ABSTRACT

MEDIA CONCENTRATION AND LOCAL, WEEKLY NEWSPAPERS: A CASE STUDY

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The growing concentration in ownership of media businesses by fewer corporations is well documented. Critics debate how concentration affects the press in its role in the public sphere of a democratic society. Additionally, as one of the most local sources of news, weekly newspapers hold a unique and important place in citizens’ news consumption in the democratic public sphere. This thesis looks at how media concentration affects the local weekly newspaper as a local news source and as a part of the local public sphere. It attempts to determine if the negative effects predicted by critics of media concentration are evident to readers of a local, weekly newspaper or if any of the possible positive outcomes of group ownership are evident. The study includes a content analysis of select issues and in-depth interviews with readers of a weekly newspaper, the Oxford Press, distributed in Oxford, Ohio.
Media Concentration and Local, Weekly Newspapers: A Case Study

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Table of Contents:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History of Weekly Newspapers:</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media Concentration:</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Local Press and the Public Sphere:</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Questions:</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methods:</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content Analysis Results:</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview Results:</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion:</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion:</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix:</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References:</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
List of Tables:

Table 1  Frequency of Story Types  35
Table 2  Column Inches of Hard News and Soft News Stories  36
Table 3  Hard news and Soft News Column Inches On Front Page  37
Table 4  Hard News Categories  40
Table 5  Advertisements by year  42
Dedication:

With appreciation to my husband, Joe, and my children Matthew, Nathan, Wade, Michael, Keilani and my fellow student, Ariana, who was attending Masters classes with me within two weeks of her birth.
Introduction

Over the years, the United States developed a system of media ownership that is unique in the developed world. While other countries maintained a great deal of state regulation of media, in the United States, early newspapers developed a model of private media ownership. Ben Bagdikian (2004), a well-known author on the subject of media concentration, opines that with the unique dependence U.S. communities have on local decision making, the extraordinary multiplicity of local self-governing units, and hundreds of media outlets in the country, a reasonable and rational media system for such a diverse group of people and places would be hundreds of local media owners, each familiar with the particular needs of his or her own community. However, this is not the model private ownership has followed in the United States. Instead, according to Bagdikian, five global-dimension firms now own most of the magazines, newspapers, book publishers, motion picture studios, and radio and television stations in the United States (p. 3).¹

Corporate mergers and the consolidation of ownership in the American communications arena have long been sources of concern. U.S. regulatory and antitrust policy traditionally attempted to secure a “diversity of voices,” largely through rules regarding ownership. However, legal trends over the last 20 years, in conjunction with political developments, have undermined the diversity rationales behind ownership rules and the associated structural regulation of mass media. Paradoxically, even as media corporations are becoming larger and presumably more powerful, ownership regulations such as limits on numbers of newspapers and broadcast stations one owner may have and rules encouraging diversity in racial and ethnic ownership are being rescinded or struck down (Horwitz, 2005, p. 181). The court and the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) seem to favor allowing the marketplace to determine ownership. The courts are expanding the First Amendment rights of corporations by protecting their rights to advertise and determine their own content with very few restrictions. Additionally, the FCC is attempting to further eliminate ownership regulations and has discontinued policies meant to encourage minority media ownership, thereby limiting regulations that may encourage ownership diversity.

While the trend is often discussed in terms of broadcasting because FCC ownership rules specifically address broadcasters, newspapers are also affected by media concentration. There are cases of single companies owning both newspapers and broadcast stations in single markets, and in the past few years, there has been an increase in cooperation in newsgathering among television stations and local newspapers that are under different ownership. This is perhaps in anticipation of more relaxed cross-media ownership rules and even normal combinations of such media outlets (Howard, 2006, p. 74) despite the fact that Congress has been reluctant to approve even mild versions of cross-ownership agreements (Yorke, 2008). Such arrangements also lower costs to each company and prevent duplication of manpower, and recognize the national trend toward media convergence. However, they also limit the number of voices telling the story and the number of perspectives available to the public. Large newspaper chains such as Gannett, Cox, and The New York Times Company continually buy up smaller chains and independent papers (Bagdikian, 2004, p. 194).

¹ Bagdikian names these firms as Disney, Time Warner, News Corporation, Viacom and Bertelsmann.
The big five own many media outlets, but their consistent growth simply mirrors the industry-wide trend toward fewer owners of more media properties. These growing companies favor horizontal growth – owning different properties at the same point in the production or distribution process but in different media, such as several television stations, a few radio stations and a movie company – as well as vertical growth – buying complementary companies such as a motion picture studio, an editing firm, a distribution company and toy and book companies to market tie-ins. Therefore, the companies profit from the same product many times over.

The local weekly newspaper is in a different realm than many of the production studios and publishing houses owned by the Disneys and Viacoms of the world. Nonetheless, in their own environment, media concentration is a daily reality to them. Like other newspapers, the small weekly continues to bring steady, if not sensational, profits, but has an image that is staid in an increasingly digital world. Often these newspapers were started by families decades ago, but changes in publishing and digital media require the newspapers adopt new approaches to remain viable. Many are sold to newspaper groups, large and small, that have the personnel, the money and the know-how to implement those changes.

In this thesis, the author examines one such newspaper, the Oxford Press in Oxford, Ohio, a small town near Dayton, Ohio, with approximately 22,000 residents. To study the operation of the newspaper under different corporate owners of the Oxford Press and how the readers in Oxford may change in their feelings and use of the paper, a content analysis provides an empirical examination of the newspaper, analyzing the content during two ownership periods prior to the purchase of the paper by Cox Newspapers in 2000, and then in 2005 following the purchase. In-depth interviews with stakeholders in the community, including the newspaper’s long-time editor, political leaders, journalists, community organizers, and business leaders who have an interest in the news coverage in Oxford and particularly the work of the weekly newspaper, provide an interpretive perspective on the issue of ownership.

Review of the Literature

History of Weekly Newspapers

The history of newspapers in the United States is a colorful one, but one that currently faces a great deal of uncertainty. The weekly community newspaper has been a feature U.S. culture in one form or another for over 200 years. The very earliest forms of printed news were distributed to localized readerships and with no greater than weekly regularity. By examining the general history of the press as frequently portrayed, but adding the history of the weekly community newspaper, one can gain a better understanding of how newspapers operated in the past and now operate in the lives of the millions who live outside large cities. Traditionally, newspaper history is focused on large cities, particularly New York. Broadening that perspective, and in particular examining the history of community publications in Oxford, Ohio, will help produce an understanding of how the community press has developed. The research of Bill Cottell into the variety of community newspapers in Oxford before 1948 was a great help in this endeavor.
The Colonial Press

The history of the weekly newspaper in the United States began in colonial times, when a handful of one-sheet “news” pages were published on a weekly, bi-weekly, or, more commonly, monthly basis. Colonial newspapers followed the British model, although with increasing freedom from sedition and licensing requirements. These early editions carried reprints from the British papers, ship arrival and planned departure times, weather reports, and lists of cargo on ships. These publications shared several characteristics often found in later community weekly newspapers: the publisher and editor was the printer, the newspaper generally reflected the politics, opinions and preferences of the publisher/printer, and distribution area was very localized. Unlike later weeklies, however, colonial editors and printers often were not writers. Others contributed material, often anonymously, and the printer took the credit or blame for the content of the paper. Political commentary or moral philosophizing was the rule of the day. Such papers became the vehicle for dissidents unhappy with the current government or official policy, finding that the publications provided a way for them to poke, prod, and criticize the reigning powers. If the Crown or its representatives found material in the paper to be too offensive, the printer was the person charged with sedition, while the writer was free to submit his writings to whomever took over publishing duties during the enforced absence of the printer (Tebbel 1969, p. 22).

Newspapers in colonial times, and indeed for 50 years beyond the end of the Revolutionary War, were written for the elite: the well-educated man who was wealthy or at least affluent. These men were likely to be those in political power or who exercised influence in the community. The newspapers were not intended as a “mass” or popular medium, and featured rather pricey (for the time) annual subscriptions (Douglas, 1999, p.3).

The Partisan Press

During the Revolutionary War, another trend began, one that turned out to be long-standing: partisanship. Newspaper publishers banked their futures with either the Sons of Liberty and their ilk of rebels, or cast their lots with the British, becoming fervently Tory newspapers. Such allegiances could be the result of principle, but were just as often the result of practicality. The publisher weighed his options, determined the side most likely to profit him, and embraced the respective cause (Tebbel, 1969, p. 53).

In the ensuing years, the wartime partisanship of Tory against patriot in newspapers were transferred into the political scene of the emerging republic. Now proponents of a strong central government, or Federalists, and the proponents of allowing the states as much freedom as possible, the Republicans, battled one another in the sponsored press of the time. Some of these openly partisan newspapers were supported by different members of the administration, including President Washington, Secretary of State Hamilton, and Thomas Jefferson (Emery, 1996, p. 68). The “news” was propaganda, supporting one party to the detriment of the other, vilifying, defaming and belittling in very personal attacks those with whom they disagreed. While Washington, D.C., was overrun with such publications, the same spirit of partisanship and slander accompanied many newspapers of the time period. Early practitioners of personal political attacks were shy on restraint and personal responsibility, but attacks of similar style and substance have followed politicians to the current day. Now, however, a
journalist would likely couch such statements as a quote from a source, (“At a news conference, Johnson said Washington is a cowardly traitor,” for example) rather than writing attacks as first person statements (“Washington is a coward and a traitor!”).

It is interesting to note that even in the very earliest days of the republic, “management” of the news and of public image was a concern to public figures. George Washington himself, while he supported a free press and disdained censorship, felt that some information was government business only, and should be withheld from the press to prevent its publication from aiding the enemy. While his position in later years became more liberal, when he lived and served as a politician, perhaps as a result of being consistently condemned in the partisan newsprint of the day, he favored managing his image and the information the government released to the popular press. This conflict between support for a free press and the desire to maintain a certain image in the press continues today (Tebbel, 1969, p. 59) Still, while invective and personal feuds marked the time period, much of the journalism dispensed by the party presses did forward public discussion and add to the function of the democratic system of government (Emery, 1996, p. 79.)

During this time period, the partisan press was concentrated in the larger, eastern cities. There was little press activity in outlying and developing communities, where survival was often still paramount, and there was no time or energy for a printing press. Very early on, the one-page editions of the period would often be passed from person to person, and sometimes people would hand-write their own news on the back before passing the papers on. As migrants, including printers, moved west, taking their printing presses with them, the business of printing a small newspaper also moved west. It was often another sideline in a printer’s business, which often included being postmaster, printing handbills and signs, and publishing legal notices. Increasingly the printer himself did not write the actual news; more often a more educated editor with opinions or party allegiances was the writer (Tebbel, 1969, p. 16).

In the early 1800s, newspaper publishing became more frequent and more widespread, thanks to the Louisiana Purchase and the westward expansion of the country. During this time period, newspapers were still directed at the upper classes, and the prices remained relatively high, due to the cost of paper and the slow pace of hand-operated presses. Nevertheless, newspapers did begin to extend their reach into more rural areas. Monthly papers began to publish twice monthly or even weekly, and a few newspapers moved to a twice weekly or even a daily publication schedule. Still, the small, weekly newspaper remained the backbone of the press in the country. In 1820, there were 512 newspapers printed, with 24 dailies (largely in the eastern seaboard cities), 66 semiweeklies or triweeklies, and 422 weeklies with an average circulation of 1,500 copies (Emery, 1996, p. 79).

These newspapers foreshadowed the content of the current weekly community newspaper, albeit in a decidedly different style. In his 1996 history of the U.S. press, Emery (1996) said:

“There was plenty of opinion, of course, but most of it was contributed by readers. Usually there was a column or two of local news, sometimes printed as scattered items without benefit of headlines. There might be half a column of exchanges or news gleaned from other newspapers arrived by the last post. The remaining material, exclusive of the notices, or ad-
vertisements, was very likely submitted by readers” (p. 82).

These newspapers provided for presentation of the local news, a public sphere for exchange of opinion on political issues, and a connection to neighbors. Although full of lies, misrepresentations, and anonymous attacks, these publications provided a means for the public to be involved in the continuing debate over the role of the federal government and, by extension, local government, in their developing communities.

In the 1820s, numerous political and technological changes came to fruition, changing significantly the newspaper industry and the political atmosphere in the nation, and increasing opportunity for community newspapers to begin and thrive as the country expanded. From the 1400s forward, printers had used largely the same technology to print a single sheet at a time with a flat bed moved by a screw-type device. However, in 1813 came the first major development, the Columbian Iron Press, and that was quickly followed by further progress in automation. Moving from a horse-powered press (using the actual farm animal to turn the cogs) and then to the steam press, the development of the steam-powered cylinder press in approximately 1925 was a revolutionary development in print (Tebbel, 1969, p. 93). Prior to that, the R. Hoe hand press with improved lever action was developed in 1922. Combined with the rapid innovation of the moveable bed press, it made possible the then unheard-of printing rate of 1,100 sheets an hour (Emery, 1996, p. 95). Developments in manufacturing cheaper paper and creating and setting type contributed to an even more active newspaper community. In 1831, a visitor to America from France noted that even in the remote villages and single-family homesteads of a developing America, stagecoaches delivered newspapers to citizens, allowing the most rural farmer to keep in touch with the politics and debate of the day (Emery, 1996, p. 90). Technology soon moved from flat bed printing to cylinder printing in Europe, a technology that spread and was improved upon in America, setting the stage for a transition in journalism in the country.

Political change also contributed to change in press function and coverage. In a movement represented by the rising to power of “common man” Andrew Jackson, the working class began to assert its voice in the American political arena. The conflict of the time was framed as pitting the “producing” class against the “non-producing” or propertied class. Assertions on both sides were strong and exaggerated; the commoners insisted that the producers of materials and wealth were left poor by those who controlled property, and the landowners and capitalists insisted that those in the lower orders of society were clearly there because they were low in morals and character, and obviously did not possess the intelligence or refinement to make decisions regarding government or order (Emery, 1996, p. 91). These arguments were carried out in still partisan newspapers by both sides, but encountered growing dissatisfaction of readers and publishers with the sponsored press. Douglas (1999) says that an explosion of reading material marked the Jacksonian era in the United States, and many more of the burgeoning number of newspapers were aimed at the less affluent, everyday American. A significant change reflected this new emphasis on the “common man”: newspapers were sold by the copy, on the street, rather than through annual subscriptions, as had been so common in the years prior (Douglas, 1999, p. 3). The convergence of all these forces -- political, social and technological -- led to the era of the personal press.
The 1830s and 40s were best known for the large city newspapers, particularly the city newspapers of New York. As the birthplace of the “penny press,” New York was home to such formidable newspaper personalities as Benjamin Day, who founded the first truly successful newspaper of the penny press era that actually sold for a penny, the New York Sun. Other newspapers of the time sold for six cents, the equivalent of the pay for one day of labor. Day’s Sun epitomized the melding of elements that characterized this period of newspapering in the United States. It was devoid of partisanship, and owed nothing to any patron or party for financial support. In fact, it was shy on political or commercial discourse of any kind, and instead focused more on such human interest features as the tale of a young, European baron, his forbidden love for a commoner, and his ensuing disinheritance. It also carried news of violent crimes and local happenings. It was printed on one of the earliest cylinder presses at the astonishing rate of 1500 complete papers in one hour, allowing a circulation of 8,000 (Emery, 1996, p. 100). So newspapers were now addressing mass audiences, lower class as well as upper, at an inexpensive rate, and often on a daily basis.

James Gordon Bennett and his New York Herald brought another strong personality and new sense of what was news to the mix, and the paper quickly became immensely popular. He made a name for the Herald by printing what people wanted to read, meaning news of all the corruption and moral decay that was growing as quickly as the city of New York. He vehemently eschewed affiliation with any party or cause, and was known for his sarcastic and biting criticism of all circles of people (Tebbel, 1969, p. 97). Later, his paper led in offering financial news, foreign news, and national news, as well as offering one of the early letters to the editor columns. He was the first to treat sports as being worth including in the newspaper, and pioneered the concepts of society pages and critical reviews of art and literature. The Herald made its name as an innovator and a perfector when it came to the newspaper business (Emery, 1996, p. 103). Horace Greeley operated the New York Tribune with similar personal influence. He was, however, noted for his restrained passion and moral convictions rather than a flamboyant personality like Bennett (Tebbel, 1969, p. 109).

While the New York newspapers dominated the newspapering world at this time, personal journalism was flourishing throughout the developing nation, as the penny press concept spread to all other large cities, particularly along the eastern coast, like Baltimore, Philadelphia, and Springfield, Massachusetts. Of note as the nation moved toward the Civil War in 1851 was the formation of the New York Daily Times published by Henry Raymond, a former employee of Horace Greeley. Raymond wanted to appeal to the masses, but also wanted to avoid the sensationalism and personal attacks that still characterized other papers of the time. Raymond famously said in the first issue, “. . . we do not mean to write as if we were in a passion unless that shall really be the case; and we shall make it a point to get into a passion as rarely as possible.” The Times largely made good on that aim, providing fair reporting and non-partisan opinion coupled with careful reporting (Emery, 1996, p. 109). While newspapers spread west with westward expansion, they didn’t grow to impressive daily status in such cities as San Francisco, Chicago, and Kansas City for decades after they flourished in New York. Still, strong personalities characterized their growth (Douglas, 1999, p. 92).
It was during this time period that the first publications appeared in Oxford. Miami University was established in 1809 (Laws, 1809, p. 43), and by 1834, professors at the college printed a variety of short-lived publications either to present the news of the University, “support the present administration,” or act as an academic journal. These publications lasted for brief periods ranging from one issue to under one year and were put out by printer/publishers, as was so common at the time (Cottell, 1948, p. 4).

It is interesting to note that another publication emerging in Oxford during this time period was printed by one of those printer/publishers and addressed the religious community. In fact, it was designed to “bring together the two factions of the Presbyterian Church.” It lasted for nine bi-monthly issues and cost 25 cents per copy, a high price for the time period (Cottell, 1948, p. 5).

The prosaic subject matter and tenuous survival of these special interest publications are typical of the earliest kinds of community newspapers published in developing communities in the United States. While the partisan and personal press was well established in the larger cities, news still filtered to outlying communities through larger cities, and the small communities often did not have a news “voice” of their own. The press in large cities could afford the new, money-saving technologies that brought the cost of publication down to a reasonable price, but the outlying communities were years away from such developments.

The Professional Press

The intensity of feeling and activity in the country during the Civil War brought to fruition several developments begun in earlier decades. Press technology continued to advance apace, and newspapers were printed on double-sided cylinder presses at twice the speed the 1844 single cylinder press could print. Trains replaced pony express riders to deliver east coast papers to distant and developing western cities, and to return the news to the east coast papers. Then the development of the telegraph in 1844 set the stage for another revolution in printing, poised to make Civil War newspaper coverage a galvanizing period in the newspaper business. The telegraph allowed immediacy in reporting news from the place it happened, and it allowed newspapers to pool resources and send news from one paper to another in a distant city where it could be printed in the next morning’s edition (Emery, 1996, p. 115).

The Oxford Citizen was the first regular newspaper in Oxford, first appearing in 1854. The first and subsequent issues reflected the trend of pre-civil war writing in the large cities, but without the more sensational aspects of crime and scandal. Front page stories of the early issues of the Citizen included missives on ridding homes of rats, “The Habits of the Mackerel,” “A Bachelor’s Defence (sic),” and snippets of poetry along with jokes (Cottell, 1948, p. 8). The cost of the newspaper was reflected still in annual subscriptions, $1.50 for a year, while newspapers in New York were sold at one cent per copy. Other items included in very early issues of the Citizen were the going prices for farm produce and a page of editorials. Advertisements included many for patent medicines, all set in approximately 6-point type (half today’s standard size of 12 point) (Cottell, 1948, p. 9).

At big-city newspapers, the aforementioned technological developments meant the Civil War was covered as no other war before had been. Newspapers had staff reporters and free-lance reporters writing personal accounts from the front lines of battles
and sending them across the telegraph wire for publication the next day. Because of the expense involved in sending telegraph messages, reporters developed a newly concise and expressive style of reporting (Tebbel, 1969, p. 115). The roles of reporter, editor and publisher were codified and standardized. Where one person often held the role of both editor and publisher, those roles became separate. The duties of a reporter began to be set, and reporters became full-time employees who didn’t have other duties at the newspaper. The tension between the government and the press, with the press questioning the people and decisions of the bureaucracy, also became solidified. Additionally, this time period saw the shift of large metropolitan newspapers from the entrepreneur and editor stage to the capitalized big business stage (Douglas, 1999, p. 91). The day of strong personal influence in the national newspaper scene was drawing quickly to a close.

The community press, however, did not make the shift from entrepreneur editor to businessman for over a hundred years after the big city newspapers. These community newspapers retained the personality of the owner, editor, and publisher (often one and the same person). In Oxford, the Citizen reflected the community view of the war, showing the consistent trend in community newspapers of localizing national stories to make them relevant to the communities they serve.

In 1861, the Citizen ran stories explaining martial law and noting the swearing in of the “University Rifles,” a division of the Union Army with 33 members from Oxford. The paper also printed letters home from these soldiers during the war. The assassination of President Lincoln warranted front page coverage in the Citizen, and was linked to the local community with the publication of a sermon reflecting community feelings about the assassination by a professor at Miami University. Interestingly, and reflecting the community nature of the publication, the stories about Lincoln were juxtaposed with an ad from the city marshal noting the auction of farm animals that were confiscated while running free in the streets of the city (Cottell, 1948, p. 11).

After the Civil War, the nation was becoming a place of cities, with the number of American towns and cities of 8,000 persons or more doubling between 1880 and 1900 (Emery, 1996, p. 157). As populations were growing in cities, newspapers were growing even faster. The numbers of daily newspapers quadrupled, and the number of weekly newspapers, serving largely small towns and rural areas but also suburban areas, tripled, increasing from 4,000 to more than 12,000. Additionally, education was increasing in importance. The numbers of children attending public school were rising, land grant and privately funded colleges were being built, and women were more often included in educational advancements (Emery, 1996, p. 160). While there were certainly hordes of poor and many groups, particularly immigrants, who were still illiterate, the numbers of educated, informed citizens was growing.

Changes at the Citizen show evidence of this development of news roles and less use of personal information. In the mid to late 1870s, the newspaper shifted from general interest articles about such things as fish and living as a bachelor to market quotes from New York and Chicago, along with a summary of general interest news articles from those cities. By 1875, the newspaper featured more local news. Since some of the daily newspapers from the cities were finding a way to outlying communities via faster and more reliable transportation, and the local newspaper began to find value in its own community rather than publishing compilations of stories from the big cities. The Citizen carried news of local events such as the state fair and community happenings. The value
that Bennett in New York placed on sports began to trickle down to the community, as the scores of a local baseball games were noted in the Oxford Citizen. The newspaper also ran a serialized novel, a common device of the day (Cottell, 1948, p. 13).

**New Journalism Turns Yellow**

Into the atmosphere of the personal press came the next major development in newspapering, beginning with Joseph Pulitzer’s purchase of the New York World in 1883. Pulitzer began big with the World and made it even larger. Much is made of the “yellow journalism” phase of Pulitzer’s ownership of the World, but prior to that, he created an innovative publication that symbolized another significant transition for newspapers. The New York World appealed to the masses with sensational headlines such as “A Mother’s Awful Crime,” but also highlighted social problems such as abuse and corruption. Additionally, Pulitzer used his not insignificant power as a crusader for causes such as civil service reform and funding the base for the Statue of Liberty – the majestic gift from the people of France had no place to rest its feet on American soil until Pulitzer took up the cause (Douglas, 1999, p. 97). Pulitzer was an innovator in using color and illustrations, and believed in having a newspaper that was informative and entertaining. He used “stunts” such as reporter Nellie Bly’s trip “around the world in 80 days,” to grab readers. These innovations helped in the creation of the “new journalism” period, which also spread to St. Louis, Chicago, Atlanta, and the Midwest as daily newspapers began their prominence (Emery, 1996, p. 168).

Then William Randolph Hearst entered the picture. Thanks to his father’s beneficence, he was given management of the San Francisco Examiner in 1887, after a stint as a cub reporter at Pulitzer’s own World. He attempted to turn the Examiner into the West Coast version of the World, and by all accounts, was highly successful (Stephens, 1998, p. 158). He then decided to compete directly with Pulitzer in New York, and ushered in a phase of journalism known as “yellow journalism.” Hearst purchased the New York Morning Journal and proceeded to out-sensationalize Pulitzer, with even more outrageous stunts, and without Pulitzer’s regard for the facts. He had more money, with his family’s fortune, and eventually was able lure away many of the top employees at the World. Pulitzer’s attempts to compete with Hearst created an atmosphere of reckless disregard for the truth, stretching of facts and misrepresentations that inspired criticism from more steady editors (Douglas, 1999, p. 113).

**A Local Conflict**

It is interesting to note that Oxford had its own version of the Hearst/Pulitzer debate going on in its weekly press. The feel was, however, more of the personal partisan press from the early 1800s rather than the salacious sensationalism of New York’s Yellow Journalism trend. The Citizen had changed management several times over the years, and in 1885, Stephen Cone took over. He soon hired an editor to handle the local news, and he focused on editorializing, criticizing, and crusading. Like his New York counterparts, he used his position to promote causes he found important. For example, he thought a new elementary school was imperative for the safety of the children. He launched a campaign to expand the school board, get himself elected to that board, voted to build a new school, then publicized and aggrandized himself in the newspaper at the time the building was dedicated (Cottell, 1948, p. 15).
The Hearst to Cone’s Pulitzer was William Osborne, editor of a competing weekly newspaper, *The Oxford News*, started in 1886. Osborne and Cone carried on a public dispute in the pages of their respective weeklies for six years until the two newspapers merged in 1892. Cone made personal attacks on Osborne, accusing him of “walking the streets with a colored female” and embezzling money. Osborne accused Cone, the acting committee chairman of the city council’s street committee, of bankrupting the committee through illegal expenditures and appropriations. Meanwhile, the *News* gained subscribers and advertising dollars. It published a popular column, “The Man About Town” with local comments and opinions, which proved popular enough to win subscribers away from the *Citizen*. Seeing this, the *Citizen* soon added such a column of its own titled, “The Bystanders” (Cottell, 1948, 18).

The two newspapers supported opposing slates of candidates for office every city election. Osborne at the *News* accused Cone’s candidates, of “sucking the life-blood” from the city, and enriching themselves at the expense of city improvements. Cone, on the other hand, accused Osborne’s candidates of ganging up on new business owners and making it impossible for them to thrive in Oxford (Cottell, 1948, p. 23). In 1890, the invective was still flying thick and hard. From the *News*: [With Cone’s candidates in power, the city is] “Controlled by as corrupt a gang of aged sucklings at the public crib as ever throttled any one by the throat.” And the *Citizen* the next year: “Go slow Billy, and furnish your readers with the truth instead of a conglomerated mass of lies” (Cottell, 1948, p. 25). Eventually this bickering led to a lawsuit filed by Cone against Osborne, who responded by noting all the times the *News* had given aid to the *Citizen* and Cone. The suit was dismissed for lack of grounds and public opinion turned against Cone. He lost subscribers and business, and in 1891 sold the newspaper to other parties. The name-calling ended for a time, renewed a few months later, then ended for good when the *Citizen* was sold to the *News* and ceased publication (Cottell, 1948, p. 31).

The lack of sensationalism and the abundance of personal invective reflect again the nature of the community newspaper. These publications were not the capitalized big businesses of New York or Chicago, who had, by this time, lost the personal feel. These were small, local businesses, owned and operated by individuals who put their stamp on what they published, and who were deeply involved in the community. The early years of partisan press also operated in a limited sphere and engendered debate and discussion around communities with its personal attacks and vindictive politics.

*Journalistic Values and Objectivity*

In the larger cities, the “yellow journalism” trend of playing loose with the facts and focusing on the sensational was picked up by a few other large newspapers around the country, but was not universal. In fact, during this same period, journalistic values of objectivity and standardized reporting were taking hold. The trend was popularized at *The New York Times*, which had lost money, readers and prestige in the late 1800s. In 1896, Adolph Ochs, a publisher from Chattanooga, Tennessee, bought the struggling daily. He infused the ideal of objectivity into a paper that already prided itself in being steady and impassive. He provided better coverage of business and more careful government coverage. These values took hold around the country as well, and as yellow journalism was phasing out in 1900, the standards of journalistic reporting and objectivity
(or treating the news as an “object”) were becoming standard, with all their inherent contradictions (Stephens, 1988, p. 264).

This trend was reflected briefly in Oxford with the newly formed Oxford News-Citizen. Led by a group of citizens that included a former mayor and other businessmen in town, it invested in a new press, allowing faster and better printing. It stopped running advertisements on the front page, common in both of the weekly newspapers until this point. It expanded on the trend the News had started a few years earlier – publishing “suburban” news, or snippets from the surrounding communities. The publishing day of the paper was changed from the traditional Saturday night to Thursday afternoon to accommodate farmers who came into town on the weekend and wanted to pick up a newspaper (Cottell, 1948, p. 33). The newspaper changed its name back to the News and changed editors several times, and had a brief period of competition from 1893 to 1895 from a newspaper called The Oxford Times. These papers also featured bickering between editors regarding personal character and political opinion (Cottell, 1948, p. 36).

This controversy in Oxford publishing took place years after the national partisan press had gone its way and objectivity had taken hold as a standard. However, as was true with the partisan press, it was no mystery in Oxford that there was bias in the publications and that citizens would get a particular point of view from each newspaper. Despite the personal biases, discussion of issues in the newspaper made citizens aware of issues in the town, and presumably encouraged discussion about the issues between citizens of the community.

The Beginning of Consolidation

Around the nation up to this time, the ownership structure of newspapers largely consisted of one newspaper owned by one man. By 1900, some chains were beginning to form; however, there were only 8 chains that among them owned 27 newspapers and represented 10 percent of the circulation of newspapers in the country. The most well known chains largely consisted of a single man owning two newspapers, as did Adolph Ochs, William Hearst, and Joseph Pulitzer. Although Hearst later acquired many publications, he did not begin buying more properties until the 1920s. Many of the giants in the newspaper business seemed uninterested in acquisitions beyond their flagship newspapers (Douglas, 1999, p. 144).

The development of newspaper chains, then, began not from the top, but from the bottom of the newspaper industry. They did not start in the East with the huge dailies, but rather in Midwest with smaller newspapers in midsized cities. The first was the Scripps news group. The Scripps family had several siblings in the newspaper business, but Edward Wyllis (E.W.) Scripps, was the one who began to acquire properties. He focused on stable newspapers aimed at the working man, bought up the newspapers, hired strong editors, and moved on to acquiring new properties. He also started United Press International, a wire service to compete with the Associated Press, which was controlled by the large New York newspapers (Douglas, 1999, p. 150). Frank Munsey was another early chain newspaper owner, but unlike Scripps and Hearst, was not a newspaperman and ran the properties with a definite business bent.

During this time period, newspapers faced growing costs in technology, and many daily newspapers shifted to weeklies, others merged with rivals as evident in the Oxford case, and others suspended publication. Pressure for advertising dollars increased, the
standardizing of journalism practices and objectivity gave readers less motivation to buy multiple newspapers, depressions and inflation made business difficult, and consolidation increased (Emery, 1996, p. 314).

While the community newspaper lagged well behind in the consolidation trends, the pressure for standardizing journalism practices and economic difficulties also evidenced themselves in Oxford. In his documentation of newspapers in Oxford, Ohio, Cottell noted that until the late 1890s, the newspaper(s) in Oxford presented interesting controversy and personal journalism. However, the tone changed as businessmen took over the news. Again, decades after such trends in the larger newspaper world, in 1897, a new group of directors bought the *Oxford News*. Included in the group was James Gamble, son of one of the founders of the Procter and Gamble Company, and two others.

The newspaper changed significantly, as businessmen rather than the strong personality of a single editor commanded it for a time. The men changed the front page, removing the personal opinion columns and filling it with local news. They took a customer-oriented approach, adding more news from the college, some national news, church news, and regional news (Cottell, 1948, p. 39).

However, as daily newspapers became more pervasive around the country and more easily reached smaller towns, the local weekly in Oxford needed to make the transition to being entirely local, rather than a source for a modicum of national news. In the early 1900s, another strong personality took over editorship of the *Oxford News*: Captain David Murphy. An old newspaperman and violent prohibitionist, he changed the name of the paper to the *Oxford Herald* and brought back editorials as a common practice. He used the newspaper as the voice of prohibition, segregation, isolationism, and women’s suffrage. His messages appealed to many readers of the day (Cottell, 1948, p. 41). In March of 1913, a serious flood caused major damage in Oxford, and prompted the aging Murphy to permanently retire and cease publication of the *Herald*. The *Oxford Forum* took up the journalistic cause in Oxford. However, the *Forum* was not a well-run newspaper. Consisting largely of syndicated material and advertising, in 1915, it apparently just stopped publishing (Cottell, 1948, p. 48). The period of 1915 to 1932 was characterized by a dearth of local news in the Oxford community. While various small newspapers sprang up and then disappeared, they did not champion the cause of local news or personalities, and were of generally low quality (Cottell, 1948, p. 51).

Perhaps this is a reflection of the sudden explosion of jazz journalism, crusading journalism, war journalism, and tabloid journalism that was blanketing the country’s big cities during the flagrant excesses of the 20s, followed by the market correction and Depression of 1929. In the chaos and frantic activity of the jazz age, newspapers were beginning and failing constantly, with grand aspirations or appeals to the baser interests. Jazz journalism was characterized by sex and crime, which had become staples of print since Bennett’s time, but added now the tabloid format and photography (Tebbell, 1969, p. 227). The ensuing chaos in the world of newspapers was perhaps beyond the prosaic weekly newspaper, and perhaps beyond the quiet university town of Oxford. But with the advent of the Depression and a sudden halt to the frenetic excesses and frantic pace of the twenties, the environment of newspapers once again changed. The fact that the next weekly in Oxford, the one that remains through this day, began in 1932 is perhaps a reflection of the arrival of calmer times and a return to home and personal concerns.
The Oxford Press Begins. From its inception, the Oxford Press focused on local stories. The front page of its first issue was filled with local items, and page two contained society news, along with advertisements. Also in that first edition were church notes, fashion articles, high school news, some general interest stories, a serialized novel again, and that newspaper staple, the obituary (Cottell, 1948, p. 52). It grew quite rapidly, according to circulation numbers and the numbers of pages in each issue. The Press changed management in 1934, continuing to expand its local coverage with sports news and a consumer’s column. In 1935, Avis Cullen became editor and business manager of the Press, and in October of 1936, she purchased the newspaper (Cottell, 1948, p. 54).

Cullen was unique in journalism for the time; not many newspapers were owned, published, edited, or even written by women in those days. Despite advances made by women, they were still unaccepted in journalistic circles. However, Cullen was well prepared for her work as a publisher and business manager, with years of experience in newspapers, as well as experience assisting her husband with his work in newspapers (Cullen, 1993, p. 6).

While the newspaper was a free advertising sheet when she joined the staff, she worked to make it a publication subscribers would pay to read, and she succeeded in this venture. She also used the paper to successfully champion the causes of installing traffic lights, providing better firefighting equipment, and other community improvements. Additionally, the newspaper over the years provided a unique chronicle of important and tragic events in the city of Oxford. It noted a 1938 fire that killed a mother and four children, kept record of municipal improvements such as bridges and road crossings, recorded new buildings erected and old ones torn down, and wrote of businesses opened and businesses closed. It also noted the two fires that plagued the newspaper itself, and provided an account of troops that moved through the area during World War II. Cullen produced an award-winning publication for many years, adding such features as movie reviews, health shorts, radio listening, a birthday column, a column for Negro happenings, and a great deal of local news (Cottell, 1948, p. 56 - 63). In short, the newspaper provided a political and commercial history of Oxford during the time period. Cullen owned and published the newspaper, with the help of Bob White, her long-time editor, until 1960. In 1960, White, his father, Robert White Sr., and his business partner, Dick Taylor, purchased the newspaper from Cullen and published for nearly thirty years. They followed largely the same formula she had, although with a naturally different style. Their focus was on local news, with detailed reports from city meetings and particularly strong coverage of the arts, such as theater and music performances. A great supporter of the arts, White attended and reviewed nearly all such performances, professional and amateur, in Oxford and the surrounding areas (Cullen, 1993, p. 7).

“Groups” and changes

As the Oxford Press developed under Cullen, the newspaper business was growing in the rest of the country. By the 1950s, there were more than 100 newspaper chains, but more than 60 percent of them were completely enclosed in a single state. The only truly national chains were the Hearst, Scripps-Howard, and the Samuel Irving Newhouse chains. Newhouse owned 13 dailies, eight Sunday-only newspapers, four television stations and three radio stations. Like Munsey, Newhouse was interested in newspapers not as an editor, but as a businessman. In the 1960s, the first truly
international chain, the Canada-based Thomson group, became larger than these chains, or “groups” as they preferred to be called. Newspapers in general preferred the term “group” which they believed reflected the fact that each newspaper remained a local and independent operation (Trebbel, 1969, p. 244). The Thomson group would eventually add the *Oxford Press* and other nearby newspapers to its holdings, before divesting itself of newspapers almost entirely in the early 2000s.

Still, these huge groups did not look at the community weekly in the mid-20th century. If weeklies consolidated, they were more likely to be part of one of the small groups, with two or three community publications owned by a single family or person, sharing publishing costs and providing advantageous advertising coverage to local businesses. This remained the standard until late in the 20th century. The *Oxford Press* fit this trend, since Avis Cullen owned and operated the *College Corner News*, published across the state line in Indiana (Cullen, 1993, p. 7), and in 1973, White purchased the *Preble County News* (Press, 1973, p. 1).

The weekly community newspaper largely ignored another aspect of consolidation, the joint operating agreement (JOA). First officially allowed in 1970, these agreements proposed to maintain multiple newspaper cities by allowing newspapers to combine advertising and financial departments, while maintaining separate editorial departments (Detroit, 2006). Such agreements are often criticized as leading to less diversity in voice in a city, but given the nature of community newspapers, there is rarely more than one in a community.

Meanwhile, there were other writing trends in the journalism industry, pushing a bit at the standards of objectivity and reportage, but never overtaking them. These various trends were eventually incorporated into either general newspapering or into individual publications that made a name with a particular style. For example, interpretive reporting rose to the forefront in the 1930s and 40s. Practitioners believed that facts needed to be placed in the proper context in order to be understood and incorporated into practice. Politics, science, and business were places where these practices became standard, with reporters interpreting the motivations of the laborer and the reasons for strikes, explaining the economics of business decisions, and interpreting political moves in terms of power and personality. This aspect of news reporting remains strong. In the 1960s, as so much of the institutional world was being challenged, so too was the press. Literary journalism came into vogue, featuring writing with a narrative style and with less focus on the interview as a news gathering technique. This form of journalism survives today, largely in magazines (Emery, 1996, p. 431). Investigative reporting came to the forefront in the 1970s, exemplified by coverage of the Watergate scandal of 1974 (Emery, 1996, p. 451).

Most of these trends, however, never found their way to the community weekly. Its bread and butter remains standard journalistic reporting of community events, politicians, and business owners. While there certainly have been examples of weekly newspapers uncovering scandal and abuse in local government and organizations, investing large amounts of time and labor into investigations is rarely in the focus or the budgets of weekly newspapers. As Brook (1993) points out, many readers of weekly newspapers are more interested in seeing news of their own or other’s events in the paper. Church bake sales, Red Cross, blood drives, a fundraiser for a hospitalized neighbor, and other such events are popular items for contributors to the paper as well as readers (p. 166).
A look at the current state of weekly community newspapers must necessarily involve an examination of how media concentration affects those publications. Therefore, it is important to examine media concentration, its implications, and its influences on media in general and on newspapers and the Oxford Press specifically.

Media Concentration in American Media

As previously noted, the concentration of ownership of media properties is of concern to many in the United States and around the world. In the U.S., the government has largely declined to regulate print media. While there are some regulations under the Newspaper Preservation Act of 1970 (forming newspaper Joint Operating Agreements, or JOAs, that allow two newspapers in a city to combine their business and printing departments in order to operate more efficiently when one newspaper is in danger of folding), there are no limits on the numbers of newspapers or magazines a single owner can produce.

On the other hand, since the Radio Act of 1927, the earliest general regulation of mass broadcasting in the country, broadcasting has been subject to a degree of regulation not present in any other medium. The rationales for regulating broadcasting are the limited electromagnetic spectrum, and the pervasiveness of the broadcast media. Therefore, under FCC regulations, there are limitations on who can purchase a license to operate a station, and limits on the numbers of television and radio stations one owner can have. (Hilmes, 2007, p. 43). Newspapers are only regulated by the FCC when they are combined with broadcasting stations under the cross ownership rules limiting the ownership of a broadcast station and a newspaper in the same market. There are also laws regulating the total number of television stations an entity may own and regulations limiting the number of broadcast stations a single entity may own in one market (Carter, Dee & Zuckman, 2007, p. 509).

However, due to a number of challenges to FCC regulations based on First Amendment arguments, changes in access brought about by digital technology and the Internet, and in response to business and economic pressures, laws and FCC policies have become increasing less stringent. Companies often cite monetary pressures as a reason for their ever-expanding acquisitions. Concentrating ownership can help financially in several ways. For example, acquiring other successful businesses shows immediate growth on the annual profit sheet and dividends for shareholders. Additionally, acquiring competitors allows companies to raise prices for advertising, thus increasing profits. Also, acquiring properties across media types allows a company to offer packages of advertising in each media that increases profit to the company. Companies also look for efficiencies in combining production facilities and staff, allowing the business to lower costs.

While the trend toward concentration is certainly evident in broadcasting, newspapers are also affected. As of 2003, one in every four radio stations had a newspaper ownership connection. However, local TV/newspaper ownership combos have actually dropped since the FCC’s rule against new combinations in 1975. The FCC has granted a few waivers in recent years, and these have resulted in a slight increase in broadcast/newspaper combinations. There also has been increasing cooperation in newsgathering between television stations and local newspapers that are under different ownership in the past few years. This was perhaps in anticipation of more relaxed cross-media ownership rules and
formal combinations of such media outlets (Howard, 2006, p. 74). However, despite expectations from some in the industry, a complete repeal of the cross-ownership rules has not been enacted. On Dec. 18, 2007, the FCC modified the rule to allow exceptions to the cross-ownership ban only in the top 20 news markets in the country, the first modification of the rule in 30 years (FCC, 2008, p. 9). This exception allows cooperation between broadcast and print outlets under the same ownership in those markets. Additionally, large newspaper chains such as Gannett, Cox, and Times continually buy up smaller chains and independent papers (Bagdikian, 2004, p. 194).

While the big five conglomerates -- Disney, Time Warner, News Corporation, Viacom and Bertelsmann -- own the vast majority of media properties, their consistent growth simply mirrors the industry-wide trend toward fewer owners of more media properties. These growing companies favor horizontal growth – owning different properties in different media, such as several television stations, a few radio stations and a movie company – as well as vertical growth – buying complementary companies such as a movie making firm, an editing firm, a distribution company and toy and book companies to market tie-ins. Therefore, the companies profit from the same product many times over.

**Negatives of Media Concentration**

There are many vocal critics of the tendency toward concentration of media ownership, and most of them favor an end to the FCC and Congress’ push toward deregulation of ownership. Instead, they generally favor more regulation and government oversight. Opponents of deregulation typically view the public interest through a “democracy” model. In that model, the policy goal is to preserve media access opportunities for diverse voices and to promote informed public discussion of important issues (Shelanski, 2006, p. 371). The U.S. Supreme Court in *Red Lion Broadcasting v. FCC* first expressed the compelling argument that not only does the speaker have the right to expression, but that it is the “right of the public to receive suitable access to social, political, aesthetic, moral and other ideas and experiences” (Pember & Calvert, 2007, p. 50). This desire for open, diverse discourse is evident in Jim Parker’s summary of three reoccurring and compelling rationales which are often cited as fears about media concentration: financial pressures, stifling of free discourse, and news content manipulation (Parker, 2000, p. 513).

**Financial Pressures.** Common ownership of media outlets within a market area as well as across the country also increases the potential for economic abuses, since one company sets advertising and subscription rates for an entire area with no interference (Howard, 2006, p. 4) as happened following the removal of most radio ownership regulation in the Telecommunications Act of 1996. Clear Channel purchased hundreds of radio stations around the country, owning many within the same markets (within raised legal limits) as well as hundreds across the country. When many media companies are owned by the same large conglomerate, there is less competition, and advertising rates go up. Many argue that while this is a situation that works well for large companies, it harms consumers.

When large, publicly owned corporations own media and journalistic entities, financial pressures come from Wall Street’s need for constant growth – pressure critics say comes at the expense of good journalism. When mergers occur, inevitably cuts in journalism positions (such as reporters and photographers) and news divisions (editors, producers and anchors) will follow. This is to be expected, since one motivation for consolidation is reducing staff to save money. Many argue this will have negative journalistic consequences.
Eric Alterman said it was nearly impossible to imagine a non-journalist standing up for a journalistic principle when even a victory would leave the company no more profitable. New York media critic Ken Auletta agreed that the discussion in cases of mergers focuses on shareholder value, stock prices, and revenue generation rather than “how do we produce the best product” (Parker, 2000, p. 515).

This tension between journalistic excellence and a profit motive is a recurring theme from consolidation critics. One notes that there are two models for finding stories in journalism. In one model, journalists are expected to “beat the bushes,” or search out stories that aren’t advertised or announced. In the other model, they are expected to “work the beat,” or cover specific entities such as the courthouse, city hall, etc., which forces them to rely on authority figures and press releases as sources. While beat reporters can be enterprising and investigative, they often have so many official entities to cover that it discourages innovation and digging and encourages reliance on officials. As cost competition comes into play, journalists and management favor beats that ensure stories on a predictable timetable and at low costs. The result is that news and public affairs are defined by authority figures such as think tanks and research institutes (Bettig, 2003, p. 7). Another critic agrees that consolidation is a system that works to advance and promote commercial values, while denigrating journalism and a culture not conducive to the immediate bottom line or long-run corporate interests (Waterman, 2000, p. 533).

Other commentators acknowledge the argument made by consolidation apologists that only big media companies can afford the huge losses that often accompany launching new media products, such as USA Today, or sustaining existing unprofitable operations. However, they argue that such support is limited. As Bettig (2003) says, it is impossible to imagine these companies doing the same for genuinely alternative voices and views. If they were truly encouraging alternate voices, more than one percent of U.S. communities would have competing newspapers instead of one-newspaper monopolies. Large conglomerates are able to engage in predatory pricing, charging below actual cost, because their deep pockets allow them to afford the temporary losses that small and mid-sized firms cannot, thereby quashing competition.

Because of these conditions, Bettig (2003) argues that the U.S. media are private property controlled by a handful of elites. This model creates a situation he sees as unworkable, since an essential contradiction emerges: the goal of amassing great profits and the goal of informing ordinary citizens are distinctly at odds with one another. So both the media and the government tend to act more as lapdogs for each other than watchdogs for the people (p. 89).

Stifling Free Discourse. Critics contend that group ownership of media properties increases the danger of media control over the flow of information to the public (Howard, 2006, p. 4).

Critics’ arguments that free disclosure of information is stifled by consolidated media ownership are supported both theoretically and anecdotally. One critic notes that with multiple media ownership, at issue is “the power to surround almost every man, woman, and child in the country with controlled images and words (Parker, 2000, p. 514).”

Alex Jones, host of NPR’s On the Media, joins others in suggesting that one reason for the reduction in journalistic staff and the pressure to combine into fewer voices is that large conglomerates simply have no understanding or recognition of news and journalism values. Companies grow larger; journalism becomes a smaller part of what they do, and
journalistic values are increasingly subordinate to business and economic values (Parker, 2000, p. 516).

When profit becomes the overarching business philosophy and news staffs are under-funded and underpaid, they become dependent on officials and authority figures such as politicians, corporate spokespersons and readily available experts. Such officials are prone to beating around the bushes – withholding information, spreading half-truths or just plain lying (Bettig, 2003, p. 7).

A major criticism of media concentration and its limiting diverse voices in the media is that economic, not political, concerns are the reasons for the relentless accumulation of media properties. Regulation, therefore, may have to enforce diversity in viewpoints. There are three diversity rationales the FCC has presented for multiple ownership rules: 1) To encourage greater gender, ethnic, and racial diversity, 2) To limit multiple ownership of the media in order to maximize diversity of viewpoints in programming, 3) To prevent undue concentration of economic power contrary to the public interest (Barron, 2000, p. 557).

Some media magnates will complain that diversity as a goal violates the First Amendment. If diversity is simply stated as a generalized goal, then it can be considered impermissibly vague. If it is framed in specific terms to encourage a particular kind of expression, then it would certainly be a content-based violation of the First Amendment. However, the Supreme Court has upheld the FCC’s prohibition on cross-ownership on First Amendment grounds. They said the policy was reasonable because it promoted the public interest in the diversification of the mass communications media and furthered, rather than contravened, the U.S. system of free expression. The court has said, “It is unrealistic to expect true diversity from commonly owned station-newspaper combinations” (Barron, 2000, p. 559).

Robert McChesney, a leading critic of media concentration and head of the organization Free Press, takes issue with those corporate conglomerates that use the First Amendment as reason to oppose any controls on ownership. McChesney points out that it is a myth that the First Amendment authorizes the corporate control and hyper-commercialization of the media and communication. He says that in his view, the First Amendment does not belong to the media, so interfering with the organization and structure of the media does not inherently violate the First Amendment, despite a media campaign to make it seem so. Framing the discussion as a First Amendment issue obscures the need for some regulation of media consolidation. He says that if diversification of ownership policies has no more justification than limiting the domination of the opinion process, then the case for their validity is established (Barron, 2000, p. 560).

News Content Manipulation. The most troubling fear of merger opponents, though, is the control that corporate interests can conceivably exert over news and public affairs programming when they control media outlets. Some contend that corporate controllers are significantly engaged in manipulation of and interference in news content in pursuit of their own corporate self-interest. (Schwartzman, 2000, p. 518). As Jim Parker (2000) suggests, stories may be killed by editors because they are defamatory or unfair rather than because of corporate pressures. But the trouble with big media mergers is that the public can never be sure of what stories are never published or produced and why they don’t make it on the screen or into the newspaper (p. 524).

Owners, editors and reporters usually deny that owners intervene in news decisions. However, an examination of the behaviors of owner/publisher of the New York Times, Arthur Hays Sulzberger, and his editor, Turner Catledge, shows the publisher frequently intervened in news decisions, and that the editor generally tried to do what the publisher asked. The publisher was able to assert influence without the knowledge of reporters (Chomsky, 2006, p. 3). As fewer owners own more media, it is likely the influence of those owners will be felt, in perhaps the same backhanded way (Parker, 2000, p. 525), although other studies do show limited or no influence. Bagdikian’s research found that almost every under-reported story “rocks the boat of corporate interests.” It seems an easy step to assume the vastness of huge conglomerates could inhibit reporters from pursuing stories (Bagdikian, 2004, p. 93).

There are those who point out that when media are caught fabricating stories or distorting facts, the other media are quick to criticize and condemn the offending outlet. But critics maintain that such internal “flak” only serves to reinforce the public’s belief that the media are vigilantly policing themselves, and they mistakenly assume that truth prevails. However, there are significant gaps in media self-coverage, particularly in any kind of critical look or systemic analysis of the processes and effects of media concentration (Bettig, 2003, p. 15). Therefore, when media outlets do cover mergers themselves, they quote owners and financial analysts, who tout the benefits of being large and having a global presence (Bettig, 2003, p. 17). Anecdotally, a New York Times editorial saw the merger of Time Warner and AOL as leading to “broader choice” and proposed that the real danger was not in a lack of voice or ownership diversity, but only that such corporate behemoths could buy political influence.

Additionally, commentators claim the corporate mindset of the media will affect not only what stories are covered, but how they are covered as well. As an example, they point to the coverage of the 1999 WTO summit in Seattle. The causes and protesters at the WTO conference in the big media coverage were covered as a group, not individuals, and characterized as “all-purpose agitators” (Bettig, 2003, p. 145) rather than individuals who had real, legitimate concerns about the Bush administration’s economic policies.

Limiting Political discourse. Lacy (2003) questions whether or not media companies lower the quality of democratic discourse by making excessive profit. He finds that people or organizations with economic and political power want to retain that power rather than share it. Without regulation, economic markets move toward concentration. In some markets, media are making excessive profits at the expense of public discourse. To change this, governments will have to enforce existing laws that promote competition and pass regulations that promote the well-being of consumers over that of businesses (p. 133). He says that consumers should not spend time or money on media content that they consider being of low quality, but also argues that the absence of competition can lead to limited public discourse.

Because of the concentration in media, a very small number of corporate decision makers ultimately will decide which messages reach the public. Critics wonder if alternative voices, viewpoints and perspectives stand a chance of making it on the air or into print when the big keep getting bigger and opportunities become more and more limited. Although the Internet has potential to alter this balance of power, major media conglomerates do own many of the most popular outlets.
Positive Perspectives and Proponents of Media Concentration

Holding opposing opinions are those who advocate deregulation of media and promote marketplace control of the press and mass media systems. These critics often use a consumer-based view, asking what the media consumer wants. Advocates of deregulation in particular view the public interest through an efficiency-oriented model. In that model, the policy goal is to promote competition that will lead media companies to better satisfy consumers’ preferences (Shelanski, 2006, p. 372). They make several arguments, including the claim that opposition to deregulation is simply politically motivated. They also argue that competition in media is strong and not adversely affected by concentration of media ownership, that it takes huge companies to take on other huge companies and big government without fear, and that the ownership is not important to journalistic values.

It’s politics. Some advocates of the free market system of regulation (or lack of regulation) claim that the role of the media in modern culture and congressional elections prompts a great deal of the comment and criticism on the topic (Murray, 2006). While the subject of media influence in the political process is one of merit, concentration defenders say that media influence and type of coverage should be the subject of debate, and that ownership of the media outlets is irrelevant to the discussion. They also claim that each political party in the U.S. uses the subject of concentration as a way to enlist support to their political point of view without truly examining the issue or examining how specific policies will affect the type and quality of information citizens receive.

Competition is healthy. Other voices insist that concentration has not affected, or has actually improved, competition in the media. A Wall Street Journal columnist summarized the arguments when he said: “Bottom line: There is far more competition in the media industry than in, say, the automobile industry or the soft-drink industry or a dozen other industries that I don't have room to list here. But at some point, rules need to reflect reality. And the reality is this: Access to the media is more open and democratic today than it ever has been in the history of the world (Murray, 2006).”

Similarly, Paul Farhi of the Washington Post says the idea that big media companies inevitably trim costs and pressure writers to avoid offending advertisers is based on a conspiratorial negative, and proposed his theory that large media owners are not the only ones facing disgruntled advertisers and tight economics. “I daresay the same pressures exist -- and may even be greater – at smaller news outlets such as the community newspaper (Parker, 2000, p. 526).”

Historical evidence shows that big media conglomerates are no more likely to engage in journalistic censorship than some of their smaller counterparts. Editorial independence is related less to the size of a company than it is to whether the owners and editors are committed to editorial integrity. Over the years, many local media have been beholden to local advertisers like car dealers, supermarket chains, and department stores. Media critic Howard Kurtz points out that even Pulitzer and Hearst were also interested in making money. In those times, reporters were at times barred from investigating local institutions where a media owner had an interest financially. In contrast, some large media companies contend they don’t have time to be involved in censoring news at the local level. They say owners of large conglomerates must concern themselves with leadership and shaping the role of the company, not daily editorial decisions (Parker, 2000, p. 526).

One analyst noted that while NBC may not want to take on GE, ABC and CBS will do so without any question. He contends that the competition for a story will make any
powerful interest vulnerable. Also, the censored individual can go public and cause a great deal of bad publicity, which media companies hate at least as much as other companies do (Parker, 2000, p. 528).

Critic Paul Farhi (1999) says consolidation has actually boosted alternative voices in the media. He says consolidation has encouraged free expression. There are currently so many information sources, that they make the idea of message domination foolish. Rather than a conspiracy aimed at media control and domination, Farhi argued that mega mergers are the result of corporations trying to keep up with a media landscape that is chaotic, competitive and compartmentalized. He has said that fragmenting markets have resulted in media companies merging in a frantic effort to remain competitive (p. 30).

Some say competitive pressures have resulted in a surge of new media outlets despite consolidation. The last two decades have increased media concentration, but also increased new information sources, from dozens of cable networks to the seemingly unlimited sources on the internet. Critic Lawrence Zuckerman argued that the giants have the resources to create new voices and preserve others. He noted many top news and information sites on the internet are subsidized by large media companies who can afford to take the losses (Parker, 2000 p. 526). Again, Fahri (1999) said alarmists have yet to assemble a convincing case that bigness is inherently bad. In fact, the counter-argument is more compelling: that bigness might be beneficial, at least in upholding and defending traditional standards of journalism: “There is no greater journalistic peril in large conglomerates than already exists,” he said. “The morals of the marketplace being what they are, bigger doesn’t have to mean badder. It could mean more respectable and if we’re lucky, more responsible (29).”

*It takes a big guy to take on the big guys.* Other critics have insisted that larger corporations are able to take risks in investigative reporting of government and businesses that smaller institutions can’t afford. Steve Marich of McClean’s said larger media outlets can afford to take risks with advertisers, and can do investigative pieces that may lead to libel challenges.

The sad truth is, the smaller your publication, the more likely it is to fold like a cheap tent at the first sign of legal trouble. It’s become increasingly necessary for media organizations to fight for the legal right to cover the news, and practically all of those challenges . . . are undertaken by big corporate media enterprises for the simple reason that they can afford to do so.” (Marich, 2006, p. 45).

Many industry observers and corporations claim that concentration should serve the public interest by helping to sustain the continued vitality of media. They insist that the practice of good journalism is good business, and that big ownership does not empirically equate with censorship. They claim consolidation has proven beneficial to increasing alternative voices. For example, large corporations may be more willing to step forward and invest financially in journalistic enterprises that may have otherwise failed, such as *USA Today*, New York 1 cable news and the purchase of the *New York Post* by News Corporation (Parker, 2000, p. 528).

Media analysts say the distance of large media corporate headquarters from local outlets decreases chances of interference and creates opportunities for strong local reporting. They are more insulated from corporate bosses in a large company than they might be in a smaller one, where the ownership might be interested in the outcome of small individual stories (Parker, 2000, p. 525). Bettig (2003) agrees, saying, for example, that owners of AOL Time Warner include the Capital Group, Fidelity Management and Research, and American
Express. Financial networks such as these are most concerned with a company’s long-term profits, and do not concern themselves with the controversial or lack of controversial content of individual articles or broadcasts (p. 32).

It’s the people that matter. Another argument made by media concentration defenders is that it makes no difference if corporations or families own media outlets, or if they are owned by individuals. What matters are the integrity and intelligence and intrepidity of those owners. A news outlet’s credibility is one of its assets, which becomes eroded by blatantly biased reporting. Therefore, even large corporate owners won’t allow biased reporting or the suppressing of stories because it will damage the outlet’s value in the community (Parker, 2000, p. 529). They insist that in today’s environment, massive companies are closely watched and want to protect their credibility and good names. Anything jeopardizing public confidence could impact shareholder confidence and stock values, keeping companies from leaning in that direction (Fahri, 1999, p. 29).

The problems are elsewhere. Other critics say that the concerns about media mergers should focus on the extent to which they create horizontal market concentration within particular media market segments or within particular local market areas. More generally, they contend that if the quality and integrity of the media, especially the news, have declined as media mergers and acquisitions have increased, the causes are not the mergers and acquisitions, but technology deregulation and the consumer sovereignty model for media provision that we have chosen in the United States (Waterman, 2000, p. 544). Defenders of group ownership say critics have failed to find instances of abuses that are presumed to exist. They also cite the fact that group owners generally compete with each other in various markets, which nullifies competitive advantages (Howard, 2006, p. 5).

Media conglomerates gather up weeklies. In light of these arguments about media concentration, it is valuable to return to the weekly newspaper and the effects of media concentration on the weekly newspaper. Within the past 20 years, the nature of concentration in local, weekly newspapers has changed. Rather than being a consolidation of one or two local newspapers to help create cash flow, benefit advertisers, and consolidate the cost of printing equipment, more recent consolidation trends involve purchases of weekly newspapers by larger newspaper firms.

Weekly newspapers are appealing to large conglomerates. Particularly in metropolitan areas, weeklies are attractive properties for newspaper and media groups. Some chains purchasing weeklies are weekly-newspaper-only chains, and others are chains that include dailies or other media properties (Coulson & Wilson, 2001, p. 17). Coulson (2001) also points out that weeklies are a way to increase a daily newspaper’s penetration into surrounding markets -- markets that would not support another daily newspaper. In fact, between 1991 and 2001, two thirds of the purchases of weekly newspaper groups have involved a daily in the same market. In one year alone, there were four major deals in which groups of weeklies involving 56 papers were bought by newspaper groups that owned nearby dailies (p. 17). These arrangements increasingly involve free circulation arrangements, where a weekly newspaper is delivered to every home in the market area (“TMC” or “Total Market Coverage”) as part of a group-owned weekly. This kind of a system can offer advertisers larger circulations, and publications can charge higher advertising rates (p. 18). Despite the “red flags” such transactions would have raised with regards to anti-trust violations in the past, in this era of deregulation and increasing numbers of outlets where individuals can go
for news (internet newspapers, blogs, 24-hour cable channels, etc.) these transactions generally go unchallenged (Coulson & Wilson, 2001, p. 19).

Terzon (2003) found that weekly journalists account for 20 percent of all print journalists, and 40.7 percent of all journalists in the Midwest. She notes that weekly newspapers are an important part of the communities they serve, because they emphasize local high school sports over national or world news, and make a local (wo)man a hero when (s)he is the subject of a feature story (p.1).

Coulson & Wilson (2001) found that larger groups generally shunned small town weeklies with annual revenues of $300,000 or less. Clearly, the advertising penetration and rate advantages are not as great in those communities. Therefore, independently owned newspapers are more likely to be found in very small, rural communities. These papers are more likely to be paid subscription newspapers than are the metro weeklies (p. 27). Again, the economics make sense in this case. Smaller weeklies cannot get the volume of advertising to make the tradeoff with free circulation viable. In fact, Terzon found that independent and family-owned newspapers in very small towns are a dying breed (p.1). She said such newspapers usually struggle with fewer financial and technological resources than suburban weeklies (p. 2).

One newspaper publisher illustrated the argument made by media concentration proponents that the economics of survival for an independent are closely tied to the community, and are perhaps more susceptible to self-censorship. She noted, “The local business owner whom you depend upon for advertising is also on the city council. When he makes a really stupid decision, you’re caught between a rock and a hard place. Newspaper people live in a fishbowl... I cater to everyone and eat lots of Rolaids (Terzon, 2003, p. 4).” According to the argument in favor of media concentration, when large groups own such newspapers, they are more willing to publish the stories noting the city council’s stupid decisions and not to consider them a difficult situation.

Other weekly newspaper owners are forced to sell to large media companies because of complicated economics. Such independent owners often do not have cash or liquidity; their assets are tied up in printing equipment and community goodwill, accounts receivable, and potential advertising dollars. Therefore, when a long-time partner dies, retires or wants to leave, it may be impossible for the remaining partners to buy them out (Brook, 1993, p. 277). Other small newspapers may face the difficulty of upgrading equipment or, more likely, technology, and can’t afford the changes. In these cases, purchase by a large conglomerate with ready cash and equipment to spare is the answer, however reluctantly it is sought.

Midmarket weekly newspapers can be attractive to buyers. Business Week recently profiled Fortress Investment Group, which is making a business of buying up small town newspapers at a rate that rivals Gannett, noted for the practice of buying weeklies in areas surrounding their daily papers. Fortress never considers a market too small, and does not have the mentality that the weeklies they buy must be tied to a larger daily. Fortress noted what many small town newspaper readers say: these kinds of media fill a news gap where big city dailies and local television and radio news programs fall short. Those larger sources don’t provide much coverage of readers’ small towns. Fortress cites 40 percent returns on several of the publications, and has promised to keep journalistic values foremost (Lowrey, 2007).

For the newspapers that are bought by chains, the pressure to perform financially is often intense. A survey of newspaper editors about errors in the paper found several who
commented that errors were increased in part because of financial pressures. One editor said that lower numbers of staff are being hired, putting more pressure on the ones that remain. He thought smaller papers were being “strangled” by bottom line pressures (Mensing, 2005, p. 18). These pressures lead to editorial decisions that change the nature of the newspaper and the value the readers receive from their newspaper.

These cuts can, however, pay off for the owners when it comes to advertising rates, other studies show. Suburban newspapers are more likely to be free circulation than are rural weeklies, and they can have higher advertising rates. In 2001, ad rates for free circulation papers were nearly double the column inch rate for paid weeklies (Coulson & Wilson, 2001, p. 23). Additionally, group-owned weeklies charged an average of $9.90 per column inch compared with the average of $6.78 for independent weeklies. Geographic area also significantly impacted advertising rates, from rural rates of $4.85 to suburban rates of $10.27 and metro rates of $16.22 per column inch. Clearly, the accompanying market penetration is also proportionally higher (Coulson & Wilson, 2001, p. 24).

**Media Conglomeration comes to Oxford.** When the economics made sense, the *Oxford Press* became a target for media conglomerates. In 1989, Bob White already had lost his long-time partner Dick Taylor, and was ready to enter a well-deserved retirement. He sold the newspaper in 1989 to Mid States Newspapers. Six weeks later, Toronto, Canada-based Thomson Newspapers purchased the *Press* and other local newspapers. This ushered in a period of distant corporate ownership, with varied management arrangements, including an in-house publisher for some periods, and a Chicago-based publisher for other periods, and the ensuing variety of layout styles and editorial policies (Personal communication, Bob Ratterman, February 2008). In June of 2000, Thomson was in the process of divesting itself of American newspapers, and scaling back to focus on a few Canadian newspapers as well as its book publishing businesses. It announced the sale of 21 dailies and 32 non-dailies to Gannett. However, Cox Ohio had the right of first refusal on two of the daily papers and ten weeklies in Ohio, including the *Oxford Press*. Cox chose to exercise that option, and became owner of the *Press* at that time. Cox Ohio is a newspaper company, but is part of the huge media conglomerate, Cox Communications, with interests in other newspapers, cable, and satellite companies across the country (Cox 2007).

Since then, as evidenced by personal interviews with the current editor and by the author’s observation of the newspaper, the *Press* has lost staff and printing operations, and has consolidated many aspects of the business. Advertising, copy editing, and page layout are now all handled at a single location that processes all such tasks for all Cox Ohio newspapers including the *Dayton Daily News, Hamilton Journal News,* and the *Middletown Journal.* According to current editor Bob Ratterman, there is a copy editor assigned to the *Press* layout each week, but that person may be otherwise occupied or out of town, and the job could be done by one of the other persons on the centralized copy desk. Advertising representatives are consolidated in Hamilton, and there is no advertising representative exclusively for Oxford. The pages of the newspaper are standardized into a template, making it easy for copy editors, but allowing little creativity for editors. Importantly, the newspaper also has an online edition (Personal communication, Bob Ratterman, February, 2008). As is common with newspapers owned by conglomerates, the websites for all the Cox newspapers look identical, and to a large extent share stories. According to Ratterman, each editor in the group has access to the
stories from each other newspaper, and can list them on each newspaper’s own website. Additionally, the printed versions of the newspaper often share stories.

*The Local Press in the Public Sphere*

*The Origins of Public Sphere*

The Public Sphere is a way to conceptualize the interactions of humans as individuals and groups and how they communicate and inject opinion into the public conversation. It includes citizens’ involvement in political discussion and the debate of political issues. As Peters said, “One of the most useful things about the concept of the public sphere is the explicit place it gives to media and modes of communication as central to political life in all varieties.” (Peters, 2003, p. 1) Jurgen Habermas developed the seminal theory of the public sphere. In the years since his theory was first presented, much discussion has altered the definition of public sphere, how it operates, and how the media function within that sphere. Although current theoretical discussion concerns how different groups, such as women, Asians, the political south, etc., relate in the public sphere and what it means to them, the public sphere concept was originally concerned with individuals and how they interact with one another, have an active interchange of ideas, and then how those ideas have an effect on the state. Because of the voice it gives to the individual and the influence it can have on individuals, the press has always been a consideration in discussion of the public sphere, and concerns over its role are often debated. After one establishes a foundation for understanding public sphere in modern media culture, the question is then, where does the small, local paper operate within the public sphere, and what is its current role within the public sphere in the United States?

*Habermas’ version of Public Sphere*

As first proposed in his work, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Habermas (2006) considered the public sphere to be a forum -- an openly accessible gathering place in which public opinion can be formed. It is not necessarily a group of people, but rather, a gathering of thoughts and ideas, a place not defined by a physical location, but by ideas. It can be conceptualized as a meeting place of the minds in which citizens gather as part of a public body to discuss ideas and formulate opinions; the idealized coffee shop or general store where citizens gather to debate public issues. In Habermas’ view, such a “public sphere” is vital for the function of a democratic, liberal society. In fact, he argues, such a sphere can only exist in a bourgeois society, where public discussions about the exercise of political power are institutionally guaranteed and can be critical in nature. Such conditions have not always existed, and therefore, the public sphere has not always existed; in fact, it may never have been fully developed (p.73)

Habermas further contends that in modern society, the media (specifically newspapers, magazines, radio and television) operate in the public sphere. In the early 18th to late 19th century, Habermas says the rational, open discourse and discussion of the time created the ideal conditions for the public sphere to operate, and the media contributed to the open discussion and criticism of ideas by encouraging dissemination and criticism of opinions. Habermas intended his theory of the public sphere to be a springboard of discussion. He hoped to “reintroduce notions of reason and rational discourse into discussions of public opinion,” which he felt were dominated too much by
opinion polls and similar empirical data gathering. Habermas is distinctly interested in
the public sphere as distinguished from “representational” publicity or public presence.
He considered the public presence of kings, lords, etc. to represent a public that was
inaccessible to the masses, and stymied the public from participation in the government.
Although they could do more than “gaze stupidly on the spectacle of the Lords and
Kings,” they had no real access to public life (Peters, 1993, p. 547). With the rise of
capitalism and the Europe-wide distribution of both commodities and information,
Habermas saw the press as replacing the court as the source of the public discussion.
Where in medieval times, the court was the source of communication such as notices,
pamphlets, etc., the bourgeois public rebelled against such power, and began to use the
press as a weapon against the court and its exclusive power over printed communication.
The bourgeois developed their own voice, and Habermas says they thereby began to
develop into a critical audience (Peters, 1993, p. 552).

Criticisms and Discussion
Thomas Murphy (2005) contends that Habermas’s formulation of the concept of the
public sphere was intended from the beginning to be controversial (p. 1964). If this is
true, Habermas’ wishes certainly have been fulfilled. The primary criticism of Habermas
is the exclusivity of his concept. With Habermas’ contention that the liberal public sphere
existed only in the bourgeois society of the 18th century, then was “refuedalized” or
transformed to being dangerously similar to the feudal “representative” public figures of
the 19th century, modern criticism has pointed out that the bourgeois public sphere in
those times would have consisted of the white, male, heterosexual and ignored all other
voices, therefore hardly constituting an inclusive public sphere.
Some scholars consider the American idea of public sphere to be a marketplace of
ideas. While a democracy values pluralism, some ideas must prevail over others, so in the
U.S. system, consensus is reached when a majority prevails. They contend this is in
contrast to Habermas’ idea of reaching a consensus of all parties through reason, where
consensus is a deliberative process, and reasoning, rational people are willing to change
their position when arguments to do so are conclusive. Mouffe (1992) says any idea of a
public sphere must take into account the large number of opposing voices present in
oppositional discourse, and the complexity of the resulting power structure. The passions
and fierce disagreements, which are part of the democratic process, should be encouraged
and incorporated into the discussion, rather than suppressed into consensus. She contends
these conflicts are not contrary to working democracy, but rather, they are central to the
current understanding of political participation (p. 757). However, mutual respect must be
present, contends Cammaerts (2007):
It is equally important to not slide into indifference, intolerance and outright
violence between communities, religions and ethnicities. But at the same time,
politics and democracy is as much about conflict and opposing conceptions of the
public interest as it is about reaching a (temporary) consensus in society (p. 4).
Other theorists insist, perhaps incorrectly, that Habermas’ ideas of publicity or
publicness are used to justify the modern media’s increasingly sensationalized reporting
on politics under the guise of giving the public needed information. However, since
Habermas stresses a deliberative, not merely informed public, this may be a less valid
criticism of Habermas than of current media practices (Haas, 2004, p. 80). Others argue
that Habermas was not so much concerned with face-to-face communication and his theories can be applied to the cyber-democracy opportunities today. Others compare Habermas’ idea of the media as promoting public reason to the argument for media as government watchdog, and propose looking at the media as a tool for promoting reason and enlightened judgment. However, they argue that only a radical democratization of the media will bring about appropriate and helpful mediated public deliberation that does as Habermas suggested it should: fill the space between civil society and the state (Haas, 2004, p. 181).

The local press in the public sphere

With understandings of public sphere theorized and debated so widely, the question appropriate to this study is how the idea should be conceptualized in terms of the local weekly newspaper. The media are critical in a discussion of public sphere, and evidence shows that local media are particularly relevant, as local news sources grow in importance.

Studies have shown that the American public is growing more and more disenchanted with the media. For example, a Pew Research Center for People and the Press study (2005) found that public attitudes toward the press continue to decline, particularly in regards to the fairness and patriotism of the media outlets. They have especially negative views of large national newspapers, such as the Washington Post and the New York Times. However, despite their negative attitudes toward the press in general, people report that they like their local newspapers and television stations (p. 2).

Moy, et. al. (2004) found that readers have a level of trust in the local media and see it as playing a crucial role in democracy. They also found that those who pay attention to local newspapers are more politically involved, and perceive themselves as better informed about local affairs (p. 541-2), providing some evidence that the local press serves a valuable function in the public sphere.

Therefore, it appears that local news sources still retain the goodwill of the population they serve. It is difficult to find any more local source of news than the local, weekly newspaper. Although there is very little academic study of weekly newspapers, evidence seems to corroborate public approval of local news as it relates to weekly newspapers. Although daily newspapers are reaching fewer households, weeklies are increasing market penetration (Coulson, 2001, p. 16). In fact, weekly newspapers have been shown to compete directly with non-metro daily customers. Where the weekly newspaper is a paid newspaper rather than a free publication, studies find that the higher the weekly readership, the lower the daily newspaper readership (Lacy, 2002, p. 38).

It is appropriate to examine, then, how well the local newspaper does at providing a public sphere forum for, most importantly, information on public issues, allowing citizens to gather enough data about a particular topic to form an opinion. It is also relevant to examine how well the weekly newspaper acts as a forum for debate of public issues. Does the local, weekly newspaper provide a clearinghouse where citizens and stakeholders gather information about issues and a forum for expression where individuals can debate and discuss issues of local importance and either come to a consensus or become aware of varying points of view?

In general, the local press has the potential to provide a public sphere forum for members of a community. When a local newspaper includes information about government decisions and community events that would find little or no mention in larger
media outlets, it can be the beginning of a discussion in the public sphere. Ideally, such information would engender public comment and discussion outside the newspaper forum. Additionally, the newspaper itself can serve as the forum for the exchange of ideas, opinions and policy suggestions that characterize the ideal public sphere through editorials, columns and letters to the editor.

Examples of this can be found in the print versions of the Clermont County (Ohio) Community Journal published by The Community Press Company, a subsidiary of the Gannett Corporation. In the print version of the paper, the editors provide a robust Letters to the Editor column. During the election season of 2007, two school districts had levies on two separate ballots, and the paper printed many letters to the editor about each of these issues (along with other issues that received less comment). At times, the editors have devoted more than a whole page to such letters. They also regularly print op-ed pieces about such issues as the levies. These letters and op-ed pieces can be straightforward expressions of opinion, such as the following: “When are the residents of the West Clermont School District going to wake up? Once again you have failed our children by a mere 80 votes. I am so disgusted that I am seriously considering moving to a community that cares about education . . . .” Another letter on the same day reads “After the West Clermont school bond issue failed, it did not surprise me that it was going back on another ballot in February. When will no mean no? I believe a failure on a bond issue vote should be good for at least a year. . . .” In this issue of the paper, two weeks after the election, six of eight published letters to the editor were published regarding different school levies. (Viewpoints, 2006, p. A4). This kind of access by citizens can lead to discussion, debate, and discourse hoped for in a functioning public sphere. It is not altogether certain to have that result, however. If the paper itself largely remains neutral, rarely proffering an opinion or taking a side in these debates, other than saying the sides must work together, then the public sphere benefit may be less pronounced. So by the evaluations of some public sphere scholars, the newspaper fails its readers by not advocating one side or the other and encouraging public debate and discussion.

The Anchorage Daily News found another way to provide a public sphere for some of its readers by allowing them the opportunity to attend the front page meeting at the paper and provide input on what they think should appear on the front page. Sometimes their ideas have been adopted, and they often leave with a better understanding of the process and the issues involved (Pollock, 1997, p. 13).

Although its value is debated, the Internet does provide some encouraging possibilities for local, weekly newspapers in terms of providing a public sphere. If the local news can be accessed online and a local paper can make the online version relevant to its readers, perhaps even more relevant than the print version because of the possible immediacy, a local, weekly paper could be successful in launching an online version of the paper that would provide a public sphere, and maintain local viability. “Citizen journalism,” or asking readers of a newspaper to become contributors to either the standard newspaper website or a special citizen journalist website is one way of accomplishing this goal (Fisher, 2006, p. 4). More recently, newspapers have turned to blogs, contests, and reader participation in non-news activities such as sharing Christmas light photos or birthday pictures. Christopher (2008) notes that newspapers online need to
maintain their gatekeeping and quality roles while hosting blogs and aggregating news content to create new brands and building community. (p. 10).

Kate Marymount of the Ft. Meyers News Press said her newspaper turned their reporters into mobile journalists, or “mojos,” in the neighborhoods. The mojos go beyond merely reporting what Marymount calls “hyperlocal” news to actively recruit and help train other contributors. Marymount, the News Press executive editor, says: “1. Deep, useful ultra-local neighborhood Web sites can be lively gathering places of people online. 2. We must have the help of residents to build these sites, but they won’t know how to contribute unless we help them” (Marymount, 2006).

Another possibility for counter-balancing the corporate emphasis on profits is the non-profit newspaper. These papers can be published by large, already established, not-for profits, or could apply for their own 501 (c) (3) status. One example of such a paper is The Norwood News in the Bronx (web site: http://www.bronxmall.com/norwoodnews/). This paper is a free, general news periodical founded in 1988 by the Mosholu Preservation Corporation, a not-for-profit affiliate of Montefiore Medical Center. According to the website, it began as a monthly and grew to a bi-weekly in 1994. Reporter James Ferguson, (Personal communication, Dec. 8, 2006) said the paper does practice a kind of “activist” journalism, trying to point out problems and keep the public aware of issues in the neighborhood. The Norwood News has joined in a larger effort (http://www.thebeehive.org/Templates/National/Default.aspx) with other Bronx newspapers to provide expanded coverage. The Norwood News, which covers Bronx District 7, recently started an online paper to cover District 5, which had no local coverage before the online paper began. Editor Jordan Moss said it was easier for people living in the Bronx to find out what was happening in the Middle East than to find out what was happening down the street. The Bronx in general is an area with very little news coverage, and a place where 50 percent or more of the people live under the poverty line. The concern is that with so much poverty, there is a serious question of how many of the intended readers can actually access the online newspaper. However, Moss thinks the fact that they have their own newspaper, even an online version, is helpful (Fernandez, 2006).

There are problems with this mode of reporting, of course. Clearly, the first is funding. An independent newspaper functioning as a not-for-profit organization without the benefit of a larger affiliated non-profit would require intense dedication from an underpaid staff and a constant search for funding. Turning to corporate interests for funding would return any such paper squarely into the corporate dependence it was trying to escape. Corporate sponsorship could also prove problematic for the readers, who would have to be convinced through consistently fair content that the paper was not promoting an ideological point of view based on the values of the sponsoring organization. Finally, it is a difficult thing in the United States to break the cycle of advertising-supported mass media. There may be opportunities for such publications in areas (such as the Bronx) where no corporate-funded media exist because traditional media owners feel they are unable to produce profitable publications. However, in areas where advertising-based media are viable, such a radically different approach would likely struggle to survive.

Clearly there is potential for local, weekly newspapers to serve the members of their communities by providing and facilitating a local public sphere. Newspapers can
utilize both traditional and more modern technologies to inform their readership about local issues and provide them a forum to discuss those issues. However, such forums could fall short of their potential in this area. A local, weekly newspaper will be most successful at providing a public sphere if the newspaper provides some structure in the form of regular information about government business and policy, takes a stand on such issues, and provides Internet forums that allow discussion of policy and decisions rather than internet forums that are largely for the display of personal photos or articles about issues outside the local area.

The Research Question

- Considering the history and current state of local, weekly newspapers, it is important to examine how the wide variety of ownership models found among local, weekly newspapers affects the operation and use of the newspapers. While some limited research has been done on the ownership of weekly newspapers, there are no data on how ownership affects the way readers value their community newspapers and how those newspapers operate in the public sphere. To begin to address this issue, these questions can be examined at a single weekly newspaper to examine the effects on that newspaper’s readers and content. The desire to better understand the effects of different ownership on reader perceptions of the Oxford Press leads to the following research questions and subsidiary questions:
  - R1: Does ownership affect the content of the local, weekly newspaper and its operation as a public sphere – a place for information, commentary and give and take about community issues?
  - Does a content analysis show a difference in the number of local vs. regional or national writers and news stories?
  - Does ownership affect the number of column inches devoted to citizen comment and input on community issues and opinion from staff or others about issues?
  - Does the analysis show a difference in the numbers of soft vs. hard news stories under varying types of ownership, particularly stories providing information about community events?
  - Does an analysis show a difference in the sources of advertising – are the advertisements placed by businesses in the community or outside the community? Does the type of ownership affect the amount and kind of advertising?
  - R2: Does ownership affect the way community stakeholders perceive the content and purpose of their local weekly newspaper and its role in the public sphere?
  - Does ownership affect the way stakeholders perceive the interest the newspaper has in providing a place for public conversation and the amount of space devoted to public conversation?
  - Does ownership affect the importance stakeholders place on their local weekly newspaper and how relevant they consider the newspaper to be in their community?
  - Does ownership affect the stakeholders’ perception of how locally-based their weekly newspaper is?
  - Does ownership affect whether or not stakeholders see a political or corporate bias in their local weekly newspaper (does the newspaper seem to favor commercial enterprises that may benefit the newspaper financially)?
Method

To test the research questions, this study examines in depth a single local, weekly newspaper under different ownership structures. *The Oxford Press* is a weekly newspaper with offices in Oxford, OH. Oxford is a small town south of Dayton, OH. Oxford is also home to Miami University, a state-sponsored university with approximately 16,000 students. The *Press* publishes each week on Friday, with a circulation of approximately 5,000 copies.

As mentioned earlier, the *Press* is uniquely qualified as a subject for this study due to its unique ownership history of private and corporate owners. From 1960 to 1989, it was privately owned and operated by Bob White and Dick Taylor, with White assuming the editorial duties and Taylor managing the advertising and financial aspects. From 1989 to 2000 (with the exception of six-week period under interim ownership) the Toronto-based multi-national publishing company Thomson Corporation owned and operated the newspaper. In 2000, Cox Ohio, a local division of Cox Communications, purchased the newspaper along with several other local weekly and daily newspapers in the area. By examining the newspaper under these three different ownership periods, the study hoped to find evidence of how the content of the newspaper and the public’s perception of the newspaper differed during each of these ownership periods.

In order to examine any differences in the way the newspaper operated under different ownership structures, the study included a content analysis of the newspaper, evaluating a month’s worth of issues (4 newspapers) from each of three different ownership periods. Rather than choose dates randomly from those periods, the researcher chose specific years. This was done to avoid dates too close to the beginning of the ownership period (when changes due to ownership wouldn’t yet be fully implemented) or too close to the end of an ownership period (when a paper may undergo alteration in an attempt to make it look more attractive to a buyer, or when a company may have lost interest in keeping the property viable). Additionally, the researcher avoided national election years, particularly during hotly contested elections, because the associated controversies could alter the normal distribution of letters and articles found in the newspaper. Another consideration was that the first ownership period covered nearly 30 years, during which time the industry philosophy about operating newspapers changed greatly. Therefore, the researcher chose 1985 a year close to the end of the independent ownership period, by which time modern ideas about newspaper layout, design, and content were being implemented in the marketplace and taught in journalism schools. The next two ownership periods fell neatly into decades, therefore the researcher chose the years 1995 and 2005 to represent the next two ownership periods. Neither of these two years included a presidential election, and each of the years fall near the middle of the ownership periods.

A sample of four issues from each year, representing just under 10 percent of the newspapers published in a year, was chosen to represent the newspaper style and content of each ownership period. Rather than choose random issues of the newspaper, which again could reflect unusual circumstances leading to a skewed view, the researcher chose one month, free from major holidays or elections that may have prompted an unusual cluster of certain kinds of letters to the editor, editorials, or news coverage. By choosing a particular month that remains the same for each of the samples, the comparisons are made equivalent. While randomization could provide results more appropriate to
generalizing, it could also provide so much disparity as to make results non-representative. March was chosen as a representative month. Therefore, March of 1985 represents the independent ownership period, March of 1995 represents the distant, corporate ownership period, and March of 2005 represents the national conglomerate ownership period.

To examine the newspapers, the researcher developed a story-coding sheet that coders used to evaluate each story on a page in the newspaper (a copy of the coding sheet is found in Appendix A). Coders marked the date, page and made up a slug, or short title, for each story on the page. Marking the date and the slug was only necessary for classification purposes and determining inter-coder reliability. However, the page number is significant, since placement on the front page or the front page of the second section indicates a greater importance placed on that story than one buried within the inner pages.

Coders then marked the author of the story as being from Oxford, from outside Oxford, or unknown. This factor is important in the local relevance issue, since local residents see a local writer as being more involved in the community and more interested in local issues. On the practical side, a locally-based writer will likely have more understanding of the background and implications of local stories, making the newspaper more locally-based, as constructed in the research question. Such writers are more likely to be acquainted with the decision makers in the city and have contacts presumably built over years of trusting (or not trusting) relationships.

Coders were also to measure the column inches of the story and note whether or not the story had a photograph. Both of these items reflect again the prominence of the story, and therefore the importance the editor places on that item. Lack of a photo or a shortened length on a story implies a less important story. If an editor allows a story to have more length, it is understood that (s)he views it as more important. Editors often use photographs to draw attention to important or interesting stories. Coders categorized stand-alone, or “feature photos” as well, classifying them as hard news or soft news and counting the caption length as the column inches of the story.

Coders then determined the type of story: opinion or news. Within the opinion categories, coders further delineated articles as letters, columns, or unsigned editorials. Opinion articles are connected with the public sphere concept: the idea that the local newspaper can serve as a place for the understanding of issues and the exchange of opinions about those issues.

In the news section, coders determined if the story was hard news or soft, and then categorized the story into one of nine different categories for hard news or one of the nine different soft news categories. For the purposes of this study, hard news was defined in the code book:

“**Hard News:** Defined in common parlance as stories that deal with topics that are serious or formal. They may be further interpreted as stories that deal with issues, facts or events that often have an element of timeliness -- they would be less relevant a week later, for example.”

Soft news was defined in the code book:
“**Soft news:** Defined as news discussing less important or frivolous subjects. It is also considered to be stories about health, relationships and non-timely events, stories that could run one week or another with very little alteration.”

After coding each story on a page in the newspaper, the coders looked at the full page and noted advertisements, encouragements to contribute to the newspaper, and any editorial cartoons.

The archived newspapers are stored on microfiche; therefore the coders had electronic copies (pdf files) of the full pages. When the coders began comparisons in story length measurements, they found great disparity. It was discovered that screen resolutions differed on each computer, leading to skewed measurements. Therefore, the lead researcher, instead of either of the coders, measured the stories. The researcher measured the stories at “100 percent” of scanned size, which equaled a 3/8”:1” ratio on the specific computer where the researcher did the measurement computations: this meant 3/8 of an inch on screen equaled 1” in the physical paper. The researcher used a flexible ruler to scale to easily measure each story without having to perform any calculations to find actual column inches.

To determine inter-coder reliability, the researcher compared coder responses on type of story and designations within types of opinion stories and between the nine distinct categories within the hard and soft news designations (See Appendix for coding sheet). Reliability also took into account author location and use of photos.

A simple reliability and a Cohen’s kappa figure were calculated for each designation. Simple reliability compares the number of possible responses to the number of times the coders agreed, and a Cohen’s kappa accounts for the times the coders may have agreed by chance.

The overall simple reliability was high on the initial sample (.75), but lower than 50 percent on the distinct hard and soft news categories. Disregarding the categories, the reliability was .84 and the Cohen’s kappa was .81. To attempt to correct for the discrepancies in the categories, the coding sheet was altered slightly. Two of the soft news categories (“Upcoming community events” and “Things to do”) were combined, leaving eight instead of nine categories, and the Announcements category in hard news was redefined to include stories about upcoming meetings of all kinds (including groups, committees and clubs). Despite these changes, with more training and a new Coder 2, the reliability was still below 50 percent on the hard and soft news categories. Attempts to improve reliability for these measures were unsuccessful, therefore, the researcher decided to largely disregard these categories in the analysis, with one exception as noted in the results section.

Following additional training with a new second coder and using determinations made during their discussion, Coder 1 recoded story categories on the second intercoder issue, the March 16, 1995 issue. Before the recoding, Cohen’s kappa was .82 for photos and .70 for writers, but the Cohen’s kappa number for story types and hard/soft news categories was again below .70. However, following recoding, the Cohen’s kappa for writer, photo, size of photo, and story type was .89. This was largely due to the coders’ agreement on how to code “announcement” stories about meetings of clubs and organizations.
Therefore, the simple reliability without including any categories (in other words, taking into account only the writer, the photo and size of photo on a story, and most importantly, the story type) was .89. The Cohen’s Kappa was .77 overall, with the kappa of .70 on the writer category bringing the overall number down. For full page evaluations, coders wrote specific numbers of advertisements in each category. It was thus impossible to figure a Cohen’s kappa, since there were multiple possibilities for each result. Therefore, the simple agreement between the coders was .81 for total numbers of ads, and a .75 on ads from the parent company. The coders had more difficulty determining which advertisements were from Oxford based stores, companies out of Oxford, or national chains with brick and mortar stores in Oxford. This reliability was only .67, under the .7 generally considered acceptable. Therefore, any results regarding specific categories of advertisements must be viewed with caution.

After coding for each type of story, the total column inches devoted to each type of story, the number of uses of photographs with each type of story, the number of authors from Oxford and from outside of Oxford, and the number of times readers were encouraged to contribute to the newspaper were tallied. The researcher compared frequencies between the newspapers and ran chi square tests for significance.

To triangulate data and evaluate a reader perspective on the different ownership eras, the researcher conducted personal interviews with ten community stakeholders in Oxford, all of whom have an interest in the newspaper and have been in the community long enough to be acquainted with the newspaper under the leadership of at least two of the three owners. The interviewees were asked about how the newspaper acted as a public sphere, how locally based it has been, and if the readers had noted any bias in the newspaper. They were specifically asked to note any differences they perceived during each of the ownership periods.

Since average citizens may not make note of such changes, the research focused on people active in the business, volunteer, or journalistic communities who would be likely to have interaction with the newspaper and would have reason to be aware of its functioning. Some interacted with the newspaper in an advertiser relationship, and others in a newsmaker relationship, while still others saw the newspaper as an outlet for publicity for their organization. Some of those interviewed had an interest in the community, and therefore were interested in how the community appeared in the news, and some were involved in other news outlets (radio stations or student newspapers) and therefore had an interest in how the *Oxford Press* covered the same events they were reporting about. To report these results, the researcher added comments from the interviews into the statistical results section, and added a separate section to report results of the interviews that did not directly fit with the numerical results.

Content Analysis Results

To analyze data from the content analysis, the researcher created frequency tables and Chi square tests to compare the three time periods (1985, 1995 and 2005) as independent variables. The analyses noted differences in story types, writers, photo number and sizes, and story length.

The most important finding in the statistical results was in the story type. A Pearson’s chi-square analysis for difference between years shows a significant difference between frequency of story types between years of publication ($X^2$(16, N=1295) =
56.104, p<.001). However, these results must be viewed with caution. The Chi square tests are suspect in power, because there was at least one cell with fewer than one occurrence in the table, and 20 percent or more of expected frequencies were less than or equal to five. Fisher’s exact test was not indicated because of the size of the tables and multiple variables being examined (Statsdirect, 2008). Therefore, examining frequencies is a more legitimate use of the results in this study.

Another striking observation is the total number of stories in each of the years. In the 1985 issues, there was a total of 488 stories among the four issues. In 1995, the total was 371, and in the 2005 issues, the total was 436. Certainly the newspaper under private ownership published more stories than were found in either of the other two ownership periods. In fact, the Thomson era is notable for fewer stories overall, fewer letters to the editor, fewer columns, fewer (0) house editorials, and fewer hard news stories than either of the other two ownership periods. One of the easily identifiable reasons for this is that the average length of the newspaper during the Thomson years was only 14.5 pages. During the year of private ownership, the newspaper averaged 18.5 pages, and during the years of Cox conglomerate ownership, the newspaper averaged 25.75 pages.

Despite the efficiencies that should have theoretically been realized through corporate ownership and the ability to sell advertising across all publications in a conglomerate, it appeared the Thomson Corporation was unable to capitalize on those efficiencies and create the ad base to generate enough advertising to expand the newspaper. Instead, the newspaper actually shrank during these years. As shown in the later discussion about advertising, the number of advertisements did increase during the Thomson years, so another explanation for the smaller newspapers is that as a conglomerate, Thomson kept the additional revenue from increased advertising without increasing its costs by adding more pages to the newspaper, and thereby increased its profits from the Press. One would assume that if this were being done at a small weekly such as the Press, it would reflect a broader policy Thomson followed across the board.

The larger number of stories published during private ownership may mean that the private owners published shorter stories, or it may mean that the corporate owners use a higher advertisement to news story ratio than did the private owners. Given that the newspaper under Cox averaged approximately 7 more pages per issue but still had fewer stories in a month leads one to the latter conclusion: Cox uses a higher ad to copy ratio, another way a newspaper company may try to increase its profits.

To pursue this issue further, the column inch data for all hard news stories and all soft news stories was calculated for each of the years (Table 2). Then the mean for each

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1985 Local</th>
<th>1995 Thomson</th>
<th>2005 Cox</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Letter</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Column</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guest Column</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>House Editorial</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hard News</td>
<td>309</td>
<td>219</td>
<td>267</td>
<td>795</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soft News</td>
<td>163</td>
<td>142</td>
<td>137</td>
<td>442</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>488</td>
<td>371</td>
<td>436</td>
<td>1295</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
type of story was calculated for each of the time periods. These calculations show that despite having fewer pages, the newspaper under private ownership published more column inches of hard news stories and nearly the same number of column inches of soft news stories. It also shows that the mean length of the stories was very similar for hard news – both averaging close to 7 inches. The mean length of soft news stories is longer in the Cox News period; however, the total column inches of soft news stories for the time period is nearly identical to the number of inches of soft news stories under private ownership. Again, for a newspaper averaging 10 more pages per issue, having virtually the same amount of space devoted to editorial copy shows clearly that the ratio of ads to copy is higher during Cox ownership. Therefore Cox does garner more advertisements, perhaps due to selling ads in several of its newspapers as a package deal to advertisers. But while these additional ads increase the size of the newspapers, they do not increase the amount of information, commentary and discussion found in the newspapers. Instead, they increase only the number of advertisements in the newspapers. These analyses also reemphasize the shorter length of the Thomson-owned newspapers. There were fewer pages, fewer hard news stories and fewer soft news stories during the Thomson years. (See Appendix for images of sample front pages from 1985, 1995, and 2005 editions of The Oxford Press.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1985 Local</th>
<th>1995 Thomson</th>
<th>2005 Cox</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Inches, Hard News</strong></td>
<td>2,256</td>
<td>1,472</td>
<td>1,908</td>
<td>3,747</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mean inches per story, Hard News</strong></td>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>6.72</td>
<td>7.14</td>
<td>21.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Inches, Soft News</strong></td>
<td>1,011</td>
<td>967</td>
<td>1,104</td>
<td>3,082</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mean Inches per story, Soft News</strong></td>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>8.05</td>
<td>21.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>3,280.50</td>
<td>2,452.52</td>
<td>3,027.19</td>
<td>6,871.17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Public sphere - information

In answer to research question one, there is a significant difference between the numbers of hard and soft news stories under private ownership and under the two group ownerships. However, it is not the difference that might have been expected. In examining how a newspaper acts as a public sphere, it could be assumed that private owners, particularly ones as community focused and detailed in providing information as interview subjects reported the Press owners to be, would provide a larger number of hard news stories than soft news stories. A common complaint given by critics of media concentration about corporate owners is that they favor soft news stories over hard news.
and provide less of a “public sphere” in terms of community information and commentary. However, in analyzing the Oxford Press, the private owners provided more of both soft news and hard news stories even though Cox actually provided less soft news than either Thomson or the private owners. This may contribute to the observations many of the interviewees made that the Press under local owners seemed “focused on the community” and “very much an Oxford paper.”

In a related issue, an evaluation of the hard news and soft news stories on the front page of the newspaper can give an idea of the editorial emphasis during each ownership structure. Corporate owners have a reputation for favoring soft news stories that may be more appealing to readers but of less informational value to them. The stories on the front page are the stories that are seen by most readers and are traditionally the most “important” stories in the newspaper. Therefore, the number of soft and hard news stories and the number of column inches devoted to each type of story were also of interest in analyzing hard and soft news stories.

Table 3 - Hard news and Soft News Column Inches On Front Page

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1985</th>
<th>1995</th>
<th>2005</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Front Page, Hard</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News Total Inches</td>
<td>240</td>
<td>132</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>522</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Front Page, Hard</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News Avg.</td>
<td>8.57</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>27.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Front Page, Soft</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News Total</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Front Page, Soft</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News Avg.</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>9.9</td>
<td>26.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>292.57</td>
<td>197.2</td>
<td>250.9</td>
<td>740.67</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These numbers are also particularly worth noting because front pages contain no advertisements. Therefore, editorial policy is more easily compared on these open pages. These numbers do show that the text-dense, privately owned newspaper had significantly more column inches devoted to hard news. The corporate owners had fewer inches devoted to hard news, again with Thomson having the fewest number of inches and the shortest average hard news stories. Cox ran a greater number of hard news stories, but shorter ones; the stories were 25 fewer inches per issue. The ratio of hard news to soft news column inches on the front page may support the contention that corporate owners focus on soft news. Under private ownership, the ratio of hard news to soft was approximately 7:1. However, under distant corporate ownership, the ratio dropped to under 3:1, and under Cox conglomerate ownership, the ratio was less than 2:1. Photographs do take more space during each of the corporate ownership periods; the design during private ownership years was text-heavy. An analysis of the data on photographs on the front page shows that in 1985 there was an average of 2.75 photos per front page, but only one was 4 or more columns wide. In 1995, there was an average of
2.5 photos per front page and two of the stories were augmented by photos of four or more columns, while in 2005, there were fewer photos per page (2.25 average) but three of the stories had one or more photos totaling four columns or more. So photos do appear to take up slightly more of the front pages under corporate ownership. Nonetheless, the ratios of hard to soft news within the years shows that the corporate owners placed more emphasis on soft news stories on the front page of the newspaper.

Public Sphere – Debate and Discussion

In providing a forum for community debate and discussion, observing the number of letters to the editor (See Table 1) shows that Cox published many more letters to the editor and more guest columns than either of the other ownership teams. However, they printed no house editorials in which the newspaper took a stand on an issue or proposed a point of view. This is consistent with observations from interviewees that the current staff is more concerned about “telling you what others think rather than telling you what they think” (B. Long, personal communication, May 6, 2008). The interview subjects also observed that the newspaper under private ownership did occasionally take a stand on an issue and suggest a course of action. This is supported by the observation that three of the four newspaper issues examined from 1985 during private ownership did contain house editorials. The Thomson distant ownership year had no house editorials. From interviews, it is clear that the Thomson newspapers did at times carry editorials, but their inclusion in the paper varied with the different publishers supervising the newspaper. Apparently the publisher supervising the newspaper during the 1995 time period did not consider editorials a priority. During Cox ownership, the Press did publish editorial cartoons in three of the four examined issues of the newspaper; however, each of the cartoons dealt with a “non-local” (national or regional) issue, adding little to the discussion of local issues. Daily newspapers owned by Cox do carry regular editorials.

Therefore, if the function of the newspaper as a public sphere is providing information, then the Press under private ownership seems to have provided the most information on the largest number of topics. If the function is to provide opinion and direct discussion, the private owners also seem to have done a better job of taking a stand and providing opinion. If the function of a newspaper as a public sphere is to provide a location for many people to have input in debating and offering opinions on a topic, then the Cox corporate ownership provided the greatest opportunity to submit opinion in the form of published columns, guest columns and letters.

This plethora of letters and columns can be viewed positively, as a means the newspaper uses to provide a public sphere of debate and discussion. However, it can also be viewed skeptically, as a means to cater to the public by printing all the letters the newspaper receives, while avoiding taking stands on any issues. In this way, the newspaper and the newspaper staff avoid responsibility for any controversy or offense to readers coming from the opinions expressed on the opinion page. This willingness to print reader-submitted opinion along with a reluctance to print publisher-created opinion material can be looked at in the context of a comment made by the current Press editor. He said the paper looks for ways to increase its page views on the Internet, and therefore they are encouraging things such as baby contests or photo albums of the local prom or a parade. He favored these kinds of reader-provided items not for their contribution to the general knowledge or promoting of discussion, but because they get the most “hits” from
visitors to the page, and that’s what the publishers are pushing (B. Ratterman, personal communication, January 24, 2008). Given that emphasis, it seems possible that the focus on printing, “every letter we get” is also a policy meant to draw readers to the paper rather than necessarily a decision made to promote debate and discussion of issues.

Despite this professed desire to encourage page views on the Internet, coder observations of encouragements to contribute the newspaper, either in print or online, showed very little evidence of such overt invitations. Encouragements to contribute were viewed by the researcher as a way the newspaper may invite readers to contribute to the debate and discussion in the public sphere. In 1985, coders noted only 8 such encouragements, all in the “Other” category (other than phone calls, letters, columns, photos or web site contributions). In 1995, coders noted one encouragement to write a letter, and three in the “other” category. In 2005, there were more encouragements, with 12 in the “other” category, two encouragements to call, and two encouragements to write a letter. Although still limited, the encouragements under Cox ownership were greatly increased, to an average of 4 per issue.

This lack of encouragement to contribute is unexpected, particularly the lack of any encouragements to contribute to the website, since there is an emphasis on web pages at Cox, and a focus on driving traffic to web pages. An examination of the 2008 version of the Press may show different results in the encouragement category, since the current editor did mention in an interview that the paper holds contests and hosts on-line photo albums with the intent of driving traffic to the website, thereby increasing page views for advertisers (B. Ratterman, personal communication, January 24, 2008). It would seem that the print version of the newspaper would contain many encouragements to contribute to the web version. It is possible that these encouragements may have increased after 2005 when the coding was done. The most recent data from the Newspaper Association of America shows advertising revenues dropping sharply in print newspapers, and increasing for online newspapers. Online advertising revenue for newspapers went up about 30 percent a year from 2004 to 2007 and 18.8 percent in 2007 (“Newspaper Ad” 2008). Additionally, the Project for Excellence in Journalism reports that newspapers are trying to report a combined online and print readership number for the benefit of advertisers (Woodard, 2007). Therefore, publishers may be taking online versions of newspapers more seriously as advertisers and readers are spending more time and money with online newspapers. Also, Cox may consider simply publishing the web address of the online newspaper to be an encouragement to interact with the online version of the paper, while coders were looking for specific encouragements to contribute to the paper in some way. This lack of encouragements may also reflect the general view at the Press, particularly under Cox ownership, that the newspaper’s function in the public sphere is more a role of providing information than one of encouraging and facilitating debate and discussion of issues.

Local Focus

Although the inter-coder reliability in categories within story types must be interpreted with caution, there is one category so distinctly larger than any of the others that it bears mentioning, particularly in context of localism. Category 6 in hard news designated “Announcements, such as a meeting, change of meeting date or venue, a new store coming to town, etc.” Originally this category did not include the first “meeting”
designation, but as the coders began their work, it became clear that it was necessary to include a designation for stories about upcoming meetings and events. Without exception the largest number of stories in the newspaper during all three time periods fell into this category of announcements. Approximately 40 percent of the total number of stories in each of the years studied were included in this category. Many of the stories were only 1 to 3 inches long.

This abundance of stories announcing meetings of support groups, church events, committee meetings, fundraisers for the Boy Scouts, Relay for Life events and so on may be what prompted several of the interviewees to say that the paper has retained a “local” focus throughout the years. The newspaper under private ownership was 44 percent announcement stories, 39 percent of the stories under distant group ownership were announcement stories, and 38 percent under Cox group ownership were announcement stories.

Table 4 – Hard News Categories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>1985</th>
<th>1995</th>
<th>2005</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Meeting report</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change in leadership</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Issue slated for upcoming meeting</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newsworthy events</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disasters – fire, death, etc</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Announcements</td>
<td>215</td>
<td>135</td>
<td>172</td>
<td>522</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Police or crime</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Court, trials</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>488</td>
<td>371</td>
<td>436</td>
<td>1295</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These are percentages of the total number of stories, not percentages of the entire number of column inches devoted to news copy. Since many of these stories were very brief, the percentage of column inches would be significantly lower. While this study cannot, of course, make any claims about the numbers of such stories in other newspapers such as city dailies, it seems reasonable to say that the number would likely amount to less than 40 percent of the total number of stories. Looking strictly at these numbers, it
does appear that the *Press*, particularly under local ownership but also under both corporate owners, did devote significant attention to acting as a means of communicating information about the local community, as far as organizations define the community. The argument can certainly be made that many of these announcements are about “soft news” events such as workshops, classes, and performances and do not add significantly to the public’s understanding of important community issues. However, each of the owners apparently felt these kinds of announcements were an important part of the mission of the *Press*, considering the number of such stories contained in the newspaper.

Another aspect of local focus is the authorship of stories. The purpose in examining this variable was to see if the newspaper under conglomerate ownership used more writers from out of Oxford, such as syndicated writers or writers from other newspapers in the group. Interviews with both the editor and readers indicated that the practice of using writers from other group newspapers has increased under Cox ownership. However, results of coding showed that a majority of the stories had no author designated, and many others used the “staff” designation. This “staff” might be writers assigned to Oxford or to any other newspaper in the group. Therefore, authorship statistics yielded little of significant interest.

What we can learn from the frequency results in this calculation is that the *Press* has not resorted to bringing in many syndicated columnists or large numbers of outside writers under any of its ownership structures. It is common for local weekly newspapers to print more syndicated and outside material as they cut staff and struggle with lower revenues. However, under Cox ownership, the newspaper has brought about largely the same results without paying for syndication. They manage to create the same amount of copy with fewer writers by borrowing stories freely from other Cox newspapers. In fact, as reported by the current *Press* editor, Cox insists that there be no double coverage of events by two of its reporters, even if the story is of interest to the readers in more than one of its newspapers’ coverage areas. One writer produces the story, which is then used by any of the editors who finds it appropriate for their paper (B. Ratterman, personal communication, January 24 2008).

The final area of interest in terms of the research question about the newspaper’s local focus is advertising. If advertisements are viewed in terms of information about the local community, they can be seen as both contributing to the local nature of the newspaper and as contributing to the information aspects of the newspaper in its role in the public sphere. This study did not examine classified advertising, although coders noted that there are many more pages of classified advertising with Cox ownership. As might be expected, these classified advertisements under Cox are often from advertisers outside of the immediate Oxford area.

The frequency chart (Table 5) shows that under local ownership, the advertisements in the newspaper focused largely on Oxford businesses. The total number of ads from Oxford businesses was substantially greater under the leadership of local owners. In terms of providing information about the local community, this may indicate that the newspaper under local ownership was a better source of local information. It may also indicate that the newspaper was ignoring a revenue stream by not venturing outside of Oxford to approach advertisers. Oxford is a relatively small community, and its citizens will necessarily travel to neighboring areas for shopping and entertainment. Therefore, the presence of few ads from outside of Oxford may show a limitation in the
ability of the Press under private ownership to provide information of interest to some of its readers.

When the corporate owners took over with the Thomson group, the number of advertisements from outside Oxford rose, as did the number of advertisements from national and regional companies with brick and mortar stores in Oxford. This could be the result of utilizing a national advertising sales team, or it could reflect the growth of such businesses in Oxford. Likely, it is a combination of the two. The trend continued under Cox ownership, with advertisements in this group nearly doubling under Cox management. Again, while this may indicate a growth in these businesses in Oxford, it likely is also related to the centralized advertising sales operations of the Cox newspaper conglomerate.

Other observations are that the number of ads from businesses outside of Oxford doubled under Thomson ownership, but went down again under Cox ownership. This was unexpected. While it is not surprising that these numbers rose under Thomson, given that they would bring in a national and regional sales focus, the researcher expected the Cox ownership years, with the centralized sales staff outside the Oxford area and the cooperative advertising situation, to be even higher in ads from outside the Oxford area. One possible explanation is that advertisers may not see a value added in advertising in Oxford given the price Cox charges to be in the newspaper. Another possibility is that there are simply fewer “Oxford based” businesses in Oxford, as more chains and national businesses have moved in. While interviewees noted that the cost of being in the Oxford paper is less than being in other Cox newspapers, particularly the dailies, they noted that the cost to advertise has gone up. Perhaps the increase is great enough that businesses without a proven record of drawing Oxford customers don’t see the value in spending the extra money to advertise there.

Also of note is the fact that, although the newspapers average 10 more pages under Cox than they did under private ownership or Thomson, the number of column inches devoted to editorial copy was nearly the same as under private ownership, the number of display advertisements is only very slightly higher than under Thomson. Therefore, unless the display advertisements under Cox are unnaturally large, the answer

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 5</th>
<th>Advertisements by year</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Oxford Businesses</td>
<td>1985</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National w/ Oxford Store</td>
<td>187</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outside Oxford</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent Company</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Number of Display Ads</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>320</td>
</tr>
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</table>
must be that there is a much larger number of classified advertisements in the Cox newspapers. This does seem a likely possibility; classified advertising is a strong source of relatively easy revenue for a newspaper, and increasing the cost by offering advertisers the ability to reach many different markets can appeal to sellers and raise revenue. Some interviewees noted the addition of classified advertisements from outside of Oxford under Cox ownership, and considered it an indication of the newspaper being “less local.”

Interview Results

The researcher completed interviews of approximately 30 minutes each with ten individual stakeholders in the community. The interview subjects included the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Role and Details</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Richard Little (R.L.)</td>
<td>Jan. 24, 2008  Former director of communications for Miami University, a large (20,000 student) public university in Oxford. Lived in area since 1984, has read the <em>Press</em> at least cursorily, for 24 years.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert (Bob) Sherman (B.S.)</td>
<td>Jan. 29, 2008  Retired Miami professor and retired Talawanda (the local school district) school board member. Reader of <em>Press</em> for 30 years.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert (Bob) Ratterman (B.R.)</td>
<td>Jan. 24, 2008  Current editor of the newspaper. Has written for the Press since the 80s and has been an employee under all three ownerships.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert (Bob) Long (B.L.)</td>
<td>May 6, 2008  A former news director at WMUB, the Miami University public radio station. Now works in P.R. and has interaction with the <em>Press</em> in that capacity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sylvia Moore (S.M.)</td>
<td>March 6, 2008  Administrative assistant at the hospital, responsible for creating press releases and advertisements for the <em>Press</em> as well as other publications where the hospital advertises. Has worked with the <em>Press</em> for over 20 years.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Lowrey (J.L.)</td>
<td>June 12, 2008  A Miami University journalism professor. Has read the <em>Press</em> at least cursorily for 30 years. Supervises students working as interns at the <em>Press</em>. Watches their work at the paper.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Any comments attributed to these individuals in this document are the result of personal communication gathered during interviews on the listed dates. To analyze and categorize the interview results, the interviewer looked at each aspect of the research questions and divided them into categories. She then looked at each interview and placed comments that applied to each aspect of the research questions under the appropriate heading. After categorizing the comments, she then looked at the comments in each section and looked for trends, patterns, or differences that seemed relevant in answering the research questions.

Most interviews (see interview guide, Appendix) focused on the three ownership periods -- local ownership (Bob White and Dick Taylor from 1960 – 1989), distant corporate owners (Thomson, 1989 – 2000), and nearby corporate owners (Cox, Ohio 2000-Present). In the interviews, subjects were asked how they thought the paper operated as a public sphere and a source of local information, and asked if the interview subject noted any bias – political, corporate, rural, educational, or any other kind of bias – in the newspaper during those three periods. It also asked how important the newspaper is to the subject and if that importance has changed over the years. Most interview subjects also gave their opinions of other aspects of the newspaper during the time periods, which provide further insight into how ownership concentration may or may not be affecting local, weekly newspapers, particularly the Oxford Press.

The interviewees had some differences among them in their observations, but also some general consistencies in their views about the newspaper’s operation, how it functioned as a public sphere, its value, and its local focus under the three ownerships.

**General Observations**

**Local Ownership.** Under the local, private ownership, each interviewee noted the complete and detailed city coverage provided by owner/editor Bob White. White was present at most city meetings and provided lengthy reports of these meetings in the newspaper. Subjects noted a heavily local Oxford focus in the newspaper at that time, containing details of city business and happenings as well as feature stories about local citizens. Several noted White’s commitment to the arts and his extensive arts coverage. Some noted the old fashioned design of the newspaper during those years, despite the fact that journalism schools were teaching modular design, larger photos, and boxes to group story elements before 1985, the year of local, independent ownership examined for this study.

**Distant group ownership.** The Thomson period of ownership did bring new design elements and a half-fold design to the newspaper. The direct oversight of the newspaper by Thomson varied between an on-site publisher and an off-site publisher. Editorial decisions fluctuated with each change of publisher, and several interviewees remembered these years as ones in which the newspaper changed frequently.

The editor of the Press, Bob Ratterman, was an employee throughout these years. Several of the interviewees commented on the advantages they saw to having the same staff after the Thomson Corporation bought the Press. While some noted differences in editorial policies, these interviewees, particularly those who advertised in the Press or worked with the Press in the role of a public relations agent, noted that the interactions they had on an individual level with the staff were very similar to those under local, private ownership.
Domestic Conglomerate Ownership (Cox). Each interviewee noted that the number of workers at the Oxford Press office was reduced under Cox ownership. The advertisers who interacted with the newspaper were more likely to emphasize this change than were regular readers or those who interacted with reporters on a regular basis.

Several noted the consolidation of staff at all the surrounding Cox-owned newspapers. Cox purchased a number of dailies and weeklies in the area, and centralized all advertising representatives in a building outside of Oxford. They also built a large building near Dayton, Ohio to house the pagination and printing operations for all of the Cox Ohio newspapers. This was a change most subjects noted, frequently negatively.

Another change consistently noted throughout the interviews was the addition of content from other newspapers in the Cox group to the Press. According to the current editor, editors from across the group have equal access to the stories from every other newspaper in the group. Several interviewees noted that they read identical articles in a local daily that they later saw in the Press. They either disliked this phenomenon or accepted it as something you had to expect, or both. Several interviewees noted the standardized layout of the newspapers, indicating that the newspapers in the Cox, Ohio group share a similar look that minimizes the unique feel of a local publication.

Specific Observations

Public Sphere – Information, opinion and commentary

Consistently, interview subjects saw the public sphere role of the local, weekly newspaper as providing information about the city, citizens, and groups and acknowledging important events in the lives and functions of these entities. Although some did say that the newspaper had a role as a place for commentary, debate, and discussion of ideas and issues, none saw it as the primary public sphere purpose of the Press.

Public Sphere Under Local Ownership:

Most stakeholders were in agreement about the role of the Press as a public sphere and source of local information under White’s editorship/ownership. They said it was a means of detailed and thorough information about the city and the people in the city. In this context, the word “information” is used broadly, encompassing both as articles and advertising, which interviewees saw as being valuable. E.B. said, “When it was owned by Bob White (The Press) was very informative – it was not gossipy like some small town papers are, but it told you what was happening in the town – the plays and concerts, the cultural activities. It was very fair. One time Bob White got arrested for being drunk, and he put his own name in the paper. That’s integrity. He lived in the community and valued it.”

R.D. said, “Bob served as a conduit of information to the community. The way the paper was used was as a common point of information.” He commented that White’s stories on city meetings were often lengthy and detailed. He suggested that some readers might not “wade through” the whole story, but would be well informed if they did.

As a hospital administrator, he noted that press releases from the hospital were printed promptly during White’s editorship, and the hospital used the newspaper as a source of passive advertising for years. However, during the White years, R.D. said the hospital didn’t emphasize advertising as much as it does today, since there was less competition for hospital services.
R.L. said he thinks the newspaper in White’s time was as “straight-up” as the newspaper today in covering very local issues: city council, school board, school levies and similar discussions. T.M., B.L., B.R. and S.M. noted that White attended nearly every city meeting and gave detailed reports. B.L. said, “It was very interesting to see the relationship between the council and Bob White. Sometimes the council would stop the meeting and call on him and ask for his opinion on things or ask for the history of a topic. He was well-connected to town leadership.” B.L. noted that White’s years of attendance at the meetings likely earned him the status of historian as much as reporter.

Additionally, E.B. said she could read about weddings, attendance at anniversary parties, visits from out of town family members and honors and awards in the Press. Perhaps such details are what caused S.M. to say, “I think they were at that point a real community paper – they really did stories that were related to Oxford. Any program or event that you had there was always a representative of the paper there.”

J.L., with the perspective of a journalist, said the newspaper under White was “very personal,” as is “typical for a weekly.” He said the paper had a personal touch. He noted the use of country correspondents who would write about the details of life in the areas outside of Oxford. However, he said articles were long and difficult to read. He said some of the stories “would go on forever” and the layout looked “slapped together.” He said the Press under White was “a very muddy paper.”

As a public sphere, J.L. said the paper did “get a lot of news in there,” for example, listing every case that came before the county court. “Some of them were very well written,” he said, but the lack of good journalistic writing and layout practices made it less accessible to readers.

In regards to public debate and commentary, R. D. noted that White did write editorials regularly and occasionally took a position, suggesting the city take a particular course of action. “To me, that’s good. You’ve got to take a stand from time to time,” R.D. said.

Public Sphere Under Distant Corporate Ownership

Current editor B.R. noted that during the period of distant group ownership (Thomson), the Press’s role as a place for commentary and public debate changed regularly. “We would reorganize at different times,” he said. “Thomson had a lot of different ways of doing things. At one point we were under the Journal News, at another time we were under an office in Chicago. Then we’d have a publisher on site. They varied in terms of what they wanted. One publisher was more interested in the business side of the paper and didn’t have any idea about the editorial side. Then we had one that had a background in the editorial side, but was just learning the business side. With him, we had regular weekly editorials.” B.R. said he didn’t see editorials as vital or a priority. “For me, weekly editorials were just one more thing to do and to make sure we had done by deadline,” he said.

R.L. noted this inconsistency in editorial policy, but said it didn’t make much difference. “They have been pretty soft-handed in dealing with subjects – besides, they’ve been in and out of the editorial business over the years.” He said the lack of desire to take a stand could be indicative of having to live in a community and get along with all groups, a theory B.L. echoed.

Thomson was forward-looking when it came to using the Internet as a public sphere. B.R. said the Press had one of the first newspaper websites in the area. “In the
mid-nineties (when the Internet was just becoming a consumer-oriented medium) we had a web site. The business-oriented publisher really believed in the Internet. All the papers were getting them (websites), but at that time, each of the papers was more independent, and our publisher was really aware of the Internet so we got one first.”

Despite the changes in editorial policy, B.L. said the fact that B.R. has stayed on first as employee then editor consistently through the years made a difference. “Other weeklies in the county like Middletown and West Chester where the editors changed constantly – there was no consistency there,” he said.

E.B. considered the editorial policies of the Thomson era to be negative in terms of public discussion. “The editorship was given to one young man and then another. The first one had nothing to say,” she said. She said one of the publishers started a column where readers were encouraged to call in anonymously to report things about their neighbors. “They would put a headline on them and publish these without any idea of who they were from.” E.B. said it set up a negative culture in town and “implied horrible things about those who were active in the community.” While other interviewees noted (with distaste) these kinds of columns in other, neighboring papers (including others owned by Thomson and Cox), they didn’t remember such columns in the Press. E.B., however, says she remembers specific allegations made about specific townspeople in such Press columns.

She disliked another editor’s personal columns about a baby lost to SIDS because he consistently favored that subject to the elimination of any local community topics. “There were so many good things going on in the community,” she said, “But he would ignore them or take the sensational single comment and turn that into the headline. The community had assets, but they were ignored, week after week.”

J.L. said, in his opinion, the Press started to become a good newspaper under Thomson, especially when it brought in the first editor and an on-site publisher. “From what I could see, Ratterman was basically demoted at that time, and I don’t know why he stayed, but he did stay,” he said. He said Thomson was “notorious for penny pinching,” but “it didn’t show up that way in the Press.” Thomson had an emphasis on accessibility through good writing and layout, and invested resources into making the Press a good newspaper. “It (the Press) had a much better layout under Thomson,” J.L. said.

Public Sphere Under Cox Corporate Ownership

As might be expected, each of the interviewees had more comment on the current ownership period than on either of the other two periods. However, in the context of these interviews, those comments were frequently in comparison to other ownership periods.

Source of public discussion: In terms of public discussion and commentary, current editor B.R. said public discussion “doesn’t have as big a role here as it does at other papers,” and they don’t do regular editorials or any political endorsements. This was affirmed by others’ observations. B.L. said the current editor, “Sees it as more his job to tell you what other people think, not what he thinks,” but both B.S. and R.D. said that the Press stays true to its mission of allowing citizens a voice.

B.R. said he does try to print every letter to the editor that is submitted, although he may have to edit at election times when there are so many letters. If a letter is long, but particularly well reasoned, he will use it as a guest column in place of the regular staff
column. He also considers the *Press’s* reporting style to be an addition to the commentary and discussion about issues. “We try to go to representatives from different perspectives for our news stories,” he said.

In the opinion of R.L. the letters published in the paper are written by older people, and younger readers favor blogs or listservs. He said letters rarely reflect community opinion, and are more useful as a reflection of the kinds of comments being made about an issue.

B.L. said the editorial page allows an outlet for people who believe Oxford is different and should have certain issues, such as aesthetics, be at the forefront of discussion. The paper allows a space for all points of view, such as the rural and town view about school district issues. “They are good about making sure people have a place and a voice even when they say outrageous things,” said B.L.

R.D. commented negatively on the anonymous phone-in columns at other Cox papers, noting that callers may have an agenda they are promoting. B.L. agreed, saying in his P.R. work he has heard of campaign workers calling in anonymously to make negative comments about the other candidate. They both felt the *Press* avoids that kind of gossipy commentary at this point. B.S. also commented negatively on call-in columns, saying they encourage the “worst kind of gossip” and keep him from subscribing to those papers that use such devices.

R.D. proposed that the *Press* might avoid editorial stands in house editorials because of the unusual socio-economic group in the area with strong conservative ties. “If you try anything to promote government involvement, you are branded as a flaming liberal. So I understand why the paper may not take positions,” he said. T.M. suggested the paper might be cautious in an attempt to avoid being sued. “You have to be careful how you write things,” he said. “With the cost of litigation, it can really affect the bottom line.”

In terms of the *Press’s* acting as a source of information about public events and happenings, interview subjects were in less agreement. Some said the newspaper is a much worse source of information than it has been in the past, particularly when it was under local ownership. Advertisers are particularly negative. “Things have really changed with getting information into the newspaper,” said S. M. “When I send out releases, they won’t show up for three to six months, and things you think are important will be in the back. We invite reporters to many programs, and no one ever shows up.”

She was particularly unhappy about a health and wellness advertising section that was published in the newspaper recently and the hospital was not invited to participate as an advertiser or a contributor of story ideas. “We are the biggest healthcare provider in the area, and I was surprised no one noticed we were missing,” she said. “We advertise with them all the time. We definitely would have been in the supplement, and it would have been more money to them. With the new people, we weren’t even on the email list. Some of those things just get dropped now.”

T.M. says the coverage of the city has been getting worse and worse. “In a town this size you would think they would make themselves known and take a position in the community but we don’t see that now. . . Corporate America looks at dollars and cents more than they look at having a mission – the mission has been forgotten.”

R.L. was more positive in some aspects. With the consolidation of reporting, he said the University, where he was public relations director for years, might actually get
more coverage. “Before, the education writer in Dayton covered all the universities around and half the school districts in the area. It was hard to get the Dayton papers to cover anything at Miami. Now they take the story the Press writer puts out.”

B.L. also said the Press provides useful information to those in Oxford. “There are a lot of issues they cover, in fact, they seem to bog down in some issues. Some topics I think ‘Who cares about that?’ But people in this town do care, and the Press covers it.”

B.S. said in his years on the school board, he found that the individual reporter seemed to affect coverage more than the ownership configuration. “The reporters have come and gone. Some have been pretty good; wrote with depth and accuracy. Others were pretty superficial. They seemed to have no interest in the subject. Because of my personal knowledge of school events, I could tell if the reporter just whipped the thing off or if they had gone into depth, understanding the background and the history of an issue. To me, it’s not so much the owners; it’s who they hire.”

B.R. said the current push from Cox is to put an emphasis on websites, specifically making them more localized and “less hard news driven.” He said the focus is on citizen involvement, but not as citizen journalists. Instead, he said the trend is toward photo galleries of holiday decorations, ball games, festivals and similar “soft news” items. “Photo galleries get the most views,” he said. Cox was running a “cutest baby” contest on all its websites at the time of the interview. “It’s all about page views,” said B.R. Although it’s not something he does regularly or considers important, he says he is not prevented from printing comment, taking a stand on community issues, or making endorsements. “We can build in an editorial easily when we want to,” he said.

Relevance and Importance of the Oxford Press

Importance under local ownership

Most contacts expressed their views of the importance of the Press to them currently as being of either less or the same as the importance as it had been to them in the past. However, E.B. said the Oxford Press was particularly important to her under when it was under local ownership. “I have to tell you that the reason I live in this town is because of the Oxford Press,” she said. “My husband was a student at Miami, and each week he would sit on the porch and look out over the city as he read the Oxford Press, and he loved that city and the comfort of that so much that he decided that he wanted to do something so he could live in the Northeast quadrant of Oxford, sit on the front porch and read the Press each week – he chose his occupation so he could live in Oxford, and he had to marry someone who would also live in Oxford, so the whole reason I live in Oxford is because of the Oxford Press.”

Importance under distant corporate ownership

None of the subjects commented specifically on the importance of the newspaper under Thomson ownership.

Importance under domestic corporate ownership

This group of readers had strong opinions about the importance and relevance of the Oxford Press under current ownership.

Those who had a negative view of the newspaper under current ownership again included largely the advertisers. T.M. was particularly dismissive and negative about the value of the Press. “As an advertising agent, its worth very little – with a circulation of
only 5,000, it’s basically worthless,” he said. “This is true for all newspapers in general, really, all newsprint, though. For me, (in real estate) 80 percent of the buyers start with the computer.”

T.M. expressed the view that printed newspapers will be a thing of the past and that news in the future will be delivered electronically. Before that, he anticipates a further consolidation of the Press with the other Cox papers, perhaps to the point that it is an insert in the Hamilton daily paper and no longer has even the bare-bones office that it now has in Oxford. “Up until five, six years ago, people used to be in the office,” he said. “Now its just a drop off place. And they’ve cut the size of the ads – they added another column on each page, cut the size of our ads – it’s a struggle for them to survive. They keep squeezing us, but I’ll squeeze back. At some point I’ll probably just put an ad in, ‘see me at www dot whatever’ and that’s all I’ll have in print advertising.”

J.L. said from a journalist’s perspective, Cox isn’t putting the same resources into the newspaper that Thomson did. “I look at the Press from the perspective of my students,” he said. “Each semester, we have six or seven interns there. It’s a great place for our students. Ratterman is great with the students. He gives them good assignments and they come out with some impressive clips,” he said. “But Cox isn’t putting the resources into the paper that Thomson did. That’s why (the current editor) uses students so much.” J.L. said he got a call from the current editor during the summer term when there are few interns available, asking if there were any students J.L. could send his way. “He’s down to practically no staff,” J. L. said “He needs the student reporters to function.” In some ways, he thinks Cox is taking advantage of the student interns, since they are unpaid. “They do get good experience,” he said, “but they also have to pay tuition and do the work of being reporters without compensation.”

In his view, one of the great losses to Oxford of Cox ownership was the elimination of a second student newspaper, the High Street Press. J.L. said the High Street paper was student-produced. “In many ways, it was superior to the (Miami) Student.” Several years before Cox purchased the Press, the Press made an agreement to handle the advertising and the printing for the High Street paper. It was a moneymaker for the Press. “Cox decided to kill it,” J.L. said. “They were making money, but weren’t paying the students producing all the copy. They decided that was against the law, so they shut it down.” In his view, that was a loss to Oxford, particularly the university community.

As a source of information, T.M. said he doesn’t rely on the Press. “I’m involved in the community; I know what’s going on without someone telling me.” He said he gets not only his national news, but also his local news online or from WMUB (the local NPR radio station). “It never used to happen that a paper would sit in its wrapper two or three days at my house, but it does all the time now,” said T.M. “The news is available too many other places.”

S.M. and R.D. were equally negative about the value and importance of the Press under current ownership. S.D. said the recent emphasis on local sports and the large numbers of advertisements in the current newspaper make it less relevant to him. “My kids are gone, and it’s the kids of my kids’ friends that are in the paper now. I just don’t have reason to read the paper like I used to – it will be 15 minutes and I’m done.”

To S.M., fifteen minutes with the paper would be a stretch. “It’s less valuable to me now, personally. It has a lot of stuff I’m not interested in. From a business
perspective, it’s the only media we have here locally, so we use it, but personally, I don’t value it as much.”

S.M. said the duplicate coverage with other Cox papers and lack of staff are issues. “Too many times, even when they’ve had their student writers call and do an interview, you’ll see misquotes, or the facts are not correct. And I’ve heard others say that there is a lot a material you can see in the Hamilton paper. There is also a lot of coverage of Miami (University). Miami has its own paper, so maybe that kind of coverage isn’t necessary. To me, there is also a lot of outside advertising,” she said.

R.D. said the Press has little value to him personally. “I’ll read the Press in about 45 seconds. There are just so many other ways to get the information I need anymore. When I’m reading, or at least monitoring, seven newspapers a day, anything that’s happening in the world, I’ll see online. It’s the other stuff, what’s in the minds of the people, that I look at, and that only takes me a few seconds.”

That said, R.L. said he thinks the paper is still valuable to some people. “A lot of people are really engaged in reading the police reports, the obits, who got married – that’s still the heart of what weeklies do,” he said. “It also depends on how long you’ve been in the community – I think over time people start to pay more attention to it. If weekly papers survive, that will be why – because people want to know who had a baby and they’ll buy the paper to find out.” That kind of soft news and civic responsibility are what weeklies do best, he said. “No one else is going to tell you about the road extending into your neighborhood,” he said.

However, he questioned how relevant the paper will remain. “It will be interesting to see what comes of it in terms of technology,” he said. “I have noticed they are posting things on the web site before they print it in the paper. That shortens the news cycle. From a P.R. perspective, you have to respond much more quickly.”

Others, however, said the Press remains very relevant to them. “I read the Oxford Press every week,” said B.S. “I read it from front to back.” B.S. said he also reads several other newspapers to get in-depth understanding of issues. “I think the local community would have very little understanding of what’s going on without it. They cover senior citizen’s events, local residents’ achievements --- one of the things I do is read the police beat and see if I see any of my former students. Every now and then, I do.”

B.L. agreed that the Press has a relevant place for him and others. “From what I see, the reason that people read the weeklies is that they get small things they wouldn’t see other places,” he said. “My daughter gets her local weekly, but doesn’t read any other newspaper. She likes to read nice stories about her neighbors and her schools. I think that’s one of the reasons weekly papers still keep going. People know they will find things there they won’t find in other places.”

Not surprisingly, E.B. values the Press under current ownership. “I value the paper,” she said, “I like hearing about my friends and neighbors in a balanced way, but not to hurt anyone. I never use the website, but I do subscribe to the paper version for my kids who live out of town, and they read it each week,” she said. “I particularly value it when it supports the activities of the community and promotes our community.”

This view of how a local weekly such as the Press is valuable in the community seems to be shared by current editor B.R. “We keep saying and hearing that weekly newspapers are the ones that will be important to communities,” he said. “Other news sources don’t do what we do – and we need to do it well.”
Former editor Bob White, now 86 years old and still writing the occasional theater review for the *Press*, still considers the newspaper valuable and relevant. “The fact is that the *Press* is 75 years old. I really hold to that. Some of the things that are in the paper now hadn’t even been thought of 75 years ago. It’s changed, yes, but things change,” he said. “It’s been around for a long time. Other communities have had newspapers and now they’re gone.”

*Local Emphasis*

In the view of both Bob White, the local owner of the newspaper from 1960-1989, and the current editor Bob Ratterman, the *Oxford Press* has always had and continues to have a local focus. They both think it covers the local area well, and don’t think that focus has changed through the years and through ownership changes. However, not all readers perceive it the same way.

*Local emphasis w/Local owner*

One thing that all of the interviewees agreed upon is that the newspaper under Bob White had a focus on Oxford and the surrounding areas that was unquestionable. Hearing White’s account of his coverage of city meetings gives an idea of why this impression is so strong. “I went to every meeting,” he said, “Council meetings were on Tuesday nights – the Press came out on Thursday, so it had to be ready on Wednesday. So I’d stay at council meeting, and sometimes it went until 11 p.m. at night – I would come up here until 1 or 2 a.m. or whatever it took to be ready on Wednesday to layout the issue. Sometimes I would take (a friend) home after the meetings then I would still come back down and write up the stories that night.

“We wouldn’t start to print on Wednesday until just after lunch. So if someone had passed away or something had happened, we could get that still at noon on Wednesday, and it would be in the paper on Thursday. Now you have to have all the stuff in by Tuesday, and it doesn’t come out until Friday,” he noted.

B.R. said the small staff at the time covered every event themselves: every ball game, city meeting, and school district meeting. He said at one point in the early 80s, the *Hamilton Journal-News* tried to provide that kind of local coverage for Oxford in an attempt to put the *Press* out of business, but were unsuccessful. In his view, the venture failed because of the consistent and solely local coverage the *Press* provided. “Bob (White) used to say we don’t care if Lyndon Johnson is in the hospital, but if he comes to McCullough-Hyde (Oxford’s hospital), then we care.”

T.M. said the paper under local ownership had better local coverage than it did under either of the two corporate owners. “They (the local owners) were totally focused on Oxford and the surrounding township and community,” he said. “It was a little different from what you have today. They used to have articles about who was in town visiting for whose 50th anniversary. That’s all gone. You used to not have to pay for death notices; they considered that a public service. That’s gone, too.”

To R.D., the change has been observable – “More corporate ownership has meant less local emphasis,” he said. He said despite Ratterman’s consistent editorship, the paper’s local coverage has changed. “But Bob White might have been overkill,” he said. “Some may have given up on his stories in frustration. Still, Bob served as a conduit of information to the community – the way the paper was used as a common point of information.”
S.M. agreed that the local coverage under local ownership was the most complete. “I think at that point there was really a community paper – they really did stories that were related to Oxford. Any program or any event that you were holding, there was always a representative of the newspaper there.”

She said the personal relationships with the staff were valuable. “When Mr. White got a news article from an outlying hospital, he would call us first and ask if it were something we were doing at our hospital. He always looked at Oxford as his primary market. When he sold that to Thomson, you could see some differences,” she said. She liked knowing the person she would deal with for advertisements or press releases. “I had one contact at the paper all the time,” she said. “Over the years, she came to know what we wanted.”

E.B. said the paper had a feel that was supportive of the town. “The main purpose of it was to make you proud of living in the town. It was informative,” she said. She said it was also very fair to all parties. “It covered the city council and schools fairly, and was extremely honest,” she said.

Local emphasis Under Distant Corporate Owner

B.R. said that different leaders from Thomson had a lot of different ways of doing things. “At the time, everything was operated more autonomously,” he said. “It didn’t have the common system. We did use some stories from the Journal-News (also owned by Thomson), but they weren’t immediately available like they are now,” he said.

B.R. said, as a weekly, the Press didn’t get a lot of attention from Thomson, where weeklies were not a main focus. “When we were under the Chicago guy, for example, we’d get an envelope of front pages marked up in red every few months – asking why we did this or that – that kind of thing. It was different. At times we would be doing the same things the Journal-News was doing, we’d just be doubling the coverage. It didn’t make a lot of sense,” he said.

B.S. said the personal relationship members of the school board had with the editor and writers seemed to make a difference, but the owners of the newspaper did not. “I didn’t pay much attention to who owned it. We always felt like we could have access to the editor in this little community,” he said.

To B.L., the Press kept its local focus under Thomson. “We considered our market (at the radio station) to be bigger than Oxford, but we would check the Oxford Press to see if they have issues that we needed to know about,” he said. “The Oxford Press mostly focused on Oxford – most of what they did was focused on Oxford and the city or school district,” he said.

E.B. disagreed. She considered the local coverage under Thomson to be less complete and more “sensationalized,” saying that the editor and publishers wanted to emphasize controversy and conflict over what she considered fair reporting. E.B. was aware of general time frames in the newspaper history, but, like some of the other interviewees, was unaware of the specific ownership arrangements.

Local Emphasis Under Domestic Corporate Ownership

The concept of the newspaper providing local news under the current domestic conglomerate ownership generated the most comment from the interviewees. While some felt the local coverage in the Press had deteriorated considerably under local
conglomerate ownership, Bob White didn’t think the foundational emphasis on Oxford and the surrounding area had changed. He said the types of stories might have changed. “I think being on council now is probably entirely different than it was 20 years ago or so. It’s much more citified, if that’s a word,” he said. “The paper will of course have a lot of different kinds of stories; there’s a lot more going on. The University is much, much bigger, and the city is much bigger.”

B.R. said Cox has implemented several design, staff, and production changes. One of the changes has been the publisher. “Since about 2002, there’s been one publisher for the dailies and the weeklies in the southwest area. She’s had all the weeklies, then they added the two dailies. She answers to publishers in Dayton.” Ratterman said, “It’s definitely the case that we focus on the local. Ann’s main philosophy as publisher is for the weeklies to reflect the town they’re in.” This publisher was recently transferred within the company, and the Press and the other nearby newspapers have a new publisher.

B.R. said that although editors are able to take stories from the story “budgets” at any of the newspapers in the group, such borrowing doesn’t happen often. “There aren’t many stories that we do (take from other papers),” he said. “But there are some, like when the Miami student who lived in West Chester died; we used their story here and on our web site.”

He said Cox insists on this arrangement to avoid duplication of reporters on any one story. Editors at any paper can post any article on any other newspaper’s web page, not just their own. “I do get complaints that the web site isn’t always local,” he said. “But stories don’t stay up long.”

He agreed that the paper has less coverage of city and school district business and meetings. “There is a tendency, not just at our paper, I think, not to cover meetings as much. We never really stopped doing that, but we may have less day to day coverage than we used to,” he said. He said they are now more likely to have one small story about the meeting, but use information they heard at the meeting to find another story or get the public’s view about an issue addressed at the meeting.

Other interviewees, however, saw the changes not as practical adjustments in staff and production, but as weakening coverage of the local area.

T.M. said “They just don’t do a good job of covering the community.” He noted that when his daughter won a prestigious national honor, the family had to write an article and send a photo in order to get any coverage of the recognition. He said the owners of the newspaper used to be well-known and respected, but it is no longer that way. “That’s true for everything anymore. Local people don’t own the restaurants, banks, and businesses,” he said.

R.L. said the limited staff makes for awkward pairings of stories in the local Hamilton Journal-News (also owned by Cox) and the Press. “There are stories held in the Journal-News so they don’t come out before the Press comes out. But sometimes a story would run on Monday in the Journal-News then in the Press on Friday.” He said the Press is picking up a lot of articles from other Cox papers, and the entertainment sections of the papers are already consolidated. “The Press hits the high spots, but they have to go back to filler for the rest because they are low on resources,” he said. With the financial pressures, R.L. said, it will be difficult for Cox to resist the temptation to merge all the nearby weeklies entirely.
R.L. noted that the sharing of stories and staff is a benefit for student interns from Miami University who work at the Press. They now have more opportunity to write and be published than they did when the Press had a larger staff and didn’t have the connections to the dailies in the area. However, he said, the quality of reporting seems to have suffer. “I’ve noticed they do rely on University press releases more,” he said.

B.L. noted that in his work as a P.R. agent, he’s also noticed the Press printing press releases verbatim. “That never used to happen,” he said. R.D. said he thinks the Press has become dependent on P.R. agents. “You almost have to have someone pushy to get the information out now. It’s evolved from what’s going on in the town to where it’s now regional advertising of services, that sort of thing, with a very brief overview from a news perspective.” He said that Oxford-centered articles will usually run in the Press first, but “if it’s really news, it will be in the Journal-News. The Oxford Press is a vehicle for people to know what’s going on in the city, but I’m not sure it does that so well anymore,” he said.

S.M. feels that the problems she’s had with not being informed about advertising opportunities and waiting months for information about hospital events to be printed happen because of tight economics and the resulting reduction in staff. She notes that these economies also affect submission requirements, and therefore limit her personal contact with staffers. “Everything is by email now,” she said. “That’s the preferred format for ads and press releases.”

R.D. said he sees the lack of news from churches to be a loss. “They started to charge for that,” he said. “Now they do a few short blurbs here and there. Churches are an important part of the community for a lot of people,” he said. “I recognize the economic reality of it, but it’s a loss.” He wonders if such economic realities will cause the Press to become an insert in one of the local dailies, and said the loss of an editorial page and an Oxford office would be a blow to the city.

J.L. said he sees the lack of staff as being a problem, and one that will grow in the future. “Ratterman has always been good about covering all aspects of the local community, especially sports,” he said. “He always has at least one intern assigned to sports. But he’s a workaholic. He is there from early morning to late at night. I think Cox is better off than they know with him, and when he leaves, it could be very difficult to replace him.” He said it would be difficult to find someone who will work as hard at covering the community and maintain the same excellent management of student reporters as B.R. has. “I just can’t see that the paper won’t go downhill without him,” J.L. said.

It is interesting to note that the Press recently made a change in its online presence. Several of the interview subjects, including the current editor, noted that the web page for the Press often contains stories that do not connect to Oxford in any way, and may have been posted on the web page by an editor from one of the other newspapers. In the opinion of some readers, this decreases the “local” focus of the web version of the paper. However, the Press recently began posting a “print version,” an electronic version of the newspaper delivered the Friday before, under the “News” button on the website’s home page. The first issue the website shows as available in this format is the April 25 issue. The effort to post the newspaper online may indicate an effort to increase the local connection on the website.
Bias in the Press

It is unnecessary to delineate ownership periods in this section, because none of the interviewees saw any significant bias in the Press under any ownership. Instead, they considered the Press to be fairly even-handed in the subjects it chose to cover.

Current editor B.R. said he has not had pressure to cover any particular stories or promote a certain point of view from any of the owners. He said, for example, if his Cox publisher received a complaint or story idea, she would pass it on to him in order to make sure he was aware of it, but would not tell him that he needed to cover it. He said any complaints he gets about bias generally go both ways. “We get comments that we’re too friendly to business, then others complain that we’re too hard on them. When I first started out, there was a big teacher strike. My wife was a student teacher, and the people at her school would tell me I was too friendly to the school board. Then the board members would pull me aside at the meetings and tell me I focused too much on the teachers’ point of view. That was my favorite; when I got complaints from both sides. I feel good about that.”

He says the fact that Cox is a privately owned company makes the profit pressures lower on the individual newspapers. As a privately-held company, they don’t have to show flashy returns each year; a steady profit is acceptable. “We’re a company; we’re here to make money,” B.R. said, “But we’re here for the long haul. They raise some hackles when they consolidate sales staff and so on, but they’re putting money into the newspapers, and it makes sense to consolidate.”

T.M. said he hasn’t seen bias, particularly political bias, in the paper, which he thinks is helped by the fact that Oxford does not have political parties in local elections. R.L. said he thinks the in-town presence of the staff limits bias. “If you just had reporters rotate into the community, if they just came in for a meeting or event and rotate out, then you might see more of it.” B. S. agreed that he really doesn’t see bias in the paper, and Bob Long concurred, saying the Press tries to balance different points of view, including the “rural” and the “city” views in the school district.

Discussion

Habermas envisioned the ideal democratic society as a place where intelligent, informed citizens debate and discuss ideas, plans, and proposals, then come to an informed consensus as to the best way to proceed. They then suggest these proposals to the governing members of the society, and the “right” solution to difficult situations is found. The local, weekly newspaper can be envisioned as a part of this process. The local newspaper provides information about the decisions and difficulties a city, township, or board is facing. In the best situations, it proposes ideas and provides an outlet for citizens to propose their own ideas. If a local weekly newspaper is acting as the best Habermasian public sphere possible, it provides information on a wide variety of topics, commentary, and a back-and-forth between citizens. If citizens are using the local weekly newspaper as the most effective public sphere, they are gathering information from the newspaper and using that information to enter into informed debates with their fellow citizens. In theory, weekly newspapers should be able to provide this opportunity for information, debate, and discussion. However, some newspapers do not achieve this ideal, either because the ownership does not value these services or because other issues, such as financial or personnel constraints, make it difficult.
At this time, newspapers of all types are looking for ways to stay or become financially viable in today’s economy and rapidly changing technology landscape. While newspapers in the era of television and radio thrived in their own niche, with the rise of portable electronics and the Internet, print’s traditional base is eroding away. Newspapers struggle to gain new, younger readers, and are in a battle to retain advertising revenue while finding a way to remain relevant to readers and profitable to shareholders while still achieving their core missions.

The industry in general is grappling with questions such as how to embrace new technology without being swallowed up and consumed by it. The struggle between the journalistic idealists -- who focus on the newspaper as a watchdog of government, as an advocate for the “little people,” and an important information source -- and the businesspeople who say the reason for the newspapers’ existence is to make money and to bring a profit for its shareholders or owners -- has never been more pointed or felt quite so desperate. Currently, the journalistic idealists seem to be losing, since staffs are being slashed at newspapers around the country and businessmen such as Sam Zell proclaim that a new day must arrive in media.

In an environment where the Washington Post is cutting staff and editions, the Chicago Tribune struggles to reinvent itself, and the Los Angeles Times loses staff positions and changes editors by the month, the local weekly newspaper is easy to overlook. Nonetheless, these issues of survival are just as important and relevant to these small news outlets, because the local weekly is an important part of print journalism in the United States. In fact, the hegemony of electronic media in the United States makes the local newspaper paradigm one of the most viable of print formats. With national and international news so easily and quickly available online and on television, fewer people have the same motivation as readers had in the past to subscribe to a regular, big-city, daily. Mid-sized papers are particularly vulnerable, since they try to fill the role of national news source and local news source, and will likely fail to provide either satisfactorily. Therefore, a local newspaper that covers local issues and provides a forum for public sphere debate and individual recognition to citizens in a small community can continue to be particularly relevant. Large papers, television stations, and advertising-supported Internet portals cannot afford to provide such exclusive coverage and become less interested in doing so as the conglomerates to which they belong become more international.

The questions, then, are whether or not concentration of ownership in local newspapers will allow them to continue their function of providing a local public sphere, whether or not they will fall behind the technology curve and thereby become irrelevant, particularly to younger readers, or if their valuable contributions will be consumed by the need for profits to the parent company, causing them to become irrelevant and uninteresting to members of the local communities. Examining the Oxford Press over the period from 1960 to 2005 provides some understanding of the changes brought about by ownership concentration, and perhaps provides some insight into both the positives and negatives that come from concentration of ownership in media properties.

The Oxford Press is party to some of the negatives as well as some of the positives related to concentration of media ownership. For example, during the era of Bob White’s ownership and editorship, the newspaper design was confusing and convoluted. While of the interviewees only the current editor and the journalism
professor made mention of this characteristic, both coders and the lead researcher noticed the design of the paper first, because it was so strikingly dense and difficult to follow. The other interviewees had likely not looked at the early issues of the newspaper for 20 years, and had likely forgotten the aesthetic look of the paper. The coders made several comments about the difficulty they encountered with the layout, including difficulty following the stories, the lack of clear jumps, the small point size of some of the headlines that made separate stories (particularly small, announcement stories) blur into the longer stories, and stories about the minutiae of daily life that seemed hardly worthy of being in the newspaper. Although larger newspapers, particularly dailies, had eliminated most of these characteristics by 1985, they were still in place at the *Oxford Press*. Doubtless this is because the same owners were putting the newspaper together in 1985 as had been putting it together for 25 years. While the business was changing around them, they continued to do what they knew.

They did, of course, keep up in some ways – for example, they eventually purchased a cold type press to replace the hot lead machine the *Press* had used from the early days. But with the tiny staff, there were no new journalism school graduates coming in with the latest ideas in layout and story ideas. There was no change in publisher that might have forced a change in design or printing, or even advertising layout. Again, readers did not seem to notice or remember these things as being significant, but as a newspaper goes, the *Oxford Press* was somewhat behind the times for 1985.

Additionally, the ownership situation at the *Press* illustrates a problem many private owners had with a weekly newspaper. The newspaper was often their only or primary asset, but it was not at all liquid. Their investments were tied up in a building, hardware such as a printing press, and the goodwill and trust of the community. When Dick Taylor became critically ill, the owners of the *Press* faced the same dilemma other owners and prospective owners have in the past, and will likely continue to face – heirs and hospitals do not want an interest in a community newspaper. They want cash. There is no way to turn a newspaper into cash other than by selling it, and the only entity willing to buy a newspaper and pay cash for it, particularly in the current climate (but even in 1989), is usually another newspaper or, more likely, a newspaper group. They can implement efficiencies to make the paper more profitable and thereby justify payments on the debt to buy it, and they know the business well enough to be comfortable taking it on. At this point, the concern of a newspaper owner wanting to sell would likely be finding a group willing to expand further. Looking for a private buyer for a newspaper is nearly unheard of in the current media and economic climate – the costs and the risks are too high for most.

The *Press* provides another example of the difficulties in trying to remain independent. Former editor Bob White indicated in an interview that he would rather have sold the newspaper (in 1989) to an individual or local newspaper, but was under pressure from his partner to sell to the first viable bidder. They initially sold to the owner of a small newspaper located in a town east of Oxford. The buyer assured White and Taylor that he had no intention of selling the *Press*. However, within six weeks, he did sell to Thomson. The amount a conglomerate can pay and a conglomerate’s focus on increasing profits makes them persistent buyers and difficult to resist.

Thomson did make some changes at the paper for the better, particularly in the layout and design department. However, its ownership also highlighted some of the most
glaring negatives of media concentration. When a media conglomerate is headquartered far away and the property is not important to the company, there is a good chance the property will be ignored or be used as a training ground for inexperienced new hires or current employees trying to change career paths. This can happen in any large company, and does seem to be what happened with the Press during the Thomson years. This confusion and lack of a consistent vision was noted by the interviewees as well as the editor, and was apparent to the coders as they examined and commented on the issues from 1995.

It appears from examining the advertisements, column inches devoted to editorial copy, and the length of the newspapers that Thomson was sucking every cent of profit it could from the Press (and presumably other newspapers it owned) while giving little back in terms of direction, management, or investment. While it knew the business and made significant efforts to modernize the Press, it did not give The Press consistent editorial direction or leadership. As many of the interviewees noted, it is likely fortuitous for the operation of the Press that editor Ratterman wanted to stay in Oxford and was flexible enough to adjust to changing demands and changeable policies of the different Thomson publishers. That continuity likely helped the Press retain what some readers saw as its relevance to the community that the interview subjects felt the Press had during the years of private ownership. It is notable that the Press under the Thomson group functioned quite independently of the other newspapers in the group, even though Thomson owned other newspapers in the area. The editor at the time and the readers all noted this independence in editorial policy, starting web sites, and so on. This leads to the conclusion that Thomson, perhaps admirably, saw individual newspapers as individual entities, separate from one another and having unique assets.

This is in distinct contrast to the operation of the Press under Cox Ohio. While Cox Newspapers is a division of the huge Cox Communication conglomerate, and it does have other print properties in other parts of the country, it is clear that Cox manages the Cox Ohio newspapers as a group and as a group separate from the larger Cox Communications company. From examining the newspapers themselves, the newspaper websites, and the Cox Ohio website, it is seems clear that Cox is marketing this group of newspapers and the related direct mail and marketing endeavors as an independent, unique company. There is very little reference to any of the other Cox Communication properties (a brief mention of a television station in Atlanta) and no mention that they are connected to the larger conglomerate. However, the Cox Ohio website is a study in modern sales convergence, because the marketing focus is on how utilizing all aspects of the Cox Ohio portfolio (the eight newspapers, the web version of the newspapers, the direct mail division, and the delivery option to include non-subscribers) can best benefit advertisers.

From this emphasis and from changes made at the Press since the purchase by Cox, there are some things that are evident about group ownership under Cox. First, Cox is not disorganized, driven in a new direction by every publisher, editor, or executive that temporarily takes the helm as seemed to be the case with Thomson. Instead, the company appears to be driven by a common vision and what appears to be focused leadership from the top, leading to small tweaks but few major changes when a new lower-level manager steps into a position.
The common theme in the Cox operation seems to be to standardize and consolidate. For example, since the creation of the Cox Ohio newspaper group in 2000, Cox has made steady efforts to standardize and consolidate the layouts of the newspapers. In 2008, if a reader picks up any Cox Ohio newspaper, it looks immediately familiar because of the similarities in layout. While Cox has retained the individual banners with unique typefaces at the individual papers, the overall look of the papers is so similar that they do not retain uniqueness in relation to the other newspapers in the group. This allows efficiency in pagination and layout, since all of those duties are consolidated into a single operation housed in one building. Likewise, the printing operations are all housed in a single, high tech facility, eliminating the need for duplication of expensive printing hardware. The staffs, both writing and advertising, are being consolidated. The writing staff at the Press has been cut to a minimal two people, supplemented by student interns from Miami University on a regular basis. The advertising staff from all the Cincinnati area papers is also housed in a single building. Press editor Ratterman says such efficiencies “make sense” as does the prohibition from Cox on having two staff members cover any single event. The websites for the newspapers are so similar as to seem absolutely identical, particularly when they feature many of the same top stories on each web page. With the Cox propensity for consolidation and elimination of duplication it seems highly likely that the separate web pages will combine to form a single web page, perhaps having one main page with a link to the local front pages. Again, this seems to be another case of efficiency and financial sense overtaking value and journalistic integrity. The addition of access to the print version of the newspapers is a giant step forward in localizing the newspaper websites, but does support the idea that a single website with access to the print versions of all eight papers may be in the offing.

While these provisions may make financial sense they do not make journalistic sense. They emphatically do not contribute to the localism of the newspaper or the value of the newspaper to the community; neither do they help the newspaper function as more of a public sphere. These provisions do not help make the newspaper better at providing information, acting as a public sphere or making the newspaper more local and more valuable to local readers. A number of the readers noted that, despite empirical evidence that the Press publishes nearly as many inches of hard news, more soft news, and nearly as many announcements about community events as the newspaper under private ownership, they felt the newspaper was not as tuned to the community and not as good at being a source of local information. However, when pressed on reasons for those feelings, the reasons often had to do with dissatisfaction resulting from the consolidation and standardization practices. They were unhappy that the Press looked so much like all the other Cox papers, and were frustrated by the limited numbers of staff available, both to cover events and to give them personal advertising attention.

When every story about the newspaper industry in current publications talks about its ill financial health, it seems to be simply an unfortunate but unavoidable reality that companies must use whatever cost saving, consolidating means they can to make a newspaper work, even if it means, as it does in the case of the Oxford Press, that the papers lose staff and local focus. Some may still be tempted to paraphrase Twain, and propose that “reports of (newspapers’) death are greatly exaggerated” and surmise that newspaper companies using those reports to justify cost cutting measures that aren’t necessarily inevitable. Maybe three or even two years ago, this argument could find
many backers. In the current environment, however, it’s becoming more difficult to find true believers in that point of view. In 1995, Thomson was likely publishing smaller newspapers with fewer pages in Oxford while increasing advertising revenue in order to make the paper more profitable without regard for what it meant to the quality of the product. Critics complain that Cox Ohio is consolidating printing, paginating and advertising to squeeze out profits from substantially healthy newspapers while disregarding quality issues. Cox argues that these cost-cutting measures are put in place to keep the newspaper group a viable business operation. Cox will find more who are willing to give it the benefit of the doubt in this argument due to the current climate of concern for the survival of newspapers. However, the concern with online page views to the point of filling the Internet version of the newspaper with reader uploaded photo galleries does seem to indicate too much of a focus on the bottom line. At the very least, it shows too little attention to the quality of news content on the web. Since advertisers pay online content providers based on page views, this emphasis may be encouraging editors to emphasize soft news and photos from readers rather than city business, information, or commentary. In that way, the view of some readers that the papers have become obsessed with the bottom line to the detriment of content may be supported.

Digitization is the trend in all newspapers, not only weeklies. Therefore, it is interesting to note that none of the interviewees mentioned the website for the Oxford Press as being important or relevant. None brought up the website without prodding, except current editor Ratterman, who mentioned it in context of his responsibilities for maintaining the website. When others were asked about the website for the Press, it was either not at all relevant to them (they never used it) or they used it very little. This raises some interesting questions for newspapers, particularly local, weekly newspapers. The current thought is that the future of newspaper delivery includes digital delivery in some form. Given this lack of interest in the Internet version, the focus on Internet in newspaper circles could possibly be overdone. It is still to be determined if the Internet is really where newspapers should be focusing their energies and if web-based newspaper is it the next newspaper paradigm. If so, it remains a questionable if the local weekly newspaper fits into that same paradigm. Possibly the online version of the Press is irrelevant because it is so unrelated to the print version. It is also possible that the responses indicating a lack of interest in the Internet version of the Press was due to the age of the interview subjects. Since the subjects were specifically chosen for their long number of years interacting with the Press, they are all over 40 years old, and most over 50, and possibly less familiar or comfortable with using technology. However, even those who do use technology more often, including using technology to access news from other sources on the Internet, did not look at the Press online. Again, this raises some issues for local, weekly newspapers as they attempt to create their online presence and the new newspaper paradigm. Local weekly newspapers need to examine carefully what they provide and how they provide it to assure that they are meeting the actual needs of their readers and are providing a product advertisers will pay for.

Another point of interest and concern for weekly newspapers is their preservation. What weekly newspapers do best, and is often forgotten due to the transitory nature of newsprint, is to document the history of a community. As is evident from the snippets of Oxford history related earlier as found in the community newspapers covering the city, many details of city history would be forgotten if it were not for newspapers, particularly
local community newspapers. Local community newspapers are a treasure trove for historians and genealogists, among others. Community members who are highly invested in the community were traditionally the private owners of these publications, and they generally cared deeply about the direction of the community. Avis Cullen, owner of the Press from 1935 to 1960, is an example of such an owner; she not only published the award-winning Press, but served on the board of directors of the library, was instrumental in raising money and building a new library, was an honorary member of the Rotary Club before it allowed women as members, was an officer in the garden club, and generally served in the community for many decades (Cullen, 1993, p. 6). Bob White, too, invested a great deal into the community, particularly supporting the arts and attending nearly every public meeting himself. With this kind of interest in the community, it is little wonder that such newspapers chronicle the history of a community in a way not found in other sources. This history is in jeopardy for two reasons: encroaching concentration of community newspapers, and the increasing digitizing of information.

As large media companies buy weekly newspapers, the companies look for whatever economizing and consolidation they can find, as seen in the direction Cox has taken with the Press and its other nearby holdings. The layout for the newspapers becomes the same, the websites are similar, if not identical, and the consolidated newspapers share writers and stories. The Press in particular comes to depend on interns as regular staffers -- students with very little connection to the community, and who are concerned largely with collecting clips rather than providing excellent news coverage. Through these economies, the local flavor of the newspapers are often weakened or lost. With these changes, the weeklies become less proficient at documenting the history of the community, as their resources and page space are diluted by other news. The communities lose an important source of history and connection to the community.

Digitization is also a threat to local weekly newspapers and the histories they contain. Daily newspapers, particularly large ones, are quickly digitizing their archived issues, and these databases are easily searched. However, this digitizing is not always happening with the weekly newspaper. While the printed pages are often scanned and preserved on microfilm, such microfilms are not transferred to searchable Internet databases or servers. While the current Press is now being archived online, the issues from 1935 to 2008 are not accessible online. The website shows only seven issues of the print version of the Press. With the miniscule size of the newspaper, it is unlikely that databases such as Lexis Nexis will go to the trouble of cataloguing the stories. In today’s world, where information is becoming irrelevant if it is not accessible from a computer, even the history that is preserved by these newspapers is in danger of being ignored or lost.

**Future Research**

Future research should examine weekly newspapers in suburban areas compared with the local, weekly newspapers in more isolated towns such as Oxford. In suburban areas covered more thoroughly by the daily newspaper, it would be interesting to see if there are readers who are as invested in their weekly community newspapers. Will these suburban weeklies, which have traditionally been more profitable than most weeklies, lose relevance to the readers and struggle even more to survive?
Also interesting is the struggles many large dailies have had as they have tried “hyper-local” coverage in recent years, particularly on the Internet. Some of these experiments have worked, but some have been failures, notably the *Washington Post*’s recent efforts. These experiments should be of interest to local weekly newspapers, given the “hyper-local” coverage they provide. Also of note are the attempts newspapers make at using online reader contributions as a way to encourage investment in newspapers. This trend merits observation to see if it helps maintain newspapers’ staying power and relevance or simply slides into cyber-anonymity like so many other experiments.

Technology is the issue of note in all newspapers, weekly and daily, local and international. It will remain so for the foreseeable future, because the pressing question for weeklies as well as dailies is how newspapers will be distributed, published, and paid for in the future technological world. Advertisers, publishers, readers will have to agree on how newspapers will (or will not) be used, what monetary value they have, who will pay for them, and how they will pay. It is currently questionable whether newspapers will continue to exist in print. The possible alternatives include proprietary Internet websites devoted to a particular newspaper, passively awaiting the view of a reader, and newspapers being delivered electronically to readers on a subscription basis to palm pilots, Kindles or electronic book mechanisms. There may also be a new delivery mechanism on the horizon, unknown and untested.

**Conclusion**

Efficiencies and consolidation may be the future of newspapers, but there will be repercussions for these practices in terms of how the newspapers are viewed by the readership. As such practices are implemented, there is a danger that enough of the readers will be alienated by the changes and see a decrease in the value of the newspaper that they do not use the newspaper to the same degree. However, there does seem to be truth to the idea that local, weekly newspapers provide information and discussion that readers cannot get anywhere else, and therefore they may remain a media source of interest and relevance, despite any frustrations readers may have. It is clear that newspaper owners and publishers will need to adjust to new delivery methods as advertisers’ visions change and priorities fluctuate.

*Quality of newspaper.* As increasingly large media conglomerates make these inevitable adjustments, the question remains whether or not the efficiencies and developments put in place and funded by large companies produces higher quality, “better” products. Is the newsy local paper with messy layout and journalistically inferior writing a “worse” product than the standardized, clean layout of the current *Press* with its shorter stories and more general appeal?

Judging from the evaluated issues of the Oxford Press, the newspaper is a “better” newspaper under group ownership. The news is more accessible; the stories are more relevant to the readers, and the access by community groups at least as good. As a source of information to the community, these things make it a “better” paper. Nonetheless, some readers consider it a worse paper, less relevant and less important, under corporate management. The difference is the personal connection. In the long, rambling, non-journalistically written city council stories, the reader saw a person invested in the community, connected to things they were connected with (or thought someone should be connected with) and treating their little town and its governance as a thing of importance.
If the paper under corporate ownership was able to retain that feel while updating the visual and organizational appeal of the newspaper, then corporate ownership would offer the “best” possible newspaper for Oxford. Unfortunately, Cox does not seem to manage this well. With the cuts in staff to minimal levels and moving operations outside the city, Cox has the look, but not the feel of quality. Relying on unpaid interns with no investment in the quality of the newspaper or the quality of the city and stretching the two paid employees across the city, county, township, university, sports beat, and all lifestyle stories results in superficial, news-release oriented newspapers. The two employees tend to take the easiest route possible to putting out a paper.

Therefore, the time period of highest journalistic and community quality for the *Oxford Press* was during the Thomson years with an on-site publisher and editor. The newspaper and the management implemented good layout practices, thorough local coverage, quality editorial choice, and solid community commentary and coverage. Thomson allowed the *Press* editorial and production independence as well. Since these periods of excellence were interspersed with periods of distant management and inexperienced editors, the quality was sporadic during the Thomson years. Nonetheless, when the editorial, management and personnel stars aligned, Thomson produced a solid, weekly newspaper that served the needs of the community well while still striving for journalistic excellence.

*Public Sphere.* This evaluation of excellence can also be examined through the vision of the public sphere. Viewing the *Press* through Habermas’ construction of the public sphere shows that the *Press* has consistently provided a public sphere for the city of Oxford. It is an excellent place for the dissemination of information about the town and the surrounding areas. Even the plethora of announcement stories provide a public sphere where citizens can find information and discover what is going on in town, the organizations in which their friends and neighbors are involved, and what people consider important enough to comment upon. Presumably, putting the information out for people to read will prompt public discussion. Doubtless, it does do so, at least from time to time.

Looking at the public sphere through the Habermasian view might lead to evaluating the Cox version of the *Press* as the most excellent paper. It prints the largest number and length of letters to the editor, allowing citizens to know what others are saying, and prints large numbers of press releases indicating fellow townspeople seem to consider important – at least, what those willing to send a press release to the paper consider important. So the citizens in this version of the public sphere are seen as somewhat passive – gathering information, processing it and, according to Habermas, ideally coming to an agreement on issues. The *Press* in its current form can be seen as serving this purpose well.

However, the public sphere in the United States is better constructed as the agonistic democracy as explained by Mouffe (1992). This construct presents a more accurate picture of the way an ideal democracy functions, and in this sense, the Cox version of the *Press* falls short.

The agonistic model accepts that there is no agreement on most issues in a democratic society, but instead there is a constant tension between many different views. Taking this approach acknowledges the vast differences of opinion in the United States, and allows for promoting a particular point of view on an issue without ever expecting to
reach a consensus, and without envisioning consensus as ideal. Therefore, an editorial page reflecting the agonistic view of the public sphere would promote particular points of view at the expense of others with no apologies. It would invite disagreement and respond to, or at least print, different ways of addressing an issue. Therefore, the Thomson years again provide a better model for the Press, since the paper under its ownership did include editorial stands from time to time, as well as letters to the editor and other personal columns. It did not attempt to reach a consensus on any issues, but rather promoted particular points of view, and left the reader to debate and decide what was best. Therefore, an agonistic democracy is best served not by simply presenting information, but by promoting particular points of view and attempting to win others to that vision. Add to this the accessible writing and layout advances in the Thomson years, and the newspaper staff that created a portion of the public sphere that encouraged strong feelings and well-defended positions, without asking for consensus. Once again, the efficiencies of Cox cannot supercede the journalistic high road followed, at least on occasion, by the editors and publishers during the best parts of the Thomson era.

Although most readers had little positive to say about the Thomson years of ownership, the newspaper under the Thomson ownership provided the best example of operating as a Habermasian public sphere. As is so often the case, citizen consumers did not seem to recognize what was “good for them” regarding the public sphere opportunities offered by the Thomson management. Thomson did offer the best opportunity of any of the newspaper owners for citizens to engage in the public sphere. It provided commentary and opinion, a place for citizens’ opinion, and an independent voice where local editors and writers had the liberty to print what they considered important without undue oversight from upper management. Additionally, it presented these articles and editorials in a readable manner using clear layout methods and standardized type styles and sizes. This made the information more accessible and usable by the readers. Although the interviewed readers didn’t recognize these benefits, it seems possible that the disorganization and lack of consistent leadership from Thomson so overwhelmed any other aspect of the period that it is these negatives that readers most remember. It is feasible that if Thomson had consistent editorial leadership coupled with its public sphere-friendly business policies, the readers would have embraced the paper more fully and perhaps recognized and taken advantage of the valuable service it provided the community.

In present newspapers, decisions about how to provide a public sphere and how to help readers relate to a publication become more than academic issues. They become matters of survival. As media companies, advertisers and readers all make adjustments and a new system of delivering, financing, and consuming newspapers emerges, local weekly newspapers must work wisely and proactively to remain relevant and important to their audience. It may be that, despite its drawbacks, group ownership is the reasonable way for them to accomplish this.
Appendix

Table of Contents:

Code Book 67
Story Analysis Sheet 96
Page Analysis Sheet 98
Interview Guide 100
Sample Front Pages 102
Media Concentration and Weekly Newspapers:

Substance and Sources:
A Content Analysis Code Book

Primary Investigator:
Rachel Murdock

Coders:
Rachel Seeman
Jennifer Anderson
Table of Contents:

Introduction: 3
Definitions of Elements: 4
Opinion pieces: 5
Hard News: 18
Soft News: 22
Encouragements to contribute: 30
Advertisements: 31
Editorial Cartoons: 32

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Introduction:
As editors and writers make choices about what information to put into newspaper stories and what stories to publish on each page, they create a personality for a newspaper. In order to understand how these choices may affect the way a local, weekly newspaper is received in the community, this study will number, measure, and classify the stories in a newspaper, examining story placement, type, and content. This code book will guide coders in categorizing each story in issues of the Oxford Press for the purpose of analyzing editorial choices.

Coding Sheet:
For each story or section of news briefs, the coders will use a story coding sheet. Any story in the paper that has its own headline will be treated as a separate story and given a coding sheet. At the top of each sheet, the coder will note the date of the paper, the section where the story was found (news or lifestyle) and note the page number where (s)he found the story.

- **Date, Section, Slug, Page:** The coder will note the date of the paper, the section (1 or 2), the page, and a one or two word slug to identify the story.
- **Length:** The primary researcher will measure the story with a ruler and note column inches, using a ruler to scale, so coders will leave this blank.
- **Photo:** The coder will note if the story has a photo. (S)he will circle No or Yes. If yes, (s)he will then circle either **one**, **two**, **three** or **four +** columns. If it is a portion of a column (for example, 2.5 columns) the coder will circle the next higher number (for our example of a photo 2.5 columns wide, the coder would circle 3 columns).
- **Writers:** The coder next circles whether the writer of the piece is from Oxford or outside of Oxford. Often this designation will be clear because it will be explicitly stated, “Oxford resident” or “editor” or in some other way denoted. The coder will become familiar with the names of staff writers or local contributors, and those authors will be designated as “From Oxford.” A third category “Unknown” is available for authors for whom residency is uncertain, and “Staff Writer” is circled when the newspaper uses that generic term. This is used particularly in the more recent issues when the Oxford Press was sharing writers with the other newspapers in the group.

The length of a story and the use of photo or lack thereof is relevant, since it gives evidence of how much importance and editor or publisher places on that item. By noting if the writer is local or not, it becomes evident whether or not the paper is relying on outside sources, perhaps syndicated or within the corporate structure, making the paper less “local.”

General Story Types:
On the next line on the coding sheet, the coder will designate the type of story. The coder has three general choices of story type: opinion, hard news and soft news. Opinion pieces are divided into four categories: letters, columns, guest columns, and unsigned, house editorials.

The other story categories are hard news and soft news. Each of these categories is divided into subcategories describing different types of soft or hard news.
Opinion:
1. Opinion pieces are usually written in the first person, using the pronouns I and me. They are often self-aware, and address the reading audience as “you.” Their purpose is to promote or propose a particular point of view or opinion on a topic. Within the general category of opinion, the coders have four classification choices.
   a. **Letter:** Letters include letters to the editor or any other letter printed in the newspaper.
   b. **Columns:** Include any first person opinion article, usually signed, and often with a photo of the author at the top. A column is often found on the editorial page, but may be found at other places in the newspaper.
   c. **Guest column:** Noted by the designation of “guest column” at the top of the piece. These are feature writers who are not on the newspaper staff, and are generally found on the editorial page. Coders will only code a column as a guest column if it is so designated by a heading.
   d. **House Editorial:** Unsigned opinion piece on the editorial page, usually taking a position, pointing out problems, or extending accolades.

News Stories:
1. Other stories that are not letters, first person pieces or opinion pieces, but address people and events. This category has two divisions.
   a. **Hard News:** Defined in common parlance as stories that deal with topics that are serious or formal. They may be further interpreted as stories that deal with issues, facts or events that often have an element of timeliness -- they would be less relevant a week later, for example.
   b. **Soft news:** Defined as news discussing less important or frivolous subjects. It is also considered to be stories about health, relationships, and non-timely events-- stories that could run one week or another with very little alteration.

After determining the general story type, the coder moves to the bottom half of the sheet. In the bottom half, the coder will further classify each type of story. (S)he will mark only one section, depending on the type of story marked on the top. For example, if the story is an opinion guest column, the coder will jump down to the opinion section, find the “signed column/editorial” category, and beneath that, circle to designate whether the column dealt with a local issue or resident, a regional or national issue or resident, or some other topic. The coder ignores the other categories, since they do not apply to that story, and moves on to the next article.

**Classification Examples**
Following are specific examples to assist the coder in classifying each type of story.

**Opinion Pieces:**
Letters to the Editor:
Letters to the editor are classified in four different categories.
- Thanks: Often following a festival or major community event the organizers write a letter to the editor to thank all those who participated. Families may also write letters of thanks following the death and funeral of a loved one.

Following are examples of Letters of Thanks:

**Letters to the Editor: Thanks**

I want to extend a heartfelt thank you to so many thoughtful friends for making my convalescence more tolerable. Whether it was just a card, a thought, a prayer, a call, a book, a visit, a flower, music, a treat, or a meal, know that you were and are greatly appreciated. I also would like to thank the Beaver Island Fire Department and the Beaver Island EMS personnel for such professionally-rendered care and treatment. You all provided me the confidence and assurance that I was virtually in the most capable care. Lastly, I want to thank my family and all the staff of McDonough's Market and Dalwhinnie for picking up the slack during my “vacation.” God bless you all.

–Bill McDonough

- An issue letter disguised as thanks (classify as issue): A letter to the editor that is ostensibly a letter of thanks, yet is merely using the opportunity of giving thanks to raise community issues should be categorized as local issue or national regional issue (whichever applies).

A letter illustrating this style of “thanks” letter follows:

**Letter to the Editor: Thanks, Greektown volunteers**

Thanks to all who helped in 2007

**Editor, The Guide:** I would like to take this opportunity to thank the 50+ residents and the city, state and federal officials who attended the Greater Greektown Neighborhood Alliance’s Holiday Dinner and Awards at Ikaros Restaurant on Wednesday, December 19. Guests at the dinner included Baltimore City Police Commissioner Frederick Bealefeld, Major Roger Bergeron, Lt. Tony Brown and Officer Holly Lane from Southeastern District Police, City Councilman Jim Kraft, Mayor’s Liaison to the Southeast Karli Swift, Barbara Baynes from Senator Barbara Mikulski’s office, and Michelle Donnell from the State’s Attorney’s office. The Citizen of the Year award was presented to Mr. Don Brotherton with help from Commissioner Bealefeld and Councilman Kraft. Mr. Brotherton also received a Mayoral Citation presented by Karli Swift, and a Senator’s Citation presented by Barbara Baynes. Ikaros Restaurant and Habanero Grill also pitched in gift certificates as a “thank you” to Don. A year ago we didn’t even exist, but now we have the support of the community, the police, our elected officials, and various City and State departments, as well as our Federal representatives. We have worked very hard in just over 11 months to bring several issues to the attention of the city and the state. With the help of Delegate Peter Hammen and his staff, we have
received Baltimore City’s pledge to provide 20% of the cost to erect a new sound wall along I-895 along Quail Street, where homes sit street level with the highway and residents are exposed to both noise and air pollution at unacceptable levels as determined by the Maryland Department of the Environment. We have worked with Evan Helfrich and the State’s Attorney’s office to crack down on absentee landlords who refuse to keep up their properties or look into the types of tenants to whom they are renting. The result has been several evictions and citations. The GGNA participated in both of the mayor’s clean-ups this year, which saw volunteers participating in greater numbers and in more locations around Greektown than ever before. We have requested that the Southeastern District police perform sweeps of the many bars in our neighborhood, which has resulted in several bar closures and stiff fines for those who are running their businesses improperly. GGNA members actively participate in the Southeastern District Police-Community Relations Council and a Virtual Citizens on Patrol program at the Southeastern District station through the monitoring of the City’s closed-circuit TV cameras, which overlook the Eastern Avenue corridor. Most recently, through SED’s Neighborhood Services Unit, members of the GGNA are participating in neighborhood crime walks to help deter crime. Close communication with Recreation and Parks has led to the planning of new green spaces throughout Greektown, and the rehabilitation of the playground at the corner of Lehigh and Gough Streets. We will be following up on all of our gains from 2007 and have several new initiatives planned for 2008. With the support of the people who have attended our meetings and events throughout 2007, we look forward to expanding our role in the community and continuing our success through 2008 and beyond. The GGNA holds its public meetings at 7 p.m. on the last Tuesday of every month at PS 228 (John Ruhrah Elementary School), 701 Rappolla Street. Our next meeting will be January 29. New volunteers and ideas are always welcome, so if you are a resident or business owner in Greektown and would like to work with your neighbors to help us make a difference in the community, please attend one of our public meetings.

**Todd A. Bonicker** President, Greater Greektown Neighborhood Alliance

- **Announcement**: Sometimes letter writers use the letters to the editor as a way to promote an event or make announcement or draw attention to their cause, as opposed to responding to a local or national issue. An example of such a letter type follows:

**Education Support Professionals Appreciation Letter**

Dear Editor:

November 14, 2007, will mark the 20th annual observance of Education Support Professionals Day—a time for saluting our public school education support professionals (ESPs) and the contributions they make to education. The interaction between children, parents, and ESPs is vital to the continued success of public education. Their work is something to celebrate.

Today's ESPs do more than provide nutritious meals and transport our children to and from school; they also serve as positive role models.
Parents and community members, visit your child's school and learn for yourself how ESPs serve as essential and equal education partners. A simple 'thank you' or card for these hard working professionals would be welcomed and greatly appreciated.

Thank you for taking time to read this letter. I'm proud to make a difference in the lives of your children by being an essential partner in their education. Let's make time together to celebrate all of our work on their behalf.

- **Local Issue:** Often writers of letters to the editor are responding to an event or issue in the local community. These letters may comment on road construction, a city council decision, or a new business. A common time for such letters is during a school bond election or a regular election. If the candidates or issues discussed in a letter are national (presidential election, etc.) or regional (governor) then the letter should be classified as being “Regional/National.” If the letter addresses Oxford issues, Talawanda School District issues, or county issues relating to Oxford City, Oxford Township, or Miami University, they should be classified as Local Issue.

**Bad Priorities**

DEAR EDITOR: Let's see: AP classes, high GPAs, class president, newspaper editor, valedictorian, working to raise awareness of genocide, deciding which college to go to. Sounds like these girls have their priorities straight. Too bad the coach can't say the same ["Designing Women," June 13]. Practically every word the coach says is dripping with contempt for teenage girls. Hey, they can be challenging (I know, I have one), but if you simply don't like them, you shouldn't be coaching them.

Stacey Bryant

- **Regional/National issue:** The coder will use this designation for a letter addressing issues common to the region or the nation, not specific to the Oxford community. These letters may be written by residents of Oxford or the surrounding area, but do not focus on local issues. An example follows:

**Letter overlooks first part of amendment**

In response to the letter "Definitions not confusing for Americans," (Jan. 4) Emmette Boone asserts that Americans do not need a court to decide for them the meaning of the phrase "the right of the people to keep and bear arms shall not be infringed." It is utterly typical for pro-gun advocates to omit the first half of the Second Amendment which states "A well-regulated militia being necessary to the security of a free state," when using this amendment to bolster their argument that Americans somehow have the right to arm
themselves to the teeth. Perhaps Mr. Boone could inform us as to which well-regulated militia he belongs to. Is it the Army, Marines, Navy, Air Force or perhaps the National Guard?

Doug Hamilton
Oxford

- **Editorials and Columns**: The next category of stories is editorials and columns. These are often found on the editorial page, but personal columns can be found throughout the paper, especially in the lifestyle section.

  - **Unsigned House Editorial**: This type of opinion piece is always found on the editorial page. When a newspaper runs an unsigned house editorial, it is seen as a reflection of the official editorial position of the newspaper. It is often found on the left hand side of the editorial page, and often runs in a wider column size (although neither of these characteristics are unalterable). It will be visually different from a personal column.

An example of a house editorial follows:

**Fluoride is a safe, egalitarian, cost-effective way to improve oral health in city of Stuart**

By TCPalm Staff
Sunday, January 13, 2008
Stuart residents who want to improve the oral health of their community will vote “yes” Jan. 29 to fluoridate the city’s public water supply.
Early voting begins Monday on this important public health issue.
Those who will benefit the most if the referendum passes are children from economically disenfranchised families who may not have regular access to oral health products and routine dental care. But all residents will receive the benefit of this cavity-fighting additive.
Area residents have been bombarded in recent months by fluoride opponents who’ve spread misinformation on the alleged health risks of fluoridation.
There is little evidence — evidence supported by solid science — to support their claims. The only real threat from overexposure to fluoride is a condition called fluorosis, where bright spots may develop on the teeth.
To the contrary, there is a 60-plus-year history of the benefits of fluoride when it is added in safe amounts — 0.7-1.2 parts per million — to the public water supply.
There also is the testimony of those who see the daily benefits of fluoridation — the members of the dental and oral health communities.
“Fluoride is safe, incredibly effective, and incredibly cost effective,” said Dr. David Boden, a local periodontist who practices in Stuart and Port St. Lucie. “It’s also egalitarian — it helps everybody across the board regardless of race and income. It’s a lifelong gift to our children.”
Boden, who has led the fight to fluoridate public water supplies on the Treasure Coast, points out that at least 70 percent of the communities in Florida are fluoridated. “But,” he adds, “we’re the only county on the east side of Florida that doesn’t have at least one community with water fluoridation.”

Then there is the testimony of leading health organizations.

• “The AMA recognized the important public health benefits of drinking properly fluoridated water and encourages its member physicians and medical societies to work with local and state health departments, dental societies and concerned citizens to assure the optimal fluoridation of community drinking water supplies.”
  — American Medical Association

• Since 1950, the ADA has unreservedly endorsed the fluoridation of community water supplies as safe, effective and necessary in preventing tooth decay.”
  — American Dental Association

Stuart residents shouldn’t just vote to fluoridate the city’s public water supply. They should do so with confidence.

Signed Column or editorial: As previously stated, signed columns can be on the editorial page or elsewhere in the newspaper. Signed editorials are often printed on the editorial or “opposite the editorial” (op ed) page. In a small weekly paper, the editorial page will also contain the “op ed” pieces. Other columns run on other pages in the paper, and will usually be based on personal (often humorous) experience, or focus on a similar theme from week to week (restaurant reviews, marriage/family advice, Fix-it advice, etc.)

Following are samples of signed columns. First is a sample of an advice column, likely to be printed on an inside page.

**The Baltimore Sun Eileen Ambrose column**

**Tax season likely to be particularly tricky**

*Baltimore Sun, The (KRT) Via Thomson Dialog NewsEdge* Jan. 20--Get ready for another tricky tax season.

Some last-minute tax legislation by Congress has once more turned something predictable and tedious into something that's confusing and, well, tedious.

This time, it waited so long to pass legislation to stop the spread of the alternative minimum tax that the IRS hasn’t fully updated its systems yet. Millions of taxpayers who file certain forms must wait until Feb. 11 to get their returns processed. That's sure to delay some refunds.

On the upside, Congress created new tax breaks for homeowners. One is designed to help people hit by the subprime lending crisis.

Some tax breaks are here only for this tax season. They may be resuscitated later, though. Appearing and disappearing tax breaks have become the norm in recent years. It keeps tax book writers busy, but confuses everyone else.

75
To help you navigate taxes this season, here are things you need to know:

--Think twice about filing early

The IRS won't be able to process five forms related to the alternative minimum tax legislation until Feb. 11. You don't have to owe AMT to be affected.

The forms: Form 8863 for education credits; Form 5695 for residential energy credits; Form 8396 for mortgage interest credit; Schedule 2, Form 1040A for child and dependent care expenses, and Form 8859 for a first-time homebuyer credit for D.C. residents.

The IRS will reject returns with one of these forms if they are electronically filed before Feb. 11. File a paper return early with one of these forms and your return will be held by the IRS and processed later. About 13.5 million taxpayers file these forms, although most aren't early filers, the IRS says.

There are other reasons not to rush.

More financial institutions than usual may be asking for extra time to get 1099 investment income forms into the hands of taxpayers. The deadline is Jan. 31.

Also, Social Security said last week it will be sending out corrected 1099-SSA forms to about 2.7 million beneficiaries -- including 32,936 Marylanders -- by the end of the month. The incorrect forms over-reported benefits received for some in Medicare's Part C and D programs.

--Mortgage debt forgiveness relief

It's a tragic scenario: You owe $300,000 on your home when the bank forecloses. The lender sells the house for $250,000. You owe income tax on the $50,000 difference.

Congress created a temporary break to homeowners in foreclosure or others who have negotiated forgiveness of mortgage debt. Homeowners won't have to pay taxes on up to $2 million in forgiven debt on a principal residence.

The tax break is good for debt erased last year and through the end of 2009.

The next type of column is a personal column featuring personal opinions or experiences:

**Monday, Jan. 28**

**JIM TYNEN: The scary side of Obama**

Daily Herald

Barack Obama's rousing speech on Martin Luther King Day showed his potential to
redeem America -- or wreck it.

Or maybe it just revealed his potential to be the latest in a long line of airy idealists who crash to earth after colliding with the reality of politics.

In the speech, the Illinois senator evoked America's highest ideals while simultaneously telling his listeners: "We must admit that none of our hands are entirely clean" -- conveying a sense that he didn't reject his political opponents, yet wanted to draw them into a great mutual enterprise that could finally erase the nation's greatest failures. He stirred his listeners, yet never lost control of himself or his audience.

Those leaders who can genuinely evoke the nation's ideals rouse us. Those who can touch our emotions thrill us. John Kennedy and Ronald Reagan come to mind. Obama may be in their league. That is why, no matter what the polls or pundits say, or how many votes he won Saturday or will win in the next few weeks, he is likely to remain a force on the American scene.

Yet his speech also showed weaknesses, as a politician and a leader. In Atlanta, he took as his theme, "Unity is the great need of the hour." But, as many commentators have pointed out, partisan strife, not unity, is a sign of political health. Only dictatorships produce 100-percent unity.

The dangers of Obama's approach became clearer as he got into the heart of his speech. He said he was most concerned about a deficit, but not the trade or budget deficits. "I'm talking about a moral deficit," he said. "I'm talking about an empathy deficit."

What an insight! All societies fall short in ethics and compassion. Politics rightly try to improve the world, not make it perfect. As many have noted, the drive for political perfection usually backfires. Anyway, the trade and budget deficits are more than enough for most politicians to handle.

Moreover, a trade or budget deficit can be discussed in non-partisan terms; a moral deficit cannot. A leader might bring together both sides in a debate, but no one can unite right with wrong.

This kind of moral confusion leads to ideological confusion. To pick one example, Obama declaimed: "We have a [moral] deficit in this country when there is Scooter Libby justice for some and Jena justice for others."

White House aide I. Lewis "Scooter" Libby was accused in the CIA leak case. His career was ruined, he spent a fortune on his defense, and he was convicted. In Jena, La., the media may have badly distorted confusing incidents of teens fighting and a noose that may or may not have had racial implications. Legal cases are still pending, and the full story has yet to be made clear.

The point is that in both cases the truth is complex and can be debated. But Obama ignored the complexities and nuances. He couldn't resist the cheap shot, the flawed symbol. That is a dangerous weakness. It hints that his aura of being above the fray might not be durable.

As many have noted, when Obama speaks, he gives few specifics. Eventually, however, a president must make decisions. In the speech, he decried the "moral deficit" that appears "when innocents are slaughtered in the deserts of Darfur; when young Americans serve tour after tour of duty in a war that should've never been authorized and never been
waged."

But what would a President Obama actually do? Would he pull American troops out of Iraq, only to send them to Darfur? I'm not saying that would be good or bad. I just would like to see candidate Obama say that right now in front of an audience of Democratic activists, or a group of suburban mothers and fathers.

His speech revealed other weaknesses. He lamented the moral deficit "when families lose their homes so that lenders make a profit." He also said that resistance to health-insurance reform happens because "the insurance companies and the drug companies won't want to give up their profits."

If investors can't make a profit, people won't be able to buy homes or new drugs. Someone who doesn't grasp that shouldn't be president. Or perhaps he just can't resist the demagogic power of such a charge. I can't decide which is scarier.

Perhaps these are minor slips. All candidates are mixtures of things. Perhaps the cauldron of a campaign will refine Obama, and leave him a wiser man and stronger candidate. But on balance, the Atlanta speech suggests that his strategy is unstable and his ideology unsound. The speech may long be remembered, but possibly only as a haunting reminder of what might have been.

• **Topic:** The coder should mark the subject each column as one of three choices: local, national/regional or other. Each of the above columns addresses national issues.

  A column addressing local issues follows here:

**Kirby: Ogling the oglers at Sundance**

**Robert Kirby**

**Tribune Columnist**

Article Last Updated: 01/23/2008 09:48:12 AM MST

PARK CITY - On Saturday, I may have seen Robert De Niro's shoulder in the 500 block of Main Street.

Truthfully, it happened so fast it could have been Robert Redford's knee or even just a hat belonging to one of Paris Hilton's backup gynecologists.

I wasn't trying to see a celebrity. I went to the festival to watch the celebrity watchers - at that particular moment, some woman hauling three dogs wearing snow boots through the crowd on leashes.

Suddenly, someone pointed at a nearby doorway and shouted, "Oh, my God, I think that's De Niro!"

In the ensuing rush, I was violently rubbed to the back of the crowd and squeezed out onto the street. De Niro (or possibly Barack Obama) got into a car and was driven away.

In the pressed ham environs of Park City, the easiest way to find a celeb is to keep your eyes peeled for a sudden hyena-like thrashing in the mob and then gallop in that direction.

You might not be able to see the actual celebrity when you get there, but you'll be close enough to hear the squeals and shutter clicks of people who can. It's thrill enough for some.

Not counting actual residents and people who work there, only about two dozen people
have legitimate business in Park City right now. The rest - about a million - are there to ogle. The publirazzi are average people with cameras the size of candy bars and a hankering to rub up against some fame. They roam the streets like shifty-eyed gunfighters, hands never straying far from their cameras.

Even so, celebs can be hard to spot because not all of them look like their famous selves. Also, some famous people are only vaguely famous - bit players, game show elbow grabbers, character actors, famous-by-marriage and paid program noise holes.

For this reason, you'll never make more eye contact with strangers than right now in Park City. Every passing face has to be processed for clues. You could be 400 pounds, but if you have the same hairdo as Meg Ryan, people will take your picture.

I was talking to a Z-list celebrity - a guy whose mom had been a munchkin in "The Wizard of Oz" - when a woman stopped and asked if I was "Robert Kirby" from the newspaper?

When I admitted it (first holding up an arm to ward off a blow), she introduced her young sons and explained how much they enjoyed reading my column. Then she asked if she could take their pictures with me.

It felt a little ridiculous. And it got worse. Standing there with my arms around her boys, I noticed a subtle change in the crowd. People paused and stared. Someone was getting their picture taken. Who was it? What had I been in? Movie? Commercial?

Well, better safe than sorry. Out came the video recorders, plastic disposables and Nikons with lenses the size of Gatling gun barrels. People hurried over. An Asian woman leaned in while her husband took a picture with his phone.

It was over in a second. Squeals from down the street announced a confirmed sighting of Tom Hanks or the rodent from "Ratatouille." Everyone rushed off. Wow, I'm famous. My picture is headed to the corners of the earth where it will be puzzled over by people who will never figure out who it is - and would feel damn foolish if they could.

- Other: Some columns don’t touch on a current event or issue or have any kind of a news “hook.” They may involve a personal anecdote, a family situation, or a general commentary on life or the state of society. Such general columns, and any others that do not seem to fit into the “local” or “regional/national” should be classified as “other.” A column that a coder would classify as “other” follows

Take Off Your Pants and Bend Over, Baldy
Barry Smith
Aspen Times
14th Aug 2006, 10:15 GMT
"NO LIQUIDS OR GELS OF ANY KIND WILL BE PERMITTED IN CARRY-ON BAGGAGE. ITEMS MUST BE IN CHECKED BAGGAGE."
This includes all beverages, shampoo, suntan lotion, creams, tooth paste, hair gel, and other items of similar consistency." That's what it says on the TSA website - www.tsa.gov. Due to last week’s discovery of a plot to blow up planes using gelatinous explosive, air travel will, once again, never be the same. The thing that puzzles me the most is why it has taken so long for this ban to occur - liquids and gels, even the non-exploding variety, have always been dangerous. Aquafresh, the multi-striped gel toothpaste, may effectively freshen breath and fight cavities, but it stings like hell when it gets in your eyes. You could easily take over a plane by wielding a tube of this stuff. (Well... if it was a new tube, not one that had been
squeezed all flat in the middle.) And as far as liquids go, what's more dangerous that Coca Cola? I'm not talking about its virus-like global pervasiveness, but its ability, when mixed with Pop Rocks, to make your head explode. The threat of a mouthful of Pop Rocks and a swig of Coke is enough to make any pilot fly a plane into something other than a landing strip. And I'm pretty sure Pop Rocks do not show up on the metal detector. And as far as danger goes, what about the stuff that's waiting there for you once you've boarded the plane? In-flight magazines? Deadly. Think paper cuts. Or perfume sample cards. Those little pretzel packets? Maybe not an immediate threat, perhaps, but all that salt cannot be good for your blood pressure. Those pillows they give you? If you bunched, say, three of them together, you could totally suffocate someone. Eventually. The TSA official list mentions lotions and creams, but what about ointments? Or salves? Or balms? Or liniments? And how about unguents? Are they forbidden, too? Look, if I have to sit through a long plane ride without an easily accessible unguent, then the War on Chaffing has been lost. I've been flying more than usual lately, and as I watch the TSA agents go through their screening routines to check for potential bombs, or nail clippers, or whatever, I feel like I'm watching a surreal cartoon. Are we safer because elderly women are forced to remove their K-Mart flip-flops before boarding a plane? Hard to say, I guess. Though I certainly feel well protected from the mounting threat of airport-based efficiency or dignity. Seriously, though, here's my main concern - since the guy got on the plane with a shoe-bomb a while back, we shall forever have to take our shoes off while walking through the security line. Now that the explosive gel has taken center stage, all of your hygienic goods of a certain consistency are, probably from this point on, banned. So, what happens when some guy gets caught trying to board a plane with a pants-based explosive device? No more pants on board - they have to be in your checked luggage with the explosive liquids. Or when someone develops an explosive that can be soaked into the follicles of your hair and detonated by the static electricity created by the complimentary headphones? Please take off your shoes, have your boarding pass and ID available, and step over to the barber station. Or, and I'm sure this day is coming - when someone develops a suppository bomb? They'll be easy enough to check for, since we lucky air travelers already won't be wearing pants. This is the vision I see for the future of air travel - no pants or shoes, shaved bald and bent over in plain sight while on the business end of a gloved finger. And all this without the aid of unguents.

**News Stories**

The next category of article is news stories. These articles report about events or people of interest to the newspapers readers. Coders will choose only one of the eight available categories that best describes the story in question.

**Hard News:**

1. **Meetings, government bodies or civic organizations:** coders will likely see many news stories that fall into this category. It includes any official report of a meeting or decision a board, council, or civic group has made.

   **Village Plaza's future unknown:** Developers want apartments instead of retail, but the council doesn't want to use tax dollars to fund change

   Jan 29, 2008 - 11:27:26 CST.
CIRCLE PINES — In the only option agreeable to all parties, the City Council tabled a decision on a request from Uppal Enterprises to turn 13,000 square feet of space originally planned for retail use into studios in the Village Plaza in Circle Pines. Vik Uppal, president of the development company, asked the council at the Jan. 22 meeting to approve changes to the community unit plan and development agreement. But council members said they needed another month to consider the changes and find a compromise between his wishes and what they feel is the most responsible course of action. As city administrator Jim Keinath wrote in a memo to the council, "this project has a long history." The development was built in 2005 using tax increment financing, which Keinath described as a subsidy from the city. The council is concerned about whether revenue would be lost if changes are made, whether taxpayer dollars should be subsidizing an apartment building and whether the area can support the density if 20 studios and four one-bedroom apartments are opened in place of the retail space. Because commercial and residential properties are taxed at different rates, the city stands to lose some $30,000 a year if the conversion to apartments is made, Keinath explained.

Uppal assured the council that his company is willing to work out some sort of agreement to prevent that loss of money. Uppal couldn't name a type of agreement to do that and the city administrator and attorney weren't immediately able to cite any similar agreement the city previously made. Keinath and attorney Steve Burstein said they'd need time to research the legality of any such arrangement. Mayor Dave Bartholomay and Council Member Dan Greensweig expressed concern about using TIF to subsidize an apartment building. "The reason for the TIF was not to fund an apartment building," Bartholomay said. The TIF agreement was to help establish a mixed-use building, Greensweig explained. A different picture of the area was painted for the council, he said, and he would not have voted to use taxpayer dollars to build an apartment building.

2. A change in leadership, meeting or rally: Stories connected with public bodies that do not specifically address an agenda item or an upcoming meeting. For example:

Hugh Wright Steps Down as Utility Commission Chairman; Pat Swann Appointed New Chairman

After nine years as chairman of the Winston-Salem/Forsyth County Utility Commission, Hugh Wright asked not to be reappointed and has stepped down.

Mayor Allen Joines and Gloria Whisenhunt, the chair of the Forsyth County Commissioners, announced today that they have appointed Paschal W. "Pat" Swann to succeed him.

Joines and Whisenhunt praised Wright for his dedication and strong leadership of the commission, which operates the water and sewer systems and the landfills that serve Winston-Salem and Forsyth County.

During his tenure the commission completed construction of the $80 million Northwest Water Treatment Plant, completed major expansions of the water distribution and sewage
collection systems, completed the lengthy permitting process for expanding the Hanes Mill Road Landfill, and completed planning and began construction of a new landfill for construction and demolition debris.

3. **Report on future item of discussion at public meeting:** These stories often discuss upcoming issues and explain why they are important, and why a government body is addressing them. For example:

   **City Council to address contaminated water issue**

   Public meeting scheduled for next week at North Vigo

   **By Austin Arceo**
   The Tribune-Star

   TERRE HAUTE — The public will have an opportunity to learn more about the contaminated wells found in the city’s north end during an upcoming public meeting. City Council members will be among those on hand during an informational meeting scheduled for 7 p.m. Feb. 5 in Terre Haute North Vigo High School, where people can learn about the five wells that are contaminated with perchloroethylene, a solvent. Several council members met Thursday afternoon with representatives from the Vigo County Health Department, the state’s Department of Natural Resources and Standard Register to learn more about the situation. Council “members, I think, left with a better understanding of what the reality of the situation is,” said council president Todd Nation, D-4th, who attended the meeting, “and what Standard Register has proposed to date to rectify that situation.” The company is offering to connect up to 25 properties to Indiana-American Water Co. Also, it will provide a lump sum payment of $3,400 to 12 of those property owners to offset future water bills. Affected homes are southwest of Terre Haute North. Standard Register does not acknowledge that it caused the contamination problems, although it formerly owned property at 1251 N. Fruitridge Ave., where it printed labels before closing in spring 2006.

4. **Newsworthy event focusing on what happened and its consequences:** These may involve local public figures, “local boy/girl made good,” a heroic act by a student from a local school, results of a ball game, or other newsworthy event.

   **Local Educator Announces Run for 22nd Congressional Seat**

   David R. Grate has announced his candidacy for the US House 22nd Congressional District Seat of New York, the office currently held by Democrat Maurice Hinchey.

   From 1992 to 1996, Mr. Grate taught English and Journalism at Alfred E. Smight Vocational High School in the South Bronx. Since 1996, he has acted as a substitute teacher in many school districts in the Southern Tier, including his current four-year tenure at Union-Endicott Central School. Mr. Grate is also part of the Committee to Elect Ron Paul in 2008.

   Mr. Grate is married to Mary Ann Galati-Grate, the current president of the Association of Vestal School Paraprofessionals. He also has a daughter who is currently a junior at Union-Endicott High School.

   Mr. Grate, who already received the endorsement of the Constitution Party of New York, will also be seeking nominations from the Republican, Conservative, Libertarian and Right-to-Life parties.

   During the time between the New Year and the Republican Primary in September, Mr. Grate
Mr. Grate continues, "This is a very large district; it goes from the city of Ithaca all the way to the Hudson River. There are seven counties in this district and in order to win, I will need the support of all seven counties." The committee, David R. Grate for Congress in 2008, is currently setting up speaking engagements and fund raising events throughout the entire district.

5. A disaster -- fire, death, car wreck, tornado, flood etc.

Drunk Driver Closes exit 4 ramp
At about 2AM William McKnight hit a car rolling his vehicle and blocked the ramp headed on to 93 in the southbound direction. The driver was treated at Parkland Medical Center, charged with driving while intoxicated and transferred to the Rockingham County Jail.

6. Announcements: change of venue for meeting, deadline for water lines, etc.
Here is an example of an announcement article:

Tioga County 2008 Annual Agricultural District Enrollment Period
The Tioga County Legislature announces its annual agricultural district enrollment period, which runs from January 2 - January 31, 2008, according to Article 25AA, §303-B of the NYS Agriculture and Markets Law. During this time, any agricultural property owner may request inclusion of viable agricultural land not already included in a certified NYS Agricultural District. Tioga County has three agricultural districts that are made up of individual parcels or properties, but organized by municipal boundaries. The North Tioga Agricultural District contains agricultural parcels in the Towns of Richford, Berkshire, Newark Valley and the Village of Newark Valley. The Spencer Agricultural District contains agricultural properties in the Towns of Spencer, Barton, Candor and Tioga. The third is the Owego / Nichols Agricultural District containing properties in those two towns. Any agricultural property owner in any of these three districts may request to have their land included in these districts during this enrollment period. The property owner must demonstrate that the agricultural land is currently viable or actively farmed. The property owner must also supply the owner name and tax map number of the property and a description of the property, including the boundaries of the parcel. Only whole parcels are eligible for inclusion. The Tioga County Legislature must hold a public hearing and officially adopt the land requested to be included in certified agricultural districts by the end of April 2008. This opportunity is for inclusion only of land in agricultural districts. Requests from existing agricultural district property owners to remove land from an agricultural district can be addressed only during the regular eight-year review periods. The North Tioga District will be reviewed again in 2009, the Spencer District in 2013, and the Owego-Nichols District in 2014.

7. Police Reports: crime stories, police beat briefs, or news from the police department -- any story about criminal activity.

Police beat

January 10, 2008

Winthrop harbor

Traffic Arrest: Brian M. Devoe, 44, of Winthrop Harbor, was arrested on a number of charges Jan. 1 when police stopped his vehicle at 17th Street and Sheridan Road. Devoe was cited for suspended registration, DUI and driving while his license was suspended.
Traffic Arrest: After police stopped a vehicle driven by Christine L. Erickson, 39, of Pleasant Prairie, on Jan. 3 on the 1000 block of Sheridan Road for improper lane usage, they also cited her for DUI, improper stopping in roadway and failure to signal when required. Erickson was later released on a personal recognizance bond and given a future court date.

Domestic Battery: Michael P. Albers Jr., 21, was arrested at his apartment at 2108 Elim Ave. Dec. 28 following a rampage during which he allegedly struck his mother in the face, threw a dog across the room and resisted arrest, police said. Albers was charged with domestic battery, disorderly conduct, criminal damage to property, resisting a peace officer and obstructing a peace officer.

### 8. Court Reports – record of happenings at the court, either briefs or longer stories about trials and results.

**Clayton Township supervisor, treasurer testify in court case**

Posted by Diane Dempsey Deel | The Swartz Creek News January 18, 2008 09:54AM

CLAYTON TWP. -- Circuit Court Judge Geoffrey Neithercut heard two days of township infighting as Treasurer Beth Perkins and Supervisor Rod Shumaker took the witness stand Tuesday and Wednesday.

And township residents are picking up the attorney tab for it, after the Township Board on Jan. 10 approved covering attorney fees for the lawsuit Shumaker filed against Perkins, accusing her of not properly performing her job and urging the court to force her to do so. Perkins said the township is not paying for her attorney, Andrew Maciak.

Neithercut's written ruling on the matter will be sent to the township this week. He didn't speak frequently during the two-day proceedings, although he did say board members don't communicate well with each other.

"I am going to sit down, write and provide specifics in detail," Neithercut said of his future ruling.

Shumaker's complaint was filed against Perkins to "cease and desist with improper, self-motivated, vindictive and overall inappropriate and improper conduct."

Township Attorney Steve Iamarino listed a number of complaints against Perkins, including not performing timely receipt of bills, failing to show for one work day during Dec. 25-31, not efficiently collecting late taxes and not complying with township Freedom of Information Act policies. He also questioned her about an inaccurate mailing that told township residents to pay their tax bills in Swartz Creek, rather than in the township.

### 9. Other – any story that is a “hard news” story focusing on events and issues, but doesn’t fit into one of the other categories.

**Fresh Thinking**

*By Kim Burgess*

*Published: Monday, February 4, 2008 1:58 AM CST*

Utah State University landscape architecture students received an unusual assignment last week: Take four days to redesign Logan, addressing specific issues like traffic congestion
and public art.

Starting last week, about 150 students, working in teams, poured over data, brainstormed, made sketches, talked to residents and caught a few hours of sleep in between. By 4:30 p.m. on Friday, each group had suggestions for making Logan a better place.

The results could actually change Cache Valley’s future.

Later in the month, the teams will present their recommendations to Logan officials. In three months, Logan will hire a planning consultant and share the students’ thoughts as the starting point of a community study.

“They (the 150 students) will give us lots of ideas,” said community development director Jay Nielson. “We have been careful to leave them on their own to do that so they aren’t inhibited by old thinking.”

The prospect of affecting a real city was a strong motivator for many of the teams.

“This project affects us,” said graduate student Lindsay Winkler.

“We’re happy to be working on the place that we live.”

Winkler and 11 teammates addressed how to create a stronger connection between USU and the surrounding community. Right now, she said, there aren’t enough shops, restaurants or nightlife to attract students downtown.

Soft News:
The last category of stories is soft news. Following are the categories of soft news stories:

1. **Story about a local person and his/her contributions and achievements:** This category includes local persons who have a book published, a song recorded, or are awarded a role in a play, have a painting hung in the capital building, or open a store or business, if the story is more about the person and the achievement than an announcement of a store opening. For example, the following story is more than just an announcement of a new business, it tells a story about the people behind the business:

   **Riverbend Retreat: Farm house renovated into a two-suite getaway along the Embarrass River**

   *By Bonnie Clark, Features Writer*
   *bclark@jg-tc.com*

   John and Teresa Davis of Tuscola were looking for a “little property to build a house on
some day.” What they bought, however, was 100 acres and a house that needed considerable work.

A year later, they have turned the Craftsman-style house into Riverbend Retreat, a beautiful inn across a country road from the Embarras River less than five miles southeast of Tuscola.

Of the 100 acres, 62 are being farmed and the rest is in woodland and pasture for horses, which can be viewed from the inn.

It’s a place where guests can sit on the front porch and watch the Embarras River meander by and turn ‘round the bend.

“The river heads southwest from Camargo and Villa Grove, and then right about here,” Davis said, pointing at the water from the living room window, “it shoots out straight toward Charleston.”

The couple still hope to build the house they were originally planning — maybe in a year or two.

“Someone called and told us there was a farm for sale,” Davis said. “We thought if nothing else, we could build a house on the land and maybe sell off some lots in the future.

“We looked at it and the house was in need of a lot of repairs because the people who owned it had rented it out for some time, and the people who lived there didn’t want to put any money into the house because they didn’t own it.

“We called my dad, who is a partner, and said, ‘hey, this is a pretty good deal for us to buy.’ The choices were to fix it up and rent it out; fix it up, furnish it and rent it; or just bulldoze it,” he said. “I couldn’t just leave it the way it was.

2. **Story about a person from the region/nation and his/her achievements.** The same as number one, except focusing on a person from outside the local area. For example:

**Right from the (MLB) scouts mouth**
HALFMOON - In less than two weeks pitchers and catchers report to spring training to kick off the 2008 major league baseball season and while millions of eyes will begin to scan the radio dials, television channels and internet websites for stats, scores, wins and loses regarding their favorite teams, there are hundreds of eyes that will be watching the games from a different angle.

On Sunday night, current major league scouts, John Stewart with the Atlanta Braves and Jim Howard with the Baltimore Orioles, shared their insights on how they watch America's Pastime, the paths that the game has taken them along with sharing what it takes to make it to the major league level.

The two major league scouts are on staff at The Sports Barn/Hayner Brothers Academy in Halfmoon when not traveling for their assigned baseball clubs. Co-owner and co-Academy Director Norm Hayner moderated an evening with Stewart and Howard, inviting the public to participate in this unprecedented evening.
Stewart has been an area scout for the Atlanta Braves since 1992 when he retired from professional baseball and recently was promoted to major league/professional baseball. Howard has been a full-time scout since 1988 with the Baltimore Orioles and was recently promoted to the level of major league advance scout. He will now scout the upcoming competition for the Orioles and report directly to the staff’s manager and bench coach. Both former players didn’t envision another career as a scout, the position found them.

3. **Story about a local resident, but with a hook to a news event.** For example, a soldier dies in the war, but the story is about him and his family, his hopes and dreams, and not about the events leading to his death. Another example could be a young person who dies in an accident. There could be two stories: a report of the accident-- what happened and when, who was with him, etc. -- would be a hard news story, but a story about the young person’s life, interviews with his former teachers, profile of his family, etc. would be classified in this category.

**Janesville soldier honored for bravery, remembered with love**

By PATRICK MARLEY [pmarley@journalsentinel.com](mailto:pmarley@journalsentinel.com)

Posted: April 7, 2004

Janesville - Army Pfc. Sean Michael Schneider received a Bronze Star Wednesday, but earning the award for bravery brought little joy for his mother, Kim.

She nonetheless displayed the medal with pride after her son's funeral, opening the case for friends and family.

"I'd rather have him back," she said as she showed it to Nate Butler, a friend of her son's.

Similar sentiments came from friends, family members and veterans who gathered Wednesday at a Janesville funeral home to honor Schneider, who died March 29 in Diwaniyah, Iraq.

Schneider died from injuries he sustained when the Army truck he was riding in from Kuwait slid off a steep embankment and flipped over, Lt. Col. Sharon L. Leary wrote in a letter last week to Schneider's wife. An earlier report indicated a roadside bomb caused the accident, but the Pentagon said Wednesday that his death resulted from a "non-hostile" incident.

Schneider's funeral was held the same day news came that two more Wisconsin servicemen were killed in Iraq. Marine Cpl. Jesse Thiry, 23, of Casco and Marine Pfc. Ryan Jerabek, 18, of Hobart died this week in separate incidents, becoming the state's 14th and 15th fatalities in Iraq.

Just before the funeral, dozens of members of the American Legion filed up to the flag-draped coffin in pairs and saluted Schneider. The service began with a song written by
Schneider's friend Jasmin Hill, and was followed soon after by a recording of "God Bless America."

Surrounded by red, white and blue flowers and a set of Schneider's fatigues, Maj. John Worthington recited the 22-year-old soldier's accomplishments in a staccato rhythm, then read statements from Schneider's wife and family.

"My husband Sean is like no other and he loves me unconditionally like no other," Yolande Schneider wrote in her letter.

"Before Sean left for Iraq, he said to me, 'Whether I'm here or just not here physically, I will always be with you and I will always take care of you.' He is a man of his word."

4. **Story about a holiday that focuses on symbols, celebrations and remembrances.**
   A soft news story about a holiday is one that could likely run any year with very little alteration. It focuses on general background or celebrations connected with the event and not with a specific event scheduled this year (which may be a hard news story).

**Season of superstition**
**A user's guide to the lost rituals of Christmas**
By Erin McKean | December 23, 2007

IT'S COMMONPLACE TODAY to decry the commercialization of Christmas, to yearn for the kind of holiday depicted in old engravings: a candle-laden tree, a hearty Yule log burning in the fireplace, some nuts to crack and - for those both lucky and good - an orange. But our idea of a "traditional Christmas" leaves out an important element: superstitions.

The time between Christmas and the New Year was once thick with superstitions and folk beliefs. An old-fashioned Christmas would have included not only Christianized versions of pagan traditions (such as the tree and that Yule log), but many other rituals and auguries, some of which seem to us more like Halloween traditions than Christmas ones.

At about the same time that modern Christmas traditions such as sending Christmas cards and eating turkey began, researchers and enthusiasts collected many waning folk beliefs and compiled them into exhaustive lists of superstitions, mainly from Great Britain. The results were impressive Victorian volumes with titles like "Traditions, Superstitions, and Folk-Lore" or "British Popular Customs, Present and Past," which - thanks to Google Book Search or the Internet Archive - are now available for anyone looking to celebrate a truly old-fashioned Christmas.

For some, Christmas superstition begins at birth. People born on Christmas are considered either fortunate, as they supposedly cannot be drowned or hanged, or unfortunate, because they are more likely to be able to see ghosts and spirits. (Sir Walter Scott said that the Spaniards attributed the gloomy mood of King Philip II, thought to have been born on Christmas, to his frequent ghost sightings, and not - as we might imagine - to always having his birthday and Christmas presents combined.)

88
Some also believe that those who are born on Christmas Eve turn into ghosts on that day every year while they sleep. If you were born on Christmas Eve and don't want to have this happen to you, the remedy is to count the holes in a sieve from 11 o'clock on Christmas Eve until morning.

Other Christmas superstitions revolve around the natural world. Some white-thorn trees are supposed to blossom only on Christmas Day; other plants, including myrrh, save their blossoming for Christmas Eve - often for only an hour. Hay carried around a church three times on Christmas Eve was said to ensure that cattle would fatten easier on less feed in the year to come. Christmas Eve is when animals behave oddly, too: cattle, donkeys, and oxen are said to fall on their knees and moan at midnight. If you can find a kneeling donkey on Christmas Eve, and make the sign of the cross on its back, you will get your heart's desire. Cattle, donkeys, and oxen, as well as the other animals, are also given the gift of speech on Christmas Eve. On the same night, you can also hear the bells of lost churches that have been flooded or buried by landslides and earthquakes.

5. **Story about a community “feel good” event, such as a parade, bake-off, pageant, fund-raiser, etc.** These stories deal with local events, but they are events that do not have a significant impact on the community, happen regularly, and are very similar to many other events. They may be annual fund raising events.

**Main Street packed for Halloween parade**

**Beauty queens, vintage police cars join costumed revelers in Newark**

*By AARON NATHANS, The News Journal*

*Posted Monday, October 29, 2007*

NEWARK -- Where else can you see Darth Vader waving from a blue Camaro instead of piloting a TIE fighter, a Home Depot shopping bag playing the trumpet in a marching band, or a posse of Girl Scouts-turned-M&M's throwing candy to the crowd?

The day after a deluge, area residents escaped cabin fever to enjoy Newark's annual Halloween parade, which one organizer estimated drew 2,000 participants and 8,000 spectators. The latter crowd lined Main Street from end to end.

"It's an event that always gains momentum," Joe Spadafino, Newark parks and recreation superintendent, said of the 40-year tradition.

Vintage police cars and floats with beauty queens passed by on Sunday afternoon, as police blocked off Main Street to traffic, causing tie-ups all around. But those lined up along the parade route had a grand old time.

"We enjoy coming out to see all our friends in the parade, in costumes," said Christine Polecaro of Newark, dressed in purple and black as a witch. She attended with her children, who bundled up under blankets.

Politics left its mark all around. One Newark boy wore a skeleton ninja costume with a "Jack
Markell for Governor” sticker smack in the middle of his rib cage.

Polecaro said she enjoyed watching marchers dressed as President Bush, Vice President Cheney and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, all wearing jail costumes.

Polecaro's children had decidedly less political tastes. Son Bailey, 6, dressed up as Batman, said he preferred "the monster car with the big blast on the motor." And daughter Emily, 7, outfitted in a bat costume, liked the skateboarders.

Seven-year-old Brandon Simeone of Newark wore a dog-catcher costume, complete with little plush dogs hanging from his shirt.

Maggie Borrelli, 3, of Newark wore a Tennessee Volunteers cheerleader outfit, compliments of her grandmother, who lives in Nashville.

Honors and Recognitions: This could involve a myriad of awards or recognitions, such as winning a school contest, being recognized by a civic group, winning a community award, graduating from a college, signing with a college team, being elected an officer in a club, going to girls or boys state, etc.

Cascade student wins scholarship

Friday, February 1, 2008

By Doug Dezotell

Cascade Elementary School student Jessica Woodard has been awarded a $1,000 scholarship as the Tennessee state winner of the annual Bonnie Plant Farm Third Grade Cabbage Program.

Woodard grew a cabbage plant that weighed more than 22 pounds as a part of a third grade science project last spring sponsored by Bonnie Plants of Union Springs, Ala. Tennessee Agriculture Commissioner Ken Givens, along with Bonnie Plants representatives Ellis Ingram, Jay Moorer and Albert Wilson, presented the scholarship to Woodard, now a fourth grader, in a special assembly of third and fourth grade students at the school. Bedford County Farm Bureau members President Marty Davis, Nelle Mahaffey and Vista Crosslin were also present.

Cascade third grade participants learned about the love of gardening and the responsibilities of growing food for the table. They were among 85 Tennessee students who took cabbage plants home, learned how to plant, fertilize, and care for them until maturity and won class contests for growing the largest plant. A state winner was drawn from that group.

"This program is a wonderful way to get kids interested in agriculture, and it teaches them not only the basics of biology, but the importance of our food and fiber systems as well," Givens said. "We congratulate Jessica on a fine job of gardening and wish her the best. We're grateful to the folks at Bonnie Plants for making this scholarship available to Tennessee students."
6. Historical features: This week in history, this town 25 years ago, the high school’s 50th anniversary, etc.

In this week in history 25 YEARS HUTTON-IN-THE-FOREST

Freak winds which ripped through Cumbria claimed a historic casualty. A tree which at one time was listed in the Guinness Book of Records as the largest Hornbeam in Britain was felled by the gales. The tree, at Hutton-in-the-Forest, was 98ft high and was one of the most interesting specimens on the woodland walk at Hutton-in-the-Forest, the home of Lord Inglewood. When the tree came down it narrowly missed Mr. Graham Booth, the head forester on the estate, who had driven underneath it only moments before it crashed to earth.

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7. What to do this week or weekend features: Artists, bands, dining reviews, movies – entertainment oriented stories.

IJ Weekend: Local concert series showcases young bands on the verge
Rick Polito

Article Launched: 10/11/2006 01:33:09 PM PDT

At 4:30 p.m. Saturday, the Verge looks to be on the verge of not happening at all. The doors are scheduled to open in about an hour but only one of the six bands has shown up. The stage is still being assembled. The sound engineer is chasing wires and plugs. People are still cleaning up after the Marin Youth Center's grand opening that day and the night before.

And both bathrooms are out of service, the men's room and the women's room.

But Mario Capitelli is confident - not quietly confident, he's running at full speed, shouting orders and questions - but confident.

The Verge isn't on the verge of chaos. It is chaos. He knows that. He expects that.

"Hey, one of the band is here," the director of the Verge Concert Series shouts, looking up from one of his many dozen tasks.

Full Page Classifications

After the coder completes the story designation, the story coding sheet is finished.

After the coder completes a coding sheet for each story on the page, (s)he will then complete a Full Page Classifications sheet. These sheets record the number of display advertisements, the number of encouragements readers receive to contribute to the newspaper, and the presence and substance of editorial cartoons.

Encouragement to Contribute:
The coder will first examine the page for any encouragement the newspaper gives its readers to contribute to the newspaper. They may have seen such encouragements as they coded individual stories. These encouragements may be “We encourage you to contribute your opinions. To send a letter to the editor . . .” They may also involve a request to send photos to the website: “We’re looking for the best holiday light displays. If you have photos of a great light display, upload it at our website.”

Coders make note of the method by which readers are encouraged to contribute: on a website, through a letter, a phone call, a photo donation, or by writing a column. They may choose the “other” category for types of encouragement that do not fit into any of the other groups. They will make a “tick mark” for each type of encouragement they note. If there are none on the page, they will leave it blank. Simply listing a reporter’s email address at the end of a story does not constitute an invitation to contribute. If the email address is listed and there is a line saying “if you have comments or questions about this story, contact reporter@newspaper.com” that is an invitation to contribute.

Advertisements:
For display advertisements, the coder notes the total number of advertisements and marks that down. The coder will use the address provided in the advertisement to determine the physical location of the business. If the coder is unsure of the physical location of the business or does not know if there is a brick and mortar store in Oxford, (s)he will list the business at the bottom of the page, and the lead researcher will conduct the necessary research to classify each business. Coders will include those advertisements in the “total number of display advertisements.” Regular classified ads are not included in this count.

Advertisements placed by the newspaper or its parent company: These ads generally encourage people to advertise in the newspaper or use the newspaper to find things to buy, or generally promote the newspaper as being valuable to the reader.

Businesses outside of Oxford: A store in another town, such as Hamilton, West Chester, etc. that does not have a brick and mortar building in Oxford, or a larger chain, internet site, car dealer, etc. that does not have a location in Oxford. This category does not include regional or national chains, such as Kroger or Wal Mart with stores in Oxford, but businesses that are in Ohio, but not physically in Oxford. An example would be Brown’s Amish Market in Hamilton.

Regional or National Stores with brick and mortar locations inside Oxford: This include such stores as ACE Hardware, NAPA Auto Parts, Great Clips, WalMart, or Kroger. Each of these stores is headquartered outside of Oxford and has stores across a wide area of the country, but also has a location in Oxford. Look for the street address to determine location.

Oxford-based Businesses: These are businesses owned and operated within the Oxford area. Insurance agents and Realtors based in Oxford are included in this count because they are individually owned and operated by the individual broker or insurance agent. The national company does not tell them where to operate, or build the location and hire them to run the store, although they may lend an aura of credibility to the local store.

Personal display ads: These advertisements are often placed in the newspaper by friends and/or family members. They are display advertisements focusing on a birthday, achievement, wedding, or similar events.

Editorial Cartoons:
The final classification category is editorial cartoons. These almost always appear on the editorial or opinion page of the newspaper. If there is an editorial cartoon on the page you are evaluating, you will mark either “Issue related” or “Non issue related.”

**Issue related:** These cartoons are attempting to make a point about some kind of issue going on in the local area or the greater region or country. They are not neutral, but poke fun at someone or attempt to make some kind of commentary about an issue. Beneath “issue related,” the coder should choose “Local issue” or “Non-local issue.”

Below is example of a local issue editorial cartoon:

![Local Issue Cartoon]

This is an example of a national issue editorial cartoon:
Non-issue related: These cartoons are not trying to make a point or needle a person or organization, but instead relate to a neutral topic. These cartoons may promote a local “hero” or citizen, or they may address the seasons, a holiday, or an award received by someone locally. Beneath “Non-issue,” coders will note if the cartoon is locally based or non-locally based.

Locally based: For example, this cartoon shows a young man dreaming about more awards to put on his trophy shelf. Since it was run next to a story about the newspaper’s awards earned at a recent competition, it is locally based.
Non-locally based: A non-locally based, non-issue cartoon could run in any newspaper just as effectively. It addresses something universal and generally non-controversial, such as spring, peace, or freedom, or is simply a humorous joke without a political or social statement.

Below is an example of such a cartoon:
After completing the Full Page Classifications, the coder is finished with that page, and moves on to the next page until (s)he has completed the paper.
Story Analysis Page

Date ______________ Section __________ Slug _______________ Page ______________

Length in column inches: ___________ Photo: 

Writer: Oxford  Outside Oxford  “Staff”  Unknown

Story Type:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Opinion</th>
<th>News Story</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Letter</td>
<td>Column</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Opinion:

IF LETTER: Thanks  Announcement  Local Issue  National/Regional Issue  Other

IF Editorial/Columns (choose best):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unsigned</th>
<th>Signed Column/Editorial</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local Issue/Resident</td>
<td>Regional/National</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regional/National</td>
<td>Other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>Local Issue/Resident</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Regional/National</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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News Stories:

Hard News:

1. Report on meeting of city or county council, commission, public hearing, or other official board of a community, organization or government and their activities.
2. A change in leadership of a group or government body
3. Report on an item that will be discussed or debated at a future meeting of an official board, council commission or government, school board, public hearing or other official body.
4. A newsworthy event such as a game, meeting, rally or speech with a story that focuses on events and consequences of events, not on personalities, relationships or feelings.
5. A disaster – fire, death, car wreck, etc.
6. Announcements such as meetings, change of meeting date or venue, a new store coming to town, etc.

7. Police reports: any report of crimes or stories highlighting activities of the police department

8. Court Reports

9. Other

**Turn over for soft news categories**

**Soft News:**

1. Story about a local person and their contributions and achievements – award, books, play, etc.

2. Story about a person from the region/nation and their achievements/contributions

3. Story about local resident, but with hook to a news event (soldier dies in the war, but the story focuses on the soldier, his family and interests, not on the details of what happened)

4. Story connected to a holiday that focuses on symbols, celebrations, remembrances

5. Story about an upcoming community “feel good” event such as a parade, bake-off, pageant, etc. or entertainment features artists, bands, dining reviews, entertainment stories etc.

6. Honors and recognitions – scholarships, graduation, signings with college teams, girls/boys state, officers elected, etc.

7. Historical features: this week in history, the high school 50 years ago, etc.

8. Other
Full page Analyses:

Date ________________    Page _______________

1. Encouragement to Contribute

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of items encouraged to contribute</th>
<th>How Often</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Website contributions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Submit photos</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Call the paper</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Write a letter</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Write a column</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. Advertisements:

Total Number of display advertisements: _______________

- Advertisements placed by the newspaper or its parent company (Thomson/Cox) __________
- Number from businesses outside of Oxford: ________________
- Number from national/regional stores with brick and mortar stores in Oxford: __________
- Number from Oxford-based businesses: ________________
- Personal display ad (birthday, family, congrats, etc.): ________________

List businesses that you are unsure if they are located in Oxford (include in total count):


3. Editorial Cartoons
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Addressing an Issue</th>
<th>Non-Issue</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local Issue</td>
<td>Non-local issue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Locally based</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not locally based</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Interview questions for Thesis Interviews:

R₁ Does ownership affect the content of the local, weekly newspaper and its operation as a public sphere – a place for commentary and give and take about community issues?

R₂ Does ownership affect the way community stakeholders perceive the content and purpose of their local weekly newspaper and its role in the public sphere?

1. What interaction do you have with the Oxford Press? How does it impact you or your work? (are you a source, do you advertise, do you count on it for publicity, are you a member of the government, etc.)

2. What do you think of the current Oxford Press? What is your view of the newspaper as providing a place for public debate? Do you think it provides a good place for a debate about local issues that matter to citizens in Oxford?

Do you think it is a good local source for news and information? Do you consider the paper locally based – with a strong local focus?

Is it valuable to you? Is it relevant to the community?

Do you think the Oxford Press is important to you as a source for news and information? For local news, what news source do you first use – the Press or some other news source? What source?

Did you know that the Oxford Press was purchased by Cox Communication in 2000? Are you aware of any differences in coverage since that time?

Is there any kind of corporate or political bias in the news reporting?

3. Do you remember news coverage from the Oxford Press between 1989 and 2000, when the Press was under different ownership?
Was there a difference in how the newspaper functioned as a place for public debate of local issues?

As a local source of news and information? Was it locally based?

Was it more, less or equally important to you as a source for news and information? Relevant to the community?

Is there any kind of corporate or political bias in the news reporting?

4. Did you have interaction with the Press pre-1989, when it was owned by Bob White, his father, Robert White, and Dick Taylor?

In your memory, did the newspaper function any differently as a place for public debate of local issues?

As a local source of news and information? Strongly locally based?

Was it more, less, or equally important to you as a source for news and information? More or less relevant to the community?

Is there any kind of corporate or political bias in the news reporting?

5. What are your impressions of coverage by the Oxford Press over the years?
Sample Front Page – March 21, 1985 – Local Ownership – note the banner on the right, with a layout appropriate for the quarter-fold presentation the owner used.
Council seeks tower demolition

Council organizing housing committee

MAC earns credit with Miami help

Court begins business in Community Building

Aging issues conference topic
Sample Front Page: March 25, 2005
References


