

Community Journalism – A study on the Mountain Times Publications

By

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## **Abstract**

The Mountain Times Publications is a group of community newspapers in the High Country. These newspapers inform the members of the High Country communities about important news and events and the newspapers promote economic growth by connecting local businesses to community members. In the digital age the Mountain Times Publications, along with other community newspapers, are facing challenges including the loss of market dominance in their geographic locales, the loss of online advertising revenue to major search engines, and the high cost of printing. The Mountain Times relies on its traditional business model, relationships with patron readers, and locally-tailored content to remain a news source in the High Country. This project is a series of articles about the Mountain Times Publications group. The articles include a history on the Mountain Times Publications, what the newspaper group provides for its communities, what business model it follows, and the responsibilities of the community journalists. The newspaper group was used as a case study to explore community journalism.

## Introduction

My honors thesis project is a case study on the Mountain Times Publications—a group of community newspapers in the North Carolina mountains. The project is a series of feature articles about the Mountain Times Publications.

Each article explores a different aspect of the newspaper group. The series begins with a brief history of the Mountain Times Publications with some background on the newspaper industry. Next, I wrote a piece to explore what community journalism is and what value the Mountain Times Publications adds to the communities of High Country.

Following this piece, I looked into the business model of the Mountain Times Publications group to see where they are struggling and how they are succeeding. Finally, I asked the journalists at these publications what it is like to work at a community newspaper.

The questions I will explore include: What value do community newspapers bring to their communities? How do community newspapers stay afloat economically, in a world where communication is rapidly evolving? What does it mean to be a journalist at a community newspaper? How has the Internet and the digital age affected community newspapers and their journalists? What other challenges do community newspapers face?

Penelope Muse Abernathy explains in her book, *Saving Community Journalism*, the digital era brings about three disadvantages to community newspapers.

First, the digital era undermines the geographic market dominance of community newspapers. By accessing news online, readers no longer have to depend on the local print paper to get local news. News can be accessed from virtually anywhere.<sup>1</sup>

Second, a portion of advertising has been diverted to online sites and search engines. Google and Facebook are becoming major competitors of community newspapers because they receive advertising revenue, even when the link connects the reader to a newspaper's website.<sup>2</sup>

Finally, community newspapers carry the high costs of printing and distribution with them into the digital age. These costs could make it difficult for community newspapers to keep up with the changing media landscape in the future.<sup>3</sup>

However, Abernathy explained that even in the digital age, a community newspaper is the glue that binds a community together politically, socially, financially and journalistically.

Community newspapers are important because they set the agenda for public policy debate. This role is even more important in the digital age because many readers can suffer from information overload. Online, it can be easy to lose sight of the context and analysis and

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<sup>1</sup> Abernathy, Penelope Muse. *Saving Community Journalism: the Path to Profitability*, 41

<sup>2</sup> Abernathy, 41

<sup>3</sup> Abernathy, 41

professional reports can provide, especially with the copious amounts of information found on the internet.<sup>4</sup>

Community newspapers encourage economic growth within their communities by providing a marketplace for advertisers to connect with readers.<sup>5</sup>

Community newspapers also foster a sense of geographic community by helping readers understand how they are connected to their communities and how their actions can affect their neighbors.<sup>6</sup>

Finally, community newspapers are important for holding community leaders accountable for their actions by reporting on those actions and creating a conversation with community members.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Abernathy, 22

<sup>5</sup> Abernathy, 25

<sup>6</sup> Abernathy, 29

<sup>7</sup> Abernathy, 29

## **A Brief History of the Mountain Times Publications**

Located in the heart of the High Country, the Mountain Times Publications documents and reflects the life of the Appalachian communities.

Inside the newsroom, reporters work side by side in an open space, with editors close at hand. One editor is positioned at the front of the room, facing the office of the executive editor. The publisher's office opens into the newsroom. Four desks are full of papers and notes; somewhere in the room a brief message from the police department comes through a scanner.

The Mountain Times Publications group consists of five community newspapers in the High Country—the Watauga Democrat, The Avery Journal–Times, the Mountain Times, the Ashe Post and Times, and The Blowing Rocket.

Community newspapers are typically smaller than metro daily publications, with circulations less than 50,000. The Mountain Times has a circulation of 18,500; the Watauga Democrat, Avery Journal and the Ashe Post each have circulations just under 4,000; and the Blowing Rocket has a circulation just under 1,000.

According to the National Newspaper Association, “the distinguishing characteristic of a community newspaper is its commitment to serving the information needs of a particular community. The community is defined by the community's members and a shared sense of

belonging. A community may be geographic, political, social or religious. A community newspaper may be published once a week or daily. Any newspaper that defines itself as committed to serving a particular community may be defined as a ‘community newspaper.’”

The Watauga Democrat is the longest continually operated business in Watauga County. The Democrat was launched in July 1888 as a political newspaper to serve the local Democratic party. Joseph F. Spainhour was the founder and owner, and John Syme Williams was the first publisher. The paper, which consisted of four pages with six columns each, was published weekly. Just one year after its launch, Spainhour sold the Watauga Democrat to D.B. and D.D. Dougherty, and R.C. Rivers.

The early issues of the Democrat were printed on a hand-operated press, known as a “Washington Press.” The press printed one page at a time and was used until 1913.



The washington printing press. Source: the Henry Ford.

R.C. Rivers took over the company and passed the ownership to his son, who operated the Democrat until 1975. After his death, ownership of the Democrat changed hands a few times until 2002, when it was acquired by Jones Media.

Founded in 1932, The Blowing Rocket, which serves the town of Blowing Rock, is a weekly paper that is published on Thursdays. The Blowing Rocket covers the news, people and cultural events of Blowing Rock.

The Avery Journal–Times has served Avery County since 1959. The Avery Journal publishes weekly community news every Thursday, covering Avery County and the nearby areas of northern Mitchell County and Roan Mountain, Tennessee.

Founded in 1978, The Mountain Times serves Watauga, Ashe and Avery counties. The Mountain Times publishes community news and entertainment throughout the three counties. In addition to the weekly publication, the Mountain Times publishes three seasonal publications—Summer Times, Autumn Times and Winter Times. These publications serve as visitor guides for the High Country.

In 1933, the Mountain Times started its Ashe edition, called the Ashe Mountain Times. It quickly began to cater specifically to the community in Ashe County, and broke away to become a source of hard-hitting news for the community. The Ashe Mountain Times later merged with the Jefferson Post, a community newspaper that operated in Ashe County since 1988, to form the Ashe Post and Times in 2017.

Jones Media acquired all five publications in 2002, bringing the newspapers together to form in the Mountain Times Publications group. Jones Media's was acquired by Adams Publishing Group in 2016. According to the Adams Publishing website, the group, a family-owned company, owns 27 daily newspapers, more than 100 non-daily newspapers and a number of other media-related businesses in 15 states. Adams Publishing provides resources and support for community newspapers and other media businesses so that they can grow and prosper in their communities.

### **The Bigger Picture**

Newspapers have served the public since the 1600s. The role of newspapers as we know it today, to inform the public about the happenings in the world around them, took shape during the 1800s.<sup>8</sup>

Throughout the 1840s–1850s, newspapers began to declare political independency and they published more about local happenings that reflected urban life and the middle-class society, rather than just the elite. During this time, reporters began to seek out the news, rather than waiting for the news to come to them. There was also growing emphasis on facts during this time, and accurate and credible reporting became the new standard.<sup>9</sup>

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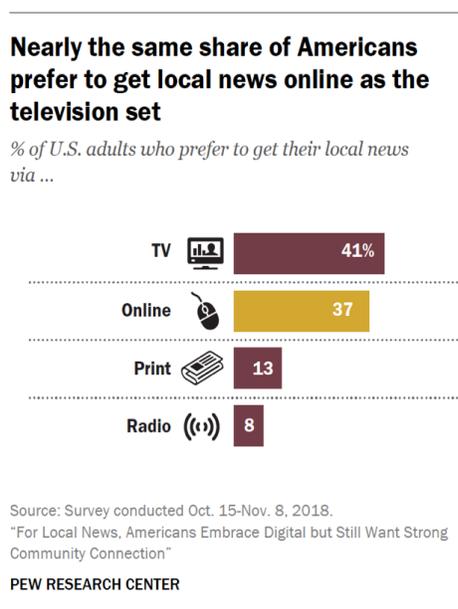
<sup>8</sup> Schudson, Michael. *Discovering the News: a Social History of American Newspapers*, 17

<sup>9</sup> Schudson, 21-23

Over the years, the newspaper industry began to compete with the rise of television and the radio. Today, online platforms are threatening traditional print circulations, and newspapers are having to find ways to keep up with the changing media landscape.<sup>10</sup>

According to the PEW Research Center, nearly as many Americans today say they prefer to get their local news online as say they prefer to get their local news through the television set.

The numbers are in the chart below.



The Watauga Democrat began publishing news online in 1996. Access to the Democrat's website is free. Typically, news articles are published online on the same days of the week that the newspaper is printed and distributed. However, there are some exceptions for posting news immediately online. Breaking news that reporters and editors feel the community

<sup>10</sup> Schudson, 181

members need to know about before the publication is printed is typically published online as soon as possible.

The rest of the publications in the Mountain Times group began publishing news online in the years after the Democrat; the Avery Journal most recently created an online platform during 2010-2011. The other publications also publish online content when the papers are printed. However, their content is behind paywalls. Breaking news stories, such as school closings, are published immediately online and are available for free access.

While the print circulations continue to bring in the most revenue for the Mountain Times Publications, their online presence is growing. This year, the Watauga Democrat had over 1.6 million page views in the month of January, a record for the newspaper.

At a time when communication is rapidly evolving, and news is becoming scattered on the web, what will these community newspapers do to remain successful? The following sections will explore why it is important that community newspapers continue to publish news, what value they provide to their communities, what their business model looks like and how that might change, and the value the journalists themselves add to their communities.

## **Community Journalism Connects Communities in the High Country**

The North Carolina Blue Ridge Mountains are home to communities bustling with local businesses, universities and tourist activities. Bringing this communities together, the Mountain Times Publications group documents the local news and happenings in the High Country.

“Our overarching idea is that we want very local news, news that matters to the community,” said Tom Mayer, executive editor at the Mountain Times. “That’s why our newspapers are so strong. It’s been our driving force and success.”

This year, the newspaper group won 35 North Carolina Press Association awards. The Watauga Democrat was named, for the second year in a row, a newspaper of general excellence.

Mayer said these awards are significant because the newspaper group and its journalists are judged by their peers.

“It’s an indication that your work is always reaching for the high standards which we set for ourselves,” Mayer said.

The Mountain Times Publications group focuses on local news that informs community members about what’s going on their communities, what their community leaders are doing

and even what their neighbors are doing, Mayer said. The content of these papers is specially tailored to the interests of local readers.

For example, the papers publish the recorded land transfers each week because community members are interested in what land is sold and purchased. They also publish school lunch menus and health reports of local restaurants. They cover local events that include Easter egg hunts and library events. Sometimes, the role of a community newspaper is simply to celebrate the community and its members.

“Typically, humanitarian issues are most important to our readers,” Mayer said. For example, the Mountain Times is doing a series on the opioid crisis in the High Country. The goal of the series, Mayer said, is not only to bring the issue to the attention of readers, but also to inform readers of the resources that are available to them locally.

“We not only aim to illustrate the issue, but to go beyond that illustration,” Mayer said. Some other topics these publications cover include poverty, hunger and homelessness.

“We are sensitive to certain stories with the community in mind,” Mayer said. “For instance, when we come across local suicides, we look at each situation separately. To be sensitive to the family, we will publish the death but may withhold the details.”

Mayer said their goal is to get the story out as quickly as possible, not for the headlines, but to get the information out to the public and stop any rumors that may be circulating.

“If we have any agenda at all, it’s informing the public about what’s going on around them,” Mayer said.

Boone Mayor Rennie Brantz said the goal of local newspapers to inform their communities is crucial for community members. When community members don’t get the facts on what is happening in the community, they may create false ideas and jump to conclusions.

A topic that in the local news has covered lately is the potential change coming to Highway 105, Brantz explained. The improvements, which are suggested by the North Carolina Department of Transportation, could affect some of the businesses by taking space away from their parking lots or making it difficult for people to get into their stores.

“I think the press was crucial in informing the community and dispelling rumors,” Brantz said. “I think the paper did a good job of explaining what the DOT was trying to do and what the consequences could be. I think the press made the public aware of what this proposal meant for the community.”

Brantz said the local papers have been a positive force in the community. They have a strong focus on what is important to the community, and they publish information on issues and developments that can affect the community as a whole.

“It’s not a mouthpiece for the town, but more of a reflection of the community,” Brantz said.

Community newspapers are also important for holding community leaders accountable for their actions.

“We are the voice that keeps those folks in power credible and honest,” Gene Fowler, publisher at the Mountain Times Publications, said. “Community newspapers are important for keeping community leaders in check to make sure they are doing their jobs to the best of their abilities.”

Community newspapers hold those in power accountable by reporting on local governing entities. For example, reporters attend civic meetings and recount the decisions made to the public, so the community members can be up-to-date on changes and decisions that are made in their communities.

“If you have a community without a local paper that will be the watchdog, you don’t have a community,” Fowler said.

In the ever-changing landscape of the news media, the Mountain Times Publications will rely on the hyper-local content it creates and the trustworthiness it has established with its communities to attract readers in the future.

“We hope that people will ultimately decide to pay for content they can rely on,” Fowler said.

## **The Mountain Times Publications Continues to use Traditional Business Model**

The Watauga Democrat has been operating for over 130 years, making it the longest continually operated business in Watauga County.

“We take very seriously the duty that a local community newspaper has in upholding the First Amendment,” said Gene Fowler, publisher at the Mountain Times Publications. “To do that, we have to run a financially stable business.”

Newspapers have traditionally made money by attracting as many readers as possible to their product at prices lower than it costs to produce the paper, then selling advertisers access to those readers. This created a model where advertisers—not readers—provided newspapers with the majority of their revenue.

The web, in some ways, is threatening this traditional business model. Despite these threats, however, the Mountain Times Publications group continues to use this model to remain financially stable.

Historically, the Mountain Times newspapers are print-based publications, and, at the moment, the print publications bring in the majority of the revenue for the newspaper group.

The Mountain Times Publications revenue comes from three areas: 10 percent is from subscriptions, including both online and print; another 10 percent is from online

advertisements; and the remaining 80 percent is from print advertisements. Of this 80 percent, display ads account for about a third of the revenue, classifieds account for another third, and preprints account for the final third.

“I choose to think of the people who advertise with us as partners,” said Tom Mayer, executive editor at the Mountain Times Publications. “They help us do our job of being a community steward.”

The main advertisers at the Mountain Times Publications are local businesses—local retailers, medical facilities, utility services and grocery stores.

In fact, the newspapers are published on Wednesdays, in part, because the local grocery stores prefer their ads to go out to the community on those days so that shoppers can see the ads before they do their weekend grocery shopping.

Manuel Zepeda, advertising sales manager at the Mountain Times Publications, said the main benefit of advertising with the newspaper group is the unique position the newspapers have established in the High Country communities. Not only does the Mountain Times Publications provide local content not offered anywhere else, but the content is credible. This credibility is extended to the businesses that advertise in the paper.

“We provide them the best way to reach the masses in the High Country,” Zepeda said.

If a company placed an advertisement in all five publications, in print and online, for one month, they would reach 300,834 people, Zepeda explained.

The reach of the publications is determined by the circulation numbers multiplied by 3.2—the average number of people each issue reaches.

While any business can advertise in just one publication, Zepeda encourages advertisers to place advertisements in more than one, if not all of the publications, if their message is applicable to each audience. The communities are close together and are, in many ways, supportive of one another.

“We need to provide them the opportunity to reach our full audience,” Zepeda added.

As for content, the newspaper group primarily focuses on the print publications, and the websites are simply extensions of the print publications. In other words, the websites are duplicates of the print publications. The only difference in the online content is certain breaking news stories that need to reach the public before the publication day, such as school closings or major weather updates.

**Mountain Times Publications  
print circulations**

Mountain Times...	18,500
Watauga Democrat...	4,000
Avery Journal-Times...	4,000
Ashe Post & Times...	3,800
Blowing Rocket...	1,000

**Multiply each circulation by 3.2  
to find the reach of each  
publication.**

Mountain Times...	59,200
Watauga Democrat...	12,800
Avery Journal-Times...	12,800
Ashe Post & Times...	12,160
Blowing Rocket...	3,200

**Population numbers of areas  
reached**

Watauga...	55,121
Avery...	17,536
Ashe...	26,957
Blowing Rock...	1,263

\*estimated numbers for print  
circulation only

“The website is not a real revenue generator,” Fowler said.

The main purpose of the website, at the moment, is to reach a wider audience.

In the month of January 2019, the Watauga Democrat reached a record of over 1.6 million views. However, the Mountain Times Publications group has not yet found the monetary value of these views.

The biggest challenge, Fowler said, is keeping a profit margin that allows the newspaper group to grow.

One problem is the increasing cost to produce a printed paper. The printing press was once the biggest barrier to the entrance of newspapers into the market. With the rise of the web, however, this barrier is being eliminated. As printing presses become more expensive and harder to come by, so do mechanics who can maintain the presses. News outlets no longer have to rely on printing news, when they can just publish the news online.

Some newspapers are combatting this challenge by outsourcing their printing. All five of the newspapers in the Mountain Times group prints its publications in the main office in Boone, North Carolina. The group purchased its printing press in 1964 and added units over the years. The most recent update was in 2013.

Printing at one location saves on the cost of maintaining multiple printing presses and allows for shift staffing, which is a benefit to the company, according to Fowler. Maintaining only one press also allows the group to invest more heavily in new technology.

A second challenge the web has posed to the newspaper industry is the dispersing of online advertising revenue to companies other than newspapers.

Fowler said that Google and Facebook are becoming the newspaper group's biggest competition.

Instead of entering, for example, the Watauga Democrat website to search for a news topic, readers are using Google to search for that news topic. In this case, readers are only looking at that one page on the website and, as articles are shared on platforms such as Facebook, the information from the site is scattered across the web, and readers no longer have to depend on the site to gather information.

While Google and Facebook are used to drive readers to news sites, they also sell their own advertising space. When a reader uses these platforms to direct them to the news site, Google and Facebook receive the advertising revenue, which takes away from the newspaper's advertising revenue.

This does not only affect the Mountain Times Publications, but it impacts news organizations across the United States. According to Pew Research Center, total digital advertising

increased by 25 percent from 2016 to 2017, but 52 percent of the revenue from digital display advertising went to Google and Facebook.

### **Numbers in the Newsroom**

According to PEW Research, newsroom employment in the United States dropped by 23 percent from 2008 to 2017. This decline was primarily driven by newspapers, where the number of employees dropped by 45 percent during the same period.

This decline was reflected in the staff of the Mountain Times Publications during this same time period. At the peak of the Mountain Times Publications, in the few years before 2008, the newspaper staff was almost twice as large as it is now, with 72 total staff members. The newsroom also had a digital department and a television station in-house.

When the financial crisis hit the country in 2008, the newspaper had to make a dramatic change to its staff. However, the newspaper group cut positions that were not essential to the newsroom, and the group did not cut any journalist positions.

The newspaper group cut administrative positions and divided the leftover tasks among the employees who remained with the company. In the newsroom, the company cut positions such as the full-time photographer and instead put the photography responsibilities on the journalists. In fact, during this time, the company added two more journalist positions to their staff.

Today, the Mountain Times Publications employs 46 staff members. Of these, 13 are journalists.

“We are certainly maintaining our staff,” Mayer said. “There are more journalists than when I started, which to me means that we are healthy overall.”

Despite the challenges the changing media landscape poses to the newspaper industry and traditional business model, the Mountain Times Publications group has remained financially stable. This conclusion is drawn from the publication group’s ability to carry out operations and bring in revenue and, at the same time, increase their circulation and readership; the large scope of their advertising reach; and their steady newsroom employment.

### **More Than Just Writers—Community Journalists are Your Neighbors**

Kayla Lasure is a full-time journalist at Watauga County’s oldest print publication, the Watauga Democrat. She has been working at the Democrat for a little over two years.

On a typical Monday, Lasure comes into the office early to mid-morning. She sits at her desk and goes over the news from the weekend. She begins to lay out story ideas and organize when each story is due. Then she gets to work, making phone calls, getting information together and picking up any documents she is responsible for publishing.

“Things are happening in these people’s communities and it’s important for them to know about the good and the bad,” Lasure said.

When she finds a story idea, Lasure first discusses it with her editor.

“If it’s something we think the community will care about, we will pursue it,” Lasure said.

Lasure has won six North Carolina Press Association awards since she began working for the Democrat. The North Carolina Press Association awards North Carolina newspapers and writers yearly for the work they do. Writers can receive awards for three fields—writing, photography and video. Lasure has won awards from each of the categories.

“The stories that I received awards for were very local stories that meant a lot to people,” Lasure said. “It meant a lot to me that the stories I got awards for also made an impact in the community.”

Lasure said her stories that won awards were stories that were well-regarded by members of the community. A couple of those stories were features of community members. Being able to tell those people’s stories was an accomplishment, Lasure said.

Recognition in the community as a reporter for the paper is another accomplishment, Lasure said.

“I think it is important to immerse yourself in the community and not see it as just a job,” Lasure said. “Think about it as your community; think about what you would want to read in the newspaper as a community member.”

Lasure writes nine or 10 articles each week. She covers county news, Watauga County Commissioner meetings, crime and courts, accidents, and education. She also contributes to the Mountain Times seasonal publications as needed.

The journalists at the Mountain Times Publications are also responsible for their photos, videos and any other media they include with their stories.

“Since we are a small staff, we all shift and share responsibilities,” Lasure said.

For example, the reporters take turns being on call on weekends.

“We have a scanner in the office, which we use to hear emergency calls from local fire departments, EMS and the police departments,” Lasure explained. “We also have a handheld scanner. If it’s your weekend to be on call, you get the scanner.”

The reporter on call is expected to cover any major events, accidents, major fires, or a significant death in the community.

“Unfortunately, news doesn’t take the weekends off,” Lasure said.

Lasure also said that working at a newspaper group that owns five local papers is helpful.

“We don’t compete with each other; we help each other,” she said.

While there are no major print publications competing in the area, some online publications create competition. In Watauga County and Blowing Rock these competing online publications include include the High Country Press, Watauga Online/Watauga Roads, Blowing Rock News and Go Blue Ridge.

Lasure said the competition does affect the paper in some ways. For example, Watauga Roads specializes in watching the weather and notifying people of road blockages and

accidents. Because Watauga Roads is focused solely on weather reports, and because it only publishes news online, it can often get this information out more quickly than the Democrat.

This is a challenge for Lasure and her coworkers. Lasure explained that she is usually more focused on the stories she is writing for the print publication and is not focused on instant news. The writers at the Mountain Times Publications group write first for the print publications, and second for the web.

In addition to local competitors, occasionally larger news organizations, such as Spectrum News, that come to the area to cover larger news topics.

Spectrum News is a news outlet affiliated with Charter Communications. The news outlet provides localized news to cities in New York, North Carolina, Florida, Ohio, Kentucky, Wisconsin, Texas and California.

“Sometimes with those I’ve found that, because I’m a local reporter, local people trust me more and are likely to give me more information,” Lasure said.

Before working for the Watauga Democrat, Lasure worked at a community newspaper in Kentucky for about seven months. Her position was eliminated during budget cuts.

“A lot of publications are being bought by larger organizations and then downsizing because of budget cuts,” Lasure said. “I would say that one of the challenges is a growing workload with a smaller staff.”

The Mountain Times Publications employs 13 journalists who cover news across the three counties and the town of Blowing Rock. The Mountain Times Publications group has not made any cuts to their newsrooms since they were acquired by Adams Publishing in 2016.

“While the staff is a lot smaller, we form really good connections with people,” said Colin Tate, a reporter at the Ashe Post and Times. “People see us in the community, and they can stop in any time. We are very accessible.”

As a community journalist, Tate said his main goal is to educate the members of his community. In order to educate the community his role is to not only produce stories, but also to be fair in his presentation of news by giving all sides of a story, to be reliable and to be accessible.

“It literally is a community newspaper; the community means something in the writing that we do,” Tate added.

Just as the community relies on journalists, journalists rely on the community members.

The journalists often gather photos and videos from community members if they cannot attend an event or get to the site of a breaking news event in time. They monitor social media and listen to what community members are talking about to find local events that are happening in the community and learn what the community members are most interested in.

“There are only so many places we can be at one time,” said Anna Oakes, editor of the Watauga Democrat. “And I think that’s a really good way to make community members feel engaged with us, too.”

Social media and the web can hinder the job of journalists, however, if taken too far. The average citizen is not trained in news writing. Reporting includes gathering information, fact-checking that information, talking to the right sources and getting the whole story from all sides.

“Journalists are being called to defend our profession and explain to people the importance of what we do,” Oakes said. She explained that many people don’t understand how a newspaper is supposed to work, which is a challenge that journalists have to overcome.

“It’s concerning to me that people aren’t taught about journalism and its presence in society, and people aren’t media-literate,” Oakes said.

## Reflection

Through my research, I have found that community journalism brings communities together, in the High Country. When looking at these community newspapers, we can get a feel for not only what is happening in that community, but what is important to community members, and what they value. These unique publications ultimately preserve their communities and inspire them to prosper.

In choosing a broad topic such as community journalism, I needed to find a way to narrow my research. Inspired by my time spent as an intern reporter at the Avery Journal-Times, I decided to use the Mountain Times Publications as a case study. This allowed me to research a broad topic on a local scale.

My research began with literature on community newspapers. I also looked into the history of the newspaper industry as a whole in order to gain a deeper perspective. Next, I began my research on the Mountain Times Publications group. I interviewed people within the company to find the information I needed. I interviewed the publisher, editors, writers and advertisers. My hope was to gain an inside look at the newspaper group and how it operates as a whole.

When I began my research, I created the following list of questions to guide my research.

These helped me to organize my thought process and track my progress.

**What value do community newspapers bring to their communities?**

Community newspapers offer local content, tailored to community members. The journalists know their audience and seek out news that is important to them. Community members will not have access to this content anywhere else—most of the time, large metro papers don't cover all of the happenings of a smaller town or focus only on local content.

Community newspapers connect community members through their reporting efforts. Not only do they provide local content, but they keep community members up to date on what their leaders are doing and what their neighbors are doing. They provide updates on weather and traffic, sports, education and events.

Community newspapers promote economic growth through their ability to connect community members to local businesses through advertising. The newspapers offer connections to the local community and a way for business to put their message in the market. The newspapers' established place in the market, depth of reach to community members and rooted trust with the community provide a positive platform for advertisers to use to reach the community.

**What does it mean to be a journalist at a community newspaper?**

Being a journalist at a community newspaper means being a community member. The journalists get to know their readers and seek out information that is not only important to those readers, but also interesting them.

Community journalists also develop relationships to work with community members—the communication flows both ways. The journalists provide information to the community members, and community members provide information to the journalists.

**How do community newspapers stay afloat economically, in a world where communication is rapidly evolving?**

The Mountain Times Publications group has remained successful using the traditional newspaper business model. Most of its revenue comes from advertising in the print publications. This may be due, in part, to the demographic of the areas the publication group serves. The main demographic in the area is older, and much of the High Country is rural. A widespread lack of access and ability to use technology has led to a consistent demand for the print publication, as opposed to the online publication.

**How has the internet and the digital age affected community newspapers and their journalists?**

As a whole, the media industry is not in competition with the internet but needs to find a way to survive with the internet.

Newspapers are trying to find ways to monetize web page views and clicks. In addition, they are looking for ways to sell more advertising space and compete with search engines and social media platforms, such as Google and Facebook, for advertising revenue.

The internet scatters news and information, which can make news difficult to navigate.

Community newspapers will need to find ways to attract readers to enter their websites for all of their news, rather than looking at different articles scattered from a number of sources on the web.

The internet has also taught people that news should be free. However, journalists need to be compensated for what they do. Community newspapers will have to find a way to convince readers that the news should be paid for and is not going to come for free.

### **What other challenges do community newspapers face?**

The internet scatters information across platforms, separating information from its initial source. In addition, social media has created a platform for opinion leaders and celebrities alike to share information and opinions. Now, anyone with a social media profile can write and share information. This has led to the spread of false information, misinformation and opinions interpreted as facts. This hurts the news industry, as many people are losing trust in media sources.

### **Conclusion**

The Mountain Times Publications group understands its market, demand, readers and the value its publications bring to the communities it serves. At the moment, the group's business model and values remain traditional, which appeals to their community members.

These community newspapers offer content that is specially tailored to their unique audiences. Over the years, they have aimed to establish themselves as a credible source of news and earn the community's trust.

While the changing media landscape poses challenges to the Mountain Times Publications, these community newspapers will find ways to continue to connect with their communities. The newspaper group will work with industry leaders and community members to remain a source of news and information in the High Country.

### **Challenges**

One challenge I ran into was that, in gathering information primarily from people within the company, my sources were not as willing to discuss their own challenges within the company or the negative aspects of their jobs. They primarily discussed the positive aspects or the challenges they were able to overcome.

My other greatest challenge was time. I completed this project within one semester and it could have easily been spread out over the course of two semesters. However, I gathered as much information as I could, and covered as many angles of the topic to the best of my ability, by my deadline for the project.

### **Future Opportunities**

This study could include other community newspapers in North Carolina. It would be interesting to compare this community newspaper group to other community newspapers in the area. I would like to know if other newspapers are experiencing the same levels of success and similar challenges. Eventually, this study on the Mountain Times Publications group could even be compared with studies on community newspapers on the East Coast or across the United States. I would like to see how community newspapers are doing, as a whole.

Another opportunity could be to research the online presence of community newspapers. It would be interesting to look into the online subscription numbers, the reach of online platforms and how community newspapers measure online success.

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