Media Literacy Closes the Local News Gap:

Understanding Gatekeeping, Agenda Setting, and Framing Theory

Can Lead to More Trusting News Consumers

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In late October 2020, a high school football coach in a small, Kansas town was arrested for driving under the influence (Wagoner, 2020). This happened days before the coach and his players were to compete in a playoff game as they attempted to defend their state championship. The local, weekly newspaper reported on the incident, and the story first appeared online. The newspaper shared the link to the story via their Facebook page, and fireworks quickly ensued. While most posts barely receive a handful of responses, this Facebook post racked up nearly 200 comments, most of which were attacks on the newspaper for publishing the story. People were incensed that a "good guy" was getting his and his family's name drug through the mud because of "something that could happen to anyone." The vitriol became so intense, the newspaper even attempted to defend itself by providing insight into how and why the decision was made to run the story. This highlights the need for media literacy. Ordinary citizens do not necessarily understand how news is reported and produced, and this lack of knowledge leads to confusion and anger. People might start to take their local media for granted. That sets the stage for such outlets to fade away and leave news deserts in their wake (Abernathy, 2018). This is a problem because local, small-town media outlets, such as weekly newspapers, provide valuable news and information for their communities. They keep people informed. "Given the centrality of news media to informing the public, trust in news media is recognised as an essential element of a functioning democracy" (Suiter and Fletcher, 2020, p. 484).

In many instances, the local newspaper also serves as a binding agent that keeps local

citizens together. Such publications are "personal and hyperlocal" (Smith & Schiffman, 2018, p. 379). The local journalists live and work in the community, so they mingle with their audiences everywhere from the grocery store to the post office and even at the local schools' band and choir concerts. Therefore, it is no surprise that local news is viewed as more trustworthy than national media outlets (Lakshmanan, 2018; Nyhan, 2019). However, that trust might only be marginal. Community media outlets "win" by default because the national media has little credibility (Schmidt, 2019). The credibility issue at a local level is compounded by how local media is often set up. This is especially true in rural areas. "The lack of a rural media infrastructure has led many rural communities to rely on more ideologically driven media corporations like Fox News and Breitbart" (Rahman & Gilman, 2019, p. 94).

However, the majority of journalism and mass communication researchers pay little attention to small-town, community news outlets, especially those that print a newspaper every week. Therefore, there is little research concerning how these outlets work and make journalistic decisions in service of their objectives to report on topics of importance and interest to the communities they serve. This is particularly important in the face of changing economics for the industry and the spread of news deserts (Abernathy, 2018; Claussen, 2020). Small-town weeklies likely don't have the same resources as large dailies that are part of a newspaper chain. This means these weeklies live and die with the local economy, and the journalists covering the community have different relationships with the subjects of their reports, which creates several questions relating to dialogical communication and discourse. Also, one must consider the technologies available and used by community media outlets. All of this relates to what news is reported and how that journalistic work is done.

In order to pull these concepts together and address the gap in the literature that concerns community media, an investigation into the media effects of gatekeeping, agenda-setting, and framing theories is necessary. Krcmar et al (2016) explained the differences between these three concepts by saying "[g]atekeeping focuses on whether a specific story is published or not. Agenda building focuses on the broader question of what topics are going to appear in print. Finally, the work on framing involves the slant that the story will take when published" (p. 256). These three concepts play a large role in news production since they each lead into the next one. Though they can be used independently, considering community media through these three lenses could illuminate the journalistic practices taking place in small towns and rural communities across the country. In combination, these three theories inform everything from the news coverage to the words used in news reports and how the audience is engaged.

Bringing together literature over these three theories would serve as a foundation for future research where additional theories could be incorporated to explore the functionality and impact of community media. Ideally, understanding the interplay of these theories as they relate to each other and impact local journalism will open the door for further exploration of the numerous facets of community media in a way that will help improve the outlets and create space for them to continue to grow and succeed. Therefore, this paper will review the literature concerning each of these theories, starting first with gatekeeping and followed by agenda-setting and framing. Finally, the conclusion will provide a synthesis of the information.

Gatekeeping Theory

Gatekeeping theory derived from the work of German-American social psychologist Kurt Lewin (Cassidy, 2006; DeIuliis, 2015; Funk, 2016; and Şerban, 2015). Gatekeeping scholars

have found a hierarchical model of analysis that includes five levels: individual, routine, organizational, social or extra-media, and ideological (Cassidy, 2006; Wolfgang et al, 2020). This theory suggests "there are people who make decisions as to what information makes it through the 'gate' and actually appears in the media" (Krcmar et al, 2016, p. 256). That means gatekeeping theory "explains the process by which a single piece of information gets chosen, transformed, and morphed into the digestible messages that reach people every moment of every day" (Ferrucci & Tandoc, 2017, p. 103). As such, gatekeeping can be viewed as subjective (Cassidy, 2006). Some might view gatekeeping as a form of bias because of perceived subjectivities. Cuillier (2012) said gatekeeping is impacted by "the routine force of journalistic objectivity through the avoidance of bias. This professional norm is ingrained in journalists in college, newsrooms, and stylebooks" (p. 6). Still, individual editors and journalists end up making decisions based upon their own beliefs and values. Those personal decisions influence news coverage regardless of how much effort is put into remaining objective (Cuillier, 2012). This makes fully understanding gatekeeping theory more complex.

As Hellmueller and Mellado (2015) said, "we must fully understand those journalists with respect to their individuality and creativity, but on the other hand, we must understand them within their larger institutional context, where the power of the individual expresses itself mainly through those occupational channels" (p. 3). Because of this, the push by Ferrucci and Tandoc (2017) to study news organizations individually instead of from a similar and singular perspective makes sense. Every institution is unique based upon a variety of factors. This is important because community media is inherently specialized, focusing on the local news and people. In this way, local journalism plays a vital role in keeping citizens informed about

decisions being made by the city council and the school board. Such entities have a more direct impact on citizens when compared to national or even state governing bodies (Katz & Nowak, 2018).

Cassidy (2006) found the concept of being a gatekeeper influences how journalists view themselves and their roles within their news organizations. Self-perception seems to play a role, and that is influenced by the institution the journalists work for and the values of the community in which they work. Going "from the perception to the performance, we can then conclude how journalists meet the demand of the organization, and a specific society, and how they integrate those into their individual understanding of professional roles" (Hellmueller & Mellado, 2015, p. 8).

Ferrucci and Tandoc (2017) also suggested understanding the journalistic routines that feed into gatekeeping was important, especially as the media landscape changes and digitally native outlets become more prominent. Pantic and Cvetkovic (2020) agreed because "[a]cademics are rethinking the traditional gatekeeping role and analyzing it in relation to the impact that increased user participation has on news production" (p. 2). The landscape is changing as participatory journalism — the ability of audiences to interact with journalists and help shape news coverage — has increased. This can manifest as something as seemingly simple as user comments on online stories (Wolfgang et al, 2020). Groshek and Tandoc (2017) found individual Twitter users act as gatekeepers by deciding what to retweet and share with their networks. Such forms of user participation in the media ecosystem highlight how there is no longer top-down control. As Pantic (2018) said, "the media landscape has undergone significant changes and is now defined by active audiences who participate in storytelling" (p. 390).

However, journalists and news outlets are still key players. Even though social networking sites (SNSs) "and other new technologies may have changed the gatekeeping process, they have not significantly changed the role of the traditional media in it" (Paskin, 2018, p. 378). Groshek and Tandoc (2017) seem to agree because they found that traditional journalists working for legacy media companies such as newspapers and broadcast television stations still view themselves as superior to other users, which could mean "that by restricting their interaction with other users — limiting the number of users they follow, mention, or retweet — traditional news organizations and journalist are protecting their boundaries" (p. 208).

The lack of consistency with how news organizations incorporate SNSs and other technologies into their workflows highlights the need for suggested best practices. Wolfgang et al (2020) pointed out that news organizations lack policies governing how to handle user comments, interactions on SNSs, and other audience engagement and participation. This is shortsighted and points out how gatekeeping is evolving. "The content circulating on social media could be a supplement to an already created story or could serve as the initial information around which the story will be created. When looking at this type of content, journalists engage with the screening process, carefully selecting what information published on the networking platforms will be distributed to their readers, via the news websites they work for" (Pantic & Cvetkovic, 2020, p. 8). In order for audience participation to come to fruition and be effective, the relationships between journalists and their audiences must change and become more open and reciprocal (Groshek & Tandoc, 2017; Wolfgang et al, 2020). "As an increasing number of users participate in developing and disseminating content online, news organizations are pressed to lift their gates and let readers voice their opinions about political, societal and other issues"

(Pantic, 2018, p. 395). This means news outlets have to cede some control and rethink their traditional practices and embrace the role SNSs can play in their work (Paskin, 2018).

Interestingly, the role SNSs and other technologies play in journalism in gatekeeping now mirrors some of the origins of the gatekeeping theory. At its onset, much of the research concerned wire services and why stories on the wire were selected for publication and some were not (DeIuliis, 2015; Funk, 216; Şerban, 2015). The difference is now that the technology shifts the power away from journalism and gives more to the audience. This occurs because "platforms now hold an important gatekeeping role between journalists and news consumers" (Russell, 2017, p. 645). This "is irrevocably changing the manner in which newspapers cover news and report information to a fractured, but active, audience through developing technologies" (Green, 2017, p. 722).

Due to the fractured nature of the audience and the abundance of options present, it could be argued that gatekeeping becomes even more important. Russell (2017) pointed out that Silicon Valley and algorithms serve the role of gatekeepers as a way to help "filter news, if only because individuals have limited ability to attend to information choices" (p. 632). On the other side of the proverbial coin, those algorithms can else help with reporting and sharing news (Green, 2017). This is particularly true in breaking news situations. As news breaks, people will turn to SNSs and websites to see the latest information because those platforms can be updated by the journalists in the field. It becomes the most up-to-date and timely information when broadcast or print schedules inhibit the ability of an organization to instantly report news via their primary channels.

The use of these technologies can become vitally important with community journalism

outlets, especially those that are weekly or less-frequent newspapers. SNSs fill in the gap

between publications. Still, the print product remains important. Funk (2016) said "that

small-town residents in particular have heavy reliance on, and attachment to, traditional

newspapers" (p. 125). This is due to the fact that the type of news being reported is

community-orientated and concerns the local people in a focused manner (Smith & Schiffman,

2018). The newspaper editors and reporters are more accessible to their audiences, and they are

covering stories that directly impact those audience members, even providing historical coverage

via reporting births, marriages, and deaths, among other types of news (Funk, 2016). This close

proximity to the employees of the newspaper gives the audience influence over the information

the newspapers' gatekeepers publish in each edition. As Green (2017) said, "the audience now

has a participatory role within the story. The readers are engaging with the reporters and editors

who are drafting the stories" (p. 734). Though SNSs "allow for more open and diverse exchange

of information" (DeIuliis, 2015, p. 20), someone still must decide to either share that content or

turn it into a news report. That only addresses the flow of information. The next step is then

deciding what types, or topics, of news will be allowed through the proverbial gate. This leads to

agenda setting theory.

Agenda Setting Theory

The concept of agenda setting in the media derived from the work of McCombs and

Shaw (1972) when they postulated that "[i]n choosing and displaying news, editors, newsroom

staff, and broadcasters play an important part in shaping political reality" (p. 176). In this way,

agenda setting tells media consumers what issues they need to pay attention to (Krcmar et al,

2016). Agenda setting says "there is a relationship between the emphasis media place on issues

— via placement or volume of coverage — and the public's subsequent assessment of the same issue's importance" (Searles & Smith, 2016, p. 2,075). Though not every news consumer is impacted in the same fashion, research has shown that public opinion closely follows the types of stories present in news reports (Djerf-Pierre & Shehata, 2017). This form of media effects is changing with the prevalence of digital platforms and technologies disrupting the traditional media landscape. SNSs can carry a different agenda than that put forth by traditional media, which can then influence the traditional media's agenda (Neuman et al, 2014). Despite the increases in options presented by digital platforms and SNSs, Djerf-Pierre and Shehata (2017) found agenda setting persists and "that public opinion is no less responsive to the media agenda in today's high-choice media environment than during the low-choice era of the early 1990s — particularly when considering the collective agenda of several prominent news media outlets" (p. 751).

The role technology plays in agenda setting is important. This is due to the fragmented media environment that currently exists in society, as pointed out by Searles & Smith (2016). However, the specifics concerning the role of technology in agenda setting appear to be ambiguous (Schroeder, 2018). This could be attributed to the fact that technology is "impacting not just individuals but global patterns of communication" (Jeffres, 2015, p. 525). More people are able to interact and communicate with a wider number of individuals. This can affect the "sustained attention in the aggregate" (Gruszczynski and Wagner, 2017, p. 398) of issues when it comes to the news agendas impacting public opinion and shaping public discourse. Schroeder (2018) seemed to argue, though, that regardless of the depth of impact, the ability to reach people with a given agenda should be a focal point. However, as Jeffres (2015) suggested, the

fragmentation and choice provided by technology and SNSs create disparities of knowledge. This would almost make a case for the need for a strong agenda-setting function of the media in order to ensure individuals have the information they need to be well-informed. After all, technology is powerful. "In the digital media environment, technology enables multiple paths of influence (not only government officials but also private interests and foreign and domestic professional communicators acting on behalf of other interests) on the media agenda and the public agenda, with direct influence from independent actors through, for example, YouTube and social media" (Gruszczynski & Wagner, 2017, p. 381).

Therefore, one type of news coverage where agenda setting is often seen and studied is in the area of politics. Jeffres (2015) pointed out that agenda setting can be used to show "that news media can determine the public's identification of a political candidate with an entire network of issues" (p. 524). In such a setting, "news outlets — particularly partisan networks — will focus on drawing a small, but loyal or passionate audience" (Searles & Smith, 2017, p. 2,078). Such partisan networks exist on both ends of the political spectrum, but conservative media appears to have done a better job in creating a following in this arena. "Conservative airtime minutes outnumber liberal ones by a ratio of ten to one. Of the six largest talk radio shows in the country, five are ultraconservative" (Rahman & Gilman, 2019, p. 79). If individuals choose to only consume partisan media they already agree with, which is referred to as selective exposure, then the agendas put forth by those media outlets have a greater impact on opinion-shaping (Chen et al, 2020). Furthermore, as Suiter and Fletcher (2020) pointed out, partisanship leads to polarization, which causes trust in the media to decline.

Politicians also shape the agenda of news outlets, though. When they provide interviews

or press conferences, their positions and titles cause news organizations to cover them based

purely upon their notoriety (Boydstun et al, 2017). When it is a politician of a certain level, such

as the president of the United States, that coverage supplants any other news. Even if what the

president is saying is not of particular importance, the fact it is coming from the president makes

it news, which gives the president the power to set the news agenda at that time. When this

occurs, the agendas being set create an "effect not only on individuals' own opinion repertoire,

but also on their thoughts about how oppositional others perceive the issue" (Chen et al, 2020, p.

52). However, as Boydstun et al (2017) highlighted, many variables exist for how much public

opinion can be influenced by politicians taking control of the media agenda. Furthermore, even

political satire can influence the news agenda (Boukes, 2019).

As Gruszczynski and Wagner (2017) said, "Agenda-setting endures in a fragmented era,

but it is ensconced in a larger set of dynamic, sometimes fleeting, relationships between the

agendas of the mainstream media, new media, and public, with effects that reflect the oft-fleeting

nature of the modern news cycle" (p. 397). This is important because the media environment has

changed dramatically since the inception of agenda setting as a media theory. It started when the

daily newspapers and the radio were the primary ways individuals received their news

(McCombs et al, 2014). In some ways, this is still the case in small-town and rural communities.

Albeit the paper is typically weekly and not daily, a newspaper still plays a central role in

keeping people informed. The SNSs and other digital tools give community media outlets extra

avenues of reaching their audiences (Schroeder, 2018). Even so, that weekly digest of news sets

the agenda for the public discourse of that community. "Agenda-setting is about the topics that

are foregrounded by the media; not what the media makes people think, but what it makes them

think about" (Schroder, 2018, p. 9). This is particularly important with local government, such as the city council, county commission, or school board of education. People need to be informed, and the local news organization provides information. The type of information, though, can influence citizens' perceptions of elected officials or the economy simply by those issues being given attention, regardless of the angle a given story may or may not take (Vliegenthart & Damstra, 2019). Though some would undoubtedly suspect bias or "fake news" in such an instance, one could argue that "the media simply were successful in matching their messages to audience interests" (McCombs & Shaw, 1972, p. 185). In short, context matters with agenda setting (Vliegenthart & Damstra, 2019). The needs and interests of the audience must be met within the cultural confines of the community being served. As Barbera et al (2019) said, "in our 24-hour media environment, politicians and the public are constantly adjusting the issues to which they devote attention" (p. 884). It is fluid. It all comes down to what is newsworthy, which could be debated. Barbera et al (2019) suggested it comes down to responsiveness, allowing various parties — media producers, audience members, and politicians — to set the agenda in different circumstances. Possibly most important in that mix, though, is the audience. "If there is a media message and no audience, there is no agenda setting" (McCombs et al, 2014, p. 793).

Framing Theory

Furthermore, without an audience, there could be no framing of an issue. Framing influences how media consumers think about those issues (Krcmar et al, 2016). The frame placed on a piece of media shapes how audiences react to the message being given (Jiawei & McLeod, 2019). This means "framing is what information is emphasized and made salient within a story and what information is de-emphasized or excluded from the story" (Krcmar et al, 2016, p. 253).

To better understand the idea, consider an actual picture frame. The physical frame only allows a viewer to see a specific portion of the image, even if there is more that extends beyond the boundaries of the frame.

Researchers have pointed out that framing is also referred to as second-level agenda setting (Borah, 2011; Krcmar et al, 2016; Neuman et al, 2014). Still, it stands as its own media effects theory. "Frames are created individually and socially within a culture, built through values, ideologies, narratives, and professional norms, and frames help journalists convey information at the macrolevel because they simplify complex issues" (Cullier, 2012, p. 6). As such, how a particular piece of media is framed can have a large impact on public opinion and discourse (Neuman et al, 2014). In part, it is because of framing that journalists and journalism overall get accused of large-scale bias and face cries of "fake news." Cuillier (2012) pointed out that "[j]ournalistic bias is often noticeable when the subject of a story involves an ingroup or outgroup" (p. 7). To explain the idea of ingroups and outgroups, Cuillier (2012) provided examples of how newspapers will cover their local sports teams more favorably than the teams' opponents and how coverage of the Iraq War following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, largely was not critical of the United States. Stroud et al (2014) suggested categorizations of ingroups and outgroups can also be applied to news media organizations themselves, such as partisan media outlets like Fox News and MSNBC that are viewed to be on opposite ends of the political spectrum.

Again, this would seem to point to a bias, but it is also a reaction to what the audience wants and needs. "Citizens take part in framing by participating in public deliberation. Citizens develop their own interpretations of media messages and talk about public issues by making use

of the resources available to them from the media, personal experiences, or common sense"

(Borah, 2011, p. 250). This leads to two-way feedback between audiences and journalists

(Burgers et al, 2016). However, a single frame being able to control or universally influence the

public discourse at a given moment in time is not a guarantee. It depends on several factors, such

as "economic and cultural resources and the journalistic routines and practices or the frame's

resonance with political and cultural values" (Borah, 2011, p. 256). Burgers et al (2016)

suggested that multiple frames used in conjunction make framing more effective and harder to

counter. Borah (2011) seemed to agree that it is beneficial for frames to be tied together.

The proliferation of frames and their implementations support the idea that attention to

this aspect of journalism as it is practiced is important and necessary. Kent and Davis (2006) said

"framing is essential to effective communication. Effective journalism not only communicates

facts but it helps readers make sense of facts" (p. 2). Without framing, audience members could

be overwhelmed with information and end up less informed, which hinders the ability of a

democracy to effectively function (Shulman & Sweitzer, 2018). One potential issue, though, is

that framing often falls along political lines and intensifies society's political polarization (Han &

Federico, 2018). Leveraging political divides and capitalizing on polarized incivility is often the

goal of political actors who utilize the media to spread their messages (Rahman & Gilman,

2019). Druckman et al (2019) pointed out that "incivility shapes the effects of partisan media" (p.

295). Global warming or climate change coverage often gets framed differently depending upon

the political agenda of the news organization. Schuldt and Roh (2014) pointed out that "these

frames are likely to affect how the public perceives the climate issue and to influence their

environmental policy preferences, something that astute political strategists seem keenly aware

of" (p. 542). As Han and Federico (2018) said, "opinion changes depending on how the media frame a social issue with an alternative news frames" (p. 703). For example, Mallouli and Sweeney (2019) found North Africa was framed positively during coverage of World War II, even though it was assumed coverage would have been negative because the people of the region were "the other" and possible enemies. Shulman and Sweitzer (2018) and Schuldt and Roh (2014) suggested two types of frames exist — emphasis and equivalency frames — that respectively provide meaning to the news via specific words that appeal to certain knowledge and provide alternative explanations of the news that is logically the same. Considering frames from these two perspectives could be beneficial. In a similar vein, Karlsson and Rowe (2019) pointed to the news ecology model as being beneficial to understanding how news is framed when the audience receives it. Community media reporters localizing national or international news events is an example of this type of framing viewed through the lens of news ecology.

Kent and Davis (2006) proposed "framing journalism" that "would recognize that it is impossible for journalists not to frame events. It would also recognize that objectivity is an unrealistic standard. Rather what journalists need to do is accept the responsibility of consciously controlling how frames are used to structure news coverage. They need to accept the responsibility to assist news consumers so that they can become more critical and competent consumers of news" (p. 8). This journalistic practice is reminiscent of service or solutions journalism, which emphasizes providing the audience with actionable information. Audience-focused journalism, or hyperlocal journalism, is crucial for community, small-town media. This is because "hyperlocal media are better at keeping up with local affairs and raising concerns about issues that are close to them geographically, socially and emotionally" (Karlsson

& Rowe, 2019, p. 26). Larger or legacy media outlets cannot provide the same nuanced coverage because they are not as embedded into the fabric of the community. This intimate relationship with the community can lead to more volatility and division, though, because of the perceptions of social identity and the relationships between the community members and reporters (Han & Federico, 2018).

Of course, as Shulman and Sweitzer (2018) pointed out, framing can be used for more than politics as the concept can be "applied to strategic communication across topics including health, risk, public relations, and marketing [. . .] In all of these domains, message designers are tasked with creating messages that will resonate with or be better understood by audiences" (p. 172). However, understanding isn't guaranteed. Wendorf Muhamad and Yang (2017) found news coverage framing causes confusion about autism. Similarly, Yu and Farrell (2020) found "national newspapers were more likely to depict autism as a disability caused by external factors comparing with local newspapers. Local newspapers more often referred the cause of autism to internal reasons. Social skill deficit cues were found more likely to appear in local newspapers than in national newspapers" (p. 501-502). This aligned with the data of Wendorf Muhamad and Yang (2017) that showed national outlets primarily frame autism-oriented stories on topics of what caused the disability with the second-most-likely frame being one of a human-interest story.

How autism is covered shows the importance of the framing. The same is true when it comes to sexual assault and legal proceedings. Pennington and Birthisel (2016) highlighted how The New York Times' framing of the 2012 Steubenville, Ohio, rape case thrust the story into the national spotlight, particularly in terms of how social media and technology played a role as the assailants and witnesses all documented the events with their phones or tablets before sharing

images and videos via social media. Bock (2015) discussed the media routine "known as the perp walk: the nonconsensual imaging of a person who is either in custody or otherwise legally obligated to attend a legal proceeding" (p. 206). With the Steubenville case, technology was framed to be both the memory of the victim and a witness to the crime, as well as a threat (Pennington & Birthisel, 2016). Perp walks, though key in television coverage of court proceedings, often frame the accused as guilty before a trial has been completed because "visual messages trump the linguistic, which means that when coupled with video of a perp walk, the word 'alleged' may be meaningless" (Bock, 2015, p. 218).

The framing of health messages impacts audience reactions and adoptions of practices. For example, D'Antoni et al (2019) looked at how messaging affects adoption rates of antivirals to combat a strain of influenza. Similarly, Gwarjanski and Parrott (2018) investigated how mental health, particularly schizophrenia, was framed. D'Antoni et al (2019) found messaging promoting human agency and discussing negative side effects had a greater, though marginal, impact on antiviral adoption versus talking about the seriousness of the virus and downplaying the possible side effects. Gwarjanski and Parrot (2018) determined that news outlets present stigmatized portrayals of mental health that are then bolstered by audience comments that perpetuate the stigmas.

Whether dealing with politics, the environment, crime, or health, the framing of a story impacts how the audience interacts with the information. The frame can cause emotional and logical responses. This highlights the importance of this media practice. Everything is framed, but a frame doesn't automatically mean the story is biased. Framing is a storytelling tool. "Professional standards in the United States dictate that journalists maintain an objective stance.

Nevertheless, journalists also embrace an ideal in which they present audience members enough information so they may have a complete understanding of an issue" (Gwarjanski & Parrot, 2018, p. 960).

Discussion and Conclusions

Theories of gatekeeping, agenda setting, and framing are complicated. Citizens and news consumers do not know these theories exist and influence the news they read in the newspaper or online, watch on the television, or listen to on the radio. Still, those theories directly impact the audience. Therefore, high schools and colleges need to teach media literacy. Romano (2017) suggested immersive learning projects in which "community members can be considered partners and coeducators, given their importance in information how students identify, frame, and analyze public issues. In return, the students create or cocreate journalistic stories about underreported issues, experiences, and activities in communities that affect civic life. In doing so, students learn important skills that will serve them as engaged and informed professionals" (p. 157). Not only do media literate individuals display more social and civic engagement (Garcia-Ruiz et al, 2014; Kahne et al, 2012; Mihailidis, 2006), it will also lead to less political polarization. "Media literacy competencies are necessary for full participation in the modern world" (Schmidt, 2013, p. 153).

The first place an individual can participate is within their local communities. As Katz and Nowak (2018) said, it is at the community level where a person can have the power to make an impact. Therefore, understanding how gatekeeping, agenda setting, and framing impact community media becomes vital. Though Suiter and Fletcher (2020) found low levels of media trust, their study did not focus on media at the local level. Local, community media enjoys more

trust than its national counterparts (Lakshmanan, 2018; Nyhan, 2019; Schmidt, 2019). Despite

this, confusion can still occur. News consumers do not understand news judgment. Using the

example provided at the beginning of this paper, Facebook users commenting on the story about

the football coach who was arrested for driving under the influence did not understand why that

event was given coverage but other stories about arrests for driving under the influence do not

receive coverage. Though the newspaper attempted to explain it — for example, highlighting

how the coach is a public figure — the explanation did not provide enough detail, it seems, to

satisfy most commenters. Too much detail — such as explaining public figures or discussing

how the sheer volume of arrests requires decisions of gatekeeping, agenda setting, framing to

take place — might have muddied the waters and led to more confusion and outrage, but a

balance could have been found.

Finding a way to provide such explanations and build trust is crucial for community

media. As news deserts threaten small-town media (Abernathy, 2018; Claussen, 2020), local

journalism's survival requires proactive measures to build support within the communities being

served. Granted, "the hostile media phenomenon, which suggests that partisans perceive that

putatively neutral media favor the opposition" (Stroud et al, 2014, p. 887), could cause mistrust.

However, at the community level, the journalists are part of the community more intimately.

They oscillate between reporting on the school board and baking cookies for their child's class

fundraiser. There is no vacillation. Community journalists know who they are and have a grasp

on their identities as both journalists and neighbors (Smith, 2018). Because of this, community

members trust the journalists to a greater degree than they might outside reporters. The problem

is that too many local news consumers adopt the "fake news" talking points and the general

suspicion of the media promulgated by national politicians and partisan media outlets. Those

consumers then lump the local news outlet in with the national outlets with which they disagree.

Trust needs to be built, maintained, and rebuilt as necessary. Community media provides

news and information residents can't get anywhere else. No other organization reports on the city

council and ensures that taxpayer dollars are being used appropriately. No other organization

covers the community center's bake sale. No other organization tells the story of the farmer who

also serves as the head basketball coach and bus driver for the local high school. Without local

media, communities lose their individuality and simply get rolled into whatever regional

coverage a nearby news outlet might provide. Still, it is crucial that community members

understand the journalistic practices their local news outlets operate under. There must be trust

and cooperation. Some community members care so much about local news, they volunteer to

keep a community newspaper publishing (Smethers et al, 2017). That same level of devotion can

be developed in other communities if media outlets pull back the current and invite residents into

the process. Failure to do so could be catastrophic.

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