Civic and Social Engagement via Community Media:

A Critical Analysis of Related Literature

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Local, community newspapers are the lifeblood of small towns. They provide valuable news and information to their communities through stories and photos of local events, and they keep community members informed about the actions of local government and school boards. Though many of these outlets still print a physical product on schedules varying from daily to weekly to monthly, not all of them have their own printing presses. Instead, these newspapers must use other vendors to print their products.

If a printing vendor isn't close to the community being covered, they may not provide a viable printing option. This could lead to news deserts — or communities and regions without reliable, local news coverage — popping up (Abernathy, 2018). Though one has to consider the quality of newspapers before they folded and left a void (Claussen, 2020), news deserts are concerning because "people with the least access to local news are often the most vulnerable—the poorest, least educated and most isolated" (Abernathy, 2018, p. 8). Because community media outlets serve as binding agents that bring residents together with common information and coverage, a news dessert can result in a decline in social and civic engagement.

First, though, the idea of community journalism must be understood. Smith and Schiffman (2018) described the concept as "personal and hyperlocal; it helps create a sense of connectedness among community members [. . .] community news media can be crucial to a person's integration into a community" (p. 422). Lowrey et al. (2008) conducted a study searching for a more definitive meaning and found community journalism, though still a bit ambiguous, "should tell a community about itself and engage in a search for meaning and sense making" while encouraging "the pursuit of, and negotiation about, the meaning of shared

symbols, such as resources, issues, and institutions" (p. 293). Smith (2018) defined community journalism more technically, suggesting it "describes weekly newspapers, small dailies, and sometimes the alternative press" (p. 525). Due to the nature of this project, the work of Bressers et al. (2015) is relevant as their case study research focused on local sports coverage as a key component of community journalism in a rural Kansas community, finding that the quality of journalism produced determines the success of a community journalism outlet.

Building upon this is the idea of audience engagement, and engagement is important. Of course, engagement isn't a new concept for community journalism. The journalists are already part of the communities they serve (Lowrey et al., 2008). As Smith (2018) said, the personal identities of these journalists are bound by their work and interactions with their friends and family members that are in the community. "Engaged relationships with audiences have always been the essence of community journalism" (Hatcher, 2016, p. 170). Such relationships mean the audience influences news coverage. The audience wants to feel involved (Mihailidis & Gamwell, 2020).

This means local media is in a nearly constant state of flux. The norms of journalism are always changing, especially when it comes to community journalism (Gutsche & Hess, 2018). Using the idea of reciprocity, Lewis et al. (2014) suggested journalism's role of gatekeeping has gotten in the way of this relationship, except in the realm of community journalism where the work is "about connectedness and embeddedness. It articulates and emphasizes the 'local' in both geographic and virtual forms of belonging, using its rootedness within a particular community to sustain and encourage forms of 'human connectivity' within that environment" (p. 232). This aligned with Hatcher (2016) who suggested that community journalism can bring

people together. “Media outlets that do not interact with their community run the risk of becoming alienated from the public” (Speakman, 2019, p. 47).

Being able to feel as though an individual is part of his or her community is crucial as it indicates social capital. Putnam (2001) suggested social capital is a web of mutual trust and cooperation derived from the participation in community groups and organizations. Bressers et al. (2015) said community journalism influences “the democratic process by allowing citizens to be part of a conversation in the public sphere” (p. 436). Therefore, in order to increase social capital via community journalism, technological tools can be used. As Niekamp (2009) said, “online journalism encourages an emphasis on local news coverage” (p. 46) because it provides an avenue for non-journalists to produce and contribute content.

Therefore, journalism itself can build community. The findings of Bressers et al. (2015) seemed to agree with this as that research alluded to a sub-community being created among volunteers of the organization they studied. Lowrey and Daniels (2017) also found a connection between journalism and community building. An example of this is journalists using Twitter to keep citizens up-to-date during times of disaster (Hinsley & Lee, 2020). This happens because journalism provides a service to the community — a service of providing news and information, as well as meaning and identity. Usher (2012) said “a community coalesces around a shared interest in the content [. . .] and can work together to (generally) build common conversation” (p. 119).

Based upon all of this, this critical analysis provides an in-depth literature review of research concerning community media, social capital, and community engagement. Using social capital theory as the lens, ways community media — understood primarily to be locally-owned, weekly newspapers or hyperlocal news websites, but leaving open the possibility that locally-

owned broadcast outlets may be part of the mix — increase engagement among residents are explored to gain a deeper understanding of how community media outlets build social capital.

Defining Community Media

The concept of community media includes several definitions. Some scholars defined the concept as local-orientated news that helps people feel like they are part of a community by covering matters and people and institutions of importance (Lowrey et al., 2008; Smith & Schiffman, 2018; St. John III, 2013). More technical definitions describe community media in terms of frequency of publication and scope of coverage areas (Bressers et al., 2015; Pauly & Eckert, 2002; Smith, 2018). Howley (2007) defined community media as "locally oriented, participatory media organizations that provide groups and individuals whose voices and perspectives are excluded from mainstream media with access to the tools of media production and distribution" (p. 3). Due to the varying nature of how community media is described, an overview of how scholars discuss this type of journalism is warranted in order to understand how community media exists within society, which helps gauge the impact such outlets can have upon its audiences.

Community media provides important information to and about residents. Howley (2007) explained this form of journalism this way: "Dedicated to promoting local cultural expression, civic engagement and social integration, community media come in many forms: access radio, so-called 'open channel' television, alternative newspapers, ethnic and indigenous peoples' broadcasting, as well as community-based computer networks" (p. 3). Frances Perreault (2021) highlighted the important role local journalists play in covering communities, especially in times of disaster. Journalists can accomplish this via social media (Hinsley & Lee, 2020). Bressers et al. (2015) discussed the importance of high school sports coverage as a type of news valued by

community members. Community media also covers local government, such as city council meetings, board of education meetings, and other entities that are funded through taxpayer dollars (Karlsson & Rowe, 2019). Such coverage by local journalists provides a perspective unique to the community. When outsiders attempt to cover a news event, the coverage is often different than that produced by those who are part of the community (Goldfarb, 2001). Variations in reporting stem from the proximity local journalists have to the news itself.

Of course, as Frances Perreault (2021) pointed out, there exists internal tension within journalists who have an ethical and professional obligation to stay neutral and unbiased while also existing as a member of communities they want to see succeed. This is an important consideration because "identities motivate behavior and tell people what to value" (Smith, 2018, p. 527). At least one by-product of this identity seeking is reciprocity. Lewis et al. (2014) said, "Reciprocity, broadly defined as exchange between two or more actors for mutual benefit, is a defining feature of social life" (p.2). This exchange can take place online or offline. Harte et al. (2017) emphasized how reciprocity "underpins the work of many hyperlocal publishers. The potential of well-developed indirect reciprocal practices and strategies can lead to a point where interaction between citizens is sustained in its own terms.

The reciprocal journalism framework therefore is a useful model to better understand the everyday nature of community journalism as it allows the researcher to consider hyperlocal journalism as a cultural practice that has as much to do with place-making as it does journalism" (p. 173). This positions the idea of reciprocity at the core of community media practices. Local journalists must work with community members to report the news, and they must build relationships with those people in order to cultivate an audience that will support the journalistic endeavors of the operation. This can take place through direct exchanges, indirect exchanges,

and sustained exchanges (Lewis et al., 2014). Furthermore, reciprocity invokes larger ideals because it speaks to how people within a community identify themselves and each other. “While reciprocity can certainly be of the negative variety (e.g., revenge-seeking), positive reciprocity, or the sharing of gifts, favors, or information for mutual well-being, has long been recognized as a necessary ingredient the formation and perpetuation of community, trust, and social capital” (Belair-Gagnon et al., 2019, p. 560). As such, “news organizations can help build stronger communities and further cement their roles in those communities by considering the community’s expectations as inextricably bound with their own” (Lewis et al., 2014, p. 11).

By operating in this way, community media can become even more valuable to the residents it serves. However, doing so could result in a change in how journalists view themselves. “Community journalists burrow themselves into the communities they write about, and they are not only surviving but also even thriving in an emergent media environment because they are not constrained by journalistic norms such as objectivity and detachment” (Smith, 2018, p. 525). For journalism purists, this could be problematic, but such a mindset could be welcomed by the community itself. This comes down to what the audience’s expectations are. Tenor (2018) found that “serving the public interest is an ambition found among hyperlocals regardless of their approach to the professional norms of journalism and their business model. Previous research has also highlighted that the public expects local media to be a ‘good neighbor,’ meaning it should care about and appreciate the community and focus on both solutions and problems” (p. 1,073). Such findings align with the prior work of Poindexter et al. (2006), who found that “for some segments of the public, the press is expected to care about the community, report on interesting people and groups, understand the community, and offer solutions” (p. 85). Such research suggests a preference for positive news. However, the news

isn't always positive, and in a situation where relationships are so important, coverage of such news can become problematic. Tenor (2018) explained that "close relationships with people who are directly or indirectly affected by the news can be a double-edged sword" (p. 1,070). This is because, even when something bad occurs, it must be covered whether the subject of the reporting is a friend or not. Such a stance speaks to the watchdog function of journalism, but, as Poindexter et al. (2006) highlighted, "the public's disaffection with the press' watchdog role" (p. 85) can lead to conflict. Once again, the aforementioned tensions of identity can come into play.

Of course, such points of contention do not occur on a daily basis. Largely, community news outlets provide a form of camaraderie. Nygren (2019) highlighted "the social role of local media" (p. 53) as it brings people together and builds relationships due to coverage of shared experiences. Leupold et al. (2018) referred to this as social cohesion. This is how society is developed, through communication process such as journalism. Referring to American philosopher John Dewey, Huntsberger (2020) said, "Dewey's theory of knowledge considers communication to be the key to the development of shared intelligence and the formation of cultural and political life. For Dewey, acts of communication are necessary steps required to build the foundations of any community" (p. 193). This communication creates the public sphere, which is a concept coined by German sociologist Jurgen Habermas. The public sphere exists, as Thomas McCarthy said, "between civil society and the state, in which critical public discussion of matters of general interest was institutionally guaranteed" (as cited in Habermas, 1991, p. xi). "In Habermas's formulation, the public sphere is integral to the constitution of civil society; it is an arena distinct from the institutions and operations of the state, the market economy, and the domestic sphere of the home, where private individuals constitute themselves as a public" (Howley, 2007, p. 1).

Due to this, community media supports democracy. At the most basic level, local news consumers experience greater interest in, expanded knowledge about, and increased participation within their communities' democratic processes (McLeod & Daily, 1996). "Studies show that hyperlocal media play an important democratic role in helping people root themselves in the local community as well as providing the geographic location with meaning," which means "hyperlocal sites aim to fill the gap in the availability of information that can stir public discourse. They recognise that hyperlocal sites can have a vital democratic role and are able to hold local power to account" (Jangdal, 2019, p. 73). Nygren et al. (2018) pointed out that "[h]yperlocal media can become new platforms for social action, for defending local communities and giving them voice in the public sphere" (p. 46). This serves as a call for individuals to pay more attention to local news instead of national news, which will support a stronger democracy. As Metzler (2021) said, "In the U.S., election ballots run the gambit from local to national elections. This means that individuals focusing solely on national news, whether by choice or by lack of options, have insufficient information to make lower-level ballot choices. A decline in local media is linked to increased straight-ticket voting, suggesting that national media further contributes to hype-partisanship" (p. 612). This damages democracy.

Luckily, local news can counter this. Huntsberger (2020) pointed out, "community media's concentration on local public affairs, and especially on less partisan issues including housing, emergency preparedness, neighbourhood clean-up and America's opioid crisis, can engage local audiences in ways that regional and national providers cannot" (p. 200). In order to keep audiences engaged, though, there must be a mix of content types, such as hard news that covers matters of public importance and soft news that severs more of an entertainment function (Jenkins & Nielsen, 2020). By providing this variety, democracy is supported because news

consumers can easily access information that assists in making decisions that impact the local community.

Though social media is prevalent in society, it cannot achieve this type of impact as effectively. “Traditional local media firms have based their legitimacy on their role in the local society — their role is to create a local identity and act as independent watchdogs of power [. . .] people still regard the local newspaper as more important than Facebook when it comes to being informed about local society. The local newspaper still has a legitimacy as a trustworthy local actor, even if power in the newspapers has moved to large groups of regional media” (Nygren, 2019, p. 65). Still, technology does play a role in fulfilling information needs. Lai and Tang (2015) found “that if people have developed a habit of keeping up with news and seeking information about the community, they are likely to use multiple media frequently to satisfy their needs and interests associated with the community” (p. 341).

Of course, technology can also allow community members to get involved in the news reporting process. News organizations can leverage citizens to contribute news as user-generated content (Johnson & Dade, 2019; Niekamp, 2009; Paulussen & D'Heer, 2013). If a news outlet doesn’t exist or is in danger of shutting down, community volunteers can come together to produce the news themselves (Smethers et al., 2017). Furthermore, as research by Muscat (2018) found, “social media enabled news users to undertake an advocacy role related to the social, cultural, professional, or political dimensions of their particular lives” (p. 225). These types of involvement and engagement are crucial. This is because it is important to ensure subsets of a given community are not ignored or overlooked by the local news outlet (Napoli et al., 2019), which is a problem that can be exacerbated by news deserts (Abernathy, 2018).

As should be clear, community media serves numerous functions. Though the business models of local news outlets are evolving (Hujanen et al., 2019), the importance of these journalistic entities remains. How the news is delivered becomes less important as long as it is being delivered in a way that community members feel involved. Howley (2007) said, "while different community media organizations make use of a variety of communication technologies, these initiatives share the same basic impulse: to provide local populations with the opportunity to participate in civil society; to promote social integration and community cohesion within geo-cultural communities; and to sustain local forms of cultural expression" (p. 19).

Though Nygren (2019) suggested local journalism might be declining in communities due to competing technologies such as social media, community media and local journalism still serve as a binding agent for individuals living within a given locality. Such news outlets are important for society because they provide a foundation for democracy through connectivity and the creation of social capital. What that means and why it is important needs further exploration. This will be addressed in the next section.

Understanding Social Capital

Social capital is a key component of civic engagement. Being civically engaged is crucial for a democracy. Being civically engaged means being aware of the happenings within and being involved in the community. This could entail being on the local school board or city council because it is at the local level where a difference can be made. Awareness can be attained through information consumption, such as via local media. This is important for community health because the decisions made locally have far more bearing on everyday life than national politics.

As such, how members of society interact with each other points to the idea of social capital. Though arguably made famous by Putnam (2001), Loury (2020) pointed out that he created the term social capital. Putnam (2001) referred to social capital as a web of mutual trust and cooperation derived from the participation in community groups and organizations. Gatsil and Keith (2005) built upon this to define the term as "the social networks and mutual trust that sustain democratic institutions" (p. 6). This requires investment within the community. This does not need to be in terms of financial contributions, though. Capital can be any resource used to make progress toward goals (Lin, 2002), such as through engagement. Putnam's research led him to see how social capital as he defined it is a crucial component for social and civic engagement (Maras, 2006). As Loury (2020) said, "all human development is socially situated and meditated," which means the "development of human beings occurs inside social institutions. It takes place as between people, in the context of human interactions" (p. 178). Mutz (2006) said there are two types of social capital that Putnam discussed — bridging social capital and bonding social capital — and "the conditions likely to promote bonding social capital may be precisely the opposite of those that facilitate bridging social capital" (p. 34).

Matei (2003) suggested that "social capital is the nutritive tissue from which civic organizations and collective action grow" (p. 6). Put another way, a functioning democratic society requires socially connected individuals. This is evident when looking at today's politically divided landscape. As Talisse (2020 December 22) said, "Bitter partisanship has rendered Americans unable to treat their opponents as democratic partners" (para. 5). Of course, this isn't new. Giddens (2013) mentioned how social ties are coming undone due to political differences, but a possible solution for this is the rebuilding of communal life. This suggests the remedy could be increasing social capital. This could be developed in youth through educational

initiatives and programming, such as journalism curricula (Bobkowski et al., 2012; Killenberg & Dardenne, 1997; Lamberth & Aucoin, 1993; Robinson, 2017).

If members of society recognize the value of being connected, positive change can be realized. How those connections are built and maintained, though, may not always look the same over time. “Social, demographic, and technological changes have all put stress on older forms of socializing, but they may also drive the evolution of new ones that are better suited to modern times” (Hudson, 2020, p. 57). Giddens (2013) pointed out that “technological innovation stimulated by capitalistic development alters basic aspects of social life” (p. 116). Putnam (2001) saw a decline in social capital by noticing fewer people were joining bowling leagues and other community organizations, which he attributed to increased television consumption. Despite the fact television news can be a source of political information (Bucy & Grabe, 2010), the issue with television consumption, as some research suggests, is that it can cause viewers to be desensitized, especially to societal ills such as poverty or violence (Edgar & Edgar, 1971). This can lead to a less civil society, which can negatively impact democracy functioning properly due to the lack of connectivity between citizens (Putnam, 2001). Such impacts can be attributed to less knowledge being available due to the lack of the prescribed engagements (Edgar & Edgar, 1971). Without this knowledge, which is important for being active in a democracy, reasons to become civically engaged dwindle because the idealism, instilled responsibility, and enjoyment of political participation becomes nonexistent (Putnam, 2001). However, social capital has not died. “In the years since, critics have found other wellsprings of public spirit beyond the more traditional civic activities that Putnam traced over time. Charitable giving, volunteerism, and more diffuse civic networking may be supplanting lodges, PTA meetings, and bowling leagues.

After September 11, even Putnam acknowledged that the national tragedy may have provided the very spark needed to reignite the public's passion for civic life" (Gatsil & Keith, 2005, p. 15).

Outside of television, other technologies can have a negative impact on the creation of social capital. This is especially true in the realm of newer technologies, such as the internet and social media. A cause of this could be that users focus more on their digital lives than the social and civic opportunities around them (Maras, 2006). The research on this, however, is varied. Some scholars believe "online communities will make possible new social arrangements, more democratic and more inclusive," while others believe "social groups facilitated by the computer revolution will, in fact, destroy traditional social bonds, leading to weak social ties" (Matei, 2003, p. 3). Hudson (2020) pointed that "internet-enabled communication does have its advantages, too. Some forms of organizing, activism, socializing, and mutual aid are greatly enabled by online interaction. In fact, there are examples of digital communication building social capital and promoting democratic ideals in unprecedented ways" (para. 49). Furthermore, it can happen anywhere or any time. "No longer is social capital constrained by time or space; cyber networks open up the possibility of global reaches in social capital" (Lin, 2002, p. 227). Abdullah et al. (2016) highlighted a case where online forums have allowed people to come together and discuss issues their communities are facing. Interacting online can help reduce limitations of participation that are inherent in face-to-face interactions (Beauvais, 2018). Using technology can also help individuals "connect with their neighbors online. It helps them break down social isolation" (Abdullah et al., 2016, p. 4).

Such considerations are germane to the discussion because a society's culture is formed and informed by the mass media consumed as it shapes public knowledge and beliefs (Potter, 2014), and these digital technologies create a portion of the mass media as it exists in society

today. As Groshek (2011) pointed out, “it is possible that new media might alter information flows and reshape democratization process precisely because of greater forms of media participation and creation” (p. 1,176). Gatsil and Keith (2005) suggested: “The amount and variety of information available to voters has increased through expanded freedom of the press (by means of the Freedom of Information Act and the precedent set by the publication of the Watergate papers) [. . .] Many Americans worry today, just as they did in 1900 (but not in 1850 or 1950) about increased concentration of media ownership and how it could affect the democratic functions of the fourth estate” (p. 5) and “the viciousness of talk radio reveals the popularity of a decidedly nondeliberative form of citizen participation” (p. 12-13).

Despite the world being digitally connected, “most journalism continues to serve audiences closer to home” (Hess, 2015, p. 482). Gilbert et al. (2010) suggested rural communities are those with less than 2,500 people, consist of large swaths of farm ground, and “tend to be older, less educated, less wealthy, and less mobile than urban Americans” (p. 1,370). Therefore, local media plays an important role in connecting and informing the communities it serves, and the reading of local print products is pointed to as being an indicator of having higher levels of social capital (Hess, 2015; Maras, 2006).

Print journalism helps counter the feelings of social and geographical isolation that rural residents can experience (Gilbert et al., 2010). Such isolation could contribute to the fact television and other media privatized leisure (Putnam, 2001). The effects of which could be more impactful in rural areas because there is less to do, and television viewing in one’s own home is more convenient (Maras, 2006). However, even though access in rural areas can be an issue, rural individuals seem to adopt new technologies quite readily, which could be due to a desire to minimize isolation (Gilbert et al., 2010). This is especially true due to social media allowing

various individuals to connect over any distance. Even so, rural social media users tend to connect with those closer to themselves geographically (Gilbert et al., 2010). This is because social media platforms allow individuals to surround themselves only with opinions and views they already agree with (Turkle, 2012). This allows for confirmation bias and the spiral of silence to exist. “Those with diverse networks refrain from participation in part because of the social awkwardness that accompanies publicly taking a stand that friends or associates may oppose” (Mutz, 2006, p. 3). Therefore, using technology to increase social capital could create possible drawbacks for individuals in rural communities that focus more on a print product for news. A resulting clash of social norms could hinder the development of social capital (Sass, 2016). This relates to the correlation between increased technology use and decreased social capital Putnam (2001) suggested. It should be noted, though, that correlation cannot empirically mean causation.

Therefore, social capital is important for a functioning democratic society, and local news outlets play an important role in that space. How this occurs, though, needs to be further explored, looking specifically at community engagement as it relates to social and civic engagement. This will be addressed in the next section.

Exploring Social and Civic Engagement

The concept of engagement presents multiple definitions, especially as it pertains to journalism. Ball et al. (2016) suggested the term’s “meaning has become an unwieldy catchall [. . .] touted as important but often oversimplified” (p. 491). Batsell (2015) viewed engagement as making strong connections with readers and news consumers to help keep the business of journalism viable with a strong customer base. In academic terms, engagement can be viewed as a type of service-learning urging students to develop self-efficacy by participating in activities of

social change (Ball et al., 2016). Mersey et al. (2010) looked at the term in a broader way by suggesting it concerns an experience narrowed down to "a specific set of beliefs that consumers have about how some media brand fits into their lives" (p. 40). With such varied meanings for the term engagement, an operational definition is required in order to evaluate how engagement takes place within journalism.

As such, based upon the research of Ball et al. (2016), the definition of social engagement can be understood as participation in social organizations and activities, and, based upon the research of Bobkowski and Miller (2016), the definition of civic engagement can be understood as demonstrating a consciousness of political news and actions taking place both locally and nationally within an understanding of the civic process. Engagement occurs via communication. This communication involves both intrapersonal and interpersonal communication (Lowrey & Kim, 2009). Research shows all communication can be attributed to either acquiring information or sharing information, regardless if the information being sent or received is more broad-based or personal in nature (Oates, 1985). Understanding such communication is media literacy, which entails acquiring skills to navigate the news media by being able to evaluate and use information critically (Guo-Ming, 2007; Kahne et al., 2012).

Interacting with or creating journalism is not necessarily attributed to technology use (Carpenter et al., 2015). However, with technology pervading society, the avenues for social engagement by way of communication are ever expanding (Briggs, 2007). This points to the fact that communication affects social interactions, which is a component of media literacy that is key for an informed and active citizenry (Garcia-Ruiz et al., 2014). In part, social interaction is motivation to develop a sense of self — such as autonomy, competence, and camaraderie – within the social context to become better citizens as supported by the self-determination theory

(Gardiner, 2013). Another important output of social interaction is the development of empathy. The human mind supports and becomes more powerful as knowledge of others grows through consumption of various communications or journalistic products (Bech Sillesen et al., 2015). This goes against beliefs that emotions do not allow for rationality, even though research suggests journalism presented in personal fashions can actually foster the development of social engagement by building emotional knowledge of and investment in news events (Bas & Grabe, 2015).

Emotion, and its counterpart passion, are important. This is because "passion conveys the specific emotion of strong enthusiasm and devotion. To have a passion in this sense is to be keenly drawn toward something—be it a person, object, activity, or concept—and, consequently, to have some kind of commitment to pursuing and sustaining that thing" (Hall, 2007, p. 87). As Goodwin et al. (2001) said, "Emotions are part of the 'stuff' connecting human beings to each other and the world around them, like an unseen lens that colors all our thoughts, actions, perceptions, and judgments" (p. 10). This is because "[e]motions are felt, situational evaluations that motivate action" (Neblo, 2020, p. 1). Developing such social skills prevent audience members from being powerless or exploitable when it comes to observing the media and the world in which they exist (Cojocariu, 2013).

Based upon media theories such as agenda setting and the media priming effect, it is clear audience members remember facts about a particular topic based upon how heavily and in what light the event is discussed in news reports (Valenzuela, 2009). Donsbach (2003) suggested social validation and predispositions drive decisions, which is important for social engagement because it outlines ways for individuals to develop the sense of self and arrive at a truth. Personal values that are guiding principles of life are created, which research suggests is impacted by

journalism involvement and lead to understanding humans in terms of a cultural society (Carpenter et al., 2015). Part of this culture is technology being used for communication and social purposes (Thurlow & Bell, 2009).

New media technologies present the opportunity for individuals to lead active civic and political lives. Successful civic engagement involves critical thinking skills, communication, organization, and decision-making (Clark & Monserrate, 2011). The best way to build such skills with individuals within a society is to reach them where they are, which is with technology (Garcia-Ruiz et al., 2014). Access to new media, such as social media, blogging, and video games, via smart phones presents ways to increase this civic engagement (Kahne et al., 2012). Studies support this by pointing out such participative forms of media provide avenues to engage civically in creative fashions demonstrating responsibility and critical thinking (Garcia-Ruiz et al., 2014).

However, it takes more than access to technology to develop this type of participation. Kennamer (1987) suggested journalism provided a space in which political activity is initiated. Members of a community must learn civic engagement means contributing to society by, at minimum, voting in elections, discussing public issues, and volunteering with organizations dedicated to social causes (Bobkowski & Miller, 2016). Clark and Monserrate (2011) argued, though, that there is danger in allowing individuals to believe volunteering is enough. Volunteering can coincide with journalism, though, when the volunteering means donating one's time to a community journalism project (Bressers et al., 2015; Smethers et al., 2017).

Knowing oneself is important for effective civic engagement and to be able to weigh in on important matters of all sizes with core a belief and understanding. This suggests that people need to feel heard, especially in the civic realm of politics. As Sprain and Carcasson (2013) said,

"political apathy can actually be rather thin if people are given genuine opportunities to interact and make a difference on local issues" (p. 17). Of course, an individual's background or station in life can also influence engagement. Low socioeconomic status can be attributed to lower levels of education, and this leads researchers to conclude people with lower levels of education do not have the same ability to process news information effectively as individuals with higher levels of education (Bas & Grabe, 2015). Furthermore, a distrust of the media could lead to less civic engagement because of ways minorities are represented, or under-represented, in news coverage and on journalism staffs (Amster, 2006; Marchi, 2012).

Though civic engagement can take many forms, the most recognizable method of involvement consists of taking part in politics. Research shows media messaging and how it is presented in any of a variety of formats can impact on how an individual views politics, whether positively or negatively (Faulkner, 2011; Lowrey & Kim, 2009). Regardless of political views, being active in the process allows individuals to develop friendships and bring communities together as social capital is built, which research suggests is important for a democracy to succeed because it allows people to interact and solve problems affecting the community in which they exist (Bressers et al., 2015). This involvement can be as simple as taking part in comment threads in online news publications, which provides new avenues for individuals to interact with the news and fellow consumers (Ksiazek, 2015). Studies suggest an understanding of this type of interactivity allows for participatory journalism on a larger and more impactful scale (Bressers et al., 2015).

A key component of communication and community engagement is the discourse that is used to exchange information. As such, civil discourse is important in this discussion because it sheds light on how informed the populace is, and the level of knowledge individuals have can be

determined by how well discussions can take place with respect and understanding and without becoming hostile (Ksiazek, 2015). Views of journalism and how it plays into civic life can be generational by nature (Andersson & Wadbring, 2015). This speaks to how engagement is created.

Part of civic development is actively gaining knowledge by way of journalism (Clark & Monserrate, 2008). People most likely to vote tend to be well-informed and regularly consume news (Kennamer, 1987). When it comes to political elections, the media plays a large role by altering how voters differentiate and judge political candidates and parties (Valenzuela, 2009). Research shows, though, media does not dictate what individuals should think but rather what they should be thinking about (Golan et al., 2005). Based upon third-person effects, however, research shows individuals believe they are not susceptible to media influence when it comes to making decisions, such as in casting a ballot, but others likely become swayed one way or the other (Banning, 2006).

Golan et al. (2005) conducted an experiment with college students and arrived at results pointing to increased participation in voting correlating with exposure to media messages that respondents felt were not affecting their decision but would have large impacts upon others viewing the same messages; however, respondents who indicated they were less likely to vote did not believe the messaging was affecting them less or more than anyone else, leading a conclusion to be drawn that voting when experiencing the third-person effect is an effort to balance the election by offsetting the vote of the more impressionable viewers influenced by the messaging. Media messaging impacts young voter turnout, especially as forms of media being used by political entities and consumers alike change (Kennamer, 1987). Online communication, such as social media, impacts public perception of political issues at different levels of

government or community (Snee, 2015). Use of social media, such as Facebook or Twitter, has been pointed out in research as being an excellent outlet for political dialogue because of its openness for communication between candidates and voters or simply among voters themselves (Fernandes et al., 2010). “The acts of political expression on social media are personalized and identity-focused and may be aimed at different audiences depending on a specific context. Given the number of potential social settings and overlapping audiences on egocentric networks, citizens engaging in political expression need to develop a broader repertoire of political selves which triggers a process of inadvertent civic learning and may lead to spillover effects on real-world political action. Research suggests that the mere expectation of expression that is followed by the composition and transmission of a message may lead to greater cognitive and emotional involvement of the sender” (Skoric et al., 2016, p. 1834). Interestingly, though, research suggests engagement occurs more with interactions of national media than community media (Drok et al., 2018).

Discussion and Analysis

As Hann (1999) said, “Communities are generally established out of a desire to have a commonality of thinking and a way of viewing the world” (p. 4). Based upon this critical analysis of literature, it becomes clear that journalism itself can build community by increasing social and civic engagement among residents of a given locality. This is done through the fostering of social capital. One way social capital can be created is via communication, and journalism provides a form of and forum to express communication, or discourse.

After all, language is key to human survival as a means for building community and identity (Iftikhar et al., 2019). Therefore, discourse within the realm of journalism is important. Not only do journalists create discourse through their reporting that impacts the audience and

community they serve, how journalists view themselves also leverages discourse. The idea of viewing oneself is important for society.

Members of a democratic society must understand themselves. “Individuals who have a good understanding of their own emotional makeup, and who are able to communicate effectively with others on a personal basis, are likely to be well prepared for wider tasks of citizenship” (Giddens, 2013, p. 119). People cannot connect with others if they don’t know how they view and present themselves to the world. This lack of personal knowledge creates barriers to developing the social ties that create social capital. Assumptions about roles and identities must combat “a public prone to partisan selective exposure, an emergent media sector willing to deliver partisan content, and a traditional media sector anxious over its—often criticized—ability to deliver news” (Carlson, 2018, pp. 1,880).

The problem is too many people only view themselves in terms of their political affiliations, which then causes them to view others only through a political lens. That must be corrected. For democracy to work, society must work together instead of in opposition to those who have differing political viewpoints. This is not an essay task as the available technology can certainly help further divisions (Hudson, 2020), but it can be done. Talisse (2020 December 22) suggested that “Americans would need to do things together that have nothing to do with politics, engaging in activities that in no way express our partisan loyalties – volunteering with a community organization, for example, or joining a bowling league” (para. 10). Opportunities to engage with fellow residents often are reported by community media. Therefore, journalism serves as a vehicle for community engagement that can bring people together within common spaces and activities.

By doing this, trust can be rebuilt. “Trust in others generates solidarity across time as well as space: the other is someone on whom one can rely, that reliance becoming a mutual obligation” (Giddens, 2013, p. 127). If people can rely on each other, the benefit of the doubt can be given to those who disagree with a given position or belief, leading to better democratic outcomes and cohesion. Society can be democratized, and the power of the people can truly be realized. People can remain autonomous and maintain their individual rights while also existing in a collective and pluralistic society.

For journalism to function properly within a democratic society, there must be trust. This is especially true during politically divisive times where “fake news” is used as a cudgel to bash any sort of media coverage that is not favorable to previously held beliefs and opinions. To combat such accusations, journalists should do what they do best and report on the claims, showing with evidence why the reporting is solid. To borrow from Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis, “the remedy to be applied is more speech” ("Whitney v. California," 1927). For example, implementing fact-checkering can help, but for it to be successful it must be done transparently in order to build trust (Humprecht, 2020). “Some individuals might not believe in corrections and instead continue to hold their pre-existing misperceptions even after exposure to evidence” (Tandoc, 2019, p. 6).

This speaks to a lack of trust, and a societal or professional norm, such as trust, “cannot exist without being discursively articulated” (Vos & Craft, 2017, pp. 1,509). Therefore, discourse plays an important role “in the way that both journalists and citizens understand journalism’s role” in society (Zahay et al., 2020, p. 2). With understanding comes appreciation and bonding. As Bicas (2021) said, “the objective is to strengthen ties, address differences between logics; it is coexistence through ayni (mutual aid). It is a strengthening of a collective experience” (p. 224).

Community journalism accomplishes this goal. As such, "leaders in American community media agree that the future is inextricably tied to local service" (Huntsberger, 2020, p. 197).

Related to this is the concept of leadership-as-practice. L-A-P embodies ideas of "collective, shared, distributed, and relational leadership" because, again, the focus is not on the traits or abilities of an individual actor (Raelin, 2017, p. 215). Carroll et al. (2008) suggested practice points to meaning, or the why behind the practices that are being done. This is an important consideration in terms of how journalism creates community. After all, "L-A-P is witness to the formation of community" (Raelin, 2017, p. 217). Since journalism is within the realm of communication and "communication sits at the very heart of leadership" (Simpson et al., 2018, p. 646), journalism needs to be considered in relation to L-A-P.

Community media, which functions within a relationship between itself and its community, serves as a binding agent that brings residents together with common information and coverage. This can take place via various platforms, such as printed products, radio or television broadcast, or the internet and social media (Butt et al., 2016; Guo, 2018; Skoric et al., 2016; Vaccari et al., 2015; Yonghwan & Hsuan-Ting, 2015). Regardless, members of the community must feel as though they have a voice and say in the production of the news (Ellis et al., 2021). To accomplish this, media outlets must cover their communities intentionally, considering how to engage residents and ensure their stories and truths are being reported.

Through this, social capital is developed, which serves the democratic goals of society by increasing social and civic engagement. To accomplish this, community media provides leadership through its practice of journalism. Through the use of such media, engagement with communities is increased (He et al., 2020). The subsequent increase of knowledge empowers community members to make informed decisions about issues of importance, such as politics

(Dahlgren, 2018). With power, marginalized voices can be heard and effectively engage with others in the community. Democracy then can be upheld and effectively function. Journalists will cover the people and events for their community media outlets, writing the first draft of history and providing the mechanism for social capital and engagement to continue.

Conclusion

Based upon this critical analysis of literature concerning the intersections of community media, social capital, and community engagement, a path forward becomes clear. First, further investigating this topic presents a viable research agenda. Though the business models of community media are changing (Olsen et al., 2021; Olsen & Solvoll, 2018a, 2018b), these journalistic entities still provide valuable functions within their coverage areas. Furthermore, gaining deeper understanding of how community media positively impacts social capital and the development of democracy can help journalism survive and thrive in small communities by providing insight into what such an outlet needs to do in order to continue to exist. This can stem the proliferation of news deserts (Abernathy, 2018).

To accomplish this, qualitative research will be conducted. Primarily, this will consist of in-depth interviews and participant observations. These methods will be used to explore, in part, the following questions: What role does community media play within a community? What type of coverage do citizens expect from their local news outlets? What types of relationships do journalists and regular citizens have with each other and with the media outlet itself? How does community media foster the creation of social capital? How does community media serve democracy? What kinds of impacts does local news have on society?

Of course, more questions can and will be approached, and along the way operational definitions will have to be developed. For example, the idea of impact will need to be solidified.

This will be tricky, though, as impact will be context dependent. Something like the Granger causality test could be used (Groshek, 2011); however, in a qualitative realm the individuals being studied ultimately will determine what it means to have an impact. This will be determined by looking for themes within the responses of interviewees. Theories such as discourse (e.g., Abdulmajeed & El-Ibiary, 2020; Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2008; Bloch, 2000; Briscoe & Khalifa, 2015; Brown & Brown, 2012; Fairclough, 2014; Finneman & Thomas, 2021; Gee, 2014, 2015; Howley, 2007; Iftikhar et al., 2019; Palmer, 2021; Sprain & Reinig, 2018; Whipple & Shermak, 2020), gatekeeping (e.g., Cassidy, 2006; Deluliis, 2015; Ferrucci & Tandoc, 2017; Funk, 2016; Groshek, 2017; Padgett et al., 2019; Pantic & Cvetkovic, 2020; Paskin, 2018; Welbers et al., 2018; Zelenkauskaite, 2019), agenda setting (e.g., Barbera et al., 2019; Boukes, 2019; Chen et al., 2020; Djerf-Pierre & Shehata, 2017; Gilardi et al., 2021; McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Mccombs et al., 2014; Neuman et al., 2014; Searles & Smith, 2016), and framing (e.g., Bock, 2015; Borah, 2011; Bucy & Grabe, 2010; Burgers et al., 2016; D'Antoni et al., 2019; Dahlgren, 2018; Han & Federico, 2018; Jiawei & McLeod, 2019; Johnson & Dade, 2019; Kent & Davis, 2006; Mallouli & Sweeney, 2019; Pennington & Birthisel, 2016; Sadri et al., 2021; Schuldt & Roh, 2014; Shulman & Sweitzer, 2018; Wendorf Muhamad & Yang, 2017; Yu & Farrell, 2020) will provide valuable insights as well.

Such a research agenda is exciting. Pursuing it will prove to be rewarding, and it will serve to support community media. Society needs local news. Those outlets are the only place individuals can receive reliable information about the communities in which they live. National outlets are not going to cover them, but small-town residents also have important stories to tell. Without community media, those stories would go untold, and their place in history would be overlooked.

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