

The Stories Not Told: A Case Study of the Information Needs of Siler City, North Carolina

FIONA MORGAN*

I. INTRODUCTION

Both the lamentations and the optimism about the Internet's impact on journalism tend to focus on national media. Yet it is local communities and local democracy that most suffer from the dwindling press. Information may be more ubiquitous than ever, but local news reporting is getting harder to find. In fact, many local communities were never well served by the institutions of media, and those institutions that do serve local community information needs may not be well positioned to adapt to changes in technology. The result is a shortage of reliable, factual information necessary for meaningful public debate. The consequence is that local communities risk becoming ever more divided and ill-equipped to solve community problems.

The policy tools available to government to intervene on media issues are limited but evolving. They include better provision of public information through open government, regulations of broadcasting and cable television, funding for public media, direct or indirect government subsidies (such as postal subsidies, public notice advertising, and tax exemption for nonprofit news organizations), and telecommunications policies promoting Internet access. The Knight Commission on the Information Needs of Communities in a Democracy provides a set of fifteen broad recommendations that do not target specific policy-making bodies so much as frame solutions to

* Research Fellow, Media Policy Initiative, New American Foundation. Associate in Research, DeWitt Wallace Center for Media and Democracy, Duke University.

the problem around three major concepts: "maximizing the availability of relevant and credible information, enhancing the information capacity of individuals, and promoting public engagement."¹

What existing research has not established is at what level of government those policies may have the most impact and where the civic need for information policy intervention is greatest. Early study of environmental policies demonstrated that the impact of both positive and negative externalities ignores the boundaries of governments.² Similarly, there may be downstream effects of information or its absence. To understand the gap between the level of accountability coverage a community needs and the level of coverage produced, we must ask the following: which stories go untold?

This case study examines a small, post-industrial city in a rural county at the periphery of two media markets, with two questions in mind: what are the community's information needs, and how well does its information ecosystem serve those needs? It examines community characteristics and dynamics that contribute to a market failure for news in the hope of enlightening policy makers as to the levels of government intervention and, by extension, which policies may best correct it.

This case study is derived from a comparative, qualitative study of four communities in North Carolina geographically located at the periphery of the Raleigh-Durham media market, written for completion of the Master of Public Policy degree at Duke University. That study selected four features of community hypothesized to be associated with lower levels of local accountability coverage. The first phase of analysis involved site selection, using descriptive statistics that include socioeconomics, population, and distance from Raleigh (center of the nearest metro media market). The second phase involved asking officials with an insider's view of relevant issues in the community to provide insight into what that level of coverage would be, how it compares to the level produced, and how the answers to those questions differ according to community characteristics. The

¹ The Knight Commission on the Information Needs of Communities in a Democracy, *Informing Communities: Sustaining Democracy in the Digital Age*, (Washington, D.C.: The Aspen Institute, October 2009), <http://www.knightcomm.org/read-the-report-and-comment> (accessed October 20, 2011).

² See the literature on environmental federalism, particularly Daniel C. Esty, "Revitalizing Environmental Federalism," *Michigan Law Review* 95 (December 1996); Robert V. Percival, "Environmental Federalism: Historical Roots and Contemporary Models," *Maryland Law Review* 54, no. 4 (1995).

third phase was an assessment of information provision using stakeholder interviews, analysis of available media, and relevant public policies. Of the four communities in the original study, Siler City stood out as the community experiencing the most acutely unmet information needs.

The findings of this case study support the hypothesis that distance from the center of the media market creates significant problems and leads to lower quantity and quality of news and information about local affairs. For communities at the periphery of a media market, broadcast and metro outlets fail to provide consistent coverage of municipal and local affairs; weekly print newspapers are the main sources of local news; information exchange and debate between stakeholders tend to be informal; blogs and other digital media do not provide significant outlets for news; lack of timely, fact-based information about local affairs leads to a low quality of public debate in both traditional and digital media; lack of an accessible archive of media coverage makes it difficult for community members to engage with information; and media outlets have little incentive to improve the quality of their information provision.

The Internet plays a significant role in the information ecosystem of Siler City; unfortunately, the supply of factual reporting fails to meet the community's appetite for online conversation. While Siler City does have a community newspaper that provides professional local reporting on city and county issues, that weekly, print-only outlet lacks timeliness. That lack of timeliness stands in contrast to the local AM radio station and online outlets, which provide venues for public speculation, often driven by ideology. Most significantly, Latinos, who make up half of the town's population, lack a voice online and offline, which leads to a profound disconnect within the community. This study concludes with a reflection on frameworks for thinking about online news and how those frameworks could inform solutions to Siler City's information needs.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Economic Stakes of Local Accountability News

To understand the potential economic impact of local accountability news coverage, or its absence, consider the experience of another small, low-income community at the periphery of a major metro media market.

In July 2010, the citizens of Bell, California, a community of fewer than forty-thousand residents in suburban Los Angeles, were outraged

to learn that their public officials had been spending taxpayer dollars to pay themselves exorbitant salaries, some approaching \$800,000. Investigative reporters at the *Los Angeles Times* (*LAT*) uncovered the corruption by obtaining public records, which list public employee salaries. Once the story broke, hundreds of citizens stormed city hall and forced the resignation of the city manager, assistant city manager, and police chief.³ The *Los Angeles Times* won the Pulitzer Prize for Public Service in 2011 for its coverage of the Bell scandal.⁴

What stunned the general public about the Bell story was not the corruption itself, but the fact that officials' twelve percent annual pay raises went undetected for years. What took reporters so long? It turns out that the self-dealing began after the community newspaper that covered Bell and its neighbors, *Community News*, was sold to a chain and ceased covering local news. Bell then relied on the *Los Angeles Times* and broadcast outlets in the broader metropolitan media market for local government coverage. Up until the 2010 revelations, such coverage was sparse. The *LAT* was in no position to take on more of the load of covering Los Angeles County's eighty-eight cities, as the paper felt the same economic pressures affecting metro newspapers across the country. With print circulation plummeting, the paper's ownership changed hands and its staff and number of pages were slashed.⁵

In the aftermath, *LAT* media columnist James Rainey wondered, "How many more Bells are out there?"⁶ With newspaper circulation and ad revenue dropping, there are half as many reporters covering Los Angeles County as there were fifteen years ago, Rainey said.⁷ Yet even with its own newsroom so reduced, the *LAT* uncovered the story because it had the resources to do so. It turned out that citizens had

³ Jeff Gottlieb and Ruben Vives, "High Salaries Stir Outrage in Bell," *Los Angeles Times*, July 15, 2010 to present, <http://www.latimes.com/news/local/bell> (accessed October 20, 2012).

⁴ James Rainey, "On the Media: An Unlikely Duo Wins Pulitzer for Bell Coverage," *Los Angeles Times*, April 19, 2011, <http://articles.latimes.com/2011/apr/19/entertainment/la-et-onthedia-20110419> (accessed October 20, 2012).

⁵ Michael A. Hiltzik, "Times to Cut Jobs, Reduce Pages," *Los Angeles Times*, July 3, 2008, <http://articles.latimes.com/2008/jul/03/business/fi-times3> (accessed October 20, 2012).

⁶ James Rainey, "On the Media: How Many More Bells Out There?," *Los Angeles Times*, July 21, 2010, <http://articles.latimes.com/2010/jul/21/entertainment/la-et-onthedia-20100721> (accessed October 20, 2012).

⁷ *Ibid.*

requested the salary records before, but, they told reporters, city officials had not complied.⁸ "A big newspaper like *The Times* can't be so easily dissuaded," Rainey noted.⁹ "As they waited for the records, the reporters frequently reminded city officials they didn't want to have to take them to court."¹⁰ It took the institutional power of a newspaper to apply the pressure that made local government function as it should.

That was not the only policy failing in the Bell case. Open government advocate Terry Francke noted that California's open-meetings law for local government, the Brown Act¹¹, "even if perfectly complied with, does not make it hard for Bell-like excesses to creep in."¹² Loopholes allow the government to avoid posting public notices or noting substantive policy making in meeting agendas. Francke laid the blame for this policy not only on the state, but also on the "newspaper industry," which had "cultivated" the policy on the assumption "that newspaper reporters will be on hand to use it in scrutinizing government behavior. But even reporters require a bit of periodic training to help them decode agendas and read between the lines of official meeting bureaucratese that the Brown Act is just vague enough to permit as barriers to ordinary citizens."¹³

The Bell case encapsulates the crisis facing local watchdog journalism. Thanks to the economic pressure facing newspapers across the country, fewer, or sometimes no, reporters are left to cover city hall and other local institutions. Holdover public policies designed to prevent corruption and benefit the media industry in its former incarnation can exacerbate the situation. Local officials fail to comply with the law either because their wrongdoing goes undetected or because they are not brought to account, thanks to insufficient information about their actions. Even though newspapers have significantly fewer resources, once those resources are applied they

⁸ Gottlieb and Vives, "High Salaries Stir Outrage in Bell."

⁹ Rainey, "On the Media: How Many More Bells."

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ The Brown Act may be found in Cal.Gov.Code § 54960 (West 2010).

¹² Terry Francke, "Why the Bell Scandal Happened and What Can Be Done," *Voice of Orange County*, July 28, 2010, http://voiceofoc.org/article_a7d8e4e2-9a78-11df-aefd-001cc4c03286.html (accessed October 20, 2012).

¹³ Ibid.

prove uniquely effective in uncovering corruption. Once the *Los Angeles Times* reported the story, news spread among the citizens of Bell, and the community mobilized to hold its officials accountable. Reporting saves taxpayers money, yet neither the sale of newspaper subscriptions nor advertising revenue can directly capture that benefit. Meanwhile, other acts and patterns of malfeasance may go unreported and, thus, go unknown.

B. Documenting the Market Failure for Local News

News is a public good in the economic sense. The facts journalists discover and make public are both non-rival and non-excludable. News generates positive externalities; watchdog reporting, the function of journalism this study is concerned with, increases the accountability of public officials and institutions.¹⁴

Academic and policy research have sought to measure the gap between past and present coverage by calculating losses in circulation and the number of reporters employed at a given time, and by measuring changes in the "news hole" (i.e., the number of stories, pages, or column inches) and categories of stories (e.g., policy issues versus entertainment).¹⁵ Yet the market failure for news—the unrecoupable benefit to the public—pre-dates the current industry crisis. Therefore, measures of change over time may quantify change in relationship to the economic downturn and the creative destruction of technological change, but past-present comparisons do not tell the full story of the market failure.

Demand for news and information can be divided into four categories: consumption (information that improves consumer choices), production (information we need to do our jobs and earn money), entertainment (information that amuses), and voter (information that influences civic engagement).¹⁶ Anthony Downs observed a market failure for voter information due to rational

¹⁴ James T. Hamilton, *All the News That's Fit to Sell: How the Market Transforms Information Into News* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

¹⁵ Steven Waldman and the Working Group on Information Needs of Communities, *The Information Needs of Communities: The Changing Media Landscape in a Broadband Age*, 123, Federal Communications Commission, July 2011, <http://www.fcc.gov/info-needs-communities> (accessed October 20, 2012).

¹⁶ Anthony Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy*, (New York: Harper, 1957), as discussed in Hamilton, *All the News That's Fit to Sell*.

ignorance.¹⁷ The statistical probability that learning about a particular candidate or policy will allow an individual to have any effect on an election or a piece of legislation is effectively zero; therefore, a rational analysis of costs and benefits will lead that person not to expend the time, energy, or money to learn that information. James T. Hamilton points out that news reporting often seeks to appeal to other forms of information demand through "diversion and drama," which leads to soft news coverage.¹⁸

Accountability news reporting, which meets voter demand, performs a community watchdog function. As Paul Starr notes, journalists prevent public corruption by keeping an eye on public officials.¹⁹ "[F]rom a political standpoint, news contributes to a well-functioning society inasmuch as it enables the public to hold government and other institutions accountable for their performance."²⁰ There is also a body of literature documenting the impact of local news, or its absence, on voter behavior and civic engagement, which documents a correlation between higher socioeconomic status and awareness of civic information. Tichenor, Donohue, and Olien summarized these findings and further proposed that the structure of mass media contributed to a failure to inform the public, particularly citizens with low socioeconomic status. The authors hypothesized that the introduction of each new medium (e.g., radio, television, Internet) increased the "knowledge gap."²¹ Jerit builds on knowledge gap research by looking not only at the structure of media but also at content. Her study examines how differences in the way media cover political issues affect the distribution of political knowledge and engagement. Using survey data and media content analysis, she finds that higher levels of expert commentary in news stories reinforce the socioeconomic gaps in political knowledge, while contextual coverage helps to close the gap.²²

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Hamilton, *All the News That's Fit to Sell*.

¹⁹ Paul Starr, "Goodbye to the Age of Newspapers (Hello to a New Era of Corruption)," *The New Republic*, March 4, 2009, <http://www.tnr.com/article/goodbye-the-age-newspapers-hello-new-era-corruption?page=1> (accessed October 20, 2012).

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ P. J. Tichenor, G. A. Donohue, and C. N. Olien, "Mass Media Flow and Differential Growth in Knowledge," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 34, no. 2 (1970): 159–170.

²² Jennifer Jerit, "Understanding the Knowledge Gap: The Role of Experts and Journalists," *The Journal of Politics* 71, no. 2 (April 2009): 443.

Chaffee and Wilson analyzed the divide between "media poor" and "media rich" communities, defining as "media poor" communities without multiple, competing daily newspapers.²³ (It is a sign of the times that most places in the country would qualify as "media poor" today.) Their surveys tested the hypothesis that the media richness of a community—as measured by the number of different daily newspapers locally published and circulated—"is associated with greater diversity in the public problems agenda held by citizens of that community," leading to richer public debate and more inclusive public deliberation.²⁴ A more recent study by Gentzkow, Shapiro, and Sinkinson, found that the entry of a newspaper into a media market significantly increased voter turnout in presidential and congressional elections.²⁵ The study found that the first newspaper had the greatest effect; the introduction of competition had a much smaller effect.²⁶

When national news is available, consumers may substitute it for local news, which has negative spillovers on local democracies. In communities where *New York Times* home delivery became available, George and Waldfogel found that fewer residents subscribed to local papers, and that, subsequently, municipal elections saw lower voter turnout.²⁷

Access to local government information, in the form of news focused on local public affairs, affects turnout in municipal elections. Comparing survey data from the Public Policy Institute of California of residents in the Los Angeles media market with the availability of weekly and daily newspapers in municipalities surrounding Los Angeles, Filla and Johnson showed that voters are less likely to turn out when local news is absent.²⁸

²³ Steven H. Chaffee and Donna Wilson, "Media Rich, Media Poor: Two Studies of Diversity in Agenda Holding," *Journalism Quarterly* 53, no. 3 (1977): 466–76, (paper presented at the annual meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism, August, 1976).

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Matthew Gentzkow, Jesse M. Shapiro and Michael Sinkinson, "The Effect of Newspaper Entry and Exit on Electoral Politics," (NBER Working Paper No. 15544, November 2009).

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Lisa George and Joel Waldfogel, "Does the New York Times Spread Ignorance and Apathy?," (working paper, July 5 2002), http://www.anderson.ucla.edu/faculty_pages/romain.wacziarg/mediapapers/GeorgeWaldfogel.pdf (accessed October 20, 2012).

²⁸ Jackie Filla and Martin Johnson, "Local News Outlets and Political Participation," *Urban Affairs Review* 45, no. 5 (May 2010): 679.

Additional studies support the hypothesis that when more local news is provided, voter turnout goes up. The availability of local Spanish-language news increased Hispanic voter turnout by four percentage points, according to a study by Oberholzer-Gee and Waldfogel.²⁹ When local news was available in Spanish, about one in four Hispanics in the Los Angeles media market watched it and one in five voted; however, these audiences did not spend more time watching news.³⁰ The authors saw this as evidence of positive spillovers in an economic sense, which justify the FCC policy of promoting localism in broadcast content.³¹

Yet the principles behind localism as a policy are difficult to operationalize. Braman found a disconnect between the assumptions behind the FCC's localism policy and the evolution of local communities as "nodes within a global society."³² She examines the gap "between the ideal and the real" by considering where local television is produced, the content of news and public affairs programs, the viewers who watch it, and the impact on local decision-making.³³ She concludes that while the location of a TV station within a community does encourage the selection of news stories based on the proximity of events, this incentive is overwhelmed by the financial pressure to minimize the cost of news production and the incentive to please advertisers.³⁴ She also found that categorizing stories by genre (such as crime, economy, etc.) was an insufficient measure of whether the story was meaningful to local decisions.³⁵ "[W]hile the ideal is that local news production would be driven by the need for news in support of local decision-making, in the real world a large proportion

²⁹ Felix Oberholzer-Gee and Joel Waldfogel, "Media Markets and Localism: Does Local News en Español Boost Hispanic Voter Turnout?", *American Economic Review* 99, no. 5 (2009): 2120.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Sandra Braman, "The Ideal v. the Real in Media Localism: Regulatory Implications," *Communication Law and Policy* 12, no. 3 (2007): 231-278.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*

of the content of these programs comes from other places and deals with matters that do not touch the community."³⁶

C. Examining Local News

To determine gaps in local coverage, we must consider what local news consists of and who produces it.

Pew's Project for Excellence in Journalism ("PEJ") Baltimore study examined the "information ecosystem" in an American city's news coverage. Researchers identified a set of local narratives and analyzed the stories produced by all local news outlets about those narratives over the course of one week. They found that most stories contained no original reporting, but merely repeated or repackaged previous reports. Of stories that did contain new information, ninety-five percent came from traditional media, and most of those from newspapers.³⁷ The study also included figures about the decline, over time, of the total number of newspaper stories since 1991.³⁸ The authors concluded, "new media has not yet come close to making up the difference."³⁹ The traditional media "still set the narrative agenda."⁴⁰

While the Baltimore study broke new ground in tracing the flow of information in a community, the research sample was criticized for not being inclusive of non-traditional media outlets that report new information and possess some agenda-setting power. For instance, one of the six selected narratives, about a historic theater, was the topic of repeated attention by a local blogger before the newspaper reported on the story; yet the blog was not included in the sample of media outlets.⁴¹

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 253.

³⁷ Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism, *How News Happens: A Study of the News Ecosystem in One American City*, January 2010, http://www.journalism.org/analysis_report/how_news_happens (accessed October 20, 2012).

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Steve Buttry, "Old Media Find Comfort in Study of Baltimore (They Didn't Look Very Close)," *The Buttry Diary* (blog), January 11, 2010, <http://stevebuttry.wordpress.com/2010/01/11/old-media-find-comfort-in-study-of-baltimore-media-they-didnt-look-very-close> (accessed October 20, 2012).

A study funded by the National Science Foundation (NSF) of local reporting in seventy-seven suburban cities and ninety-eight Metropolitan Statistical Areas found the majority of news about local government still comes from newspapers, but in suburban communities, it is weeklies, not dailies, providing the most coverage.⁴² Researchers measured "the nature and extent of local government coverage and examine[d] the factors that predict variation in coverage."⁴³ The findings confirmed PEJ's observation that the bulk of news coverage comes from newspapers. Baldwin et al. found that television news coverage tended to focus on central cities rather than suburbs and that suburbs are more reliant on weekly newspapers than on daily newspapers for municipal coverage.⁴⁴ Topics differed as well, with more "city government, human interest, and community news" in the suburban coverage, while cities saw more coverage of crime, courts, accidents, and business.⁴⁵

The NSF study has two major shortcomings. Baldwin examined news coverage on the day of and the day after a randomly selected city council meeting in a given three-month time frame. Researchers did not consider whether the meetings were of any particular importance. A comparison of coverage among cities may be of limited meaning given that there is no qualitative basis for choosing the meetings. A related problem is that this study uses topic categories to assess news coverage, and topics offer no information about narrative depth or quality of coverage, a shortcoming this study avoids through the identification of narratives that community stakeholders indicate are significant.

In their study of press coverage and political accountability of members of Congress, James Snyder and David Stromberg offer insight into the problem of press coverage of communities with multiple bodies of jurisdiction. "[T]here is often a poor fit between media markets and political jurisdictions, making coverage of some jurisdictions too costly," the authors wrote.⁴⁶ The study measured this

⁴² Thomas Baldwin, et al., *News Media Coverage of City Governments in 2009*, Quello Center for Telecommunications Management and Law, 2010, http://quello.msu.edu/sites/default/files/pdf/PEJ_City_Govt_report-final.pdf (accessed October 20, 2012).

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ James M. Snyder, Jr., and David Stromberg, "Press Coverage and Political Accountability," *Journal of Political Economy* 118, no. 2 (2010): 356.

fit, called congruence, between media markets and congressional jurisdictions, and it found that where congruence was high, there was greater press coverage of members of Congress; voters were better informed and more likely to vote in elections; members were more likely to pursue constituents' interests, stand witness before committee hearings, and vote against the party line; and federal money was more likely to be spent in that district.⁴⁷

A 2009 study for *New Jersey Policy Perspective* considered the high levels of corruption in the state by cataloging the "inadequacies" of journalism statewide, "particularly in relation to the number of governmental units. New Jersey is distinctive in both respects."⁴⁸ There are 566 municipalities and 593 operating school districts, with separate governing bodies and budgets, due to the state's "home rule" tradition.⁴⁹ As elsewhere, the number of reporters has declined in recent years, but the problem predates the current industry crisis. "New Jersey has faced a chronic news deficit because of peculiarities of its geography and economic development," Weingart wrote.⁵⁰ He continues:

From the time of the nation's founding, the state has developed in the shadow of the two great cities across its borders, New York and Philadelphia, and failed to develop a major urban center of its own. Today, New Jersey's largest city, Newark, is home to just 3.2 percent of the state's population, and rather than serving as an independent media center, Newark falls within the larger New York media market. So instead of watching local newscasts devoted to New Jersey issues, people in the northern part of the state watch TV news oriented to New York City, while southern New Jerseyans watch stations based in Philadelphia. Many New Jersey residents also listen to out-of-state radio

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Scott Weingart, *Less News Is Bad News: The Media Crisis and New Jersey's News Deficit*, A Report from New Jersey Policy Perspective and the Sandra Starr Foundation (October 2009), available at http://www.njpp.org/assets/reports/democracy-media/2-rpt_mediacrisis.pdf (accessed October 20 2012).

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 16.

stations and read out-of-state newspapers. As a result, they know less about their own state's news than citizens of other states know about theirs.⁵¹

Filipe R. Campante and Quoc-Anh Do found greater levels of political corruption in states with isolated capitals. They examined three mechanisms for holding state politicians accountable and found that newspaper coverage of state politics, which was greater when population was more concentrated around the state capital, was the most significant factor explaining lower levels of corruption, even more significant than voter turnout.⁵²

D. Siler City's Place in the Broader Media Ecology

This author's case study on the information ecology of the Raleigh-Durham area (also known as the Triangle) of North Carolina provides a broad overview of the ways in which residents in many different Triangle communities access and engage with news and public affairs information about their communities.⁵³ The report demonstrates that there are a number of small or sparsely populated communities within or at the periphery of the Raleigh-Durham media market. Most are within the range of one or more daily newspapers that aim to cover the entire market. Weekly community newspapers serve most small communities in the Triangle; very few small communities have locally oriented blogs or online forums of significance.

The dominant newspaper in the market, the *News & Observer* (N&O), covers twenty-one municipalities but has lost more than half of its editorial staff in the past ten years through layoffs, buyouts, and attrition. It has significantly fewer reporters covering local beats. The executive editor has invested reporting resources in state-level investigative projects that have had significant impact, including the

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁵² Filipe R. Campante and Quoc-Anh Do, "Isolated Capital Cities, Accountability and Corruption: Evidence from U.S. States," (working paper Harvard Kennedy School Faculty Research Working Paper Series, May 2012).

⁵³ Fiona Morgan, *An Information Community Case Study: The Research Triangle, N.C., New America Foundation* (April 2011), [http://newamerica.net/sites/newamerica.net/files/policydocs/Triangle%20NC%20Case%20Study%20\(Versio%202.0\)_0.pdf](http://newamerica.net/sites/newamerica.net/files/policydocs/Triangle%20NC%20Case%20Study%20(Versio%202.0)_0.pdf) (accessed October 20, 2012).

conviction of the former governor.⁵⁴ Meanwhile, the paper has expanded its community weekly papers from six in 2008 to nine in 2010. They are distributed at no cost according to the total market coverage model. *N&O* executives say they are financially successful. Yet those same papers employ few reporters, in some cases fewer than the number of municipal jurisdictions they cover, and have closed newsrooms within communities such as Durham and Cary, consolidating offices to cut costs. Meanwhile, most other weeklies in the market are owned by chains, such as Heartland Publications and Womack Publications, which operate sets of papers, sometimes consolidating operations in a single newsroom. The Triangle media study offers limited insight into the interaction of media organizations and information needs at the municipal level in any small community.

A small community of fewer than eight thousand⁵⁵ residents and six square miles, Siler City is fifty-one miles from Raleigh and thirty-three miles from Greensboro, the center of the "Triad" media market.⁵⁶ To the extent people in either metro know of Siler City, it is known to draw Latino residents to jobs at the local chicken processing plants and to farm work in the surrounding rural areas of Chatham County. This distinction has earned Siler City some national media attention over the years, such as a *Mother Jones* feature in 2000⁵⁷ and coverage in a four-part PBS series titled "Matters of Race" in 2003, both of which examined issues of assimilation for Mexican immigrants.⁵⁸

Like many small communities in the Triangle, Siler City relies on metro media and a weekly print newspaper to supply coverage of local

⁵⁴ Mandy Locke and Rob Christensen, "Long, Odd Arc of Mike Easley as Mystifying as the Man Himself," *News & Observer*, November 28, 2010, <http://www.newsobserver.com/2010/11/28/829855/long-odd-arc-of-mike-easley-as.html> (accessed October 20, 2012).

⁵⁵ U.S. Census Bureau, *2010 State & County QuickFacts: Siler City* (Washington DC: Bureau of the Census, 2010), <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/37/3761860.html> (accessed October 20, 2012).

⁵⁶ "Siler City, North Carolina," *Google Maps*, Google, <http://maps.google.com> (accessed October 20, 2012).

⁵⁷ Barry Yeoman, "Hispanic Diaspora," *Mother Jones*, June/July 2000, <http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2000/07/hispanic-diaspora> (accessed October 20, 2012).

⁵⁸ Mark Sachs, "Tuned In: U.S. Melting Pot Still Simmering: 'Matters of Race,' a Four-Part PBS Series, Looks at Lingerin Issues of Our Assimilation," *Los Angeles Times*, Sept. 23, 2003, <http://articles.latimes.com/2003/sep/23/entertainment/et-tips23> (accessed October 15, 2012).

affairs. Yet metro media coverage has been irregular and is becoming less frequent. A search for mentions of “Siler City” in the *News & Observer* and the Greensboro daily the *News & Record* demonstrates the decline (see Figure 1): Between 1998 and 2000, coverage in both papers increased, reaching more than 600 mentions in the *N&O*. Even as *N&O* coverage began to decline the following year, coverage in the Greensboro paper steadily caught up. In 2006, both papers ran approximately 370 stories mentioning Siler City. The following year, a decline in both papers began; then came a sharp drop-off in 2009, with only eighty-two stories in the Raleigh paper and forty-eight in the Greensboro paper, setting a new baseline. This decline mirrors the timeline of the industry-wide financial crisis.

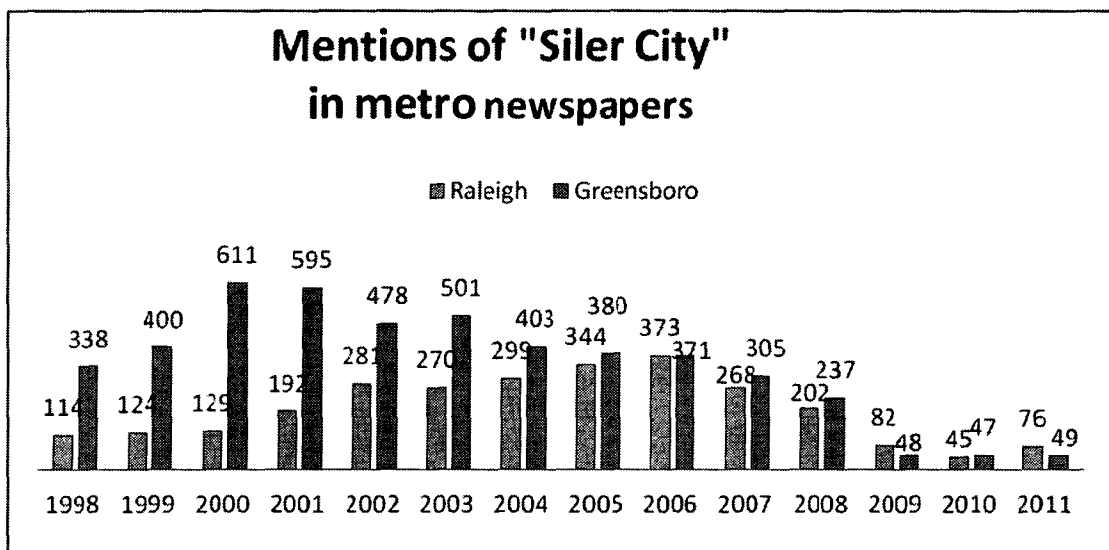


Fig. 1. Mentions of “Siler City” in an “America’s Newspapers” database search of the *News & Observer* (Raleigh) and the *News & Record* (Greensboro) archives, excluding sports and obituaries sections and standing crime column.

III. DATA AND METHODS

The general approach of this paper is to use qualitative research methodologies alongside descriptive statistics to form hypotheses about which community characteristics and related factors contribute to a gap in local accountability coverage. The goal is not to test hypotheses but to bring a qualitative understanding of community

information needs to bear on other researchers' past and future hypotheses and on policies designed to serve those needs.

Analysis of the media gap can be done in essentially three ways: past-versus-present, one place-versus-another, and ideal-versus-real. This paper employs primarily an ideal-versus-real approach. I used a multi-step qualitative analytical process, informed by Patton;⁵⁹ King, Keohane and Verba;⁶⁰ and Brady and Collier;⁶¹ to analyze the role media outlets play in different small municipalities at the periphery of the Raleigh-Durham media market. By interviewing stakeholders about the most pressing issues facing their communities in the recent past and immediate future, I have identified specific topics or narratives.

The notion of ideal coverage does not imply endless amounts of information; it should take into account both the direct costs and the opportunity costs of accountability journalism and the fact that the public interest is an undefined concept in economics. Chapter 9 of Hamilton acknowledges the challenges to a full cost-benefit analysis of journalism, while offering analytical tools, such as contingent valuation, that may help determine those costs and benefits within a real-world, economic framework.⁶² "Part of the difficulty lies in estimating the impact of a lack of information," Hamilton wrote.⁶³ "Since information is part of an instrumental good valued because it influences many types of decisions, analyzing news markets also requires an examination of how political markets work."⁶⁴ News judgment necessarily involves weighing opportunity costs. Reporters and editors who choose to devote time, resources and pages or airtime to covering one story cannot cover another simultaneously. Breaking local, national, or even international may require those resources in the place of a perfectly legitimate local story. With those limitations in mind, however, it is possible to identify a level of coverage that would

⁵⁹ M.Q. Patton, "Qualitative Interviewing," *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2002): 339–380.

⁶⁰ Gary King, Robert O. Keohane, and Sidney Verba, *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

⁶¹ Henry E. Brady and David Collier, eds., *Rethinking Social Inquiry: Diverse Tools, Shared Standards*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010).

⁶² Hamilton, *All the News That's Fit to Sell*.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 241.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

significantly impact the political, civic, and economic choices community members face, particularly in the area of public accountability.

I interviewed stakeholders with an insider's view of relevant issues in the community; people surveyed are those a journalist would turn to as *sources* for information about what is, or should be, *news*. Asking both elected officials and politically engaged people who are not in public decision-making roles may correct for the biases of any single perspective and triangulate issues that are likely to be significant to all members of the community. Survey responses provide a sense of specific stories or topics local media serving each community would ideally cover. This provides a normative benchmark sense of what optimal coverage would include. The interviews also yield insights about the ways civic leaders in a given community access and engage with information.

In selecting communities for the original study from which this essay is derived, I created a dashboard of characteristics such as population, population density, socioeconomics, educational attainment, and boundaries of governmental jurisdiction (such as the match-up between town government, county government, and legislative district). I chose four communities at the periphery of the Raleigh-Durham media market. The hypothesis was that communities with smaller populations and residents with lower socioeconomic status and education will have less accountability coverage and lower quality coverage because advertisers will find those audiences less desirable and thus media organizations will not be able to recoup the investment in journalism. Multiple jurisdictions require significantly greater reporting resources to cover adequately, which necessitates greater costs of newsgathering. Because literature demonstrates that suburban or exurban communities receive systematically different coverage⁶⁵ and that socioeconomic status, education, and race contribute to awareness of civic information,⁶⁶ the dashboard includes information about the socioeconomic and racial composition of those communities.

Siler City was the most disadvantaged of the four communities on all counts: it had the smallest population and the lowest household income, the lowest education, and the highest level of poverty. According to the 2010 Census, Siler City's median household income

⁶⁵ Baldwin, et al., *News Media Coverage of City Governments in 2009*.

⁶⁶ Tichenor, Donohue, and Olien, "Mass Media Flow and Differential Growth in Knowledge."

was \$30,629, forty-nine percent of adults had graduated high school or higher, and only ten percent had a bachelor's degree or higher, while twenty-five percent of people lived below the poverty level.⁶⁷ Furthermore, forty-two percent of households spoke Spanish at home⁶⁸—a remarkably high number that suggests language presents a unique challenge for information provision in this small community. The starkest statistic is the one that best expresses the dysfunction in this community's civic process: Hispanics comprise fifty percent of the population of Siler City⁶⁹ but as few as three percent of the registered voters.⁷⁰

I chose two stakeholders affiliated with local government, Siler City Commissioner John Grimes⁷¹ and Town Manager Joel Brower.⁷² To get the perspective of stakeholders from organizations that play a prominent role in the community, I interviewed Siler City Elementary School Principal Angie Brady-Andrews⁷³ and two employees at a drop-in support center for Latinos called El Vinculo Hispano (the Hispanic Liaison of Chatham County).⁷⁴

Each respondent was asked a standard set of survey questions about the community's information needs and the extent to which those needs are met. Survey questions were worded in order to avoid leading respondents to comment on what has been covered in the media and instead to topics that may not have received media coverage. The questions reflect the notion of diversity in agenda holding by asking about the "most important problems" facing the community. Questions that seek to identify which media outlets are significant in the community came after questions about content.

⁶⁷ U.S. Census Bureau, *2010 State & County QuickFacts: Siler City*.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ Author's analysis of 2011 data gathered from the Chatham County Board of Elections. Prior to 2005, voter registration did not include questions of ethnicity; 3% of registrants indicated they were Hispanic; adding all undesignated registrants to the total would make it 20%.

⁷¹ John Grimes, interview by author, March 1, 2011.

⁷² Joel Brower, interview by author, March 1, 2011.

⁷³ Angie Brady-Andrews, interview by author, March 1, 2011.

⁷⁴ Hernan Sedda and Sandra Forrester, joint interview by author, March 1, 2011.

After an initial set of questions designed to solicit those specific stories independent of the notion of media coverage, I followed up with a set of questions about the most reliable sources of information available and the extent to which media provide trustworthy news coverage and opportunities for public engagement.⁷⁵ Stakeholder responses helped identify specific narratives or decision points, beyond discussion of general issues.⁷⁶ In the case of Siler City, I interviewed additional stakeholders with first-hand experience navigating the politics and media environment in the county. These included Barry Hayes, owner of a local AM radio station;⁷⁷ Randall Rigsbee, managing editor of the

⁷⁵ Stakeholder questions:

- What do you believe is the most significant decision [the town or city] has faced in the past year to two years?
- What was the most significant event for people living in [the town or city] in the past year to two years?
- What is the most significant problem the community has faced in that time?
- What do you consider to be the three biggest challenges facing [the town or city] in the coming year?
- How do people in [the town or city] engage in public debate?
- What do you consider to be the most trustworthy source of information about [the town or city]?
- What sources do you, in your capacity as a public official, turn to for news about the community?
- Where do you believe people in [the town or city] get most of their news about the community?
- Is there a blog or website that is a popular source of information about [the town or city]?
- Is there a media outlet that provides a forum for public discussion?

⁷⁶ PEJ's 2010 Baltimore study provides an example of how to organize analysis around narratives of key interest. Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism, *How News Happens: A Study of the News Ecosystem in One American City*.

⁷⁷ Barry Hayes, phone interview by author, March 22, 2011

local weekly newspaper;⁷⁸ Paul Cuadros, a Siler City soccer coach, author, and UNC-Chapel Hill journalism professor;⁷⁹ Ilana Dubester, former Executive Director of El Vinculo Hispano;⁸⁰ and Randy Voller, mayor of Pittsboro, the seat of Chatham County.⁸¹ I asked those stakeholders questions about the extent to which local media covered the specific story threads identified, and what sort of coverage and news judgment were involved. I asked questions about staffing, duties, and the sense respondents have about the role of their media outlet, or media outlets more broadly, in the community.

IV. SILER CITY: THE DISENFRANCHISED MAJORITY

Turn the radio dial to 1570 AM in Siler City on a weekday morning, and you will hear the community's economic struggles given voice in WNCA's daily live call-in program. "Dial a Deal" is a kind of on-air swap shop, with listeners offering to sell farming equipment, guns, unused industrial supplies, and household items, for cash. The modest studio of the 5,000-watt station is visible from U.S. Highway 64, alongside shuttered factories that weigh heavily on the minds of community members. Like much of Siler City, WNCA's studios lag behind. The station has no digital equipment, and there is no archive of its programs, including the daily morning news commentary its owner provides.

Politics in Chatham County have grown more contentious over the years as the split between the rapidly growing northeastern part of the county, including the county seat of Pittsboro and bedroom communities to the Triangle, diverge, culturally and economically, from the traditional, agrarian, industrial western parts of the county, which are suffering acutely from the economic downturn. While rural western Chatham is primarily a farming economy, Siler City is industrial, with forty-five percent of the employed population working in manufacturing, as of 2010 Census surveys.⁸²

⁷⁸ Randall Rigsbee, interview by author, March 23, 2011.

⁷⁹ Paul Cuadros, interview by author, March 1, 2011.

⁸⁰ Ilana Dubester, phone interview by author, April 1, 2011.

⁸¹ Randall Voller, phone interview by author, April 2, 2011.

⁸² U.S. Census Bureau, *2010 Selected Economic Characteristics, 2006-2010 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates*, (Washington DC: Bureau of the Census, 2010), http://factfinder2.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=ACS_10_5YR_DP03 (accessed October 20, 2012).

Downtown at the corner of North Chatham Avenue and East Second Street are two signs of the changes to traditional Siler City. El Vinculo Hispano, the Hispanic Liaison of Chatham County, is a walk-in community center for Hispanics in the area. From its modest corner storefront office, it offers a food pantry, translation services, youth leadership programs, and counseling in navigating housing, driving, and other challenges community members face. Across the street is a coffee shop connected to the N.C. Arts Incubator, a partnership between downtown businesses, the N.C. Rural Center, Central Carolina Community College Small Business Assistance Center, and a set of sculptors, painters and photographers that work and display their work downtown.

A. Siler City's Recent History

In 2000, former Ku Klux Klan grand dragon David Duke came to Siler City for a rally against the influx of Hispanic immigrants.⁸³ More than ten years later, that event is etched into the collective consciousness of the town. The fact that local residents organized a race-baiting event that drew more than three hundred supporters in a town of six thousand is a reminder of the cultural fault lines that continue to exist as Siler City struggles to adapt economically and culturally.

The furniture and textile factories that North Carolina once was known for are shuttered in Siler City. For the past decade, poultry processing plants have been the town's major employer. The closure of the Pilgrim's Pride plant in May 2008 left 830 workers without jobs. "That was a major blow," said Siler City Commissioner John Grimes. "We've lost our manufacturing base in this county, and that's hurt our middle class. Hurt. Hurt."⁸⁴

The poultry plants recruited scores of Latino workers, which changed the town's demographics. Today, half of the community is Latino. That concentrated growth is making Siler City a Latino hub, according to Paul Cuadros, a Chatham County resident who coaches soccer at Jordan Matthews High School, "Not everybody works at the poultry plant. A lot of Latinos are bedroom Latinos. They live in Siler City, but they don't necessarily work in Siler City. They're working in Asheboro, they're in Sanford, in Greensboro. They're driving to

⁸³ Paul Cuadros, "When David Duke Comes Marching In," *Salon*, April 4, 2000, <http://www.salon.com/news/feature/2000/04/04/latinos> (accessed October 20, 2012).

⁸⁴ Grimes, interview.

work.”⁸⁵ They are also having children, which means Siler City is growing even as surrounding communities see their young people disperse and their median age rise. “These small towns that used to be traditional factory towns are dying out because the young people have left, the jobs have left, and all that’s left are old folks,” Cuadros said.⁸⁶ “Siler City doesn’t suffer from that problem. Siler City’s problem is one of growth.”⁸⁷ Yet the town’s political leadership continues to maintain a traditional mindset that views outsiders, especially those who speak a foreign language, with suspicion. Cuadros chronicled these tensions in his 2006 book: *A Home on the Field: How One Championship Soccer Team Inspires Hope for the Revival of Small Town America*.⁸⁸

The tension extends well beyond Chatham County. Federal and state immigration policies have combined with the economic downturn to put pressure on Latinos throughout North Carolina. Stricter controls over drivers’ licenses have made it impossible for many Latinos to drive legally; if they are caught driving without a license, they could be detained or deported.

B. *Siler City’s Top Stories*

Grimes, a former Chatham County commissioner who is serving his third term representing the town, owns and runs Cecil Budd Tire Company, the downtown business his father-in-law founded. On a recent weekday afternoon, he sat on a stool answering calls and checking the stock market online. He said town leaders are preoccupied, as everyone is, with the need for economic growth. “Jobs. Jobs. Jobs. That’s the name of it right now, jobs. I’ve got people coming by here all the time wanting to know if we’re hiring. I’m talking about educated people, people’s got a college education, wondering if we’ve got any opening to deliver tires or change tires. It’s tough.”⁸⁹

So when news came that the Delaware-based parent company of Siler City’s largest employer, Townsend poultry processing plant, filed

⁸⁵ Cuadros, interview.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Paul Cuadros, *A Home on the Field: How One Championship Soccer Team Inspired Hope for the Revival of Small Town America*, (New York: Harper, 2007).

⁸⁹ Grimes, interview.

for Chapter 11 bankruptcy in December 2010, local leaders were eager to find some solution that would keep the plant running and the workers employed. All stakeholders agreed this was the most significant event or problem to face the community in the past two years. "If this plant had shut down, that would have been the end of Siler City," Cuadros said.⁹⁰

In February 2011, Townsend announced it had sold its North Carolina division to Omtron, an affiliate of the Ukrainian egg producer Agrohholding Avangard, for \$24.9 million, and that the Siler City plant would continue to operate.⁹¹ "Some Ukrainians bought it," Grimes said. "We got together with the county and offered some economic incentives for them to make it appealing to them to purchase the plant." Grimes described "attracting new industry" as the "No. 1 challenge" in the coming year.⁹²

During a retreat in January 2011, the Chatham County Board of Education considered a proposal to redistrict K-8 schools in Chatham County. Five K-8 schools operate in sparsely populated areas, such as Moncure and Silk Hope. Operating these schools requires a higher per-pupil expenditure than conventional elementary and middle schools require. Moving rural K-8 students to Siler City and Pittsboro schools would have saved an estimated \$900,000 annually. In public meetings, parents voiced strong disapproval of the plan, and the board voted to abandon it in February.⁹³

Siler City Elementary School Principal Angie Brady-Andrews sends her own two children, aged eight and five, to the school where she has worked for eleven years. Her husband is a farmer in Silk Hope, and both are lifelong Chatham County residents. Siler City is a Title I school, with eighty-three percent of students economically disadvantaged.⁹⁴ Between sixty and sixty-five percent speak Spanish at home. She said that by creating a two-way Spanish-English

⁹⁰ Cuadros, interview.

⁹¹ Reuters, "Townsend, Inc. Sales Receive Bankruptcy Court Approval; Company Readies to Transition Its Operating Divisions," press release, February 18, 2011, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/02/18/idUS195257+18-Feb-2011+BW20110218> (accessed October 20, 2012).

⁹² Grimes, interview.

⁹³ Chatham County Board of Education, "Mid-Year Retreat Session," agenda and attached reports, January 14, 2011, http://chatham.k12.nc.us/modules/locker/files/get_group_file.phtml?gid=2348954&fid=14784800 (accessed October 15, 2012).

⁹⁴ Angie Brady-Andrews, interview by author, March 1, 2011.

immersion program, the school “created an opportunity to offer something extraordinary to both groups of children.”⁹⁵ UNC-Greensboro sends student teachers to Siler City and provides professional development resources to school staff, which Brady-Andrews cites as another challenge turned into opportunity for the school community. But she is concerned that the school board’s decision to abandon its K–8 restructuring plan leaves her school at a disadvantage she cannot compensate for with creativity. “These smaller schools, which are predominantly white and more economically advantaged, are getting additional services paid for out of local funds,” she explained.⁹⁶ “It’s not all equal.”⁹⁷

Nor is it all about money. In his 2000 account of the David Duke rally for Salon.com, Cuadros noted that the influx of Hispanic children to public schools, Siler City Elementary in particular, was a flashpoint that led up to the event. “White and black parents are afraid their children are not receiving a quality education because many of the Hispanic children do not speak English,” Cuadros wrote.⁹⁸ “This fear sparked an angry school board meeting last September, attended by more than 100 people, that was a first step toward the February rally.”⁹⁹

In 2011, when Republicans took control of the North Carolina state legislature for the first time since Reconstruction, they also took charge of the Chatham County Board of Commissioners. Among their first orders of business was drastic spending cuts, including the elimination of two staff positions from the county budget, Human Relations Executive Director and Sustainable Communities Director.¹⁰⁰ Hernan Sedda, Executive Director of El Vinculo Hispano, said that was the most significant recent decision that has affected

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Cuadros, “When David Duke Comes Marching In.”

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Rebekah L. Cowell, “Chatham County Commissioners Start Cutting – and Two People Lose Jobs,” *Independent Weekly*, January 3, 2011, <http://www.indyweek.com/triangulator/archives/2011/01/03/chatham-county-board-of-commissioners-eliminate-human-relations-director-position> (accessed October 20, 2011).

Latinos in the Siler City community.¹⁰¹ “I believe that position is very important to any community.”¹⁰²

County government typically provides social services, and the absence of the human relations position means the Vinculo must provide for even more of the needs of Chatham’s Latino residents. Sedda is an American citizen from Panama who lives in Greensboro and recently joined El Vinculo. He and his colleague Sandra Forrester explained the many roles their organization plays. One program includes walk-in assistance for basic needs. “If you consider that there’s a language barrier,” Forrester said, “everything that people need to survive, whether it’s food stamps or a literacy problem as well, Social Security, just guiding them, helping them through daily stuff, whether it’s connecting them to electric services, paying bills, referring them to a lawyer.”¹⁰³ The second program is youth leadership development and gang prevention. The third, funded by a Governor’s Crime Commission grant, assists the victims of crimes. “We do a lot of interpreting,” Forrester said.¹⁰⁴ “I think it’s a challenge also for law enforcement when there’s no one bilingual in the office, when you have half the population in Siler City Hispanic. I can imagine [that must be] quite a nightmare for the police. And also when you have undocumented people, maybe there’s a tendency not to report crime because they don’t want to speak with the police for fear of getting deported or arrested. That’s quite a unique challenge, I imagine, for a city administration.”¹⁰⁵

Sedda added that one growing challenge for their clients is the expiration of driver’s licenses issued in 2003, the last year the N.C. Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) accepted tax identification numbers; today, the DMV requires Social Security Numbers, which many Latinos do not have. “Those licenses are expiring. So people are either not driving . . . or they are driving, because there’s no options, driving around with no license, getting ticketed, getting fined. There’s no income, and some going to jail. For our community, I think that’s one of the biggest challenges. So loss of income, and having to drive further distances to find work with your family based here. And all the

¹⁰¹ Sedda and Forrester, joint interview.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

other problems that come when you can't pay your bills and you can't pay rent."¹⁰⁶

In 2009, Siler City completed a new drinking water reservoir, part of a \$19 million infrastructure improvement package that presents a challenge to leaders who are trying to keep taxes low.¹⁰⁷ For many years, Siler City faced an intense drinking water shortage that created another difficulty for attracting businesses and industry. Joel Brower, Siler City's Town Manager, cited the decision to "spend that kind of money" as the most significant decision the town has had to face in recent years. "We felt it was important, that we needed adequate water supply for the community," Brower said.¹⁰⁸ Making payments on \$16 million in debt over the next eighteen years will be difficult without raising the tax rate. Yet, Grimes and Brower say that keeping tax rates and water rates low is crucial to attracting employers.

C. News Sources in Siler City

Several years ago, Brower contacted the local phone company to see about expanding Siler City residents' toll-free calling area. The phone company agreed to set up a "trap" to monitor where the most calls were going. "About a month into this thing," Brower said, "the lady called me, and she said, 'It's kind of difficult because . . . it's not one area. The percentage is kind of split.'"¹⁰⁹ This did not surprise Brower. Siler City is nearly equally distant from Greensboro to the northwest, Chapel Hill to the northeast, Asheboro to the west, and Sanford to the southeast. "We're like the hub of a wheel, and we've got citizens whose allegiance is all around."¹¹⁰ Some watch the Greensboro TV news; others watch Raleigh's. Some daily newspaper readers subscribe to the *News & Record*, others to the *News & Observer*, and others to the *Sanford Herald*, a daily owned by the Paxton Media Group, serving Lee, Chatham, Harnett and Moore counties.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ "Charles L. Turner Reservoir Project," Town of Siler City, http://www.silercity.org/index.asp?Type=B_BASIC&SEC={77C95A40-2427-4104-9413-537BB73C2306} (accessed October 15, 2012).

¹⁰⁸ Brower, interview.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

The *Chatham News* is Siler City's only dedicated print newspaper. It is one of two weekly editions published by the Chatham News & Record Publishing Company, based in Siler City and owned by Alan D. Resch, who serves as Editor-Publisher. A staff of one managing editor, three reporters, and one sports writer/photographer produces both the *News* and the Pittsboro edition, the *Chatham Record*. The two papers have a combined circulation of seven thousand, with slightly more than half distributed in Siler City. The *News* and *Record* do have a website, but it contains only the headlines and first few paragraphs of the current week's news stories.¹¹¹ No digital archive exists, either on the site or in any searchable, archival database. Reading past issues of the *News* or the *Record* requires access to print archives, kept at the library and the papers' offices.

Randall Rigsbee is managing editor and has been with the *News* and *Record* since 1996. He assigns and reports news and writes a weekly editorial. "We wear a lot of hats here," he said after a morning of inserting ads into the print edition and coordinating office maintenance.¹¹² Rigsbee explained that the two editions are "very much the same."¹¹³ Resch wants all stories to appear in both editions, so the difference is in placement of the stories on pages A1 and A2, "the front and jump pages." The papers cover Chatham County government, Siler City and Pittsboro town government, and occasionally Goldston, a town of fewer than four hundred residents. "I actually cover the Chatham County commissioners, so I spend a lot of time at those meetings," Rigsbee said.¹¹⁴ He said he tries to cover the Chatham County Planning board. He often writes hard news, meeting coverage, and features for a single week's paper. "It really is just a matter of how many hours there are in the day."¹¹⁵

Rigsbee loves his job, but he is honest about what he sees as the paper's limitations. He wishes the paper did more enterprise reporting and magazine-style news features of the type published in the *Independent Weekly*, a Durham-based, metro-oriented free weekly

¹¹¹ *The Chatham News*, <http://www.thechathamnews.com> (accessed October 20, 2012).

¹¹² Rigsbee, interview.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

newspaper.¹¹⁶ “A lot of times, people will call me and say, ‘I read this in the *Independent*. How come y’all aren’t doing this kind of reporting?’ It’s because I just spent six hours in a county commissioners meeting, you know?”¹¹⁷ About a year before our interview, the paper lost its only Spanish-speaking reporter. “I felt a lot more comfortable having him on the staff,” Rigsbee said, “but we get by fine.”¹¹⁸ Perhaps the most notable limitation of the newsroom is its production side; the *News* and *Record* are still produced using paste up, rather than desktop publishing. Wax-coated photos, ads, and headlines adorn the walls of the production area, mementos of past editions. The presses are through double doors, in the back of the building.

“They’ve got good reporters over there at the *Chatham News*,” Cuadros said. “They win awards. But it’s a weekly. And issues that happen during the week are never covered until the following week. So there’s a lack of timeliness with a lot of the stories.”¹¹⁹

Asked whether the weekly deadlines are a frustration when it comes to reporting breaking news, Rigsbee replied, “Sure, I could give you all kinds of examples. Only on rare occasions is breaking news urgent enough to merit online updates. We’re not all that geared toward our online presence,” Rigsbee said.¹²⁰ “We’ve actually won some [North Carolina] Press Association awards for it . . . but it’s hardly my focus.”¹²¹ Capacity remains an issue.

Competition with metro news organizations has dropped off, Rigsbee said. “When this economy went south, some of our biggest competitors sort of dropped out of Chatham County. The *News & Observer* had been [competitive] for many years. They seemed to focus on Chatham County, and then they stopped. We get a little bit from them. The Durham and Chapel Hill papers and the Sanford Herald also like to report on Chatham County.”¹²² (The Durham

¹¹⁶ Disclosure: This author was a reporter for the *Independent Weekly* from January 2003 to August 2009, a fact known to Rigsbee prior to the interview.

¹¹⁷ Rigsbee, interview.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Cuadros, interview.

¹²⁰ Rigsbee, interview.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Ibid.

Herald-Sun, *Chapel Hill Herald*, and *Sanford Herald* are owned by the same parent company, Paxton.)

Asked where most people in Siler City get news about the community, Sedda said, "Fifty percent *La Conexion* and *Que Pasa*, because fifty percent are Latinos."¹²³ *Que Pasa* is a weekly Spanish-language newspaper with Charlotte, Greensboro, and Raleigh-Durham editions. It circulates more than 67,000 copies statewide, with about eight hundred copies of the Greensboro edition in Siler City.¹²⁴ *La Conexion* is a Raleigh-based, Spanish-language weekly, independently owned and published by an immigration attorney, with a circulation of seven thousand.¹²⁵ Dubester said *Que Pasa* covers state issues and laws that affect Latinos. "It's a regional newspaper, so there's only so much time that their reporters can devote, but they are always on the lookout for stories and do a good job of staying in touch with local leaders. If they're told about an event or story, they'll often cover it."¹²⁶

WNCA radio is the only daily media outlet dedicated to Siler City. The AM station is owned by Barry Hayes, who provides daily morning news commentaries from 6 to 9 a.m. Asked what he believes to be the station's role in reporting on pressing issues, Hayes responds, "As the only daily, even hourly news source in Siler City, WNCA's responsibility and duty to report is major, and it is incumbent upon us."¹²⁷ Hayes employs five announcers who provide a few minutes of news and commentary during breaks from the beach music programming. The station also airs hourly updates from the N.C. News Network, a statewide news operation owned by Raleigh-based Curtis Media.¹²⁸ Hayes said he attends town commission meetings and then reports on them the next day, but he doesn't send any of his staff. "I can't afford to have the staff go there," he said.¹²⁹ Nor does Hayes record audio of the meetings to play on the radio. "I have tried

¹²³ Sedda and Forrester, joint interview.

¹²⁴ Circulation Verification Council, "Audit Period January 1, 2009 – December 31, 2009: *Que Pasa*," <http://www.cvcaudit.com/media/index.aspx>.

¹²⁵ Morgan, *An Information Community Case Study: The Research Triangle, N.C.*, 16.

¹²⁶ Dubester, phone interview.

¹²⁷ Hayes, phone interview.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*

recording, and it's more trouble than it's worth. Plus," he added, "I think it intimidates the commissioners, and they don't speak freely."¹³⁰

About forty-five to fifty minutes of Hayes' morning program is his "live, local news," and an additional ten to fifteen minutes is listener calls. More than half an hour is N.C. News Network programming. When asked what mix of news and commentary comprise his news portion of the show, Hayes replied, "It's about ninety percent content and ten percent commentary."¹³¹

Other stakeholders characterized that mix differently. "The radio station doesn't do any real reporting. It's just Barry," Cuadros said.¹³² "He may read from the paper and read what people are saying."¹³³

"I love Barry Hayes, he's a great guy, he's really smart," Rigsbee said.¹³⁴ "But his [show] is so much opinion. He gets away with murder. He'll say things that just turn out not to be the case. But I tell ya, I hear from his listeners. He does have a big audience, and they'll call and say, 'Is this true?' We'll check it out. Sometimes it is; sometimes it's not."¹³⁵

There is no text or audio archive of Hayes' morning programs. The only record available for research was the "issues and programs" report, which Hayes made available upon request, as per the Federal Communications Commission's regulations 73.3526 requiring commercially licensed broadcasters to maintain a file for public inspection.¹³⁶ The regulations state that the issues and programs list should be produced quarterly. "The list must briefly describe both the issue and the programming during which the issue was discussed,

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Cuadros, interview.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Rigsbee, interview.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Federal Communications Commission, "Requirement to Maintain a Public Inspection File," Enforcement Bureau, Broadcast, <http://www.fcc.gov/eb/broadcast/pif.html> (accessed October 20, 2012).

including the date and time that each such program was aired and its title and duration.”¹³⁷

Hayes’ handwritten document contains brief quarterly entries of two to five lines. Two recent examples:

10-1-10 Town is still experiencing a drop in reservoir level. County elections coming up has reached fever-pitch among county commissioners candidates.

1-3-11 Town went back on water restrictions near end of November due to receding water levels in town reservoirs. Townsend, Inc. the largest employer and water user, has declared bankruptcy. Community is greatly concerned that plant will close.

WNCA used to air Spanish language programming five nights a week through an arrangement with El Vinculo Hispano that lasted from November 1998 to December 2010. Asked why the program was discontinued, Hayes said, “Lack of monetary support.” He said support “had dwindled” until the station’s budget required that he “cut the hours back and finally had to discontinue it.”¹³⁸ He added that the need for Spanish-language programming no longer exists. “My feeling is that most of the Hispanics that live here are fluent in English now They can get the news off the English broadcast just as well as anyone. I don’t encounter any Hispanics anymore that don’t speak English.”¹³⁹

Dubester, who was executive director of El Vinculo at the time, recalled the matter differently. She said the organization paid Hayes \$400 to \$450 per month for a half-hour show from 7 to 7:30 p.m. on weeknights. Some nights were aimed at teenagers; others were call-in programs. She said El Vinculo was reluctant to do business with Hayes. “We broadcast via WNCA because it was the only choice, not because we wanted to support the station. Barry Hayes makes no secret of the fact that he doesn’t like immigrants,” she said.¹⁴⁰ Items in

¹³⁷ “The Public and Broadcasting: How to Get the Most Service from Your Local Station,” Federal Communications Commission, The Media Bureau, revised July 2008, http://www.fcc.gov/mb/audio/decdoc/public_and_broadcasting.html#_Toc202587577.

¹³⁸ Hayes, phone interview.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Dubester, phone interview.

Hayes' issues and programs report support this statement. Then in 2006, immigrants and their allies marched through Siler City. "Thousands of people came from all over the state," Dubester said.¹⁴¹ "Workers felt empowered and several called the [United Food and Commercial Workers International] for help in organizing poultry workers."¹⁴² El Vinculo was not involved in union organizing, which took place in 2007, but the organization decided to allow union representatives on the air, Dubester said. "We debated internally and decided to allow them to present on our radio show because the information was important for the community, and many clients had questions about what was happening. Union organizing is a legal and protected activity."¹⁴³ Dubester said Hayes had learned some Spanish and listened in on the program. "He was very concerned about what we were saying on the radio, and he wanted to monitor it. After that show, he banned us from the radio station. We couldn't work out our differences, so we spent a month rebroadcasting because he wouldn't let us into the studio."¹⁴⁴

El Vinculo's program ended in 2007 after a dispute over control of content. "He was demanding censorship rights over our programs," Dubester said.¹⁴⁵ "We were paying for our air time, censorship was uncalled for and out of the question as far as we were concerned. After about six years of broadcasting, we canceled the contract and the programs."¹⁴⁶ She said Hayes called back a few months later, "but he still wanted to have control over the topics discussed in our program. His list of 'censored' material was so broad that it would be useless for us to try to accommodate, even if we were willing, which we were not."¹⁴⁷ (Hayes' entry on the matter, dated 10-2-07, reads: "'La Charla' [the name of the program] does not wish to continue program unless they can have 'free-reign' to politicize beyond the boundaries of public-affairs. Also possible budgetary constraints.")

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

The third main source of information in Siler City is not a conventional news source. Gene Galin¹⁴⁸ owns and operates the Chatham County Online BBS, an online bullet board system,¹⁴⁹ and the Chatham Chatlist, a subscriber-based e-mail list.¹⁵⁰ Galin also owns a monthly print shopper publication, *Chatham Journal*,¹⁵¹ but his online properties have considerably more reach. *Chatham Journal Weekly* repurposes some posts from the BBS and Chatlist and includes timely posts of county commissioner meeting minutes and short posts about high-school theater, sports, and community events.¹⁵² Residents use the Chatlist to exchange information, buy and sell items, and post questions. A digest of email posts is delivered daily. "It's really good," Forrester said. "People are making continuous comments, whether it's government, politics, lost animals, everything goes on there, and it comes out every day. I think it's got pretty wide reach to people in the county."¹⁵³

Whether the Chatlist is a news source is open to debate. Rigsbee thinks not. "I know Gene Galin who operates that thing, and he's a really interesting guy and I really like what he's doing with it. I don't know of any other community that has anything like it. So I'm not knocking it by any means, but I don't really think of it as a news source at all, and a lot of it I find is just not true." Rigsbee said.¹⁵⁴ "It's unreliable, it's a lot of opinion, and that's OK."¹⁵⁵ Yet Rigsbee recognized, with a certain amount of frustration, that the Chatlist may be a substitute for conventional news. "There are times when I know people have posted questions on there, and it's something we've

¹⁴⁸ Multiple attempts to reach Gene Galin for an interview were unsuccessful.

¹⁴⁹ Chatham County BBS, <http://chatham-county-nc.com/bulletinboard/index.php> (accessed October 20, 2012).

¹⁵⁰ Subscribers can sign up via <http://www.chathamchatlist.com> (accessed October 20, 2012).

¹⁵¹ *The Chatham Journal*, <http://chathamjournal.com> (accessed October 20, 2012).

¹⁵² *The Chatham Journal Weekly*, <http://www.chathamjournal.com/weekly> (accessed October 20, 2012). Gene Galin has also experimented with online video. *Chatham Journal News, Livestream*, <http://www.livestream.com/chathamjournal> (accessed October 20, 2012).

¹⁵³ Sedda and Forrester, joint interview.

¹⁵⁴ Rigsbee, interview.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

written about. And I'm thinking, if you'd read it, you'd know, or if you trusted us or whatever."¹⁵⁶

The BBS allows for more real-time conversations. Threads vary, but the most active topics pertain to politics. Rigsbee said the timeliness makes the bulletin board more useful to him. "If there's an issue going on . . . sometimes I will go on there and read, just to get a sense of what people are saying or how people think about it."¹⁵⁷ Many posters use pseudonyms, which stakeholders say affects the trustworthiness of the information and the tone of conversation. Dubester said she has been the subject of attacks on both the Chatlist and the BBS. "I don't ever pay attention to the bulletin board," she said.¹⁵⁸ "It's even more vicious than the Chatlist. The fact that people can hide behind pseudonyms just emboldens them to write awful personal attacks, lies, and disrespectful comments."¹⁵⁹

Nevertheless, Cuadros said the BBS is a source of information for many people in Chatham County. "The media here in Chatham County is ad hoc," Cuadros said.¹⁶⁰ "It's not well reported. Instead, information is passed between people and groups of people here through rumor, sometimes a lot of misinformation, a lot of political slanting and bias. Currently, it's probably being driven more by blogging than by traditional media like Barry or the newspaper."¹⁶¹ He sees the partisan tone and lack of vetted information as symptomatic of a lack of daily news. "The bulletin board that Gene provides is a valuable service in that people can actually talk and exchange information," he said.¹⁶² "But it only goes so far, and it only has as much expertise as the bloggers on there. And unfortunately, they're not real reporters. They are partisans in whatever positions they hold."¹⁶³

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Dubester, phone interview.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Cuadros, interview.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

Informal communication is a significant source of information in town, according to stakeholders. Forrester said she hears of news through word-of-mouth, interagency exchange, "rumors from clients that you follow up on."¹⁶⁴ Brady-Andrews said she believed most people in Siler City get their news about the community from the Sidewalk Cafe, a downtown eatery and gathering place, and "the barbershop," followed by the *Chatham News* and WNCA. "I think, because we only have a paper that comes out once a week, it lends itself to us just having conversations. That's probably where some misinformation gets spread, too, because it's not always coming directly from the source," she said.¹⁶⁵

D. Coverage of Top Stories in Siler City

Coverage of the Townsend story illustrates the lack of timeliness and reporting capacity among conventional news outlets. Townsend filed for bankruptcy on December 19, 2010. The news appeared on the front of the December 23 issue of the *Chatham News* (ill-timed, as it appeared next to the banner headline, "Merry Christmas!"). There was no mention of Townsend in the December 30 paper, which was mostly dedicated to year-in-review content.¹⁶⁶ On Friday, February 18, 2011, Townsend's sale to Omtron was announced. The *Chatham News* ran a front-page story on the sale the following Thursday, February 24. On Friday, February 25, the *News & Observer* published a story about the sale. Cuadros pointed out that the *N&O's* story "was probably the most comprehensive work that was done. But that was a week late."¹⁶⁷

The impact of the sale is an ongoing issue for Siler City. In its February 24 story, the *Chatham News* reported on incentives that state and local leaders offered Omtron and quoted local leaders, including Brower, saying they were told by the new owners that the plant would continue to operate without job losses. The following week, the paper quoted the state agriculture commissioner saying that

¹⁶⁴ Sedda and Forrester, joint interview.

¹⁶⁵ Brady-Andrews, interview.

¹⁶⁶ Weekly publications frequently arrange holiday publishing schedules to produce copy ahead of time, giving their staffers time off during the week after Christmas.

¹⁶⁷ Cuadros, interview.

Omtron would “ensure that an estimated 1,500 jobs stay in our state.”¹⁶⁸

There was little follow-up that spring. A search in Lexis-Nexis Academic and America’s Newspapers showed only a March 17 story in the *News & Observer* about Omtron’s business strategy to export dark meat and a March 23 guest opinion article in the *Durham Herald-Sun* urging government officials to protect the Rocky River from the plant’s effluent.

Rigsbee recognized the significance of the Townsend story, but said the paper has not yet done justice to it. “We do the best we can” with a small staff, Rigsbee said, “We haven’t saturated it like I think we should. . . . One challenge, we’re still trying to get on top of that story, is we don’t have a good contact with the buyer.”¹⁶⁹ While the paper has covered Townsend primarily as a jobs story, Rigsbee said he recognizes there are other significant aspects to it, such as the environmental impact.

Hayes said his program provided “full coverage from bankruptcy filing to sale to reorganization.”¹⁷⁰ He said he relied on official sources. “We’re in constant contact with the management team over at Townsend. We also saw media releases, and we saw coverage that came in on the Internet.”¹⁷¹ Asked which sites he used as sources, Hayes replied that he checked reports from the company that handled the bankruptcy. “You know, we had a Townsend employee working here, a Hispanic fellow, and we never compromised him to pry for information. We didn’t want him to lose his job. We always went through the front door and contacted the Townsend manager.”¹⁷²

Brady-Andrews said rumors are circulating among people in Siler City that, contrary to public statements by the company and public officials, workers at the plant have been fired and are being told to reapply for their jobs. Investigating the story would require sources beyond Townsend management; many of the workers are vulnerable, legally and economically, and most speak Spanish.

¹⁶⁸ Mike Gates, “Poultry Producer Offered Incentives to Retain Jobs,” *The Chatham News*, March 3, 2011, p.1-A.

¹⁶⁹ Rigsbee, interview.

¹⁷⁰ Hayes, phone interview.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² Ibid.

The Chatham County Schools redistricting plan received coverage in the Chatham News as well as metro publications such as the *News & Observer* and WRAL-TV.¹⁷³ Coverage was driven by public meetings and quotes from parents unhappy with the proposal. “We covered that pretty extensively,” Rigsbee said.¹⁷⁴ “It was hard not to, they had so many community meetings on this. And the outrage over the proposal.”¹⁷⁵

Brady-Andrews said that while the issue received considerable coverage, she believes the stories were unbalanced, in that they focused on the testimony of unhappy parents and ignored deeper questions of equity. She said that at Siler City Elementary, “We get no additional local funding above what our regular allotment is, so our per pupil expenditure is \$1,033 less than the school with the highest per pupil expenditure. That’s not in the media.”¹⁷⁶

Cuadros said conventional media could not keep up with the pace of the debate over the school redistricting issue. “It became a huge, conflated issue, all of which was driven by the blogs, certainly not by the traditional media here. Not by the radio, certainly not by the newspaper. The newspaper’s too slow to really capture what was happening.”¹⁷⁷ Hearings took place over a period of several days and drew hundreds of people. The issue was moving fast, Cuadros said, “so the bulletin board was abuzz with commentary of people discussing what the plan entailed, how much it would cost, what it would mean for the schools, how people felt about it and so forth.”¹⁷⁸ Cuadros observed that people posted details of the proposed school system budget, trying to determine areas that might be cut. One called Cuadros, asking for help to determine why someone in the central office of the school system was affiliated with the North Carolina High School Athletic Association and was paid more than \$100,000. “It’s a good question,” Cuadros said.¹⁷⁹ So he called the employee and asked.

¹⁷³ Example story: WRAL, “Chatham Considering Grade Shifts in Schools to Save Money,” WRAL.com, January 26, 2011, <http://www.wral.com/news/education/story/9007851> (accessed October 20, 2012).

¹⁷⁴ Rigsbee, interview.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷⁶ Brady-Andrews, interview.

¹⁷⁷ Cuadros, interview.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

The employee explained that the athletic association provided his salary to the school system. "So Chatham County Public Schools is not paying a dime for this individual. It's just a pay-through. But the bloggers thought this to be like a sinister thing. So when I told this person this is just a pay-through, the person said, 'Well, I never would have found that out.' And I said, all you've got to do is call the guy. It took me ten minutes to do. They said, 'That's not what I do. I'm not a reporter.' . . . What that says to me is that the bloggers are snatching information on the web, trying to interpret it in the way that they can, using each other to interpret this information, but not actually going to the source."¹⁸⁰

The Chatham BBS was not the only online source of information about the schools story. The Chatham County Schools provided some updates on its own blog and website.¹⁸¹ And a group of concerned residents started an open group on Facebook that had more than nine hundred members as April 2011.¹⁸² Brady-Andrews was aware of the group and said, "One of our board members was a member of that group and tried, at times, to post information to clear up the misinformation that was being stated, or just to provide more information."¹⁸³ Cuadros found it interesting that Facebook emerged for the first time as a significant forum for civic discussion in Chatham. He believes the lack of anonymity made a difference. "It still suffers from the same symptoms, a lack of vetting, reportage, fact-checking, confrontation. It still suffers from the same blogging problems. But at least people have to own their content, so generally it's less nasty than the bulletin board. That discussion was very, very different in tone than Gene's bulletin board, where people are anonymous and can say crazy things."¹⁸⁴

Coverage of the human relations position was mostly limited to coverage of the overall budget cuts. Rigsbee said the cuts were "no surprise," since the Republican majority had campaigned on the issue.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ Chatham County Schools, 'Hot Topics' in Chatham County Schools (blog), <http://chathamcountyschoolshottopics.blogspot.com> (accessed October 20, 2012).

¹⁸² "Chatham County Schools - Redistricting Plan," Facebook page, https://www.facebook.com/home.php#!/home.php?sk=group_145981882124426 (accessed October 20, 2012).

¹⁸³ Brady-Andrews, interview.

¹⁸⁴ Cuadros, interview.

“There were a lot of folks who were not happy with that decision. And a lot who were.”¹⁸⁵ Rigsbee’s January 6 news story on the commissioners’ meeting quoted one Pittsboro resident who spoke against the decision.¹⁸⁶ Rigsbee wrote an editorial on the issue the following week titled, “Cuts sometime painful but bottom line matters,” in which he concluded, “the three new commissioners cannot be faulted for fulfilling campaign promises. The timing was right, too.”¹⁸⁷ Hayes said he covered the story “as part of the bigger picture of cutting expenses and redundant positions in the efforts to return to constitutional government.”¹⁸⁸ Dubester said *Que Pasa* covered the issue for the Spanish-speaking community.¹⁸⁹

The driver’s license story has received coverage as a statewide issue in the Spanish papers, Dubester said.¹⁹⁰ But Chatham media have yet to look at it as a local story. “That is something I don’t think we have touched on here at all. It’s a good idea,” Rigsbee said.¹⁹¹ Hayes said, “This was a state issue, and this was covered pretty much on the N.C. News Network. We have not covered this specifically as a local issue. Not in any great depth, anyway. I was not even aware of some of it.”¹⁹²

E. Public Debate in Siler City and Chatham County

Most stakeholders said they did not know of a forum for debate beyond public meetings. Brower mentioned that serving on volunteer boards was an avenue for citizens to “express their opinions and concerns.”¹⁹³ John Grimes said citizens provided feedback to him in

¹⁸⁵ Rigsbee, interview.

¹⁸⁶ Randall Rigsbee, “County Board Cuts Expenses,” *The Chatham News*, January 6, 2011, p. 1-A.

¹⁸⁷ Randall Rigsbee, “Cuts Sometime Painful but Bottom Line Matters,” *The Chatham News*, January 13, 2011, p. 6-A.

¹⁸⁸ Hayes, phone interview.

¹⁸⁹ Dubester, phone interview.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

¹⁹¹ Rigsbee, interview.

¹⁹² Hayes, phone interview.

¹⁹³ Brower, interview.

person. "They stop you on the street," he said.¹⁹⁴ He said interacting with citizens "in the public arena, meeting in the cafe, restaurants, church, wherever you come across," was an important source of information for him as a public official.¹⁹⁵ Sedda and Forrester said there are few opportunities for public debate among the Hispanic community outside of church.

Rigsbee said the newspaper has an open line of communication with people in the community who suggest stories and sometimes criticize the paper's coverage.¹⁹⁶ The newspaper has a policy of not publishing articles by people seeking to promote their own product or business. Asked if an advertiser had ever objected to a story, Rigsbee said, "That has happened. We want to be good to our advertisers, we don't want to alienate them, but I'm not going to change the content of the paper for an advertiser."¹⁹⁷

The *Chatham News* publishes some letters to the editor; Rigsbee estimated the average was two per week, but he would like to publish more. He said he would like for the *News* to provide a forum for public debate. "We're here for that," he said.¹⁹⁸ But there is little capacity to expand that role online. The website does not accept comments or have a forum where readers can post.

Barry Hayes' program allows call-ins from citizens. But WNCA can be heard only in Siler City and parts of southern Orange County, depending on the weather. Hayes' commentaries sometimes address county government issues, but residents in the county seat of Pittsboro can neither hear nor respond. This, combined with the lack of any archive, is a source of tension among those he criticizes.

"Once, our Board member asked for the transcript of the news," Dubester said. "He was saying some very nasty things about El Vinculo and about me during the time when the United Way withdrew our funding. A board member of ours heard it on WNCA and called the station to try to get a transcript, and the answer was something like, 'It's not for public information. We don't share that.' Even though

¹⁹⁴ Grimes, interview.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁹⁶ Rigsbee, interview.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

they just broadcast it live in the air, the transcript is not available to the public.”¹⁹⁹

Pittsboro Mayor Randy Voller, a prominent Democrat in Chatham County, said he has offered to appear on Hayes’ program, but Hayes declined. Voller said he is often the target of Hayes’ political invective. He said he has a recording of Hayes calling for listeners to throw him “a blanket party,” which means a gang assault on a person for the purpose of intimidation. Voller said the comment disturbed him.²⁰⁰

“One could sit here and say, is that license being used to its best effect?” Cuadros said.²⁰¹ “The public airwaves? You own it, I own it. The answer probably is no, in the sense that it’s not really providing any information. The answer might be yes, given the size of the community. It doesn’t really reflect a lot of the community here, in the sense that Siler City is fifty percent Hispanic now, and it doesn’t reflect that. It may reflect Barry Hayes, what he wants to do. He’s got the license, he’s got the broadcast equipment, and it reflects his personality.”²⁰²

Voller is also a subject of criticism on the Chatham BBS, but he has been banned from accessing the site after a conflict with Galin. In July 2010, Voller posted a link to a story in the *News & Observer* about a legal judgment against Jason A. Feingold, editor of the website “Home in Henderson.” In that case, a former Vance County commissioner sought the identities of anonymous commenters who he claimed had made defamatory statements about him. Amanda Martin, a Raleigh attorney who often represents media organizations in First Amendment cases, defended Feingold, but Superior Court Judge Howard Manning ordered Feingold to turn over information about the posters. “Do you have any thoughts about the ruling and/or the case?” Voller wrote. Galin responded with a defense of anonymous posts, and of his readers’ ability to discern credibility for themselves:

Anonymous authors historically have made contributions to the “progress of mankind.” There are benign reasons that an author may choose to remain anonymous: fear of retaliation or reprisal, the desire to

¹⁹⁹ Dubester, phone interview.

²⁰⁰ Voller, phone interview.

²⁰¹ Cuadros, interview.

²⁰² Ibid.

avoid social ostracism, the wish to protect privacy, or the fear that the audience's biases will distort the meaning of the work. "Anonymity is a shield from the tyranny of the majority" without which public discourse would certainly suffer.

Voller said the problem with anonymous posts is that people do not take responsibility for the things they write, and it is difficult to confront critics on equal terms or to evaluate the source of information. "You have a lot of information on that BBS that's either half true, a quarter true or not true, but it's hard for people to sort out what's true," he said.²⁰³ "There will usually be a kernel of truth surrounded by a patina of bullshit. It's very difficult for the unfamiliar reader to know the difference."²⁰⁴

Galín and Voller exchanged personal messages, and the following evening, Galín posted again to the BBS in a more defensive posture. "If you're thinking about threatening me with a lawsuit," he wrote, ". . . have your attorney draw up the formal complaint and send it to me."

From that point on, Voller could no longer log in to the BBS from any of his computers, at home or at work. Anyone who had ever used Voller's Wi-Fi network (which uses Voller's IP addresses) was also banned, meaning that many of the county's progressive politicians were now unable to engage in conversation on the BBS. "Basically what he did was cut off anyone who had a moderate to progressive voice from posting on there."²⁰⁵ Voller tried to interest local media in writing a story about his expulsion. Hayes declined to have him on the air to discuss the matter, Voller said, and Resch at the *Chatham News and Record* said he would not consider the event newsworthy unless Voller filed suit. Already feeling marginalized by the tenor of the debate on Chatham BBS, political progressives took their outrage over Voller's excommunication and launched a rival site, Chathamist. Both sites continued to operate as of April 2011.²⁰⁶

Brady-Andrews said Siler City is lacking in opportunities for truly inclusive debate. "I don't feel that there's an ongoing dialogue between

²⁰³ Voller, phone interview.

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

²⁰⁵ Voller, phone interview.

²⁰⁶ Chathamist: Life in Chatham County, <http://chathamist.com/forum> (accessed October 20, 2012).

different stakeholders in the city and the local government,” she said.²⁰⁷ Asked if there were an online forum, she did not mention the BBS or the Chatlist, but expressed concern that an online forum might not be “comfortable” for older residents. She said including immigrants and first-generation U.S. citizens in discussion is an important challenge, and she expressed concern that the county’s minority African American population may feel increasingly marginalized.²⁰⁸

“I’m concerned by the lack of understanding and the tolerance,” particularly with regard to conversations about immigration issues, she said.²⁰⁹ “I worry about the acceptance of our children and what the future’s going to be like for them growing up in a society and a world where they are marginalized and where they feel like they don’t have a voice. . . . I feel like what’s happening here is an example of what’s happening in lots of rural areas all across the country, and maybe even in suburban areas too. It just doesn’t bode well for the future of our city, county, state, nation, when we still struggle so much with having an understanding of people who are different from us.”²¹⁰

V. FINDINGS: THE STORIES NOT TOLD IN SILER CITY

Siler City is a community that lacks the ability to talk to itself. Evidence for this conclusion lies in two main findings: First, there was a telling contrast between the pressing issues raised by stakeholders involved in the Latino community, and the lack of awareness of those issues by other stakeholders.²¹¹ Second, no media outlet managed to get ahead of the biggest and most intensely local story facing the community, the fate of the Townsend chicken plant. In July 2011, after stakeholder interviews were completed, Townsend announced it would shut down its facilities in Siler City. News of the closure followed public statements by the owners, and was reported in

²⁰⁷ Brady-Andrews, interview.

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

²⁰⁹ Ibid.

²¹⁰ Ibid.

²¹¹ This contrast was in no way reflected by the local media in the sense that Chaffee and Wilson discuss diverse agendas in “media-rich” communities; in fact, media stakeholders seemed unaware of some crucial issues that Latinos raised.

worried tones by the business reporter for the *News & Observer*²¹² and by the *Sanford Herald*, which subsequently ran a story quoting county and state agricultural officials who were attempting to negotiate with the plants owners.²¹³ Missing from these stories were the perspectives of workers at the plant who may have shed light on rumored conflicts between the new owners and the Latino workforce. These rumors emerged multiple times during stakeholder interviews. To investigate those rumors would have required a reporter with Spanish language skills who could take the time to earn the trust of the subjects.

The weekly newspaper, the *Chatham News*, provides the only source of verified journalism in Siler City. Some sources said the paper "leaned right," but said it did a good job covering local issues. Its major flaw is timeliness and frequency. The owner of WNCA regards his AM radio station as a daily news source, but there is significantly more commentary mixed in than he acknowledges—if stakeholders and his own issues and programs report are accurate.

Cuadros put the problem succinctly: "The news here in Chatham is no longer the kind of news that can be reported on a weekly basis."²¹⁴ Residents fill the information vacuum through informal conversation, rumor, speculation, and ad hoc information gathering. Stakeholders complain that there is little accountability for public comments, either for Hayes or for the anonymous comments on the Chatham BBS. Anonymity contributes to a lack of vetted, factual information.

In a town where the majority of residents are Hispanic or Latino, there is no Spanish language outlet for local news. The newspaper has no Spanish-speaking reporters, and while Spanish-language papers do cover state issues that affect Latinos, there is no consistent coverage of town and county government bodies available in Spanish. Latinos feel disenfranchised from Hayes' station. There is no Spanish-language BBS. "The Latino community here is completely voiceless, powerless, and has no representation whatsoever in local government," Cuadros

²¹² David Bracken, "Chicken Plant Closings Deal Blow to Two N.C. Cities," *Charlotte Observer*, July 30, 2011, [http://nl.newsbank.com/nl-search/we/Archives?p_product=CO&p_theme=co&p_action=search&p_maxdocs=200&s_dispstring=chicken%20AND%20date\(7/30/2011%20to%207/30/2011\)&p_field_date-o=YMD_date&p_params_date-o=date:B,E&p_text_date-o=7/30/2011%20to%207/30/2011\)&p_field_advanced-o=&p_text_advanced-o=\(chicken\)&xcal_numdocs=20&p_perpage=10&p_sort=YMD_date:D&xcal_useweights=no](http://nl.newsbank.com/nl-search/we/Archives?p_product=CO&p_theme=co&p_action=search&p_maxdocs=200&s_dispstring=chicken%20AND%20date(7/30/2011%20to%207/30/2011)&p_field_date-o=YMD_date&p_params_date-o=date:B,E&p_text_date-o=7/30/2011%20to%207/30/2011)&p_field_advanced-o=&p_text_advanced-o=(chicken)&xcal_numdocs=20&p_perpage=10&p_sort=YMD_date:D&xcal_useweights=no) (accessed October 20, 2012).

²¹³ Jennifer Gentile, "Townsend's Closure to Have Lasting Effects," *Sanford Herald*, August 26, 2011.

²¹⁴ Cuadros, interview.

said.²¹⁵ While many Latinos are U.S. citizens, their median age is twenty-five, and few are registered to vote. It is unclear what consequences this mismatch of population and political representation will have when political districts are redrawn this year. Given that research by Oberholzer-Gee and Waldfogel ²¹⁶ demonstrated that the availability of Spanish-language news increased Hispanic voter turnout, one could hypothesize that Spanish-language media coverage of local affairs in Siler City and Chatham County could increase political participation among Hispanics there.

Stakeholders express a strong sense that public debate has become increasingly contentious and has been bifurcated, with one side of the political spectrum talking to itself, and the other side left out of the conversation. "Siler City has no alternative media," Voller said.²¹⁷ "There is no alternative voice."²¹⁸ On a more positive note, stakeholders agreed on one thing: jobs and economic development are the most crucial concerns facing the community.

There is a vacuum of information on fast-moving issues in Siler City, and a big part of that vacuum is caused by a lack of timeliness in the traditional news media. The issues and the discussion are moving faster than the news, and that discussion is being driven by online conversations that lack basic facts, vetting, reporting, and accountability. Even if it were online, the newspaper does not have the capacity to do daily reporting or provide breaking news. Metro media cannot perform a municipal-level watchdog function without ongoing beat-style reporting on municipal affairs. This is true not only of the metro daily newspapers, but even of the Spanish-language weeklies that cater to the very population left out of the town's public conversation.

Into the vacuum of information flow rumor, speculation, and partisanship. Basic information about municipal, county, and school governance is mediated by political rhetoric. The lack of an accessible, digital local news archive worsens the quality of conversation and puts the town's public record out of reach. With no common set of facts for people to refer to, even regarding things that happened last week, information exchange becomes a battleground.

²¹⁵ Ibid.

²¹⁶ Oberholzer-Gee and Waldfogel, "Media Markets and Localism."

²¹⁷ Voller, phone interview.

²¹⁸ Ibid.

Local ownership is typically thought to be a positive when it comes to media policy. But in Siler City, local ownership does not appear to come with any incentive to invest in improvements to the information infrastructure. The owners of the newspaper, the radio station, and the BBS know each other and are allied to varying degrees with Republican party politics in Chatham. Barry Hayes, the radio station owner, was the only local owner willing to be interviewed for this study (which interview took place after I requested his station's public file). While Hayes boasted that his station is the town's only source of local news, he said he did not want to provide a broadcast of public meetings because doing so would "intimidate" elected officials.

VI. THE FUTURE OF ONLINE JOURNALISM IN SILER CITY

This case study supports several findings of the Federal Communications Commission's 2011 report on community information needs: that many communities "now face a shortage of local, professional, accountability reporting," that an abundance of news outlets does not necessarily translate into an abundance of reporting, that traditional media such as newspapers and broadcasters remain the most significant providers of local news, and that digital technology combined with the decline in reporting has shifted agenda-setting power.²¹⁹ For communities that fall in the crack between metro media markets, there may be an inverse relationship between the number of different media outlets citizens turn to and the number of stories about the communities' major challenges. The coverage may also be diffused across more sources, with no one source pulling together news from the multiple bodies of jurisdiction and providing a full picture of a small community.

While the low level of technology in place at Siler City's weekly newspaper and AM radio station may be unusual, it is not unique. Local awareness of the BBS and other online forums demonstrate that there is an engaged audience within the community that uses the Internet. But the presence of digital discussion forums does not provide a quality substitute for traditional news media.

Elsewhere in this volume, Patrick Barry considers the evolution of "fine-grained information about neighborhoods," such as those in Chicago, where Barry helped to create community news through the

²¹⁹ Waldman, *The Information Needs of Communities: The Changing Media Landscape in a Broadband Age*.

Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC).²²⁰ This typology is comprised of five basic categories, each in turn comprised of sources that range from traditional reporting to raw data streams, from heavily edited to "streams of unverified information that must be interpreted." Yet all are organized around, or can be filtered by, a discrete geographic area. Applying this typology to Siler City's information environment gives us a sense of what is present and what is missing, which gaps might be filled by better networking existing information, and which require the production of information that does not currently exist. The differences between the sources available in Chicago and those available in rural Siler City also underscore the systematic differences between urban and rural information environments. Notably, the "hyperlocal" concept of neighborhoods within a city is flipped, with most town-level information available from county-wide sources.

"Traditional" news, the first category, in Siler City comprises the *Chatham News*, along with irregular coverage produced by media outlets in the surrounding metros. Yet since the *Chatham News* lacks a significant online presence, there exists a network gap. Unlike Chicago, Siler City does not have a Patch.com, Everyblock, or other online-only, professional news sources. "Hyper-Local Blogs and Info Sites" are limited to Chatham Journal,²²¹ which mostly aggregates press releases and reports posted elsewhere, and Explore Siler City, a site launched in August 2012 (after the bulk of research in this study) as part of an economic development initiative.²²² There are numerous examples of "Special-Interest News," from advocacy groups such as El Vinculo Hispano²²³ and Chatham County Together.²²⁴ The Chatham County BBS might fairly be classified as "Crowd-Sourced Data, News, Tip Sheets," in that the posts are unverified. "Unfiltered Public Data" comes from the town and county government and the local school district. Chatham County has a GIS site that offers direct access to geographic information system data, along with county tax and

²²⁰ Patrick Barry, *As Hyperlocal Info Streams Grow, a Taxonomy to Sort the Methods*, 8 ISJLP 531 (2013).

²²¹ See Chatham Journal, www.chathamjournal.com.

²²² See Explore Siler City, www.exploresilercity.com.

²²³ See El Vinculo Hispano, www.hispanicliaison.com.

²²⁴ See Chatham County Together, <http://chathamcountytogether.org>.

register of deeds records.²²⁵ The site also publishes government press releases, budget and planning documents, and the minutes and video records of county commissioner meetings, among other things. The Town of Siler City site publishes board of commissioner meeting minutes in PDF form. These "data" could be provided in a more technologically accessible format. Notably, few of these sources even include Spanish-language information. Overall, the top two category layers—those that involve original news reporting—are either lacking or disconnected from the online ecosystem.

Tom Rosenstiel of the Pew Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism, proposed a framework for thinking about the functions of journalism.²²⁶ He argues that twenty-first century journalism has eight essential functions: *Authentication*, *Watch Dog*, *Witness*, *Forum Leader*, *Sense Making*, *Smart Aggregation*, *Empowerment*, and *Role Model*. Applying this framework to Siler City, and Chatham County more broadly, I would argue that *Authentication* is woefully lacking. The *Chatham News* is the only conventional media outlet that consistently serves this function. But as stakeholders suggested, rumors move faster than a weekly print newspaper can authenticate them. Timeliness is an important aspect of serving this function in a way that will improve the quality of public discourse. The sort of crowdsourced fact-checking function that occurs with national news goes unperformed in a community with low critical mass of online participation. The *Witness* function is lacking, especially for Siler City's Latino community. While the newspaper provides some basic *Watchdog* functions, the editor laments a lack of time and resources to step back and provide the *Sense Making* function, which is performed only intermittently by metro media. While the BBS empowers some residents to express their views, this empowerment depends upon English language proficiency as well as Internet access. Even many residents who possess both feel disempowered by the lack of mediation on the sites, as they feel they will be exposed to personal attack. In Siler City, non-media institutions, such as El Vinculo Hispano and the public schools, are more actively engaged in organizing forums and role modeling. As for *Smart Aggregation*, the greatest problem is that there is precious little to aggregate.

Online journalism could play a significant role in improving Siler City's information ecosystem—online discussion already does. Yet the

²²⁵ See Chatham County Geographic Information Systems, www.chathamgis.com.

²²⁶ Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel, *Blur: How to Know What's True in the Age of Information Overload* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2010).

best ways to meet this rural community's information needs may not be particularly advanced in terms of technology, but rather will address basic information needs and tackle the problem of high fixed costs of quality content creation. (Digital distribution may be cheap, but professional reporting is not less expensive on a digital platform.) For Siler City, the high number of Spanish-speaking residents means even higher fixed costs, in that even quality reporting *in English* would ideally require Spanish-speaking reporters and some translation. Paul Cuadros is exploring possibilities for student journalists at UNC-Chapel Hill and neighboring institutions to report on Chatham County through the Reese News Lab; this would entail transportation and scheduling challenges (Siler City is forty-five minutes from Chapel Hill). Other solutions may include a grant-funded reporting position at a conventional media outlet, or the establishment of an independent nonprofit news organization. Whatever the institutional process, more professional reporting, made available online, will infuse the rest of Siler City's online information ecosystem with the most crucial and underprovided material: timely, reliable, authenticated news.

