

Public Abstract

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Rural community newspapers are an oft overlooked part of the media landscape, but they play a vital role in the dissemination of news in small markets and can be a tremendous resource for communities. However, they do face many challenges. One of the top obstacles for small publications is how to approach the ever-increasing shift to online news. Many of these papers are without the intrinsic means to deliver engaging and profitable print and online products. Community newspapers in Western North Carolina are no different. They are furiously working to find balance in their marketplaces, but unlike larger publications located in more urban centers, they have precious few resources with which to publish across several platforms, not to mention that many of their readers live in rural areas where broadband Internet is still the exception rather than the norm. With the online media landscape continuing to evolve, these papers are analyzing their strategies moving forward in hopes of striking the proper accord within both their newsrooms and their communities.

This research surveyed community newspaper managers at 13 Western North Carolina publications with circulations under 15,000 and used their answers with an analysis of the demographics of their communities, the usage of local news websites, as well as the availability of Internet to determine where these newspapers are in the digital age in their communities. It was discovered is that these papers do not have the online products of their larger, metropolitan counterparts nor do they have the financial and physical resources in place to tackle a transition to more and more online publishing. However, by keeping their focus on print, these papers are serving the needs of the communities where local online news is not yet in high demand, and the online models they are currently utilizing are affected by a decrease in access to high-speed Internet in these areas as well as the online traits of rural residents. This research helps gauge the long-term viability of community newspapers and how they are working within the framework of their communities in their role as local news providers.