity of Viewpoints

- Media outlet conducts surveys to solicit public opinion.
- Media outlet conducts focus groups to identify issues relevant to community life.
- Media outlet invites community members to air opinions on community issues and news content.
- Media outlet provides space or time for community members to air opinions on community issues and news content.
- Media outlets provide community residents with a way to directly access news decision makers (e.g., offer physical access to the news building in a geographic community or provide online access to decision makers for Web sites).
- Media outlet's news gathering structure accommodates coverage of marginal viewpoints.
- Media content reflects coverage of community's minority or marginal viewpoints.
- Media content reflects coverage of human-scale events and stories.

The next two items show awareness of community power structure influence.

- Media content reflects reporting on conflict within the community.
- Stories reflect awareness of nonofficial sources.

Preliminary Measures for a Subscale Assessing the Degree to which News Outlets Lead and Help Solve Problems by Integrating Feedback into a Cohesive Representation

- Media content focuses on local issues, events, institutions, and people.
- Media content reflects efforts to present a consistent, manageable, ongoing agenda of the most pressing community issues.
- Media content provides readers with background/context on ongoing issues.

- Media outlet proposes specific solutions to community problems.
- Media content connects those who have problems in a community with information from those who are potential problem solvers.
- Media outlet provides information from beyond the community that helps community members make sense of community issues.

Many of the terms used in these lists would need to be further specified before actual use—for example, the term “human-scale stories” would need to be operationally defined. Also, these measures of practices and content can be assessed by observing practices and content *and* through attitude surveys. For example, an item like “provides information on local clubs and organizations” could be measured by assessing news content, but it could also be treated as a goal or function of a news organization, and journalists and audiences could assess its importance.

DISCUSSION

This article represents a first step toward construction of a community journalism scale. Research is also needed on audiences’ and journalists’ perceptions of community journalism, which could inform the scale.

We do not claim that this article represents an analysis of *all* relevant scholarship on the relationship between community and media over the last decade. Only journal articles were explored, and among them, only those that surfaced using the aforementioned search terms and journal titles were analyzed. Doubtless, we have missed some relevant works. Nevertheless, the scope of the search was wide, and the sample should be practically representative and useful.

It is interesting how closely the models of community and community journalism, and the resulting suggestions for scale measures, recall the descriptions given by journalists and scholars at the beginning of this article. These descriptions suggested community journalism should tell a community about itself and engage in a search for meaning and sense making. Similarly, community journalism as described in this article encourages the pursuit of, and negotiation about, the meaning of shared symbols, such as resources, issues, and institutions. Early scholarship by Park and Janowitz argued that community media should be sensitive to cultural variety but encourage social cohesiveness. Likewise the model proposed here suggests community journalism should facilitate debate and resolution and should value pluralism and cohesiveness.

This study’s systematic analysis of scholarly literature pertaining to community and media has unearthed new ways of conceptualizing community

and community journalism. Authors here have cast both concepts as processes rather than as static entities, thus accommodating conceptual conflicts within these concepts (e.g., pluralism vs. cohesiveness). However, the ongoing tension between striving for cohesion and recognizing pluralism should not be ignored. Neither is an end in itself. The diligent community journalist would neither settle for cohesion at the expense of marginalizing minorities nor sacrifice sense making for the goal of celebrating differences.

Incorporating the very real impact of the community's power structure enhances the external validity of the construct. Any scale of community journalism must acknowledge that efforts to practice community journalism take place within the context of constraining social forces over which journalists have little control.

We hope that a community journalism scale will allow for a fuller study of the impact of community journalism on society as well as study of what shapes degree of community journalism. By making community journalism a continuous variable, continuous variables that measure social benefit, such as degree of civic engagement, level of social capital, level of political knowledge, and understanding of risk, can be correlated with degree of community journalism to help assess the impact of journalism on community. Continuous variables that assess organizational, economic, professional, and community context can be correlated with degree of community journalism to explain why orientation toward community journalism is stronger in some news organizations than in others.

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