

“Democracy Dies in Darkness”
Local News Engagement Means more Public Participation
(With apologies to the Washington Post)

Beth Potter and Vincent Russell
University of Colorado Boulder

Introduction

As local news engagement has declined across the country, so, to, have traditional Main Street mores – things like talking to your next-door neighbor over the fence, volunteering at your child’s school or voting in your local fire district election. However, journalists try to keep the adventure we call “democracy” alive by informing readers about local topics.

While many scholars have looked at the general relationship between local news and civic engagement, this study extends the body of research by exploring specific factors of local news engagement in the current transitory media landscape and linking those factors to certain types of public participation.

More than 360 people responded to an online Qualtrics survey, disseminated through a link in an email to “The Colorado Sun/Sunriser” (Hutchins, C. 2018) and “The Denver Post/Mile High Roundup” newsletter subscribers. Of the total, researchers used about 315 complete surveys in the final tabulations. Researchers created a local news engagement (LNE) scale of 11 questions and used an existing KASP scale of 55 questions (knowledge, attitudes, skills and participation) created by scholar Daniel Schugurensky (Schugurensky, 2002) to create a snapshot of how survey respondents interact with their communities.

Despite rapid changes going on in the media industry, survey findings show that news consumers are more likely to be engaged in their communities. Specifically, Colorado residents who subscribe to one of two online newsletters - the Sunriser or the Mile High Roundup - and who give tips to local news outlets, write letters to the editor and/or attend news-related events are more likely to be engaged in their communities than news subscribers who do not do those things. People with higher household incomes who subscribe to a newsletter also are more likely to be engaged.

Researchers reviewed literature about normative theories of the media, (Christians, C. G., Glasser, T. L., McQuail, D., Nordenstreng, K., & White, R. A., 2009) which hold that journalism is a tenet of a democratic society.

RQ1: Among local news consumers, what is the relationship between the level of local news engagement and the rate of public participation?

H1: There is a positive relationship between more involved forms of local news engagement such as writing a letter to the editor, sharing stories with others, and attending in-person events organized by local news outlets – and public participation.

Participants (N=315) were asked 11 local news engagement questions such as where they go to look for news, how often they read, watch or listen to the news, how often they share things with others that they find in the news, their community engagement habits, if they know the names of their local public officials, if they have been involved in solving community problems and other similar questions.

On the public participation side, participants responded to a 29-item scale of KASP indicators about their knowledge, attitudes and skills related to community involvement.

Literature review

News outlets in the United States – whether they're newspapers, online newspapers, radio or television outlets - facilitate public deliberation, according to the normative theory of media in democracies (Christians et al., 2009).

Local media outlets help people navigate social, political and cultural agendas. The press facilitates public deliberation by framing democracy as an interactive dialogue where citizens engage with one another to discuss pressing social issues, identify solutions and implement those solutions (Christians et al., 2009).

Although many scholars have examined the relationship between local news and civic engagement, this study extends that body of research by exploring the relationship between local news engagement and public participation. Analyses of survey data collected from a non-probability sample of local news consumers in Colorado (N=315) show that those who write letters to the editor, share stories with friends and/or attend news-related events are more likely to be engaged in their communities than local news consumers who do not do those things.

Analyses also show that higher household income and local news engagement mean higher rates of public participation, but a higher age and local news engagement does not mean a higher rate of public participation.

The findings may possess implications for the normative theory of media in democracy, suggesting that local news media play a role in how people develop the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary for public deliberation.

This research paper examines the ways people get and share local news and how that engagement relates to broader forms of public participation.

Specifically, this paper analyzes the ways that people engage with local news outlets (i.e., writing letters to the editor, sharing stories with others, submitting content to a local news outlet)

and how that engagement relates to non-institutional forms of public participation (i.e., attending community meetings, addressing community issues, attending rallies or protests).

The study provides empirical assessments of the normative theory's claims that 21st-century journalism is participatory and promotes dialogue and deliberation within communities.

To add to the empirical definition of news and local news engagement, scholars Livingstone and Markham frame it as people's cognitive, social, habitual, and motivational engagement with the news media as shown in values affinity, identity, and talk. (Livingstone & Markham, 2008).

In addition to contributing to scholarship on newspapers and civic engagement, the article also extends Daniel Schugurensky's (2017) conception of democratic knowledge, abilities, skills, and practices (KASP) from the sphere of face-to-face public deliberation processes into the realm of mediated communication, an area previously unexplored in KASP literature.

The study concludes that local news engagement and public participation rates are positively correlated. Additionally, the level of one's local news engagement and an individual's household income significantly predict rates of public participation. That is, as a person's local news engagement and household income increase, so does their public participation. Notably, age did not significantly predict public participation rates.

The U.S. news media – both local and national - is considered a vital component to a healthy and sustainable democracy. For centuries, scholars have argued that local media – newspapers, online newspaper, radio and TV - support democratic engagement by informing citizens of political and community happenings, as well as serving as a watchdog over public officials (de Tocqueville, 1835; Rothenbuhler, 1996; Peer, Malthouse and Calder, 2003; Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2007). However, news media subscription and circulation rates have been declining for years, raising questions about the implications for public participation in civic affairs (Shaker, 2014).

Ever since Jurgen Habermas's put forth his concept of the "public sphere," (1962, 1989), scholars have discussed the importance of a "public world," where residents are informed and maintain a certain quality of public discourse (Christians et al, 2009.)

John Dewey discusses what makes a democracy, for example (1946), as does Hannah Arendt in her thoughts about a "public realm" (1958) (Couldry, N., Livingstone S., Markham T., 2010.) Feminist scholar Nancy Fraser talks about "an institutional arena for discursive interaction." (1997, 451) (Christians et al, 2009.)

According to Couldry et al., "public connection," is a space where matters of public concern should be solved which is linked "to some common frame of collective action about common resources. (Couldry et al. 2010.)

Shaker (2014) researched the connections between local newspapers and public participation and found that in cities like Denver where the Rocky Mountain News local metro newspaper went out of business, public participation rates decreased.

While much of the literature about local news and civic engagement focuses on voting and other institutional forms of engagement, (e.g., McLeod et al., 1999; Ognyanova et al., 2013; Shaker, 2014), this research paper studies relationships between local news engagement and distinct types of public participation. Although voting and other institutional forms of public engagement are valuable ways to measure public engagement, studies about those areas fail to capture other significant ways of contributing to civic affairs.

We begin with a literature review of scholarship related to the normative theory of media and theories of public participation that provides conceptual frameworks for local news engagement and public participation that informed the study. Next, the researchers outline the methods, identify research questions and hypotheses, and explain measures from the survey questionnaire. Finally, the researchers lay out the survey results and discuss the significance of those results for scholars, democratic institutions, and local news outlets.

Public Participation and a Normative Theory of Media

This study was informed by a normative theory of media and theories of public deliberation and public participation. This section first delineates the normative theory and how it informed the concept of local news engagement used in the study, as well as how it informed the research questions and hypotheses. Next, theories of public deliberation and public participation and the KASP scale all are explained.

A Normative Theory of Media

A normative theory of public communication is one that provides a reasoned explanation of how public discourse ought to be conducted for a community or nation to identify and implement solutions to its problems (Christians et al., 2009). Christians et al. (2009) further clarify that a normative theory “attempts to *explain* how certain forms of discourse lead to good collective decisions” (p. 66). Normative theory functions as a conceptual foundation and explanatory rationale for public communication (i.e., news media) in a democracy, and it explains the roles of media systems and institutions in democracy. This research project draws on the citizen participation tradition in normative theory, as well as the facilitative role of the press mentioned by Habermas.

Habermas talks about normative democratic theory centered on how public participation, through discursive processes of deliberation, can legitimately influence political decision-making. (Livingstone, S. and Lunt, P. 1994.)

Christians et al. (2009) argue that since the 1970s, journalism in the United States has operated within a tradition of citizen participation. The citizen participation tradition emphasizes supporting and improving local, small, and alternative media that support people as they work to challenge the status quo. Local news outlets are expected to provide increased support for grassroots social change campaigns by reporting on them and therefore better equip citizens to work for social change.

Central to the citizen participation tradition is an ethics of dialogue that emphasizes the importance of the multiplicity of cultural identities, opinions, and life experiences (Christians et al., 2009). This ethic gives rise to the promotion of dialogue and deliberation in public communication where “Public discourse is defined not by the leadership and power holders but by *all* people in the debating community, especially minorities, the poor, and the marginalized who are less articulate” (Christians et al., 2009, p. 62). The citizen participation tradition of normative theory also embraces “public journalism,” in which the media not only informs the public, but it also works towards engaging citizens and creating public debate. (Rosen 2001)

Finally, media that emphasize citizen participation are expected to build community through public deliberation, transformative action, and nonviolence (Christians et al., 2009).

Another key component of normative media theory is the facilitative role of journalism (Rosen, 2001, Christians et al. 2009). As Christians et al. (2009) explain, “In their facilitative role, the media promote dialogue among their readers and viewers through communication that engages them and in which they actively participate” (p. 159). According to Rosen, news media outlets facilitate, strengthen, and support participation in civil society outside the state and the market. They not only report on the happenings of civil society but also seek to enrich and improve it.

The press facilitates public deliberation by framing democracy as interactive dialogue where citizens engage with one another to discuss pressing social issues, identify solutions, and implement those solutions (Christians et al., 2009). Media outlets help readers and viewers navigate social, political, and cultural agendas. Deliberation considers a “wide range of evidence, respectful of different views,” weighs available data, and considers “alternative possibilities” (Macedo, 1999, p. 58). In sum, a normative theory of the media explains the press as supporting democratic habits among citizens by encouraging them to create and disseminate the content that forms civil society, as well as by framing coverage of current events as public deliberation where sociocultural issues are debated.

Drawing on these ideas from the normative theory of media, researchers came up with 11 questions to create a local news engagement scale. The scale was informed by previous work by scholars in the area of news engagement, including similar questions formed in a longitudinal study about news done by Ha, L., Xu, Y., Wang, F., Yang, L., Abuljadail, M., Hu, X., Jiang, W., & Gabay, I. in 2016. In the study, Ha et al. conceptualized news engagement as five different levels of consumer interaction with news. (2016).

In our study, local news engagement is defined as ways that people interact with, distribute, consume, and create local news. Given both the citizen participation tradition and the facilitative role of media, one can expect that local news is more likely to influence public participation. For example, newspapers readers and TV watchers know they're more likely to be published or recognized if they write a letter to the editor of a local newspaper or send a picture to a local TV station rather than a national one. Similarly, community members are more likely to have material that is helpful and interesting to local news outlets than to national ones. For example, only certain individuals are in a position to be whistleblowers at federal agencies, but many more people can create and share news content about their local schools, their local sports teams and their local nonprofit groups - content that would be of interest to local news consumers.

Lastly, if media promote opportunities for citizen engagement, then the local level is often the first place where civic engagement occurs. Tracy (2010) calls this "ordinary democracy," where residents interact most frequently at the local level and are most likely to influence government at this level. In this vein, attending public meetings, presentations, panels, and debates is easier and more feasible at a local level. One does not expect CNN to host a debate between local school board candidates, but local news outlets regularly perform this function.

All this is not to say that national news outlets do not also fit into a normative theory of media. Rather, this study focused on local news and local news engagement because the effects and opportunities of civic participation and facilitating public deliberation present a rich area to test the claims of the normative theory. This paper focuses on the citizen participation tradition with local media, especially newspapers, and looks to engagement with those types of media. The conceptual definition of local news engagement implemented for this study complements theories of public participation, discussed in the next section of the paper.

Knowledge, Attitudes, Skills, and Practices of Public Participation

This project also draws on Schugurensky's (2002, 2006) KASP scale of public participation. The scale has been applied in several studies of democratic learning that have explored the contribution of participation in public deliberation processes to the development of democratic knowledge, attitudes, skills, and practices among participants (Cohen, Schugurensky, & Wiek, 2015; Lerner & Schugurensky, 2007; Schugurensky & Meyers, 2008; Schugurensky, Mundel, & Duguid, 2006). Schugurensky's KASP framework directly addresses the learning outcomes of participatory democracy. It does this by assessing informal learning in a democratic process, where learning may not be conscious or intentional but the result of experiential encounters and group socialization. By identifying 55 indicators of democratic learning, the KASP scale elicits the tacit knowledge of participants as it relates to democratic, participatory habits.

Schugurensky (2006) contends that learning democratic habits is best promoted through practicing them. That is, the informal learning of participatory democracy is experiential and requires practicing democratic sensibilities to refine those sensibilities. For example, one does not

learn public speaking merely by reading about public speaking; one must practice public speaking. Likewise, one cannot learn how to build consensus among diverse neighbors merely by reading about it; one must actually strive to build consensus through interactions with others. As Schugurensky (2006) explains:

The learning that is acquired through participation (be it related to attitudes, knowledge, or skills) often has an expansive effect. This means that, as people become more familiar with, and more effective in, local democracy, they also become more interested (and even more engaged) in broader issues of regional, national, or international scope. (p. 172)

Therefore, the KASP scale not only records what participants have learned in a democratic process; because of the experiential aspect of informal learning, the scale also records how respondents have participated in public affairs.

The KASP scale complements the citizen participation model and facilitative role of public communication proposed in the normative theory of media. Normative theory suggests that news media promote implicit learning suitable for local democratic engagement and public deliberation, and the KASP scale measures informal learning and practices in public deliberation processes. Our study extends these theories by applying the KASP scale to mediated contexts, as well as empirically assessing the ways people engage with local news and their rates of public participation.

Our study operationalized newspaper engagement with the previously mentioned 11-item scale that asked participants how many times in the past six months they had read a local news headline, written a letter to the editor, and provided a tip to a local news outlet about a story, among other behaviors. We operationalized public participation according to a 29-item scale adapted from KASP indicators that ask participants about their knowledge (i.e., “I know how to get things done in my local government), attitudes (i.e., “Most of the time, local elected officials can be trusted to do the right thing”), and skills (i.e., “Making collective decisions”). Some items were removed from the original 55-item KASP scale for the purposes of this study because they were irrelevant and/or hindered the scale’s validity. For example, the original item “Monitors and keeps track of the public budget” was deemed too specific to the scale’s original use as an evaluation of participatory budgeting processes, and the item was therefore excluded from this study.

Drawing from both the normative theory of media and theories of public deliberation, the research question for this project related to the relationship between local news engagement and rates of public participation:

RQ1: Among local news consumers, what is the relationship between the level of local news engagement and rate of public participation?

According to the normative theory of media in democracies, where news media have become more participatory and facilitate public deliberation (Christians et al., 2009), the first hypothesis follows:

H1: There is a positive relationship between local news engagement and public participation.

Furthermore, other studies have demonstrated that the higher a person's socioeconomic status, then the more he or she will engage in civic affairs (Lynch, Smith, Kaplan, & House, 2000; Neckerman & Torche, 2007; Uslaner & Brown, 2005). Additionally, scholars have found a positive relationship between age and civic engagement (Coley & Sum, 2012; Kruse & Schmitt, 2015). These factors contribute to the next two hypotheses:

H2: There is a positive relationship between socioeconomic status, local news engagement, and public participation.

H3: There is a positive relationship between age, local news engagement, and public participation.

To answer these questions, researchers administered a survey questionnaire to gather data.

Methods

Data for this study came from a nonprobability sample of 315 adults. Babbie (2016) argues that nonprobability sampling is warranted for populations where the exact number of members is unknown, as is the case with the target population of this study. After researchers received Institutional Review Board approval, we invited participants to self-administer an online survey in November and December 2018. A hyperlink to the survey was shared in the online newsletters of two local media outlets (*The Colorado Sun* and *The Denver Post*), and participants were invited to complete the questionnaire. To incentivize participation, individuals were told they could enter into a random drawing for two \$50 gift cards after completing the survey.

Measures

The variables in this study comprise measures of local news engagement, public participation, and demographics. Descriptions of each measure follow.

Local news engagement. Based on the normative theory's claims that media promotes participation among consumers (Christians et al., 2009), the survey instrument tapped respondents' levels of engagement with local news, including number of local news subscriptions, letters to the editor, and attendance at events organized by local news media. Each measure was asked at a ratio level. Participants were asked the number of times in the past six months they had read or listened to a local news story, shared a local news story with others, and submitted a tip about a story to a local news outlet, among other items. Each item was combined to create a measure of local news engagement ($M=103.59$; $SD=18.76$) that was reliable, with a Chronbach's $\alpha=.53$.

Public participation. Respondents were asked a battery of questions related to public participation. Participants were asked the extent to which they agreed with certain statements on a

five-point item (1=*strongly disagree* to 5=*strongly agree*) related to knowledge (e.g., “I know how to get things done in my local government;” “I understand the needs of my neighbors and those in my community;” “I know about current issues being discussed among local elected officials”) and attitudes (e.g., “Citizen participation in local government is important;” “Most of the time, local elected officials can be trusted to do the right thing;” “I am responsible for helping fix issues in my city”). Respondents were asked to rank their comfort on a five-point item (1=*not at all* to 5=*extremely*) related to skills (e.g., “Making collective decisions;” “Planning and organizing community meetings;” “Public speaking”). Each item in the scale was combined to create a measure of public participation ($M=956.46$; $SD=5,917.18$), and the scale was highly reliable with Cronbach’s $\alpha=.93$.

Profile of respondents. Control variables for H1 include gender, education, age, household income, and race. Of the 315 respondents, 58.3% are female, 40.3% are male, and 1.3% are gender non-binary. In terms of education, the average number of formal years of schooling was 17.22 ($SD=2.98$), approximating a bachelor’s degree. Variables of household income and age were used to address H2 and H3, while other demographic variables were held constant. The median household income of participants is \$100,000 ($M=\$121,973$, $SD=88,269.57$), and their average age is 55 ($Median=59$, $SD=15.96$). As for race and ethnicity, respondents are 92% white, 1.3% Asian American, 1% Black or African American, 2% Hispanic or Latinx, and 4% Other.

Results

H1 necessitated a test of the correlation between local news engagement and public participation to see if normative theories of the media hold in what is arguably a transitory period for both mass media and national democratic institutions.

We used multiple regression to test the hypothesis that more involved forms of local news engagement and higher socioeconomic status (household income) would predict public participation.

We asked participants a set of 11 questions to assess their level of local news engagement as inspired by previous scholarly work and by the normative theory of the media (see Table 1).

First, respondents were asked how many minutes they spent consuming local news each day ($M=78.75$, $SD=56.38$). The following questions asked how many times in the past six months participants had engaged in certain behaviors. Participants estimated how many times they had read a local news headline ($M=329.35$, $SD=738.82$), commented on a local news story online ($M=12.4$, $SD=46.53$), read or listened to a local news story ($M=333.37$, $SD=780.37$), liked a local news story on social media ($M=345.16$, $SD=5744.38$), and donated to a local news outlet ($M=1.97$, $SD=6.29$). Additionally, respondents were asked how many times they had written a letter to the editor ($M=1.24$, $SD=10.78$), shared a local news story with others ($M=41$, $SD=66.01$), provided a tip about a story to a local news outlet ($M=1.9$, $SD=15.58$), submitted a photo or video to a local news outlet ($M=2.53$, $SD=23.72$), purchased a local news subscription as a gift for someone else

($M=.1$, $SD=.44$), and attended an in-person event organized by a local news outlet ($M=.35$, $SD=1.03$).

We ran Pearson's correlation to test the correlation of each form of local news engagement to public participation rates. Four forms of local news engagement were statistically significant (see Table 2), including sharing a local news story with others ($r=.17$, $p<.01$), attending an in-person event organized by a local news outlet ($r=.13$, $p<.05$), writing letters to the editor ($r=.14$, $p<.05$), and reading local news headlines ($r=.12$, $p<.05$). H1 is partially supported. The remaining variables did not significantly correlate with public participation rates.

These variables included commenting on a local news story online ($r=.07$, $p>.05$), reading or listening to a local news story ($r=.04$, $p>.05$), providing a tip to a local news outlet ($r=.1$, $p>.05$), submitting a photo or video to a local news outlet ($r=.02$, $p>.05$), liking a local news outlet's post on social media ($r=.11$, $p>.05$), purchasing a local news subscription as a gift for someone else ($r=.09$, $p>.05$), donating to a local news outlet ($r=.11$, $p>.05$) and minutes spent consuming local news ($r=.04$, $p>.05$).

H2: Some local news engagement variables significantly predict public participation rates.

RQ2: Do local news engagement variables such as providing a tip to a local news outlet predict a participant's public participation rate?

Multiple regression analysis was used to test which demographic variables and local news engagement variables significantly predicted public participation (see Table 3). The results of the regression indicated that four predictors explained 15 % of the variance (Adjusted $R^2=.15$, $F(17, 163)=2.85$, $P<.001$). Income ($\beta=.21$, $p<.01$), providing a tip to a local news outlet ($\beta=.21$, $p<.01$), attending an in-person event organized by a local news outlet ($\beta=.21$, $p<.01$), and writing letters to the editor ($\beta=.14$, $p<.05$) predicted public participation. Years of education ($\beta=.01$, $p<.05$), race/ethnicity ($\beta=.08$, $p>.05$), age ($\beta=.04$, $p>.05$), gender ($\beta=-.01$, $p>.05$), reading local news headlines ($\beta=.14$, $p>.05$), commenting on a story online ($\beta=.02$, $p>.05$), reading local news ($\beta=-.13$, $p>.05$), sharing a story with others ($\beta=.08$, $p>.05$), submitting a photo or video to a local news outlet ($\beta=.03$, $p>.05$), liking a story online ($\beta=.00$, $p>.05$), purchasing a news subscription as a gift ($\beta=.00$, $p>.05$), donating to a local news outlet ($\beta=.11$, $p>.05$), and minutes spent consuming local news ($\beta=-.01$, $p>.05$) did not predict public participation. H2 was supported.

Discussion

Recognizing the vital role that local news media play in encouraging public participation, this study provided an empirical investigation of the predictors of local news engagement and public participation. This study sought to better understand connections between individuals' local news engagement, public participation, age, and household income. The study has implications both for the status of democracy and citizen participation in civic affairs in the United States, as well as for normative theories of media and theories of public participation. Several findings from the study are worth highlighting.

First, local news engagement and public participation are positively correlated. This finding lends support to the normative theory's claims that news media promote civic participation (Christians et al., 2009). The fact that local news engagement and public participation are positively correlated lends credence to concerns from media scholars about citizens' declining trust in news, falling subscription rates, and the consolidation of media companies into ever-larger conglomerates (Shaker, 2014). The study also supports claims from the normative theory about the facilitative role of news media. Christians et al. (2009) posit that local news uniquely encourages the public deliberation of community issues and promotes democratic sensibilities. They argue this is accomplished through opportunities for citizen journalism and hosting of local candidate debates, among other unique contributions of local news media.

To assess public participation, this study drew on the KASP scale, a scale originally designed to measure knowledge, attitudes, and skills learned through public deliberation processes. The positive correlation between local news engagement and public participation found in this study lends credence to the normative theory's claims that local news media facilitate and promote public deliberation, especially because the measures of local news engagement that were statistically significant involved greater levels of participation from consumers.

This idea of deliberative democracy relates back to Habermas's thoughts about the categories of deliberation – sharing information, talking about it, forming opinions and participating – all of which indicate characteristics of “discourse” and “communicative action” (Habermas, 1984).

As the study shows, just reading more news or subscribing to an outlet does not correlate with public participation. But more deliberative, involved forms of local news engagement such as writing letters to the editor and attending in-person community events contribute to public participation. For advocates saying local journalism strengthens democracy, this study shows that democratic learning and public participation goes beyond voting or contacting elected officials.

Additionally, this study supports and adds further nuance to prior studies related to local news consumption and civic engagement. Whereas Moy et al. (2004) found that *attention* to local news correlated with public participation rates, this study sought to understand how *engagement* with local news connects to public participation rates.

This study's findings of positive correlation supports prior work related to the ways local news media bring disinterested residents together (Campbell, 1999) and raise people's concerns about social issues (Smith, 1987).

This study goes one step farther by conceptualizing participants as active contributors to local news, not merely passive consumers of news. Our operationalization of local news engagement, rather than local news attention, demonstrates that people are not merely local news purchasers, receptacles of information about their community, but are active creators and participants. The more that people engage with local news media, the more it is likely that they are

gaining practice in democratic skills and habits that make them more likely to participate in other public and community affairs.

Other media scholars have focused attention on local newspapers and public participation rates. This study lends support to prior research that shows correlations between the presence of local newspapers and public participation rates (Shaker, 2014) and local newspapers, newspaper consumption, and civic engagement (McLeod et al., 1999). In addition, our study extends those findings into other forms of local media, including television, radio, and online platforms.

Although local newspapers continue to serve vital roles in communities, this study broadens the scope of prior research to make claims about multiple forms of local media and their contribution to public participation rates. The findings provide empirical evidence that it is not merely the presence or circulation of local newspapers that correlates with public participation; instead, engagement with local news media such as television, radio and online platforms also correlates with public participation. As local newspaper circulations continue to decline, this study offers hope that citizens can still engage with other media platforms to practice the democratic arts.

This research also extends Schugurensky's KASP scale into mediated communication. Whereas previous studies have focused on face-to-face public deliberation (Cohen, Schugurensky, & Wiek, 2015; Lerner & Schugurensky, 2007; Schugurensky & Meyers, 2008; Schugurensky, Mundel, & Duguid, 2006), the findings outlined herein demonstrate the fit of KASP to assessing public participation as it relates to media. The study generated high internal reliability for the scale of knowledges, attitudes, and skills that was adapted from the KASP scale. The scale used in this study therefore offers a new analytical tool for communication and media scholars concerned with civic engagement.

Although formal, institutional forms of civic engagement such as voting and voter registration rates continue to be useful for public communication scholars (e.g., McLeod et al., 1999; Ognyanova et al., 2013; Shaker, 2014), this study has focused on informal forms of public participation, operationalized as relating to one's neighbors, planning and organizing community meetings, concern about neighborhood problems, and knowledge of current issues, among other items. Such a conception of public participation demonstrates that local news media do not merely contribute to people voting; they contribute to democratic knowledge, skills, and attitudes vital to promoting deep, sustained civic engagement and community building. Schugurensky's KASP framework offers a systematic way to analyze public participation that has been under-explored by media scholars.

Second, local news engagement and household income were significant predictors of public participation, but age did not predict public participation. This finding supports prior research that has found positive relationships between socioeconomic status and public participation rates (Lynch et al., 2000; Neckerman & Torche, 2007; Uslaner & Brown, 2005). Notably, though, this study's findings place local news engagement at nearly the same strength of

prediction as household income when considering public participation rates. It is reasonable to conclude that as an individual's income increases, his or her level of local news engagement will also increase. The person will likely have more disposable income to spend on local news subscriptions and more time to write letters to the editor, attend events hosted by a local news outlet, and read more stories. The relative similarity between level of local news engagement and household income to their predictions of public participation found in this study demonstrates that these factors are closely intertwined.

Additionally, level of local news engagement and household income explained only 3% of the variance in public participation. Thus, although the fact that local news engagement and household income explained public participation was significant, these two factors only accounted for a small portion of variance. That means this study sheds some light on explaining public participation, but much remains cast in shadow. Other predictors may include gender, race, geographic location, years of education, length of time at their current address, an individual's trust in local government, and/or an individual's feelings of empowerment for social change. Future studies ought to further explore the relationships between such factors and public participation rates to better illuminate what variables lead to increased public participation.

Notably, age did not significantly explain the variance in public participation rates. This finding contradicts previous studies that argued that as an individual ages, their civic engagement increases (Coley & Sum, 2012; Kruse & Schmitt, 2015). A potential explanation for this finding is that previous studies conceptualized civic engagement as voting and/or contacting elected officials. As previously discussed, this study cast a broader net for public participation, predominantly emphasizing attitudes and practices outside of voting and contacting elected officials. Many of the operationalization ideas for public participation include collectively working with community to address social issues, as well as attitudes about trust and empowerment for public participation and knowledge of civic affairs. Although one may expect competency in skills associated with public participation to increase with age, civic knowledge and attitudes about public participation are likely independent of age. That is, one can believe citizen participation in local government is important regardless of how many years one has lived.

Again, this finding offers hope for the revitalization of American democracy by demonstrating that any generation can engage in the forms of public participation identified in this study and that local news engagement is more significant than how old one is. Practically speaking, advocates who wish to promote public participation need not focus attention on specific age groups but can rather emphasize increasing local news engagement across all ages to increase public participation rates.

Limitations and Future Directions

Several limitations of the study need to be addressed. First, because the sample was not randomly selected, researchers are limited in generalizing results. Second, participants come most

heavily from one geographic area (Colorado), are overwhelmingly white, mostly middle-aged, and somewhat affluent. The sample is therefore not representative of the American population. Third, the internal validity of the local news engagement scale was somewhat low (Chronbach's $\alpha=.53$). This raises questions about how well the study measured local news engagement. Finally, survey questionnaires were self-administered online. The questionnaires relied on participants to self-report rates of local news engagement and public participation. Given the social desirability of these concepts, participants may have over-estimated their rates, which would inflate scores in the survey. These limitations present several opportunities for future research.

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