

**Title page**

**WEEKLY DILEMMAS:**  
A Study of Community Journalism, Connections and Ethics in Small Towns

by

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Submitted to the William Allen White  
School of Journalism and Mass Communications  
and the Faculty of the Graduate School of the University of Kansas  
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master's of Science

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## Acceptance Page

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This paper would not have been possible without the guidance of faculty at the William Allen White School of Journalism and Mass Communications at the University of Kansas, and without the cooperation of five weekly newspapers in Kansas: the *Washington County News*, the *Osawatomie Graphic*, the *Marion County Record*, *The Coffey County Republican* and the *Chase County Leader-News*. I appreciate the opportunity to visit and study these five newspaper offices and have learned from the remarkable people working there. My thanks go out to all of the small-town residents and journalists participating in this study. Many thanks go out to Professor Peggy Kuhr, the chair of my thesis committee, for her support and invaluable and innumerable contributions to my success at KU. Thank you for your guidance and dedication to this study of small-town newspapers and journalism ethics. My appreciation also goes out to the members of my committee who each in their own way made this research possible. Tom Eblen, editorial consultant for the Kansas Press Association, who retired from the School of Journalism in December 2001, was an expert source for choosing my weeklies and editing my paper. Justin Marlowe, assistant professor in the School of Public Administration, advised on research methods, and provided an invaluable “outsider” perspective to journalism in small towns. To my committee and the participants in my study who were very gracious with their time, thank you. Special thanks to Susan Fischer and Marion and Roger Weaver who welcomed me into their homes. This paper is dedicated to all the educators and journalists who have helped me along the way. Special thanks to Dean Ann Brill, who helped clear all the clutter and develop a comprehensible and interesting thesis topic. This paper also would not have been possible without my family, especially my husband, who even in his most hectic, stressful and preoccupied moments (and mine too), gave me the help that I needed. Thank you for your continuous support, Michael Krings.

## PREFACE

The author of this paper grew up in a small town in Nebraska. She has seen the empty store fronts on Main Street and empty chairs at community meetings. Her family members are community leaders and have dedicated countless hours to local organizations. This author has read a weekly newspaper for most of her life. Her hometown newspaper is small and dependent on local businesses to survive. The author's upbringing in a small town, her experiences with small newspapers, and her interest in media ethics and community journalism led her to undertake this study about decision-making at small-town weeklies.

## ABSTRACT

*Journalists at weekly newspapers are able to connect with their communities by practicing community journalism. But it's not always an easy approach. Conflicts of interest of varying degrees occur when journalists are intimately involved in their communities. In a small town, those conflicts arise frequently. Journalists often are writing stories about organizations they belong to or people they know personally.*

*This research paper explores the connections weekly journalists have with their communities, and what potential problems those connections can cause for journalists living and working in small towns. It also provides examples of how journalists' civic and social ties influence decisions about coverage of local issues and events. And finally, this paper demonstrates how small-town journalists make decisions when faced with advertising and community pressures.*

*Interviews were conducted with employees of five weekly newspapers in northeast and central Kansas – the Washington County News, the Osawatomie Graphic, The Coffey County Republican, the Marion County Record and the Chase County Leader-News – and with members of the communities. The findings from the case studies reflected in this paper add to the literature of the community journalism discipline.*

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## INTRODUCTION

The editor of the *Washington County News* had been at the job since August 2003 and didn't have a journalism background. But Dan Thalmann knew how rumors get started and never quit, how local citizens want to see the truth in black and white, and how everyone has his or her own idea of what's fit to print. So in March 2005, when a local man was arrested on a charge of sexual abuse of a minor, Thalmann got an earful. His staff, local residents, relatives and sources all suggested how his paper should cover the story. A member of Thalmann's family tried to prevent the story from being published: Thalmann's step-sister, the Washington County attorney, told him not to report on the case because it would prejudice potential jurors. With no written policy about handling such a situation and plenty of advice, Thalmann had a decision to make. He published the news about the alleged abuse, including the name of the accused, his criminal history, his picture and his relationship to the 7-, 9- and 12-year-old children. Thalmann decided the story had public interest and relevance. He knew it would upset some readers, but he made the decision and stood by it.

The Society of Professional Journalists Code of Ethics states that journalists should "tell the story of the diversity and magnitude of the human experience boldly, even when it is unpopular to do so" (Society of Professional Journalists, 1996). But at a small community newspaper this can prove difficult, not only because of community pressures, but also because of the need to make a profit and survive, often in rural areas that are struggling financially.

A community newspaper is not necessarily a rural newspaper, like the *Washington County News* in north-central Kansas. The key to community journalism is relationships, not size. Jock Lauterer, in his book, “Community Journalism: A Personal Approach,” elaborates on the definition of community journalism. He says:

- Community journalism occurs when journalists become “citizen-journalists, intimately involving themselves in the welfare of the place, the civic life of their towns” (Lauterer, 2000, p. xiv).
- Community journalism flourishes when journalists are “an active member of the very community they’re covering” (Lauterer, 2000, p. xiv).

Community journalists care about the town’s “successes and tragedies and rewards and problems and even its wonderfully plain, ordinary, everyday life” (Waddle, 2003, p. 16). Community newspapers also provide an “affirmation of the sense of community” – a reader’s desire that bigger papers cannot fulfill (Lauterer, 2000, p. 14) – in addition to the local news that other newspapers and other media do not cover. Small-town newspapers are often the only source for local news; and this is the news that weekly newspaper readers care about (Anderson, personal communication, March 1, 2005).

Community journalists play a role “in defining and reflecting the perspectives of community members” (Husselbee & Adams, 1996), and with more than 60 million weekly newspaper readers nationwide, the role of the weekly newspaper is significant (Steffens, personal communication, June 6, 2005). In 2004, the United States had

1,456 daily newspapers and 6,704 weekly newspapers (Newspaper Association of America, 2004). The readership and potential impact of weekly newspapers is significant. “In Kansas, Missouri, Nebraska, Wisconsin and Iowa, the majority of newspaper association members are weeklies – most of them independently owned” (Tezon, 2003, p. 4). This is true across the United States (Steffens, personal communication, Nov. 4, 2005). According to the Kansas Newspaper Directory (2005), there are 43 dailies in Kansas, compared to 193 weeklies, most of which are small-town weeklies.

Typically, smaller communities are closer-knit than big cities. Small-town journalists’ loyalties may come into conflict more often than big-city journalists’ loyalties do. In some cases, decisions may be even more difficult for employees and owners of small weekly newspapers. There, difficult decisions are exacerbated by the fact that the journalist is truly accessible to readers (Anderson, personal communication, March 1, 2005). In some cases, particularly crime-related stories, small-town journalists must find a middle ground between reporting truth and serving their readers (Pumarlo, 2005). At the *Washington County News*, a small-town weekly editor found that reporting the truth in his community wasn’t easy. Some weekly newspapers shy away from controversial issues. “You will have small-town pressures and reservations and you will duck an issue sometimes to avoid a fight among friends and neighbors” (Kennedy, 1974, p. 51). Most small-town weekly newspapers are independently owned and may shy away from controversial issues because they don’t have a large company supporting their decisions (Eblen, personal communication,



April 26, 2004). Stories might go untold or be told in a way that appeases sacred cows, and they may be major advertisers and publishers' friends and relatives (Bagdikian, 1983). Newspapers have their sacred cows – topics or people who must be treated carefully – and this occurs among papers of all sizes, as well as other media organizations (Bagdikian, 1983). Difficult decisions must be made, and the public will not always agree. Like renowned publisher and editor William Allen White once wrote, “If an editor is honest he is bound to offend someone every day of his life” (1937, p. 277).

For decades, researchers have looked at community connections and the relationship to newspaper readership. “The notion of community has long been central to the newspaper’s concept of circulation area” (Stamm, Fortini-Campbell, p. 3, 1983). A search on the database Expanded Academic ASAP and an interview with Les Anderson, associate director of the Elliott School of Communication at Wichita State University, indicated that little research has been done on journalists’ own connections to their communities. This paper looks at community journalism in its classic form, the small-town newspaper, and considers the dilemmas that these close connections pose. The focus is on small towns, with populations ranging from 1,000 to 6,000. This paper provides a greater understanding of decision-making processes regarding conflicts of interest and societal and economic pressures. It considers the ethics involved when journalists are intimately involved in the communities they cover. This investigation into community journalism and media ethics also explores

how, and if, small-town journalists distinguish between their roles as community members and as journalists.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Community journalism flourishes when journalists are “an active member of the very community they’re covering” (Lauterer, 2000, p. xiv), and this journalistic approach is more than being able to put names with faces. Community journalism is about a journalist belonging to his or her community, being involved in its organizations and activities (Lauterer, 2000, p. 38). Community journalism is the “bonding between reader and newspaper that occurs when a genuine caring relationship” replaces profit motive (Waddle, 2003, p. 14). Lauterer makes a distinction between community newspapers and large dailies, saying, “The most common misconception is that the community paper is a small version of the big city daily. Nothing could be further from the truth” (Lauterer, 2000, p. xiv). A positive and intimate relationship between a newspaper and its community is what sets small-town papers apart from big city dailies (Lauterer, 2000).

Community journalism as defined in this paper is not the same as civic journalism, sometimes called public journalism. Civic journalism also focuses on relationships and stresses that journalists should participate in democracy, advocate civic involvement, improve public life and demonstrate that they have a stake in the communities they cover (Rosen, 1993). This is a type of community journalism, but is not the approach to journalism that this paper investigates. Mid-sized daily newspapers, like *The Wichita Eagle* in Wichita, Kansas, and *The Spokesman-Review*

in Spokane, Washington, more commonly practice some form of civic journalism, while most small-town papers routinely practice a more personal type of journalism.

In a survey of smaller dailies and weeklies, one-third of editors said they never had heard of the phrase “public journalism” (Fitzgerald, 1996). Garrett Ray, associate professor of journalism at Colorado State University, asserted that community newspaper editors weren’t paying attention to the theory of public journalism because “they are already doing it” (Fitzgerald, 1996, p. 27). But, they were doing it differently than larger-market papers. In small-town journalism, “people are what matter” (Lauterer, 2000, p.14). Lauterer asserts community journalism starts when journalists recognize that the newspaper is not theirs, but belongs to the community. Community newspapers should uphold a sense of “our town,” of our community and of “a positive and intimate reflection of the sense of place” (Lauterer, 2000, p. 14).

Many employees at newspapers of all sizes are tightly connected to their communities through home ownership, friendships, memberships and other forms of community ties. Lauterer says true community journalists should belong to local organizations in order to develop connections that will allow them to improve coverage of issues and events (personal communication, Sept. 22, 2004). A lack of connection leads to detachment from the community, less credibility and fewer readers (Lauterer, personal communication, Sept. 22, 2004). In a small town, journalists find it hard not to be part of the community. Tezon surveyed 36 publishers at papers with an average circulation of 5,302 and found that 35 said they have to be

“married to the communities they serve” (Tezon, 2003, p. 10). The community newspaper plays an integral part in building and sustaining the community (Waddle, 2003), and small towns are what make America work (Lauterer, personal communication, Sept. 22, 2004).

Although the weekly newspaper is often read second to a larger market daily, it provides something that the big papers cannot: local news from a local source (Anderson, personal communication, March 1, 2005). Small-town newspapers are often the only source for local news. The local paper may have the responsibilities of being the town’s cheerleader and watchdog (Tezon, 2003). It’s also the town’s historian and mirror. Community journalists play “a significant role in defining and reflecting the perspectives of community members” (Husselbee & Adams, 1996).

#### Weekly newspapers

Some communication and media researchers argue that weekly newspapers are an under-researched part of mass media and society (Lauterer, personal communication, Sept. 22, 2004; Anderson, personal communication, March 1, 2005). The Huck Boyd National Center for Community Journalism at Kansas State University and the organization’s annual Newspapers and Community-Building Symposium at the National Newspaper Association convention highlight smaller newspapers including weeklies. Jock Lauterer, director of the Carolina Community Media Project and former weekly editor, and several other like-minded scholars and teachers, formed an interest group for the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication in 2004, with a thrust toward researching small-town

newspapers. So, it could be argued that the interest in small-town journalism is growing.

It is important to analyze the differences between dailies and weeklies. While this study does not address those differences, examining them gives some justification as to why the decisions small-town journalists make and the roles they play in their communities and at weekly newspapers deserves separate consideration. In the case of weeklies, money and time are two ways weekly newspapers differ from their larger counterparts. The *Chase County Leader-News*, a newspaper with about 1,400 paid subscribers, spent all of the roughly \$120,000 it earned annually. The annual budget for the entire operation of the *Washington County News*, a paper with 2,727 paid subscribers, was about \$370,000. The larger the circulation and market, naturally, the more financially healthy the newspaper should be. In comparison, \$310,000 was the photo budget for 2005 at the *Topeka Capital-Journal*, a newspaper with 52,212 daily circulation and 65,798 Sunday circulation (Goering, personal communication, Oct. 21, 2005). At a U.S. daily with 8,900 to 10,000 circulation, \$390,000 paid for the salaries of the news and editorial staff (Inland Press, 2003). Money relates to another economic pressure facing small-town publishers – getting good help and paying a livable wage (Anderson, personal communication, March 1, 2005). The pay is usually lower at weekly newspapers, where many newspaper careers start (Landon, 2003). At most weeklies, there is just not enough money to hire a large staff, so weekly newspaper employees have an opportunity to be involved in many aspects of journalism, to be jacks-of-all-trades (Lauterer, 2000). Small-town journalists

generally are involved in every aspect of the business including writing, editing, photography and design. With smaller staffs, a weekly newspaper may struggle to cover every event or meeting. Weekly newspapers typically have only one deadline per week. Les Anderson, publisher of the *The Ark Valley News* in Valley Center, Kansas, a weekly, asserts that time is something weekly newspaper journalists have little of usually because weekly newspapers have smaller staffs (personal communication, March 1, 2005). “You don’t have much time to improve or time to think” (Anderson, personal communication, March 1, 2005). In addition, smaller newspapers more often than larger papers are able to “make changes without going through levels of bureaucracy” (Lauterer, 2000, p. 15). Editors in small towns are more accessible to readers in and out of the newsroom. Readers often run into small-town editors at the post office or grocery store and usually won’t hesitate to approach them to talk, complain or sing their praises (Lauterer, 2000). Anderson stated that a woman in a grocery store literally ran her cart into him just to get his attention to talk to him about the *The Ark Valley News* (personal communication, March 1, 2005). Besser cited another important difference between small and big newspapers: “Big town papers tend to report more bad news; small town papers specialize in good news” (1994, p. 2).

There are no scientific data to show that small-town papers are better community papers than big city dailies. Nevertheless, small-town papers have appeal. Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist William Allen White refused to leave his daily paper in Emporia, Kansas, which at the time had a population of 13,000, for a better-paying

job at a bigger paper on the East Coast because he believed being a part of a small-town paper was better than working at a big city daily (Johnson, 1947). Publisher Greg Branson of the *Osawatomie Graphic* was the A-section editor of the *Minneapolis Star-Tribune*, but left to come back to his native town, where he knew he could have more decision-making responsibility in the profession, and at the same time have more flexibility to be with his family (Branson, personal communication, May 20, 2005). Now he lives in his home state and county, and publishes three News-Press Gazette-owned newspapers in the area: the *Miami County Republic*, the *Louisburg Herald* and the *Osawatomie Graphic*, the last of which is a case study in this research. NPG is a family-owned media company based in St. Joseph, Missouri. For Mark Petterson, managing editor of *The Coffey County Republican*, living and working in a small town was all about supporting and reporting on his community. The 40-year-old started at the newspaper in high school, leaving for only a short time to earn a bachelor's of science in business from Emporia State University.

For people who have never been to a small town or worked at a small newspaper, it may be hard to understand the way of life there. There is usually a “‘folksy’ quality in small town papers” (Besser, 1994, p. 1). Small-town papers are most likely financially able to publish only once a week. Lack of news and other resources, such as staff and equipment, may also factor into the publication schedule. Some small-town papers publish bi- or tri-weekly, while others are nothing more than shoppers, community bulletins or calendars. The content of a weekly paper is primarily local, including deaths, births, wedding announcements, awards, court

proceedings, sheriff and police logs, local education, local sports, and the society news (Lauterer, 2000). It is the local news that weekly newspaper readers care about (Anderson, personal communication, March 1, 2005). And, it's the news they often know about before the paper is published (Lauterer, 2000). In many cases, working at a weekly newspaper does not involve getting the scoop on other papers or other media. In many households, the weekly newspaper is read second to a daily paper (Lauterer, 2000). Anderson said that was not true on the day weeklies come out (personal communication, March 1, 2005). In fact, it could be argued that weeklies when compared to dailies are just as popular and better read (Anderson, personal communication, March 1, 2005).

### Small Towns

Social science researchers have defined small towns as “incorporated places ranging in population from 2,500 to 20,000” (Tolbert, Irwin, Lyson & Nucci, 2002, p. 97). Some researchers have used the term “rural communities” in describing cities with populations between 20,000 and 40,000 (Beaudoin & Thorson, 2004). On the other end of the spectrum, Wall (1999) limited her study of small towns to those with 6,000 or less in population. In their research on community media and municipal elections, McCleneghan and Ragland (2002) researched cities with populations from 4,104 to 42,071. For the purposes of this study, small towns will be defined as any incorporated community with a population of 6,000 or less.

### Community



What constitutes a community? This is a concept that researchers have struggled to define for decades (Stamm & Fortini-Campbell, 1983). One of the most obvious ways is by using census data, but a community can also be defined by the development of relationships and systems within a location or organization (Stamm & Fortini-Campbell, 1983). This research implements Stamm and Fortini-Campbell's three domains of community: community as a place, community as a social structure and community as a social process. Stamm and Fortini-Campbell break down these domains into connections or ties that people form. Ties to place include home ownership, years of residence in the community and anticipated length of stay. Ties to structure include friendships, relationships with neighbors and other community members, volunteer groups, service clubs and committees. Ties to social process involve engaging in community affairs, attending meetings, sharing concerns and thoughts, and facilitating change. Stamm and Fortini-Campbell used a telephone questionnaire to gather their data.

#### Media Ethics in Small Towns

To study media ethics in small towns, it is important to understand the relationship that small-town journalists have with their communities. In a small town, people know the editor of their local paper. When asked whether she allowed her newspaper to endorse local candidates, Linda Geist, publisher and owner of a weekly in Monroe City, Missouri, said no because "we're related to half of them or live next to them" (Anderson, 2003, p. 15). Newspaper editors can become friends with their community members and therefore may develop a high level of trust and valued

rapport with community members. The weekly editor is accessible to readers, and in many cases knows everyone in the community by name. In some cases, there is a disconnect between the small-town journalists and the community, but this problem is much more common in larger market papers (Lauterer, personal communication, Sept. 22, 2004). “As a general rule, reporters in small towns identify better with their communities” (Pumarlo, 2005, p. 14).

It has been argued that small-town journalists cover their communities better when they are involved in them. But this involvement can pose conflicts of interest, which most journalism codes of ethics warn about. The Society of Professional Journalists Code of Ethics, developed in 1996 with the help of many journalists from large and small newspapers, states that conflicts of interest are to be avoided. But it is common for weekly editors to be involved in civic organizations (O'Brien, 2003). These small-town journalists may also hold elected positions. The weekly editor in a town of 1,000 people may be involved in several civic organizations because there is simply no one else to do it (O'Brien, 2003). What happens when the editor of the paper serves on the school board? Or the editor is the mayor? Does participating in community clubs and organizations interfere with the journalist's ability to be fair and balanced? According to O'Brien (2003), scholars and small-town journalists have somewhat conflicting views about a journalist's involvement with his or her community. Bob Steele, senior faculty and ethics group leader at The Poynter Institute, does not advocate journalists getting involved in their communities (Steele, personal communication, Sept. 20, 2005). Steele said small-town journalists may be

asked to join organizations more often than journalists in larger cities, “but the competing loyalties would be just as, if not more problematic, in such situations” (Steele, personal communication, Sept. 20, 2005). “The journalists should be guided by the principle of independence, and if that is eroded by competing loyalties, their credibility as impartial, professional observers and reporters of the news can be damaged” (Steele, personal communication, Sept. 20, 2005).

However, many small-town journalists indicated that involvement, not including elected positions, does not create problems with conflicts of interest (O’Brien, 2003). Tim Blagg, who was running a newsroom of 12 people in Greenfield, Massachusetts, said “It doesn't matter who his reporters are seen with out in public, just as long as the reporters’ stories are fair and balanced” (O’Brien, 2003, p.17). Brook Hodges, editor of the 4,100 circulation newspaper in Winslow, Arizona, said journalists shouldn't have to choose between being a journalist and being involved in civic activities (O’Brien, 2003). O’Brien quoted Hodges as saying, “Our town is so small, if you aren’t involved outside of the newspaper, you can’t have a life. Everybody’s kids play ball. Everybody goes to the same church ... You’re entitled to be involved in your community” (O’Brien, 2003, p. 16).

The dynamics of a small town can pose other potential dilemmas for journalists. They may have to print something negative about a neighbor or a friend. The personal relationship that readers have with a weekly editor is different from the one daily readers have with a daily newspaper editor, who often is faceless to his audience (Pumarlo, 2005). Reporting on a local suicide, traffic accident or student-

athlete suspension is “much easier for big-city newspapers” (Pumarlo, 2005, p. 12). Community pressures, in addition to small-town journalists’ social ties to the community, do have the potential to influence content (Kennedy, 1974, Bagdikian, 1983, Pumarlo, 2005). In addition, decisions about when a story is newsworthy or whether to publish a particularly graphic or emotional photo of a local tragedy are often handled differently in small-town papers than they are at larger dailies (Pumarlo, 2005). “Some small-town newspapers just bypass the difficulties of reporting on tough and sensitive issues by implementing a blanket policy of not reporting them” (Pumarlo, 2005, p. 61). Newspapers must be “prepared to print all the news if they are to survive” (Pumarlo, 2005, p 10). But not all publishers would agree. Soley and Craig found that publishers respond to pressure from the community by putting pressure on their staff to self-censor (Soley & Craig, 1992). In addition, they found “small circulation newspapers are more likely to acquiesce to advertiser pressures than large newspapers” (Soley & Craig, 1992, p. 6).

Pressures from advertisers can also influence content (Bagdikian, 1983). In a survey of editors at newspapers with less than 25,000 circulation, 64.1 percent reported that there were internal pressures to self-censor (Soley & Craig, 1992). In a survey of 147 editors of newspapers selected from the 1991 edition of the *Editor and Publisher International Yearbook*, 70 percent who worked for papers with a circulation under 25,000 said an advertiser has “tried to kill” stories (Soley & Craig, 1992). Out of that same sample, 88 percent of 147 daily editors said advertisers had canceled advertisements because of content they disagreed with, and 92.5 percent of

147 daily editors said advertisers had threatened to pull their advertisements because of stories (Soley & Craig, 1992). They also found “the number of editors who reported that advertisers had influenced their newspaper’s content dropped as circulation rose” (p. 7). In a survey by An and Bergen (2004), results showed that newspapers with less than 25,000 circulation were more likely to compromise in an unethical situation compared to newspapers with more than 25,000 circulation. An and Bergen (2004) offered three reasons why journalists working in smaller communities might compromise their ethics:

- Dependency on advertising because of small circulation
- Increased vulnerability to advertisers’ threats because of limited number of advertisers
- No directly stated restriction on advertiser influence

Advertising pressures aren’t the only ones on small-town newspapers’ budgets. There are also pressures associated with payroll, technology, printing, mailing, other utilities and bills and payments (Anderson, personal communication, March 1, 2005; Lauterer, 2000; Bagdikian 1983).

Ethical dilemmas of varying degrees will occur, and in small-town newspapers there is often no written policy (Anderson, personal communication, March 1, 2005; Pumarlo, personal communication, Sept. 29, 2005). A lack of policy may make decisions more difficult. The Society of Professional Journalists Code of Ethics states that journalists should “tell the story of the diversity and magnitude of the human experience boldly, even when it is unpopular to do so” (Society of

Professional Journalists, 1996). But, as the literature shows, this may prove difficult at community newspapers, particularly those struggling financially.

“Every major step in the journalistic process involves a value-laden decision” (Bagdikian, 1983, p.181). Lauterer agrees, saying:

“The community newspaper editor better have a moral compass that is locked unswervingly on magnetic north, because his or her reasons whether and how to publish will be tested and questioned with almost every issue that comes along and with every issue of the paper that comes out” (Lauterer, 2000, p. 288).

#### The Viability of Small-Town Businesses

The livelihood of many small-town weeklies depends on the community’s ability to stay viable. From the corner barbershop to the grocery store, small-town businesses are, or at least should be, as important to the local newspaper as the people themselves. “If the merchant needs our advertising help, it is also true we need the merchant’s advertising. For without it our community newspapers cannot exist” (Kennedy, 1974, p. 85). Some small-town weeklies are part of thriving communities; others are not. Without advertisers, a weekly newspaper becomes nothing more than a bulletin or calendar of events (Eblen, personal communication, April 27, 2004), and the news hole shrinks significantly (Anderson, personal communication, March 1, 2005).

The decline of rural America has been predicted since the 1950s (Schaeffer & Loveridge, 2000). A lack of community leaders, retailers and population threatens the

very existence of some small towns (Schaeffer and Loveridge, 2000). Out of 36 weekly publishers in the Midwest surveyed, all stated that they had concerns about economic growth (Tezon, 2003). Tezon (2003) suggested that the key to survival of rural communities could be found in researching small, rural newspapers. Houston Waring, a former editor of the Littleton, Colorado, *Independent*, said “The newspaper makes the community’s economy work by advertising. Cities’ retail trade drops markedly when newspapers cease to operate even temporarily” (Sim, 1969). This decline is emphasized if farms begin to disappear. “If rural communities, already endangered because of continued stagnation of agricultural economies, are to survive and prosper, the institution of the community weekly will be key to that survival” (Tezon, 2003, p. 20). In this paper, the small-town community includes townspeople as well as the rural population because many subscribers to weekly newspapers and customers at the local stores live outside the city limits. The concept of “local” in this research was based on Merriam-Webster Online, which defined local as “of, relating to, or characteristic of a particular place” and “not general or widespread” or “of, relating to, or applicable to part of a whole.”

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The literature shows that small-town journalists are closely connected to their communities and do face community pressures from both local residents and advertisers. Three research questions were developed to gain perspective on the level of connectedness and the amount of pressure felt by small-town journalists.

- RQ1: How do community journalists distinguish between their roles as community members and as journalists?
- RQ2: How do editors and publishers of weekly papers handle social and economic pressures?
- RQ3: How do social and business ties to the community affect decisions about coverage?

## METHODOLOGY

In qualitative research, the researcher is the primary data collector (Creswell, 2003). Two qualitative research methods – interviewing and observation techniques – were used to collect data for this research. These research methods were implemented at five weekly newspapers in northeast and central Kansas. As Creswell (2003) states, qualitative research is done in the natural setting, so the best way to answer the research questions set forth in this study was to conduct face-to-face, in-depth interviews with the staff at the newspaper's office. In addition, the author observed the newspaper operation and interviewed at least six community members at each community. Questions asked in the interviews can be found in Appendix A. The newspapers in this study ranged in circulation from 1,479 to 2,955, and the staff size ranged from 3 full- and part-time employees to 12. The researcher spent four or five days in each community. Spending longer than five days may have increased the validity of the study (Creswell, 2003). It could also be argued that spending more days at each newspaper would not have produced any new data, meaning saturation of the data has taken place (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The total number of interviews



conducted was 59 – 19 working journalists; two retired journalists; six advertising, production and clerical newspaper employees; and 32 community members.

Grounded theory was used to identify themes that arose from data collected at the field visits. Grounded theory is defined as a theory “that was derived from the data, systematically gathered and analyzed through the research process” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 12). In this approach, the researcher does not begin with any preconceived notions (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The author felt that she met all of the characteristics of a grounded theorist identified by Strauss and Corbin (1998, p. 7):

- “ability to think critically and abstractly”
- “ability to step back and critically analyze situations”
- “ability to recognize the tendency toward bias”
- “ability to be flexible and open to helpful criticism”
- “a sensitivity to the words and actions of respondents”
- “a sense of absorption and devotion to the work process”

Grounded theory is a qualitative research method with inductive characteristics (Warren & Karner, 2005). Inductive research brings in concepts “derived from the data gathered” rather than deductive, which uses a theory or concept and makes hypotheses (Warren & Karner, 2005, p. 8). “Grounded theories, because they are drawn from data, are likely to offer insight, enhance understanding, and provide a meaningful guide to action” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 12). Most of the data gathered was in narrative form – storytelling. Using the narrative approach, the researcher culled themes from the interviews. Experiences of editors and

publishers and staff members, stories from their professional life and descriptions of their roles in their communities were revealed. The author searched for “critical incidents” that had happened at the newspapers to provide deeper meaning to the research (Keyton, 2001). The researcher was able to identify themes and ask relevant questions based on her experiences in the journalism profession and in small communities. In addition, by developing a rapport with the subjects, the researcher was able to identify deeper meaning and get more poignant answers (Warren & Karner, 2005).

Interviews have been used with other qualitative studies, ranging in topic from “Karner’s 1994 study of inpatient Vietnam veterans diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder” (Warren & Karner, 2005, p. 117) to adolescent girls’ behavior (Durham, 1999). Furthermore, interviewing methods have been used in the fields of social science for decades (Warren & Karner, 2005). Wall (1999) conducted interviews in small communities and those interviews gave insight into what characteristics a small town must have to be successful. Tezon (2003) interviewed newspaper publishers, whose quotes added depth and color to her research. Creswell states that using interviews elicits “views and opinions from the participants” (2003, p.188). In this paper, these views and opinions are presented in narrative form to bring order and cohesion to the paper. Many of the constructs in this study can be more easily revealed from doing interviews rather than doing a content analysis, which would show the occurrence of something happening, not why or how it happens (Keyton, 2001).

It is important to point out that the act of storytelling is subjective and that the person being interviewed may not be completely forthcoming (Keyton, 2001). A researcher using interviewing techniques must be concerned about inaccuracies due to poor recall, biased questions and answers, and “reflexivity,” which occurs when an interviewee gives an answer that he or she thinks an interviewer wants to hear (Yin, 1994). In each town visited, six members of the community who were not affiliated with the newspaper were interviewed. They included: the city administrator, school superintendent or principal, a local volunteer, a mayor, a Chamber of Commerce representative and a clergy member. The interviews with community members were used to collect more data, with a range of attitudes and beliefs, which increased the validity of the research (Keyton, 2001). The observation was conducted at the newspaper offices at different times on different days, which is a form of triangulation, or the use of different data to increase the validity of the research (Keyton, 2001).

### Measuring Community Ties

This research is predicated on the assumption that these community journalists made no deliberate effort to separate themselves from community organizations, which is in conflict with journalism codes of conduct and with business management, public administration and other ethical codes of conduct that say employees should remain uninvolved. Information about the level of community involvement of the participants was collected. To gauge participants’ connections to their communities, this research used the three domains of community: community as a place,

community as a social structure and community as a social process (Stamm & Fortini-Campbell, 1983). Stamm and Fortini-Campbell (1983) used a telephone questionnaire to gather their data. Here, the researcher used face-to-face interviews to collect the data, which showed that most of the journalists were connected to their communities through home ownership, business ownership, social networks, and active organizational involvement.

### Sample Selection

Kansas newspapers were chosen as a purposeful sample due to their proximity to the researcher. Weeklies were chosen because they are an understudied area of research (Anderson, personal communication, March 1, 2005). Lauterer (2000) states weekly newspapers and small towns make up the heart of the United States that is often overlooked by academic researchers.

The names of weekly newspapers were collected from the Kansas Newspaper Directory. Doug Anstaett, executive director of the Kansas Press Association, and Tom Eblen, editorial consultant to the Kansas Press Association, were consulted to narrow the sample from 21 candidates to seven. The researcher then conducted a short questionnaire with the weekly newspapers' editors or publishers via telephone to further aid in selection. The final sample was narrowed to five. Information on the five weeklies, including a map of their locations, can be found on page 75. The questionnaire used in the initial interviews can be found in Appendix B. Some of the questions concerned the demographics of the town, such as population, business base, and type and number of schools. Some questions dealt with small-town journalism

and difficult ethical decision-making. Other questions were about community involvement. All participating newspapers were asked whether they thought their community or coverage area had a solid advertising base.

All five of the newspapers selected were weeklies in towns with populations less than 6,000; they had an average population of 2,886. The newspapers reside in communities that have a strong enough advertising base to sustain the newspaper for at least five more years, according to responses given during pre-selection interviews with editors and/or publishers. The communities that these newspapers serve all have local volunteer organizations and, in most cases, the weekly newspapers' employees are involved in these organizations. The smaller staff sizes enabled completion of the research within the four or five days spent at each location. To meet limitations of time and budget the newspapers had to be located within a two- to three-hour driving distance of Lawrence, Kansas.

#### Field Research Methods

The field research that was carried out in the spring and summer of 2005 included driving to these communities on a Thursday and interviewing people in the newspaper office and community during a four- to five-day period. The author went into the news offices Thursday and interviewed staff, observed and set up interviews with at least six community members. Most weeklies are published on Wednesdays, so Thursday was selected as the starting day for the field research. Interviews with the editors and publishers were conducted at their convenience. The average interview lasted about one hour. In cases where one person was the editor and the publisher, or

any participant was involved in both the business and the editorial sides of the newspaper, the interview took longer.

At different times during the research, the newspaper office and the staff's interactions were observed and employees were interviewed. The author chose to interview employees involved in the editorial and business side of the newspaper. Most interviews with community members were conducted after speaking with the newspaper staff. The researcher also examined archived papers, advertising rates and any other newspaper documents.

Creswell (2003) suggests that everything counts as observation during field research, so two notebooks were necessary during each visit. A steno notebook was used for observation; one side of the notebook pages had descriptive notes, and the other side, reflective notes (Creswell, 2003). Another college-ruled notebook contained notes from interviews. A tape recorder with a microphone was used with the interviews. Most of the questions were open-ended, and subjects were asked to be interviewed one-on-one. All but two of the interviews involved "one interviewer and one respondent" (Warren & Karner, 2005, p. 116). Specific stories and experiences about each participant's career and their personal beliefs, goals and affiliations with various organizations were part of the narration that came from interviews.

#### Data Storage and Analysis

After the data was collected, the tapes were transcribed. The tapes were to be kept at the researcher's residence for a period of one year after the research was completed. The first organization of the data was under the category of each weekly

newspaper, in order to decrease the possibility of observations from one case study getting mixed up with another. Then, the data were organized into “chunks” and the researcher looked for themes (Creswell, 2003). The initial process of analyzing themes is often called “open coding” (Warren & Karner, 2005, p. 191.) Some of the themes included conflicts of interest, community pressure, community standards, and the newspapers’ and the journalists’ roles in the communities. These and other major headings act as a code for identifying themes and other pertinent information from the data (Keyton, 2001, Creswell, 2003, Warren & Karner, 2005).

The study’s methodology relied on respondents’ memories. It is possible that some of the data gathered could be the result of respondents’ poor recall (Yin, 1994). In addition, the data could have been weakened by respondents’ unwillingness to be forthcoming with the facts (Creswell, 2003). Getting a participant to feel comfortable talking with a stranger while being interviewed can be difficult, (Warren & Karner, 2005) and could have affected the answers. In addition, respondents may have provided answers to biased questions or given answers that they felt the respondent wanted to hear (Yin, 1994). To help validate the data, the author checked facts presented in interviews with journalists with other employees of the newspaper. This process, called “member checking,” helped identify when people were not being forthcoming (Creswell, 2003).

## FINDINGS

Community journalists in this study didn’t need a degree in journalism to carry out their work. At the time the research was conducted, the *Washington County*

*News* and *The Coffey County Republican* employed no one with a journalism degree. At the *Osawatomie Graphic*, the *Chase County Leader-News* and the *Marion County Record* most of the newsroom employees had journalism degrees or had taken journalism courses. Degree or no degree, the journalists at these newspapers identified with the community they covered, and it showed in their reporting and writing. Those journalists who did not have formal journalism training were aware of community standards, as were those who have taken journalism courses. All of the journalists who participated in this study considered their audiences when making difficult decisions about coverage. In all, 19 working journalists, two retired journalists, six advertising or/and clerical employees, and 32 community members were interviewed.

So, what is the key to doing community journalism? According to Roger Sims, news editor of the *Osawatomie Graphic*, a community journalist's best asset is developing a good relationship with his or her community. Community journalism attempts to foster a positive, intimate relationship between the newspaper and the community, but it is not always an easy approach. Some of these journalists had difficulties separating their personal life from their professional life. A few experienced conflicts of interest with their newspapers and organizations they belong to. Some found that the connections to and their care for the community – in addition to the reliance on advertisers – put pressure on the decisions they make. All of the newspapers' staff seemed to follow unwritten rules, such as keeping consistent in not allowing advertisers' pressures to influence news decisions, among others.



In respect to research question 1, all of the publishers, and the majority of the editors, said they either didn't distinguish between their roles as community members and as journalists or they said it was difficult separating the two. Seventeen out of the 19 journalists said they had at least one membership in a community organization. Eleven journalists were active members of at least three organizations, including service, business, and school organizations. Four – three journalists and one retired journalist – were or had been elected to governmental organizations. The majority of the journalists in this research owned their home and planned to stay in the community. Jerry Schwilling, publisher and editor of the *Chase County Leader-News*, was one publisher who didn't make a distinction between his role as a journalist and his role as a community member. "It's kind of like the clothes I wear. I wear the same clothes at work that I do at home, that I wear everywhere else that I go. I'm in the same package everywhere I go," Schwilling said. Other journalists said:

- "It can't always be as clear-cut as you want," said Greg Branson, publisher of the *Osawatomie Graphic*.
- "Even if I'm involved in something totally separate, I'm also still thinking how this might work into the newspaper or how it might help the situation or bring attention or awareness to the situation," said Dan Thalmann, editor of the *Washington County News*.
- "Sometimes it's nice to go somewhere where people don't know me and not have to be concerned about people wondering if I'm there because I'm working at the newspaper or if I'm just there because I

want to be,” said Donna Bernhardt, managing editor of the *Marion County Record*.

The Faimons at *The Coffey County Republican* said they struggled less on this issue especially since their youngest child’s birth, which forced them to stay at home more and focus on their family. About half of the staff members said they found it difficult to separate their personal life from their job. A higher level of community involvement directly correlated to the difficulty many of the journalists had distinguishing between their personal and professional lives. Some small-town journalists regardless of involvement saw themselves as representatives of the newspaper when they were off work.

Additionally, most of the editors and/or publishers, along with their staff members, worked long hours. “I worked 12-, 14-hour days seven days a week,” said Bill Meyer, retired publisher of the *Marion County Record*. “If you want to have an 8 to 5 job, don’t go into community journalism.” When Sims was the editor of the *Louisburg Herald* he said he worked from 8:30 a.m. to 10 p.m. Monday through Friday and usually on weekends. As the news editor of the *Osawatomie Graphic*, a newspaper with a larger staff, he had fewer long days and said he could spend some time away from his job. Sims, who worked an average of 55 hours each week at the *Osawatomie Graphic*, was one of the few journalists interviewed who said he had distinctly separate personal and work lives. Michael Norris stated he had separate personal and work lives, but they were connected. He saw himself as a representative of the *Marion County Record* at all times. He started covering schools and a school

board district in the summer of 2005, in addition to working as a sports editor/reporter – the job he was hired for in August 2004. In that dual position, Norris said he could work a 40-hour-a-week job, but he wanted to do more in order to do a good job. Norris said he worked “pretty much nonstop” on producing high-quality journalism. “I’m probably the first person in a while that has been able to devote basically 100 percent of my time,” he said, adding that both the newspaper’s coverage and relationship with readers and sources had improved since he’d started. Long hours at work appeared to contribute to the lack of separation between the community journalists’ personal and professional lives. Add that to their accessibility – their offices are downtown and open to the public – and their prominence, as the only media in town, and the separation becomes even more difficult. All of the journalists interviewed said community members often approached them when they were off work and just out-and-about in the community. Additionally, Becky Reeves, news editor of *The Coffey County Republican*, and Mark Petterson, managing editor of the same paper, both said that they had received occasional calls at home, usually from a reader who didn’t receive her paper or a community member trying to get some press.

Fourteen out of the 19 journalists said they struggled to separate their professional lives from their personal lives. The most common reason given was that they thought the public didn’t make such distinctions. “That’s what they see me as. Even though I don’t have my camera or I don’t have my notebook, I’m still a newspaper person,” said Jennifer McDaniel, editor of the *Osawatomie Graphic*. “You can go into a store and hear ‘you’re the newspaper lady.’” Dan Thalmann, editor of

the *Washington County News*, said he could hardly separate his job from his personal life because of his prominence as a journalist in the community.

“I’m not sure people are able to separate me from my job. I mean we pretty much recognize here that if you’re in this business to stay, you’ll always be a newspaper person,” he said. “People will always make comments jokingly or something like, ‘Oh, don’t say that, that newspaper guy’s around.’”

Eleven community members were asked if they always associated their local editor, publisher or reporter with the newspaper or if, when they saw them at town events, they recognized them as a fellow community member. The results were split. Of those asked, about half said they always associated them with the newspaper. Osawatomie Mayor Tom Speck said when he saw local journalists around town he automatically connected them with their job at the *Osawatomie Graphic*. But, Martha Newkirk, local volunteer and life-long Burlington resident, did make the distinction because, she said, of the various roles local journalists play in the community. “I sit on two or three other committees with Mark, and I kind of forget when I’m in there that he’s on the paper, and the same with Becky,” she said. “Unless I see her with a camera, I don’t think about it.”

### Ethical Dilemmas

This research looked for critical incidents – dilemmas that elicited discussion in the newspapers’ offices and conversation among community members. The researcher found that the participants in this study weren’t always able to recall

ethical dilemmas, and some had to think back two to three years. The rate of occurrence of these dilemmas varied among newspapers and journalists. Some journalists said they dealt with problems every week. Others said every month or less frequently.

*Conflicts of interest.* The journalists interviewed were involved in many civic organizations, often reporting on the organizations they belong to. This research was based on the belief that the publishers and managing editors set an example for their staffs regarding the level of involvement that was acceptable. Here are some examples of editors' and publishers' community connections.

- Thalmann received statewide attention in February 2005 as the co-founder of the popular Low German Heritage Society, a group that aims to preserve the nearly extinct dialect; and he covered the story for his newspaper. He was also active in his church, the Kansas Rural Life Task Force and held various board appointments.
- Branson was an active member of the Chamber of Commerce and had served on at least four local committees, including the town's sesquicentennial planning committee.
- McDaniel was a member of the Rotary Club, First Lutheran Church, United Fund, and the Citizens Advisory Board to the Osawatomie State Hospital. She was also filling Branson's term on the Chamber of Commerce and the John Brown Jamboree committee.

- Chris and Catherine Faimon, publishers of *The Coffey County Republican*, scaled back their involvement when their third child was born in April 2005, but they were still involved in Rotary Club.
- Petterson, managing editor of *The Coffey County Republican*, was the mayor of New Strawn, a small town four miles north of Burlington in the paper's coverage area, and was a Republican precinct committeeman for the Republican Central Committee. He also belonged to a local band, Rotary Club, and Jaycees, and was part of the county's strategic planning committee, an appointed position.
- Bernhardt was a board member of the Kiwanis Club and Marion Chamber of Commerce. "And that's really all I'm really involved in just because frankly I don't have the time to devote to a lot of community organizations," she said. She also volunteered at the high school and was a member of the school improvement committee.
- Schwilling was active in his church, serving in several different capacities. He also was a member of the Chase County Chamber of Commerce, and volunteered at the county fair. He also volunteered his time playing bluegrass in the area.

Appendix C provides a more comprehensive list of the community involvement of every newspaper owner and employee interviewed.

So, how involved was too involved? And how did the journalists at these weeklies decide? As mentioned, none of the five newspapers studied had a written set

of ethical guidelines. Some journalists said they hadn't heard of the Society of Professional Journalists Code of Ethics. The consensus in all of the newsrooms was that getting involved with their communities' organizations and events was more a benefit than a potential or real conflict of interest. Involvement helped generate story ideas. Catherine Faimon said she encouraged community involvement in the newsroom. "I know it's taboo in bigger cities," she said. "I think in order to get a feel for the community and to know what's going on we really do need to be involved." McDaniel said she also encouraged staff to be involved with the community as a good way to "keep a finger on the pulse of the community." This included everything from volunteering to coach summer league softball to becoming an active member of a school improvement steering committee. "Truthfully, it's a responsibility, in my mind, as an editor to say yes more than no as much as they can, because you have to help build this community," said Branson, who was part of the school steering committee. "You have to do that. Do you run into conflicts? Yeah, you do. You hope that you figure out the best way to do it."

Many publishers and editors allow or even encourage their staff to be involved with the community, but most news organizations draw the line at political involvement – saying it is a clear conflict of interest. The Society of Professional Journalists Code of Ethics states clearly that journalists are to avoid political involvement or public office. But at these weeklies, it wasn't unusual. When asked whether they allow staff to run for an elected position, three publishers said they didn't think it was their right to prohibit an employee from taking on any

governmental role. Two publishers said that they would not prohibit employees from taking on a governmental role, if that role was served at an institution outside of the newspaper's city or local school district. Meyer said he would prohibit Bernhardt from running for the Marion City Council, but Bernhardt said she wouldn't discourage political involvement of her staff. "I think these city commissions and school boards, they need good solid people, thinking people, people who are in tune with what's going on in the community," she said. "And sometimes those people are hard to find." She added that she would not expect a reporter who was a political official to cover the meetings. Others journalists echoed Bernhardt's statement, saying that so few people exist to take on those roles in small towns that it was unfair to the communities to prohibit their employee from being involved. Greg Branson said, "It goes back to that whole thing about taking a responsibility in the community, and if I worked at a larger daily paper, hell no I wouldn't let them. I don't think I should keep somebody from doing it. I will have a talk with them and tell them about the upsides and downsides, stuff that you may not be able to do." Many journalists at the *Osawatomie Graphic*, said the newspaper sent someone else to cover meetings or events that a co-worker was an active member of, once even sending a reporter from a sister newspaper to cover the Prairie View School Board because Sims, the news editor, was a member of it.

Chris Faimon said that he trusted his staff to be independent as journalists even when they held positions in the government. Specifically he trusted his managing editor, Petterson, to keep his job as mayor of New Strawn, and his job at



the newspaper separate. Schwilling, *Chase County Leader-News* publisher, said he wouldn't want to have the struggle between being the editor of the newspaper and a local politician. He said he was reluctant to run for office.

“It would create a conflict of interest for me to be able to report on it,”

Schwilling said. “It could just be problematic because people could see it as my having an unfair advantage, because I could use the paper as a way to support my agenda, put forward my agenda where they wouldn't have that opportunity.”

He said that he could consider letting his business manager run for office, but that anyone who wrote news content would be discouraged.

At the time of the research, three of the five newsrooms had someone on staff who currently held or had held an elected office. In another newsroom, the retired publisher had held an elected office while working for the paper. Thalmann had been a school board member for two years and reported on the school board at the same time. When he was promoted to editor in August 2003 he retired from the school board, he said, thinking that would be too much potential for a conflict of interest. At the *Osawatomie Graphic*, Sims had served four terms as a school board member for 16 of the last 20 years. He came to the newspaper in 2001 as editor of the section of the newspaper that covered his school district. “When I was hired as the Linn County news editor, part of the agreement was that they would go ahead and send somebody else to cover the board meetings ...” he said. “So they said, ‘We won't make you quit. We understand that in some of these small communities people have to wear

different hats.”” Sims recognized that his involvement could be seen as a conflict of interest, but he tried to make sure that it wasn’t. Sims said he didn’t write, edit or even read the stories about the school board. At *The Coffey County Republican*, the managing editor, Petterson, was mayor of his home town, New Strawn, four miles north of Burlington in the newspaper’s coverage area. The city of 450 people rarely had controversial issues to deal with, Petterson said, so unless one came up, he wrote up the city council stories, which were basically edited versions of the minutes. “He gets treated just like anyone else is. He gets quoted in the paper,” Catherine Faimon said. Petterson also usually reported on the Burlington City Council. Petterson said the situation wasn’t ideal, but explained the newspaper had little, if any, other option with only 12 employees, less than half in news. He admitted there were times when his position posed a conflict of interest because his newspaper did cover the government of New Strawn, where he was mayor. One example of how Petterson handled a conflict-of-interest story was in 2004, when New Strawn city officials enforced the building ordinance on a local family’s tree house. The newspaper sent Reeves, the news editor, to cover that issue. Petterson said shortly after he moved back to New Strawn in 2000 city council members asked him to run for city council. He declined, but the community voted him in as a write-in candidate in 2001. Reeves said she had been asked by county commissioners to run for Burlington City Council in the last election; she declined. For Petterson, his town of 450 people spoke once again and voted him in as mayor in 2003. Petterson said “I kind of got talked into [running for mayor] and I felt that I owed it to our city to run.” He later commented,

“I was the first person to grow up in New Strawn to become the mayor.” Although he said it was a great experience, Petterson was hesitant to run for re-election; he said he was going to try to find someone else to be mayor when his term ends in 2007.

Finally, retired publisher of the *Marion County Record*, Bill Meyer, was a school board member. “I was complaining once and they said ‘If you know so damn much why don’t you run for school board?’ So I did. And I was on for 14 years,” Meyer said. He said he wrote the stories about the school board, adding: “It’s not fair. See, I could put my spin on it, and people probably thought I did. I tried not to. They always told me that you need to be objective, not subjective.”

The one newspaper that didn’t have someone who had served on a governing body was the *Chase County Leader-News*. But editor and publisher Schwilling was no stranger to governing bodies and conflicts of interest. He said he used to have weekly lunches with the county commissioners until community members told him that he was participating in what appeared to be a “good ‘ol boy network.” He said no county business was discussed, but he quit having lunch with them after receiving several complaints from community members. Schwilling also said he was active at governmental meetings beyond just attending, taking notes and asking the occasional question. Both Schwilling and Thalmann, at the *Washington County News*, said they were trying to talk less, but that was difficult given the different roles they played in their communities. “I’m a journalist, but I’m also a taxpayer,” Schwilling said.

Despite the journalists’ level of involvement, every journalist in this study and a large majority of community members who were interviewed said they believed the

newspapers carried out their role as news providers in ethical ways. Most of the participants – journalists and non-journalists – said the community organizations journalists belonged to did not receive favorable coverage compared to other organizations. Thalmann said in order to remain objective he often made content decisions by asking himself what the *Salina Journal* or the *Topeka Capital-Journal* would do. When asked how they stay objective, some of the community journalists dismissed the idea of objectivity, favoring another tenet of journalism – fairness.

“There is no real such thing as objective. What you’re searching for is fairness. That is what you’re really trying to attain ... You’re talking with this person about this issue; you want to talk to the other side about this issue. That’s not objectivity; that’s fairness,” said Branson, publisher of the *Osawatomie Graphic*.

Petterson, managing editor of *The Coffey County Republican*, said his paper usually tried to be fair, but sometimes reporting all sides of an issue in a small town was difficult. “I think sometimes people don’t want to tell their side of the story. Sometimes they want to tell too much,” he said. Schwillling said he tried to stay objective, tell the truth and keep his opinions to himself. His method wasn’t the one used by some of the other journalists, but he said it worked for him. Schwillling intentionally wrote stories in a straight-forward, matter-of-fact way, so he said he could “stay objective, and so I can talk to everybody.” For example, Chase County Commission meeting stories written by Schwillling rarely had quotes and read like edited-versions of the minutes. According to the mayor of Cottonwood Falls, Dan

Riggs, “he does exactly what a good news provider does, gives both sides of the story and doesn’t try to slant it one way or the other. He puts the facts out there, and you make up your own mind.” Kay Lauer, Strong City Grocery store owner, said she’d like to see the paper be a little more opinionated. “I think people would like a little more of a stance taken. They’d like to see – if there’s something that needs to be addressed in the community then the paper should be giving some direction there. It’s okay to have an opinion.” Lauer was part of a group that brought Schwilling to town to open a rival newspaper to the *Chase County Leader-News*. The *Chase County Pioneer* opened in July 1993 and closed in October 1994 when the owner of the *Chase County Leader-News* died and Schwilling merged the papers. Lauer said Schwilling was a lot less controversial than a previous owner, who she said, editorialized in news stories, which she didn’t like. Schwilling said he struggled sometimes with not editorializing in some stories, and it bothered him when he did, which wasn’t very often. When Schwilling did let his personal feelings for the community influence decisions on coverage, it usually involved accentuating the positive about the community in stories, especially those regarding sports and community events, he said. Many of the other journalists also said they tried to frame their stories in positive ways. Gordon Schrader, owner of Schrader Insurance in Osawatomie, said the *Osawatomie Graphic* tended to praise the city more than be critical of it. Positive stories and headlines were common, especially in sports-related stories. Susan Cooper, news reporter for the *Marion County Record*, said she didn’t think it was difficult to be unbiased in a small-town newspaper, but she said “it takes

the right kind of person to be able to do that, to be able to set aside personal feelings and differences to do the job. It's a delicate balance." In each community at least one community member, sometimes more, commented that the newspaper negatively reflected the community. Bernhardt, managing editor of the *Marion County Record*, sent out a survey to readers in July 2005 and found that a common complaint was that the paper was too negative. She said she was trying to write editorials that were less "hard-hitting" to try to answer this complaint.

Another challenge and sometimes conflict for these small-town journalists was dealing with friends and relatives as sources. Those journalists who were native to the communities they served tended to struggle the most with this issue. "Everybody is related to everybody else. You run into that family issue quite a bit," Bernhardt said. As mentioned in the introduction, Thalmann's step-sister was the Washington County attorney at the time of this research. Thalmann reported on court news for his newspaper and quoted his step-sister at times. McDaniel's husband worked for the sheriff's department. They had never worked a scene together; but she said, if they ever did, she knew he wouldn't give her any special access or information, and she wouldn't expect it. Reeves had triplets who were juniors in high school at the time of this research; but the three, who were outstanding students and athletes, only occasionally got their faces and names published in the paper. Co-workers said they often tried to avoid publishing news about Reeves' triplets because they didn't want to be perceived as favoring the news editor's children. Being related to residents in the newspaper's coverage area wasn't always a negative. Kevin

Kinder, Linn County editor at the *Osawatomie Graphic*, said there was a real “familial quality” to living and working as a journalist in a small community. “I have a natural tie-in to the community to say, ‘Listen I’m one of you. I’m a part of this community experience, and I have a right and a place here,’” he said.

*Community pressures.* Possible conflicts of interest were only one downside to being active in the community. Journalists mentioned other concerns. McDaniel that community groups she belonged to in Osawatomie often made her feel like their public relations representative. Catherine Faimon and Reeves both stated that they had been appointed to the “publicity” committees of the organizations they belonged to. Usually, *The Coffey County Republican*, like several of the other newspapers, had space to publish stories promoting a business or event. Petterson, the managing editor, said he did feel that these types of promotions were relevant to the readers. The journalists said they tried to give equal coverage to all organizations, but Reeves said coverage decisions sometimes followed the cliché “the squeaky wheel gets the grease.”

Community pressures came up in various forms at these newspapers. Some journalists, especially editors, said they had been asked by a source to withhold information. Petterson said he was once offered \$50 to keep a man’s name out of the Register of Deeds record. He didn’t accept it, and the name ran. Arrests and crime listings were the area where journalists received the most requests to leave a name out of the newspaper. Years ago, Carol Chitwood, reporter and copy editor for the *Osawatomie Graphic* who at the time worked as the cops and courts reporter, said

someone came into the newspaper office and threatened her because his name was published in the public record. The man stopped when the chief of police walked up behind Chitwood. A co-worker had called him to the newspaper office and let him in the back door. She said:

“You know, everyone who is in the police blotter would rather not be in the paper, but sometimes there are some bigger stories that you are going to run, and people are going to be upset about it. And I can understand that. And I think everybody else can understand it. But if it’s a major thing that warrants being pulled out of the police blotter and run, I think we have to do it.”

Meyer, retired publisher of the *Marion County Record*, said the newspaper’s coverage of crime over the years had resulted in the window near his desk being shot out, the building being spraypainted with obscenities and the tires on his car being slashed. Despite these examples, the editors and staff at all five weeklies said they were consistent in publishing everything from the public record. Thalmann said that when someone told him not to report on something, for example his step-sister telling him not to report on a sexual abuse case, that gave him even more incentive to report it. McDaniel said people who try to leverage their community or official clout over the newspaper were wasting their time. There were some decisions made with pleasing the community in mind. Michael Norris, sports editor/reporter at the *Marion County Record*, said he had been asked to not report on the score of the local high school game, adding “obviously I’m going to put it in ... but we come out once a



week and if there's two games, I'm going to make my big story on the one they won, and then just a little thing on the one they lost."

All the journalists interviewed said that, at times, sources asked them to let them preview the story. Usually, the journalists said they didn't comply. What they commonly did was read parts of the story to the source or checked facts with the source. There were exceptions. Jeremy Gaston, sports reporter/editor at *The Coffey County Republican*, said he was willing to hand over stories to sources if he thought the source was just checking for accuracy. He said he wouldn't make changes the source requested unless they were "relevant." *Washington County News* sports editor/reporter Marcia Hubbard said she once was told by a source, who was influential in the community, "I'm not asking you to let me see the story; I'm telling you that you will let me see the story." She did because she said she was scared of the source, and because the story was not controversial. She said she usually read back quotes or checked facts with sources.

*Upholding community standards.* All of the community newspapers provided coverage that showed sensitivity to community standards. Some journalists reflected on how stories could have been done differently. Looking back on the coverage of Miss Nude North America, who lived in Coffey County, Petterson said he would have changed the story he wrote. The newspaper printed the details of the contest and a picture of the woman in her swimming suit and received several complaints from readers. Some even canceled their subscriptions, he said. Catherine Faimon said the newspaper went into "greater detail than we should have." "We had a lot of people

who complained, but it was also our best-selling edition ever,” Chris Faimon added. On the first sexual abuse-related preliminary hearing he ever had to cover, Thalmann agonized over what information to put into the story and what to leave out. He said the 10-inch story took him two hours to write. And he asked three members of his staff to proofread it. Thalmann said he thought writing with sensitivity toward community standards and the alleged victims of the crime would be better than telling all of the shocking details of a sexual crime. Details about crime, death, or traffic accidents, particularly fatality accidents, led to community complaints, the journalists said. Photos of accidents also upset readers. Catherine Faimon favored reporting the truth over appeasing angry readers regarding printing stories about crime and accidents. “We don’t really have a set policy on how to determine what news goes in and what doesn’t go in. Probably 99 percent of the time we will report it, because we will always have people who are upset,” she said. Although the five newspapers had no written policies, all said they had an unwritten rule to never publish dead body photos, and all followed that rule. Some newspapers typically published a mug shot of the person who died. A few accident stories and photos, even if they didn’t have dead bodies in them, did receive some complaints.

For almost all of the journalists, gauging community standards wasn’t hard because local residents recognized their editors on the street and approached them frequently. McDaniel recalled a time when she was approached by a victim of a tragedy. A mother in mourning stopped her on the street and cursed her and the newspaper for publishing news about her son’s death in a car accident. McDaniel said

the woman just wanted to “vent.” Schwilling said some local residents complained when the newspaper did not cover accidents. With only Schwilling and one other reporter, sometimes they had difficulty covering accidents, he said. Occasionally journalists couldn’t really say why they published certain stories or photos. Several journalists said decisions about coverage of controversial issues usually just required common sense.

By and large, the sports reporters and editors said they wrote in a way that the community could identify with by staying positive and, as Jeff Gulley asserted, by being a permanent record that student-athletes could look back on with pride. Gulley was the *Osawatomie Graphic’s* sports editor and, as with most community weeklies, he was the reporter, photographer and editor. He said he didn’t write stories about high school suspensions. Even one time when all of the senior starters were suspended from a district game, Gulley didn’t publish it in the newspaper. The students didn’t need to be more embarrassed than they already were, he said. As the publisher of the *Chase County Leader-News*, Schwilling handled a similar situation differently. He reported on how a student-athlete was suspended from school for allegedly smoking marijuana in the school gym. Schwilling said “If I had not written about that my credibility would have been ruined,” because the information was spreading all over town in the form of gossip. Though most of the town knew the name of the student, Schwilling didn’t publish the name. Still, the parents of the student arranged a meeting with Schwilling to tell him that their son was contemplating suicide, in part because of the publicity, he said. Stories relating to

violations of school codes, especially when athletes were involved, were mainly the ones that caused sports editors and reporters to feel pressure from the community, namely from the coaches, high school athletes' families or sometimes from the school administration. Norris said occasionally he collaborated with school officials on story ideas. "I'll talk to them," he said. "If there is a story idea that I have, I will kind of ask them, not 'What do you want me to write,' but you know, 'What would you like to see in there. Give me some ideas.'" He said he sometimes made headlines sound good even when the team lost "not so no one is mad at me, but, you know, it's basically Marion fans who are reading it." In addition, the stories that the journalists thought would be too sensational or offensive for the front page would occasionally be printed on an inside page – a decision based on community standards.

Norris said parents had frequently asked for stories about their children, especially when they participated in sports that were not routinely covered by the newspaper. He said finding space in the news budget wasn't a problem, so if the story was in or close to Marion County, usually he wrote the stories and published them the next week. All of the newspapers in this study accepted story ideas and citizen submissions. As noted, these newspapers were small. The employees and the community members realized that they were not able to write every story about the community or cover all angles of an issue. Press releases from local community organizations and churches were published in all five newspapers. Some of them were run verbatim, and some editors edited out parts of press releases that seemed to have a clear advertising message.

*Advertising pressures.* Journalists at all five newspapers said advertisers rarely made requests that led to dilemmas. This may have been the case because all five newspapers said their newspapers had an unwritten policy that the news should not be influenced by advertising pressure. At *The Coffey County Republican*, Catherine Faimon said there were some advertisers who expected a story with advertising they purchased; but her paper, as well as the four others, rarely, if ever, wrote stories that were “free ads.” Sometimes advertisers did get a story in, but only if it was newsworthy, as determined by the editors. Chris Faimon said the newspaper staff didn’t feel pressured because advertisers hadn’t ever come right out and said “If you don’t do a story, we’re not going to run an ad.” When asked if they faced pressure from advertisers to change their content or stop reporting on something, the Faimons said they had never been faced with such a situation.

The most frequent source of advertising pressure came from local business owners. The business owners and former business owners interviewed in this study said they had never heard of or witnessed advertisers/business owners asking for that kind of favor, but four journalists at four different newspapers said that business owners in their town have pressured them. These accounts involved business owners who had been arrested or had a relative in trouble with the law wanting names withheld from the newspaper’s police record. The editors said they never acquiesced to those requests. Even when advertisers threatened to pull their ads, the editors and publishers said they weren’t swayed from reporting the facts. The five newspapers were consistent in saying no to advertisers’ requests regarding changing the news

content. “We would rather lose the advertiser and report honestly and ethically, than think about the money because it will come back eventually,” Catherine Faimon said. At the *Osawatomie Graphic*, which had a separate ad staff, the staff hadn’t felt the need to respond to advertisers’ news-related requests because few advertisers made them, said Paul Branson, Greg Branson’s father, who’d worked there for more than 40 years. The *Osawatomie Graphic* had a long-standing unwritten policy that coverage of news events wouldn’t be determined by who advertised with the newspaper. Even if they lost an advertising client, Paul Branson said the newspaper would survive. “We can’t control this. It’s really not financially scary,” he said. “We’ve gone down this track for a long time, with all three papers that have the same really strict philosophy. And so, it’s not a threat, and so you are not faced with it all the time.” Of the community participants asked about advertising pressures on the news content, all of them said they thought their local newspaper was not influenced by advertisers’ own agendas. More than half of the community participants were asked if they thought the news staff would not publish a story if an advertiser asked them not to. One person said that could happen, while the rest of the community members said that they had never heard or seen that happening. The newsworthiness of a story was determined by the editors, and not by the advertisers, according to about a dozen community members’ responses. Advertisers had to pay for publicity, meaning the newspaper didn’t publish stories that were basically free advertisements, said Claudia Pottorf, assistant at the Coffey County Chamber of Commerce. All of the newspapers’ staff members said that business stories were published only when

they were newsworthy. Some journalists mentioned that the parts of press releases that advertised a business or for-profit event were usually edited out. Schrader, owner of Schrader Insurance in Osawatomie, said that advertising pressure on news content was common 25 to 30 years ago, but not today.

Many of the newspaper employees interviewed said few advertisers and subscribers had left the newspaper because they were upset with the news content. Out of those who had, most came back. Bill Meyer, retired publisher of the *Marion County Record*, during his more than 50 years of experience had heard from several advertisers, upset about some of his more controversial editorials. He said when a sports editor wrote a column that attempted to make fun of the long-standing rivalry between Marion and the neighboring town of Hillsboro, the community didn't get the subtle humor. Meyer said some advertisers viewed the column as a serious piece of work and complained that it caused more commotion and animosity between the two towns. Some canceled their advertisements, but Meyer said the newspaper survived. And eventually the advertisers came back. Paul Branson said that he convinced business owners to advertise in the *Osawatomie Graphic* because of the market the paper reaches, and not because business owners agreed or disagreed with what was printed within its pages. The few accounts of boycotts by advertisers did not result in huge monetary losses for the newspapers. In Cottonwood Falls, a few advertisers upset with a previous editor's news decisions boycotted the newspaper because of the publication of controversial stories and editorials in the early 1990s before Schwilling became editor, he said. The advertisers eventually returned to the *Chase County*

*Leader-News*. Meyer; his managing editor, Bernhardt; Thalmann at the *Washington County News*; and several other journalists said that sometimes news content was used as an excuse to quit by advertisers who could not afford to advertise.

The research found that all of the newspapers provided two favors routinely: publishing advertisements past their deadlines and giving free publicity to community fundraisers for victims of disasters and illnesses. And, Schwilling said he gave advertising discounts to his church.

Two journalists were involved in both reporting the news and selling advertising. Schwilling said his dual role had not created any problems for the newspaper, adding that some advertisers preferred to do business with the publisher. Hubbard, sports editor and advertising manager at the *Washington County News*, said her two desks were symbolic of the way she kept her two jobs separate in her mind. She said sports and advertising motives didn't conflict. She also said she had never been in a situation where she had to choose between appeasing an advertiser's request and publishing the truth even if it meant the newspaper would lose that advertiser.

*Economics*. These newspapers had been in business since the late 1800s. Through dramatic changes in the economy, these papers prevailed. Still, at the time of this research, all five communities had empty storefronts on Main Street or downtown. Some of the journalists commented on their concerns for the future of their communities. Greg Branson and his father said they'd seen many local businesses close during the last 20 to 25 years, which was hurting local organizations.



“There’s only so many leaders in a small town, and they are getting fewer and far between all the time,” Greg Branson said. “You had all these institutions that required leaders to be part of – to be not only on committees, but to make sure the community functioned.”

Greg Branson said some of the responsibility to lead the community was put in the lap of the newspaper. About half of the newspaper employees were active leaders in the community. Thalmann, a self-identified “booster,” had this to say about the town of Washington: “We need to take care of it. We need to promote it to the next generation. We don’t do a very good job of that.” Schwilling said Cottonwood Falls was at “minimum operating capacity, minimum services,” but hoped rising gas prices would compel people to shop at home. There was something to be optimistic about in this little-known tourist destination, Schwilling said. The county’s population was on the rise. In 2000, Chase County’s population increased for the first increase in 100 years, by about 6 people, he said. Bernhardt revealed what she hoped wouldn’t happen to her community. When asked whether she planned to remain in the community for another four years, Bernhardt replied:

“I hope so. Marion isn’t really as well off as it could be. I’m sure we are going to be here in four years, but I’m not sure it’s going to be the same community that I grew up in, that I raised my kids in. If we are just going to be a bunch of houses and two or three convenience stores and no hospital and no schools, then I don’t think I want to live here.”

Some community members also answered questions about the economic vitality of their communities, and many of the responses reflected a lack of vitality. Responses from community members, especially those involved in civic groups or government, and even those who had negative reviews of their newspapers showed a belief that the towns had a need for a newspaper that supported the community. More than one community member echoed with a comment made by Jami Williams, local volunteer and Marion resident. She said the paper needed to be the community's "eye to the outside world," and show that Marion was a town worth living in. When asked to comment on his local newspaper, Malcolm Stamm, business owner and life-long Washington resident, alluded to the difficulty of owning a business in Washington. He said, "I got a lot of respect for Dan [Thalmann] being the young guy that comes into the town and tries to make a go of it at any business in town." The mayor of Washington, Travis Kier, confirmed that hardship when he said, "I think you see an increased need for organizations like the Chamber [of Commerce] to hopefully solidify what is here and to help promote everybody, not one, but all." He added that Thalmann did a good job – usually in his editorials – of promoting the development of local businesses. Tom Speck, mayor of Osawatomie, commented on the decline of business in town. He said Osawatomie once had three men's clothing stores, 11 gas stations and five grocery stores. Now, he said he couldn't find a work shirt in town. And, the town had just one grocery store.

"I think more than saying that the communities have failed, is that the transportation system has gotten so much better. It was very rare when

I was growing up in Osawatomie that people commuted to work,” Speck said. “They lived where they worked. Well, now that’s not the case. So, the smaller communities had a great difficulties staying up and giving the people those things that they could get in bigger communities.”

Jon Hotaling, the economic development director for Coffey County, praised *The Coffey County Republican* for writing editorials that supported shopping locally and for covering business closures. “A lot of times when these businesses fail and you read it in the paper,” he said. “And you say ‘Maybe I should have gone there more often’ or ‘Maybe I didn’t patronize that business.’” Mayor of Burlington, Rick Raymer, said the city had been losing some downtown businesses, and had offered interest-free loans for renovating downtown businesses in order to help the local economy. Residents and journalists in Burlington were more optimistic about the local economy. Raymer was one of 1,031 people, in a county of 8,865 people, employed at the Wolf Creek Power Plant. Most community members said the nuclear power plant – the county’s largest employer – had boosted the local economy and aided the hospital and the schools.

Kier noted a connection between the decline in business and decline in population in Washington. “Our region has suffered terribly in the last 20 years. We’ve had a huge decline in population out here.” Washington County had a decreasing, aging population; Coffey County’s population was stagnant; Miami County and the surrounding counties were growing as Kansas City expanded, but

small-town residents there were worried about the effects on their local businesses. Marion County's population had decreased over the previous four years, and beyond, (U.S. Census, 2004), and Bernhardt said the paper had lost circulation during that time. As noted, Chase County grew in population since the 2000 census, but was still one of Kansas' smallest counties, with a population of 3,068 (U.S. Census, 2004). At all five newspapers, publishers had to adapt as economic factors changed the world around them. Branson said it was an old way of thinking to believe that local retailers would continue to be the bread and butter of small-town newspapers. He said newspapers – and chains have had more success at this than independents – needed to sell their market and their circulation to big retailers – the local, mom-and-pop store's enemies – in order to survive. The *Osawatomie Graphic* shared advertising with Greg Branson's two other newspapers, the *Louisburg Herald* and the *Miami County Republic* – all in Miami County. The *Marion County Record*, the largest of three newspapers owned by Hoch Publishing Co., Inc., shared advertising and circulation revenue with its sister papers, the *Hillsboro Star Journal* and the *Peabody Gazette*. Thalmann, who was buying the *Washington County News*, said he had thought of some alternative streams of revenue in case local advertising started to dry up. Some of these newspapers, like *The Coffey County Republican*, sold office supplies to bring in some extra revenue. But, none of them charged for obituaries.

#### Interviews with community members

Like all of the community members interviewed for this study, the Coffey County economic development director was on a first-name basis with his local

journalists. And like many others, Jon Hotaling had talked with his local journalists on several occasions, both formal and informal, such as at Rotary meetings and at county planning meetings. According to interviews, all five of the newspapers could be counted on to be reliable and unswervingly local. In some communities, residents gathered at the post office waiting for the newspaper on the day it came out. Ted Hunter, Osawatomie city council member and retired Methodist pastor, said the *Osawatomie Graphic's* local coverage was "its main draw." "I think the newspaper is a very beloved part of the community," said Deb Zeiner, administrative director of the Chase County Chamber of Commerce. "They're my friends and neighbors," said Riggs, mayor of Cottonwood Falls. As mentioned, some of the community members were related to the local journalists.

Most of community members said journalists' coverage of friends or relatives or involvement with local organizations was not a conflict of interest. Michael Stegman, superintendent of the Unified School District No. 222 in Washington, explained it this way: "I call it a conflict of interest if you, if you take sides because of your friendships or kinships." He said he thought that didn't happen at the *Washington County News*. In Strong City, a business owner and life-long resident, who asked to remain anonymous, said the *Chase County Leader-News's* weakness was not being involved in more organizations and attending more community events. Martha Newkirk, local volunteer and life-long Burlington resident, said small-town journalists' community ties to people and organizations allowed them to discern when a news tip was from a legitimate source or not. "It might help them be more

discerning and knowing..." she said. "So, they know the people more. So, it would keep them from jumping in the middle of something that they would be sorry for later."

Some residents interviewed were concerned about journalists who were elected officials. Three officials from two different communities commented on how journalists' involvement as elected officials concerned them. One of the reasons offered was that those journalists likely knew too much confidential or sensitive material, therefore they faced a conflict between their loyalties as politicians and their loyalties as news providers. Raymer, mayor of Burlington for two years, remembered wondering if Petterson, the managing editor of *The Coffey County Republican* and mayor of New Strawn, was going to cover Burlington City Council meetings. "My spotting glasses were on, and I was really watching him closely to see if the style and topic he was using was going to change. And really I didn't see anything obvious." Raymer said he was upset over some of the columns Petterson wrote after he was elected New Strawn's mayor. But Raymer also said Petterson had offered to publish a column by the Burlington mayor. Raymer declined at the time.

Aside from memberships in local organizations and churches, the community members shared another thread with local journalists. Both the community members interviewed and the newspaper employees recognized the important role of their newspapers. Hotaling said the newspaper served several roles. "It informs and clarifies issues ... it informs the public, and, like I said, sometimes rumors gets started about a certain business or an event or whatever, and the newspaper can print

the true story and that helps keep rumors, non-facts, from dominating the public.” He said *The Coffey County Republican* was doing a good job fulfilling those roles. The newspapers acted not only as informers, but also as historians, watchdogs, mirrors and advocates of community spirit, togetherness and growth. Rick Weiss, superintendent of the Chase County Schools, said “I think it’s great to have somebody who truly appreciates their home and wants to make it a better place to live in.” Pat Ireland, minister of the First Presbyterian Church in Cottonwood Falls, said she thought the newspaper’s mission was to shape the community. Many others had similar thoughts.

- “It fits the small-town role of highlighting what we do. Without the newspaper how would we know about the deaths, about the weddings, all the things that go on in the community, the sports – they do a good job with sports. But just other things. People can make fun of it all they want to and people from bigger cities do, but I really think we enjoy it in a small town because we know everybody,” said Newkirk, local volunteer and life-long Burlington resident.
- “How can a newspaper not be a leader in the community? You got a lot more power in print than what a lot of people think. A newspaper can create a lot of problems, or it can do things that are good for the community,” said Tim Schook, city administrator of Washington.
- “The newspaper serves the role as being a vehicle to communicate, not only what’s happening, but giving you a forecast maybe of where

things have been and what different organizations, clubs and events are happening. It's a neat way to tie everything together and to make the community closer," said Travis Kier, mayor of Washington and local grocer.

- "Most of the time we wouldn't know what's going on in county government, city government, school board meetings, things that affect us here. There's no place else to get that. There just isn't another source that's aimed at us ... That's why I even bother reading the paper. It's the local stuff that nobody else covers or nobody else covers as well, and that's what they do for us," said Larry King, pastor at the Good News Christian Fellowship Church in Marion.

King spoke of a role that most all of the other participants hadn't mentioned – that his newspaper, the *Marion County Record*, "is a source for most of us for decision-making."

All of the newspapers placed a high emphasis on their duty to report on local governmental entities, like county commissions, school boards and city councils. Tom Speck, mayor of Osawatomie, liked the fact that his newspaper was "the eyes and ears of the community." He went on to explain:

"A typical council meeting for us will have maybe 10 citizens attend ... everybody else either doesn't care or is satisfied with the way things are going. So oftentimes the only way they know what's going on in the city is it being run in the paper. Yes, I think they have a very important



role, and to a degree, which is not bad, they keep the rest of us on our toes and honest. Where you get into a lot of controversy sometimes would be executive session, the Freedom of Information and open meetings and those kinds of issues. In fact, there have been times where I had to refer to them because they knew the act better than I did.”

Still, Gordon Van Zile, minister of the Christian Church in Burlington, expressed his dismay at the focus on government stories:

“It seems to be a common practice in a small town. I don’t see the paper reporting maybe the details of individuals and families as much as their role in reporting what’s happening in county government and with the school board and the schools.”

Zeiner said the *Chase County Leader-News* did a good job of covering meetings, crime, community club events and the like. Nevertheless, she said she would like to see more issue stories, but knew there was a good reason Schwilling didn’t do issue stories very often. “In a small community if you tackle the issues too much he’s afraid he’ll lose subscribers.” Zeiner said she’d rather have a newspaper that didn’t “rock the boat than one that did and ceased to exist.”

About half of the community members provided at least one example of how their newspaper could improve. One community member who asked to remain anonymous said the local newspaper was not fair and honest and reflected only one side of certain issues. Among other readers’ complaints were:

- The newspaper reflected too much of the owner's beliefs.
- There were too many typos and spelling errors.
- The journalists did not live in the communities they worked in.
- There were too many stories that focused on one town instead of the whole county or other towns in the coverage area.
- Instead of uniting people, the newspaper divided community members and towns.
- The newspaper hadn't changed and probably never would, even if community members offered suggestions to the editors or publishers.

A few community members also commented about inconsistencies in the newspaper. The community members who thought negatively of their towns' newspaper did not take pride or ownership in the newspaper and preferred to get their news from their neighbors, other newspapers or other forms of media.

Despite readers' negative comments about their newspapers, all but one community member thought their newspaper was ethical. Answers to questions regarding conflicts of interest revealed that more than three-fourths of community members thought the newspapers' coverage was not biased in favor of organizations journalists belonged to. Most community members also thought their newspaper did not serve anyone's agenda, and did not bow to unethical community pressures or inducements. King, pastor at the Good News Christian Fellowship Church and resident of Marion for 20 years, said some Marion County residents "have quite a bit of influence," but that influence wouldn't keep their names out of the paper's criminal

and arrests records. The newspaper consistently published the names of community members who were arrested. (The journalists also stated that they would publish their own names or the names of their family members in the newspapers' crime records.) Riggs, mayor of Cottonwood Falls, said he didn't believe any of the four staff members at the *Chase County Leader-News* would do anything unethical. Riggs said Cottonwood Falls was not the type of community to "manipulate the news media."

The majority of the community members said they thought their newspapers had improved since they'd been readers. "I think he's trying to get a really good flavor. It's better than it was," Raymond Bott said about Thalmann. "I think it's much gentler and kinder than it was a while back, but maybe, maybe a little too much so," said Bott, a real estate broker and auctioneer in Washington. Thalmann, who had no journalism background, wanted his community to read a "real" newspaper, and not a gossip column. In Washington, as in many of the communities, the stereotype of the weekly newspaper as a social "rag" was fading. "I hear people refer to it as the local gossip paper, but I don't think so, [not] as much now as it used to be," said Van Zile, minister at the Christian Church of Burlington. Joan Boyer, Osawatomie city manager, said the stereotype of the weekly newspaper being full of gossip and feature stories was not true for the *Osawatomie Graphic*. Among the adjectives readers used to describe their weeklies were: "honest," "friendly," "progressive," "thorough," "consistent" and "open to people's opinions." Community members often liked the fact that their newspapers contained all local news. New ownership and staff, the addition of color and new presses and designs were also some of the improvements.

Thirty-one out of 32 community members also stated that the newspapers were objective or tried hard to be objective. Also, all of the community members interviewed, except for one, said they trusted their local journalists. Many trusted their small-town journalists more than state or national journalists, and their newspapers more than mainstream media. “On a national newspaper level, they’re definitely not the quality individual that you have in a small-town newspaper,” said Robert Cook, superintendent Osawatomie Unified School District No. 367. “I think some of them are pretty biased, and I think that they slant to one side pretty heavy, the liberal side.” A small-town journalist knows when not to push a story, he said. Some of the community members, especially those who had been interviewed by state and national journalists, agreed with Cook’s opinion that bigger media are more profit-driven and less respectful of sources’ time and thoughts. Some, like Weiss in Cottonwood Falls, thought that state and national media were more sensational. Others said that bigger media seemed to be more liberal. Community members also said the big-city newspapers and television stations usually didn’t cover their towns unless a murder or other serious crime occurred. All community members agreed that for local news their local weeklies were the most reliable source.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Many of the answers to the interview questions provided information that was community-specific, but the data were generalizable or applicable to the population of small-town weekly newspapers. Small-town newspapers were able to identify with their communities more because they were involved. “Not having any connection at

all would be very difficult,” said Schwilling, the publisher and editor of the *Chase County Leader-News*. Thalmann, editor of the *Washington County News*, and Greg Branson, publisher of the *Osawatomie Graphic*, along with other journalists, had connected to their communities in the three ways Keith Stamm and Lisa Fortini-Campbell examined in their 1983 study on community ties and newspaper readership. They had ties to their communities as a place; as group, neighborhood or a family; and as decision-makers and facilitators of community issues. The publishers and most of the editors were attached to their communities and always had been. Many journalists expected they would never leave their towns. Five journalists had been at their job for 10 years or more. Five journalists had been at their job for five to nine years. And, nine journalists had been at their job for four years or less.

All of these journalists had positive comments about their communities, and all believed that the newspaper’s service to the community would continue, even in towns where some businesses could not. Furthermore, all of them believed the newspaper would be there much longer than they would. The research found that the community members trusted their journalists to be ethical and seemed to respect and understand the newspaper’s role. Likewise, the journalists understood their roles – to belong to their communities, to participate in them and to do right by the stakeholders. Chris Faimon, publisher of *The Coffey County Republican*, reflected the views of many of those interviewed at the newspapers and in the communities, saying: “When they say community newspaper I guess it really means we’re just

stewards of the newspaper. We're just operating it right now, but really the community owns it."

Small-town journalists didn't just share a common thread with their communities; they shared the whole blanket. Regarding research question 1, fourteen of 19 journalists found it difficult to separate their personal lives from their professional lives for several reasons. More than half of the journalists said that they never were really off work and that they were always listening for story ideas. Community involvement, which at times included holding elected and/or civic positions, kept them thinking of news stories. All of the publishers encouraged civic involvement for that reason and also because too few community members were available to fill these roles. All of the editors said they wouldn't prohibit their employees from running for office, but would discuss the pros and cons with the employee. The line between newspaper and community roles was blurred by the typical work load, accessibility to the public, and personal and professional commitment to community. The observed behavior and interviews with journalists showed a strong connection to the structure of the town. The journalists were members of groups or organizations and maintained those memberships. Appendix C lists many ties these newspaper employees and owners had to their communities. The newspaper employees shared a need to be civically involved. Petterson, managing editor of *The Coffey County Republican*, was not alone when he expressed his duty to his town. "Everybody has to kind of step up and take part in the community," he said.

Despite all of these connections, conflicts of interest did not seem to be a problem at these community newspapers. Most of the community members and journalists said the organizations that journalists belonged to did not receive preferential treatment in the newspapers. By and large, there was no evidence of favoritism by the newspaper toward organizations or sources. Despite the relationships small-town journalists had with their sources and readers, they were still able to stay objective or at least fair and balanced in the eyes of most community members. At least three community members in each town commented that the journalists acted professionally and ethically even when covering organizations they belonged to or people they knew personally. While a few community members were skeptical of the ability of journalists to be political leaders, they were out-numbered by the locals who were not concerned with journalists' political involvement.

A reciprocated community trust between the journalists and their readers appeared to exist on many levels. "They're my neighbors. I trust my neighbors," said Riggs, mayor of Cottonwood Falls. "I don't think anybody who works down there has any axes to grind. They're just people like everybody else in this community." Raymer, the mayor of Burlington, said "I think they sincerely try to do a job to respect everyone." Many community members shared his belief. Weekly readers relied upon their newspaper as a much-anticipated source of information. In all of these towns, the newspaper was the only source of local information. "No one else reports on anything down here," said Pottorf, the assistant at the Coffey County Chamber of Commerce. Many other readers in this study echoed this fact. In turn,

journalists relied on the public to tell them about the news, especially regarding social happenings and local events. Due to the nature of small towns, there was a familiarity between the reader and the journalist. Readers knew the journalists by name and weren't hesitant to come up and talk to them or stop in the newspaper offices for a chat.

Regarding research question 2, there was evidence that these five newspapers faced or had faced some overt and subtle advertising pressures, but no evidence that these newspapers succumbed to those pressures. Community members, sources, friends and relatives rarely tried to influence the content of the newspapers. The journalists in this study tried to avoid letting advertisers and community members influence the news content. Some of the pressures were smaller, such as a resident asking to keep his name out of the police record; and some were major, such as a county attorney asking the editor not to run a relevant crime story. Journalists at these five newspapers worked hard to stay consistent, to avoid bias or favoritism and to print what was in the public's interest in a fair and accurate way. Decisions about how to handle community suggestions and requests were handled on a case-by-case basis without written guidelines or codes of ethics. But, few community members mentioned concerns about consistency. The community and advertising pressures that were most common were requests to not publish something in the newspapers' criminal reports. All of the community journalists said they would not give in to those requests, even when offered money or threatened. Journalists also heard requests



from sources to hand over a story for review before publication. All but four journalists discouraged giving into requests for prior review.

Regarding research question 3, the journalists had few ties to businesses in the coverage area, beyond the newspaper-advertiser relationship. The publishers, some of the editors and advertising staff said they had become acquaintances and occasionally friends with advertisers, but that relationship didn't seem to affect the coverage. It was wrong, in the newspaper employees' minds, to allow advertisers to leverage their accounts with the newspaper to gain publicity in the news section or to request information be kept out of the newspaper. As most everyone admitted, the most-read part of their local newspaper was the police reports. Aside from publishing everything in the sheriff's and city police report, the journalists followed some other unwritten rules followed by many news organizations, such as no photos of dead bodies.

When a difficult decision came up, the journalists said they relied on co-workers' advice. Some journalists sought help from friends at other newspapers, university professors or members of professional journalism organizations, and community members. The journalists' day-to-day activities showed that they had little time to consult ethical guidelines. Furthermore, the occurrence of ethical dilemmas was fairly rare at all five newspapers. Hubbard, sports editor and advertising manager for the *Washington County News*, said most decisions could be made using common sense. Four other journalists said they agreed with that statement. As mentioned, none of the newspapers had written codes of ethics. Bernhardt, managing editor of the *Marion County Record*, said "If you go through

and try to write down every rule that would apply to every situation that would be all that you would do is just write policies.”

After studying five weekly newspapers, the researcher developed some philosophies regarding ethics and small-town journalism. This researcher encourages newspapers to create a policy manual for common issues, such as covering tragedies. The Society of Professional Journalists’ Code of Ethics could be a good starting point. Pumarlo (2005) suggests incorporating public opinion in the policy-making process. Other newspapers or state press associations also could offer versions of journalistic guidelines. While quite a few of the unwritten rules were understood by journalists in this study, turnover had occurred. Two of the journalists, both who were recently hired, were unable to say what the paper’s unwritten policies were. A written set of guidelines could help encourage consistency in decision-making. This researcher offers three other recommendations for weekly newspapers based on what the newspapers in this study were doing.

- Stay consistent in responding to advertisers’, sources’ and readers’ requests
- Keep public good ahead of making profit
- Be alert and sensitive to community standards

*Future Research.* Further research could include larger newspapers, both daily and weekly, and could incorporate quantitative methods. Mass communications researchers also could look at small communities with two competing weekly newspapers, at least seven of which exist in Kansas. Future studies could also look at

towns where residents believe the newspaper does not serve their community well. Researchers could examine community relations and journalism in small towns that are experiencing growth in minority populations. The Hispanic demographic is the fastest-growing market in the United States; and the Hispanic population is growing in each state (Steffens, personal communication, Nov. 4, 2005). “At traditional newspapers there may not be anyone on that paper who can serve that population,” Steffens said. This issue affects large and small communities, he said. Other minority populations could also be researched.

## INFORMATION ON THE FIVE WEEKLY NEWSPAPERS

1. The *Washington County News*, published on Thursdays, covers the entire county of Washington. The newspaper was located in the city of Washington, Kansas, the county seat. The newspaper's circulation was 2,727 (Kansas Press Directory, 2004). At the time of this research, the *Washington County News* employed seven people: five full-time and two part-time employees. One freelance writer also contributed to the paper. It was owned by Ned Valentine, publisher of the *Washington County News* and the *Clay Center Dispatch* in Clay Center, Kansas. Dan Thalman was the editor of the newspaper and ran the business. Thalman stated that he would officially buy the newspaper in early 2006 (personal communication, May 3, 2004). The city of Washington had a population of 1,223, and the county's population was 6,483 (U.S. Census, 2000). Washington had several businesses, including two grocery stores, two variety stores, two antique stores, two motels and two banks. There also were four school districts – though one was considering consolidation – and several community organizations in the county, including a Rotary Club, Lions Club and Low German Heritage Society. Washington is near the Kansas-Nebraska border in northeast Kansas. It is situated on Highway 36, 30 minutes west of Marysville, Kansas, and about two hours north of Manhattan, Kansas.

2. The *Osawatomie Graphic*, published on Wednesdays, covers the southern part of Miami County, all of Linn County and part of Franklin County. The circulation was 2,899 (Kansas Press Directory, 2004). At the time of the research, the newspaper had nine full-time and three part-time employees. It was owned by the

News Press Gazette newspaper group, which purchased the paper in the fall of 2004. The publisher was Greg Branson, who published two other NPG newspapers in the area, *Miami County Republic* and the *Louisburg Herald*. Osawatomie's population was 4,645 (U.S. Census, 2000); it was the largest town in the sample. The population of the *Osawatomie Graphic*'s market area, which includes Miami County, Linn County, and part of Franklin County, was about 45,975, according to Greg Branson. The editor, Jennifer McDaniel, had been at her job since December 2004, and had worked previously for the newspaper. Osawatomie had a strong advertising base with stores, restaurants, two motels and one grocery store and one car dealership. There were several local organizations, including Rotary Club, a park beautification group, Lions Club, Chamber of Commerce and church groups. The *Osawatomie Graphic* covers five school districts. Osawatomie is in northeast Kansas along Highway 169, about 10 minutes southwest of Paola and about one hour south of Kansas City. It is in Miami County, directly south of Johnson County, which is part of the greater Kansas City area.

3. *The Coffey County Republican*, in Burlington, published Tuesdays and Fridays, covers the entire county. Its circulation was 2,700 (Kansas Newspaper Directory, 2004). The publishers and owners were husband and wife Chris Faimon and Catherine Faimon. At the time of the research, the newspaper had nine full-time and three part-time employees. The managing editor of the newspaper, Mark Petterson, was the mayor of New Strawn, a town in Coffey County four miles north of Burlington. He had been a full-time employee since 1985. The population of

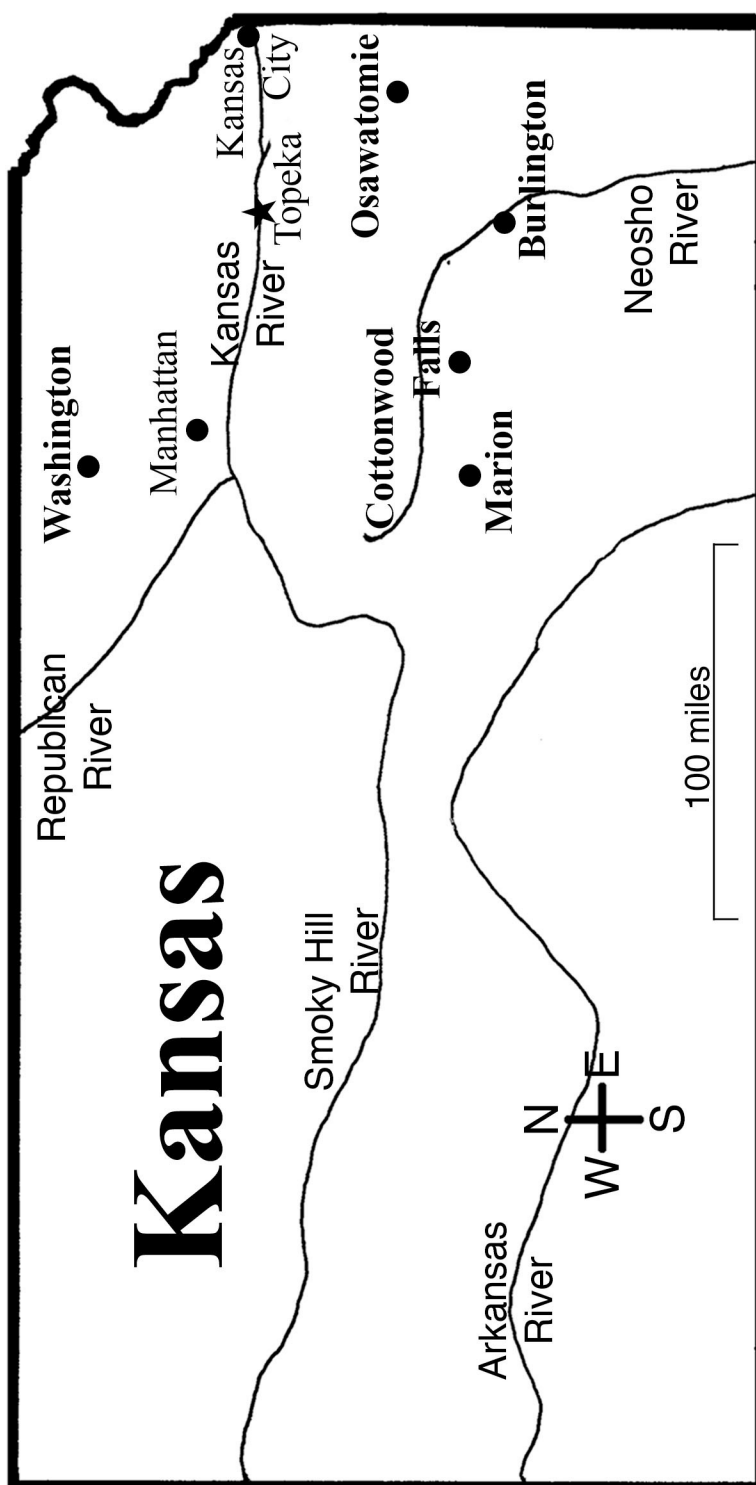
Burlington was 2,790, and the population of the county was 8,865 (U.S. Census, 2000). The town had several restaurants, stores, insurance offices, and three hotels, one grocery store and two car dealerships. The town of Burlington had one school district and several volunteer organizations, including an arts council, Lions Club and Rotary Club. The paper is located in Burlington, the county seat of Coffey County, Kansas. Burlington is located in northeast Kansas on Highway 75 about 45 minutes south of Topeka.

4. The *Marion County Record*, published on Wednesdays, covers the entire county of Marion. The paper's circulation was 2,955 (Kansas Press Directory, 2004). At the time of the research, there were eight full-time and two part-time employees of the *Marion County Record*. The newspaper shared advertising dollars with two other weekly newspapers in the county, *Peabody Gazette Bulletin* and *Hillsboro Star Journal*. All three of these newspapers were owned by Hoch Publishing Co., Inc. Bill Meyer, retired publisher and co-owner of Hoch Publishing Co., Inc., had won almost every award the Kansas Press Association had ever given out and several from other organizations (Anstaett, personal communication, April 22, 2004). Donna Bernhardt has worked at the paper for more than 20 years and had been the managing editor since 2003. The population of Marion was 2,110, and the population of the county was 13,361 (U.S. Census, 2000). There were many businesses, including restaurants, stores, gas stations, one motel and one bed and breakfast. The community had local organizations, including the Lions Club, Kiwanis Club, Marion Chamber of Commerce and Marion Advancement Campaign. The newspaper is located in

Marion, Kansas, the county seat of Marion County. Marion is in central Kansas just off of Highway 56 near Highway 77, about one hour south of Junction City and two hours southwest of Topeka.

5. The *Chase County Leader-News* in Cottonwood Falls, Kansas, published on Thursdays, covers all of Chase County. It had a circulation of 1,479 (Kansas Press Directory, 2004). Jerry Schwilling was the owner, publisher and editor of the paper. He also sold advertising. The newspaper had one part-time and two full-time employees. There were 966 people in Cottonwood Falls, the county seat of Chase County (U.S. Census, 2000). Chase County had a population of 3,030 (U.S. Census, 2000). The town had one bed and breakfast, two hotels, two restaurants, one clothing store, and was known to be a travel destination because of its Flint Hills location. Cottonwood Falls is situated off of Highway 50 on Highway 177 in central Kansas. It is about 35 minutes west of Emporia and about one hour and 15 minutes southwest of Topeka.

## MAP OF NEWSPAPER LOCATIONS





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## ACADEMIC INTERVIEWS

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Jim Pumarlo, Director of Communications for the Minnesota Chamber of Commerce and retired editor of the *Red Wing Republican Eagle*, Red Wing, MN.

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Bob Steele, The Nelson Poynter Scholar for Journalism Values at The Poynter Institute, St. Petersburg, FL.

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Brian Steffens, Executive Director of the National Newspaper Association, Columbia, MO. June 6, 2005. (573) 882-4021

## SAMPLE PRE-SELECTION INTERVIEWS

Greg Branson, Publisher of the *Osawatomie Graphic*, Osawatomie, KS.

April 27, 2004. (913) 837-4321

Donna Burnhart, Editor of the *Marion County Record*, Marion, KS.

March 7, 2005. (620) 382-2165

Richard Clasen, Publisher of the *Eureka Herald*, Eureka, KS.

April 27, 2004. (620) 583-5721

Catherine Faimon, Publisher of *The Coffey County Republican*, Burlington, KS.  
January 31, 2005. (620) 364-5325

Jennifer McDaniel, Managing Editor of the *Osawatomie Graphic*, Osawatomie, KS.  
February 10, 2005. (913) 755-4151

Bill Meyer, Retired Publisher of the *Marion County Record*, Marion, KS.  
April 27, 2004. (620) 382-2165

Jerry Schwilling, Publisher of the *Chase County News-Leader*, Cottonwood Falls,  
KS.  
April 27, 2004. (620) 273-6391

Dan Thalman, Editor of the *Washington County News*, Washington, KS.  
May 3, 2004. (785) 325-2219

Caroline Trowbridge, Publisher and Editor of the *Mirror*, Tonganoxie, KS.  
April 27, 2004. (913) 845-2222

## APPENDIX A

*Insert the newspaper name in blanks unless otherwise specified.*

Questions for editors and publishers: About yourself and your life in the community

1. Can you state your name, your occupation and the paper you work for, please?
2. What is your age?
3. Who owns this paper? (Not asked of every participant.)
4. How many years have you been at your job?
  - 4a. What other positions have you held at this newspaper, if any?
5. What is your previous newspaper or other media experience?
6. Have you ever worked for a daily?
  - 6a. If you have, which one?
  - 6b. How big was (were) the city(ies)?
  - 6c. Other than deadlines and publication schedules, what are a few of the differences between a daily and a weekly newspaper?
  - 6d. Why did you leave the daily newspaper business?
7. What made you want to work at a weekly newspaper?
8. If you have recently had a non-journalism career, what was it?
9. Do you have any degrees? What in?
- \*(following questions establish community ties)
10. Where do you live?
11. How long have you lived here?
  - 11a. Did you grow up here?
12. Do you tend to move frequently or infrequently? (Frequently means moving every 2 or fewer years).
  - 12a. If you move frequently, what have been some of the reasons for your moves?
13. Do you own your house or do you rent?
14. Do you own any other property in your community or elsewhere?
15. Do you think you'll be living in your community in two years? Why or why not?
  - 15a. Do you think you'll be at your current job in two years? Why or why not?
16. Do you think you'll be living there (or here) in four years? How about eight years?
17. Describe the role you, as a person, play in your community.
18. What community organizations are you a member of?
  - 18a. How active are you in the meetings of your organizations?
  - 18b. Are you reporting on the organizations' meetings or events while attending as a community member?
  - 18c. Do you raise issues and concerns as a community member?
  - 18d. Do you organize meetings?
  - 18c. Do you hold any positions on committees, boards or in organizations?
19. Are you a member of a local church?
  - 19a. Which one?
  - 19b. How active are you in your local church?

20. Do you have children in the school system?
    - 20a. If yes, how many?
    - 20b. What grades?
    - 20c. How active are you in school organizations, such as the PTA?
  21. Can you see a future for yourself (and your family) in your community in 10 years?
    - 21a. Why or why not?
  23. Can you see yourself at this job in 10 years? Why or why not?
  24. On a scale of one to five (one being not very and five being extremely) how happy are you at your current job?
  25. Do you have any relatives in this community or in your coverage area?
  26. Would you say you have a lot of friends in this community?
  27. Would you say that if you were not the newspaper editor (or publisher) that you would have fewer or more friends?
  28. How do you keep your news coverage objective as a journalist when you are involved in various aspects of your community?
  29. Do you see a difference between your role as a community member and as a journalist?
    - 29a. If yes, what is it?
    - 29b. If no, why is there no difference?
  30. Do you have any ties to businesses in your coverage area other than the newspaper-advertiser relationship?
- Second set of questions for editors and/or publishers: About employment with newspaper
31. As the editor (and/or publisher) do you sell ads?
    - 31a. If yes, do you also manage or write editorial content?
  32. Are any of your staff involved in both the editorial and advertising aspects of the newspaper?
  33. How would you describe the separation between the advertising and editorial side of the newspaper?
  34. How do you decide whether something is newsworthy?
    - 34a. Do you often ask yourself “What would I want to see or read in the newspaper?” or do you put yourself in the readers’ shoes?
  35. What reasoning do you use when publishing something, whether it is a photo or a story that could upset your readers?
  36. What reasoning do you use when publishing something that could upset your advertisers?
  37. As the newspaper editor (or publisher), what values do you instill in your staff?
  38. Do you talk to your staff about difficult editorial or advertising decisions?
  39. On average, how frequently do you make difficult decisions about the content and placement of stories in your newspaper?
  40. What are some of the more difficult decisions you’ve had to make as far as content?
    - 40a. How did you make those decisions?

41. Have you or anyone else there ever felt pressured by local advertisers, friends or local officials to stop reporting something, change your coverage or hand over your stories for prior-review?
42. Do the ties you have to businesses in your community affect how decisions are made regarding content?
  - 42a. If yes, how so?
  - 42b. If no, why not?
43. Do personal relationships with friends, relatives, community members and sources affect how decisions are made concerning content?
  - 43a. If yes, how so?
  - 43b. If no, why not?
44. Does your newspaper face pressures from advertising?
  - 44a. Are those pressures subtle or very obvious or both?
  - 44b. On average, how frequently do you feel pressure from advertisers?
45. What are some of the economic pressures other than advertising that you or your staff deal with?
46. Can you share with me some of your experiences with advertising and other economic pressures?
  - 46a. How did you handle those?
47. On average, how frequently does your newspaper face pressures from community officials, friends, relatives or other community members?
48. Can you share with me some of your experiences with this type of pressure?
  - 48a. How did you handle them?
49. Does your newspaper have a written policy and/or a written code of ethics?
  - 49a. If no, have you ever discussed making a policy manual or code? Why or why not?
  - 49b. If yes, may I have a copy?
  - 49c. Do all of your employees have a copy?
  - 49d. Have they read the policies and/or code of ethics?
50. Do you have unwritten rules that you expect your staff to follow?
  - 50a. What are the unwritten rules for journalists on the editorial side of your newspaper?
  - 50b. What are the unwritten rules for employees making business decisions?
51. Do you think those unwritten rules are known and understood by every one of your staff?
52. On average, how frequently are those unwritten or written rules bent or broken?
53. Do you encourage or discourage your staff to participate in community events and organizations? Why?
54. What about elected positions? Is your staff allowed to be elected to a position in your coverage area?
55. What are some conflicts of interest that you have had to deal with?
  - 55a. How did you deal with those conflicts of interest?
56. What is the newspaper's budget?
  - 56a. What is the biggest expense on the budget?



57. Is it hard to make payroll sometimes?
58. Have you ever had a major advertiser pull its ad?
  - 58a. If yes, what caused them to pull their ad?
  - 58b. Did that advertiser return to the newspaper?
59. Does this newspaper make a profit?
  - 59a. What is the biggest money maker for the newspaper?
60. Who are the three top advertisers?
  - 60a. Which one's the biggest?
  - 60b. May I see a list of advertising clients?
61. If you lost your top advertiser, what would be the consequences to the newspaper?
62. If faced with a decision of whether to publish a hard-hitting news story and lose an advertiser or hold the story and keep the advertiser, how would you handle it?
  - 62a. Would you ever not publish a hard-hitting news story if you knew it would cause you to lose your top advertiser?
  - 62b. Would you ever not publish a hard-hitting news story if you knew it would cause you to lose your top advertiser and some smaller advertisers as well?
  - 62c. Would you ever not publish a hard-hitting news story if you knew it would cause you to lose enough advertisers that you would have to publish fewer pages?
  - 62d. Would you ever not publish a hard-hitting news story if you knew it would upset the community groups that you belong to and cause you to lose readers?
63. What changes has the newspaper undergone since you've worked here?
64. What role(s) do you think the newspaper plays in the community?
65. How would you compare the quality of content in the \_\_\_\_\_ to the quality in the \_\_\_\_\_ (name of neighboring newspaper)?

Questions for staff: About yourself and your involvement with the community

1. Can you state your name, your occupation and the paper you work for, please?
2. What is your age?
3. How many years have you been at your job?
  - 3a. What other positions have you held at this newspaper?
4. What is your previous newspaper or other media experience?
5. Have you ever worked for a daily?
  - 5a. If you have, which one?
  - 5b. How big was (were) the city(ies)?
  - 5c. Other than deadlines and publication schedules, what are a few of the differences between a daily and a weekly newspaper?
  - 5d. Why did you leave the daily newspaper business?
6. What made you want to work at a weekly newspaper?
7. If you have recently had a non-journalism career, what was it?
8. Do you have any degrees? What in?
9. Where do you live?
10. How long have you lived there?
11. Did you grow up here?

12. Do you tend to move frequently or infrequently? (frequently means moving every 2 or fewer years).

12a. If you move frequently, what have been some of the reasons for your moves?

13. Do you own your house or do you rent?

14. Do you own any other property in your community or elsewhere?

15. Do you think you'll be living in your community in two years? Why or why not?

15a. Do you think you'll be at your current job in two years? Why or why not?

16. Do you think you'll be living there (or here) in four years? How about eight years?

17. Describe the role you, as a person, play in your community.

18. What community organizations are you a member of?

18a. How active are you in the meetings of your organizations?

18b. Are you reporting on the organizations' meetings or events while attending as a community member?

18c. Do you raise issues and concerns as a community member?

18d. Do you organize meetings?

18e. Do you hold any positions on committees, boards or in organizations?

19. Are you a member of a local church?

19a. Which one?

19b. How active are you in your local church?

20. Do you have children in the school system?

20a. If yes, how many?

20b. What grades?

20c. How active are you in school organizations, such as the PTA?

21. Can you see a future for yourself (and your family) in your community in 10 years?

21a. Why or why not?

23. Can you see yourself at this job in 10 years? Why or why not?

24. On a scale of one to five (one being not very and five being extremely) how happy are you at your current job?

25. Do you have any relatives in this community or in your coverage area?

26. Would you say you have a lot of friends in this community?

27. How do you stay objective as a journalist when you are involved in various aspects of your community?

28. Do you see a difference between your role as a community member and as a journalist?

28a. If yes, what is it?

28b. If no, why is there no difference?

29. Do you have any ties to businesses in your coverage area other than an advertising client relationship?

Second set of questions for staff: About your employment with the newspaper

31. As the \_\_\_\_\_ (fill in the blank with job title) do you sell ads?

- 31a. If yes, do you also manage or write editorial content?
- 32. Are any other employees, including your editor or publisher, involved in both the editorial and advertising sides of the newspaper? How are they involved?
- 33. How would you describe the separation between the advertising and editorial side of the newspaper?
- 34. How do you decide whether something is newsworthy?
  - 34a. Do you ask your editor or publisher?
  - 34a. Do you ask yourself “What would I want to see or read in the newspaper?” or do you put yourself in the readers’ shoes?
- 35. What reasoning do you use when publishing something, whether it is a photo or a story that could upset your readers?
- 36. What reasoning do you use when publishing something that could upset your advertisers?
- 37. What values does your boss instill in you and the staff, such as accuracy, credibility, getting the whole story, etc.?
- 38. When advertising or editorial decisions come up, do your news employees talk to each other about how to make the decision?
- 39. On average, how frequently do you make difficult decisions about the content and placement of stories in your newspaper?
- 40. What are some of the more difficult decisions you’ve had to make as far as content?
  - 40a. How did you make those decisions?
- 41. Does your newspaper face pressures from advertising?
  - 41a. Are those pressures subtle or very obvious or both?
  - 41b. On average, how frequently do you feel pressure from advertisers?
- 42. Have you or anyone else there ever felt pressured by local advertisers, friends or local officials to stop reporting something, change your coverage or hand over your stories for prior-review?
- 43. Do the ties you have to businesses in your community affect how decisions are made regarding content?
  - 43a. If yes, how so?
  - 43b. If no, why not?
- 44. Do personal relationships with friends, relatives, community members and sources affect how decisions are made concerning content?
  - 44a. If yes, how so?
  - 44b. If no, why not?
- 45. What are some of the economic pressures other than advertising that you or the staff deal with?
- 46. Can you share with me some of your experiences with advertising and other economic pressures?
  - 46a. How did you handle those?
- 47. On average, how frequently does your newspaper face pressures from community officials, friends, relatives or other community members?
- 48. Can you share with me some of your experiences with this type of pressure?

- 48a. How did you handle them?
49. Does your newspaper have a written policy and/or a written code of ethics?
- 49a. If no, have you ever discussed making a policy manual or code? Why or why not?
- 49b. Have you read the policies and/or code of ethics?
50. Do you have unwritten rules that your boss expects you and the staff to follow?
- 50a. What are the unwritten rules for journalists in this newspaper?
- 50b. What are the unwritten rules for employees making business decisions?
51. Do you think those unwritten rules are known and understood by everyone in the office?
52. Have the unwritten or written rules been bent or broken?
- 52a. If yes, when?
- 52b. If yes, who made the ultimate decision?
- 52c. If no, have you ever had incidences or news that may have necessitated breaking the rules?
53. Does the editor and publisher encourage or discourage you to participate in community events and organizations? Why?
54. What about elected positions? Are you allowed to be elected to a position in your coverage area?
55. What are some conflicts of interest, real or perceived, that you have had to deal with?
- 55a. How did you deal with those conflicts of interest?
56. Has the newspaper ever in your history not made payroll?
57. Have you ever had a major advertiser pull its ad?
- 57a. If yes, what caused them to pull their ad?
- 57b. Did that advertiser return to the newspaper?
58. What is the newspaper's top advertiser?
59. If you lost your top advertiser, what would be the consequences to newspaper?
60. If faced with a decision of whether to publish a hard-hitting news story and lose an advertiser or hold the story and keep the advertiser, how would you handle it?
- 60a. Would you ever not publish a hard-hitting news story if you knew it would cause you to lose your top advertiser?
- 60b. Would you ever not publish a hard-hitting news story if you knew it would cause you to lose your top advertiser and some smaller advertisers as well?
- 60c. Would you ever not publish a hard-hitting news story if you knew it would cause you to lose enough advertisers that you would have to publish fewer pages?
- 60d. Would you ever not publish a hard-hitting news story if you knew it would upset the community groups that you belong to and cause you to lose readers?
61. What changes has the newspaper undergone since you've worked here?
62. What role(s) do you think the newspaper plays in the community?
63. How would you compare the quality of content in the \_\_\_\_\_ to the quality of the \_\_\_\_\_ (name of neighboring newspaper)?

Questions for community members: your role in community and general knowledge about newspaper

1. Can you please state your name, occupation and name of business you work for?
  2. If different than number 1, can you please state the role you have in the community?
  3. What is your age?
  4. Do you live in \_\_\_\_\_ (name of town)?
    - 4a. If not, where do you live?
    - 4b. How long have you lived there (or here)?
  5. Do you own a home? Or rent?
  6. Do you own any other property in the town where you live or in \_\_\_\_\_ (name of town)?
  7. How long have you been at your job? Or in your position or role for the city?
  8. What local organizations, clubs, associations and church do you belong to?
  9. Do you read the newspaper?
  10. Do you read the newspaper every week or do you sometimes skip weeks?
  11. Do you subscribe?
  12. Have you ever written to the newspaper as a guest columnist or a letter to the editor?
  13. Have you ever been a source for a newspaper story?
  14. How frequently are you interviewed by newspaper staff?
  15. Are you on a first-name basis with some of the staff?
    - 15a. Who?
  16. Do you consider the \_\_\_\_\_ your newspaper, by that I mean do you feel a community ownership in the newspaper?
  17. How important do you think the newspaper is to other community members?
    - 17a. Do readers consider it “their” newspaper?
    - 17b. Do readers talk about it over dinner, in church, over coffee and other places?
  18. Can you please give me five adjectives you would use to describe the newspaper?
- Second set of questions for community members: specific newspaper attributes
19. What values, such as accuracy, getting the whole story, credibility, etc., do you think national and state journalists at bigger newspapers have?
    - 19a. What values do you think your local journalists have?
  20. Do you think it’s hard for them to be objective in reporting the news in such a small town?
  21. Have you ever been angry at the newspaper?
    - 21a. What for?
  22. What do you think the newspaper is doing right?
  23. Do you often see these journalists at community meetings?
    - 23a. What are they like?
    - 23b. Are they engaged in conversation?
    - 23c. Or do they just sit quietly and report on what’s going on?
  24. Can you recall any stories that have not been reported by your local newspaper?

- 24a. What were they about?
25. How do you think the local newspaper handles local tragedies, such as a suicide or fatality accident involving a teen?
26. What do you think the role of the newspaper is in your community?
27. Do you think that the journalists in general are trustworthy?
28. What about journalists at the \_\_\_\_\_? Can they be trusted to report the truth?
29. Do you think journalists in general are ethical?
30. What about journalists at the \_\_\_\_\_? Are they ethical?
31. Can you recall anytime that the newspaper has published something that was the talk of the town?
- 31a. What was it?
32. Has the newspaper ever published something that made the majority of the town or readers angry?
- 32a. What was it?
33. Do you think, or have you ever witnessed, the newspaper employees having conflicts of interest that make it difficult to report objectively?
34. Do you think, or have you ever heard of, the newspaper not running a story because of an advertiser's request?
35. Do you think, or have you ever heard of, the newspaper not running a story because of a friend's, relative's or source's request or for some other societal influence?
36. What are the stories in your community that aren't getting published?
37. Do you read any other newspapers?
- 37a. What are they?
- 37b. What do you think of the quality of the \_\_\_\_\_ compared to those newspapers?
38. What do you get out of the \_\_\_\_\_ that you can't get from other media?

## APPENDIX B

## Questionnaire for the pre-selection interviews

*Insert the newspaper name in blanks unless otherwise specified.*

1. Would you and your staff and the owner of the \_\_\_\_\_ be receptive to a researcher coming into the office, asking questions and observing how employees do their day-to-day work for one week or five days?
2. What is the population of \_\_\_\_\_ (name of town)? Is there lodging in your town?
3. Does your town have an ad base, such as a grocery store, car dealership, insurance offices, farm implement dealers, restaurants or stores, and do you feel the town has a healthy enough ad base to sustain the newspaper for another five years?
4. How many people work at the newspaper?
5. What is your coverage area?
6. Does the publisher or owner work at the newspaper?
7. Does the editor or publisher sell ads?
8. Do you think the community is pretty close-knit?
9. Name four or five civic organizations that are active in your community.
10. Do you or your staff participate in those organizations? Does the staff belong to other organizations, local churches, schools, clubs, etc.?
11. Is there a school in your community?
12. What role do you think the \_\_\_\_\_ plays in the community?
13. Do community members seem receptive to changes at the newspaper, whether they be staff, layout, coverage or ad or subscription rate changes?
14. Does the newspaper have a code of ethics and does the newspaper owner or publisher discourage staff from being involved in community organizations?
15. Do you believe \_\_\_\_\_ practices community journalism?

## APPENDIX C

### Newspaper employees' community involvement

This list represents the involvement mentioned at the time of the research.

#### *Washington County News*

Dan Thalmann, 31, managing editor and publisher

Current involvement: Rotary Club member, Low German Heritage Society co-founder and co-coordinator, Linn Booster Club member, Lutheran School volunteer, Kansas Rural Life Task Force member, Linn Housing Authority Board member, St. Johns Lutheran Church member, vice chairman of the congregation and evangelism committee member.

Prior involvement: Historical Society Board member, Unified School District No. 223 School Board member, economic development board member, Lutheran School recess volunteer

Larry Graham, 62, advertising production manager

Current involvement: Christian Church member

Susan Fischer, 23, reporter

Current involvement: AmeriCorps Volunteer to Service America member, PEO (a philanthropic organization of women to promote education) member, First Unified Methodist Church member, high school forensics judge, Washington County Health Fair volunteer

Marcia Hubbard, 55, sports editor and advertising manager

Current involvement: Washington County Women's Bowling Association member, Catholic Church member

Prior involvement: President of the Washington County Women's Bowling Association

Carol Ohlde, regional sales manager (no data on age)

Current involvement: St. John Lutheran Church member, church choir member, church janitor, Serving Our Savoir church group member

Prior involvement: 4-H volunteer, Sunday school teacher

Judy Wiechman, business manager (no data on age)

Current involvement: St. Peter's Church (south of Barnes) member, NCKP Soybean Plant and Willow Creek Dairy stock owner

#### *Osawatomie Graphic*



Greg Branson, 35, publisher

Current involvement: Rotary Club member, soccer and T-ball coach

Previous involvement: Chamber of Commerce board member, Osawatomie's 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration committee member, John Brown Jamboree committee member, steering committee auxiliary member for the school bond issue, Osawatomie Economic Development Committee member

Jennifer McDaniel, 33, editor

Current involvement: Rotary Club member, Paola Lutheran Church member, United Fund member, Citizens Advisory Board to the State Hospital member, Chamber of Commerce member, John Brown Jamboree committee member

Roger Sims, 55, news editor

Current involvement: Linn County Children's Coalition member, volunteers running a youth center in Parker, cemetery board treasurer, trying to organize Big Brothers, Big Sisters of Linn County

Prior involvement: Long-time Linn County School Board member

Carol Chitwood, 70, copy editor/reporter

Prior involvement: United Fund co-organizer, Girl Scouts volunteer, Sunday school teacher

Jeff Gulley, 35, sports editor: No data.

Kevin Kinder, 23, reporter

Current involvement: Big Brothers, Big Sisters of Wichita, church member (name of church not available)

Paul Branson, 64, advertising sales manager

Current involvement: Lions Club member, Lions Club golf tournament organizer, John Brown Jamboree member

Prior involvement: Lions Club president, Chamber of Commerce president, steering committee member for Christmas in October

Sonia Reeder-Jones, 31, advertising sales: No data.

## THE COFFEY COUNTY REPUBLICAN INVOLVMENT

Chris Faimon, 34, co-publisher

Current involvement: Rotary Club member, Masons member, Knights of Columbus secretary, St. Francis Xavier Catholic Church member

Prior involvement: President of Rotary Club.

Catherine Faimon, 34, co-publisher

Current involvement: St. Francis Xavier Catholic Church member

Prior involvement: Burlington promotions committee member, Chamber of Commerce task force member and Manufacturer's Association member

Mark Petterson, 40, managing editor

Current involvement: New Strawn mayor, Rotary Club member, Jaycees member, Coffey County's strategic planning committee member, Republican precinct committee member for the Republican Central Committee, Burlington United Methodist Church member, local musician

Prior involvement: New Strawn City Council member, Rotary Club president, Jaycees president

Becky Reeves, 48, news editor:

Current involvement: Burlington United Methodist Church member and treasurer for 5 years. Catbackers (school group) chairperson of the membership drive, school volunteer

Jeremy Gaston, 24, sports reporter and editor and photographer, designer, Web site production  
Local musician

Kristin Chambers, 46, advertising manager

Current involvement: School volunteer

## MARION COUNTY RECORD

Donna Bernhardt, 41, managing editor

Current involvement: School volunteer, Marion Kiwanis Club member, Marion Chamber of Commerce board member, Valley United Methodist member

Prior involvement: School improvement committee member

Bill Meyer, 80, retired publisher

Current involvement: Board of Kansas Historical Society member, Kansas Newspaper Foundation member, 99<sup>th</sup> Infantry Association member, William Allen White Foundation member, Valley Methodist Church member

Prior involvement: William Allen White Foundation president twice, Kiwanis Club member and president, Chamber of Commerce member

Michael Norris, 23, sports editor/reporter

Current involvement: Kiwanis Club member, High School SITE Committee member, community recreational ball game volunteer

Susan Cooper, 48, news reporter

Current involvement: Kiwanis Club member, Chamber of Commerce member

Prior involvement: Marion city economic director and because of that job had participated in all city events

Melissa Parmley, 26, advertising sales manager

Current involvement: Marion Chamber of Commerce member, church (name of church unavailable) member, baseball tournament volunteer, local women's group volunteer, school volunteer

Melvin Honeyfield, 52, production manager

Current involvement: Lions Club treasurer, Florence Labor Day committee member

#### CHASE COUNTY LEADER-NEWS INVOLVEMENT

Jerry Schwilling, 53, publisher and editor

Current involvement: Methodist Church member, choir member, church administrative council member, Sunday school teacher, Chase County Chamber of Commerce member, county fair volunteer, local musician

Jennifer Crawford, 33, reporter and photographer

Current involvement: Parents and Teachers Helping Students volunteer, soccer coach, school volunteer, Methodist Church member

Marion Weaver, 63, business manager

Current involvement: Methodist Church member