

The Stories Not Told:

Understanding the Gap in Local Accountability News Coverage

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Executive Summary¹

Policy Question (p.1)

What levels of government should address the market failures relating to public affairs coverage and accountability journalism at the local level?

Research Question (p.1)

Which community characteristics contribute most to the market failures relating to local accountability coverage?

Introduction (p.2)

In July, 2010, the citizens of Bell, California, a community of fewer than 40,000 residents in suburban Los Angeles, were outraged to learn that their public officials had been spending taxpayer dollars to pay themselves salaries as high as \$787,637. Investigative reporters at the *Los Angeles Times* uncovered the corruption by obtaining public records that listed public employee salaries. Citizens in Bell had requested the salary records before, but city officials had not complied. Once the story broke, hundreds of citizens stormed city hall and forced the resignation of the city manager, assistant city manager, and police chief. The story won the Pulitzer Prize for Public Service in 2011.

What stunned the general public about the Bell story was not the corruption itself but the fact that officials' 12% annual pay raises went undetected for years. What took the reporters so long? The self-dealing began after the community newspaper that covered Bell and its neighbors, *Community News*, was sold to a chain and ceased covering local news. Bell relied on the *Los Angeles Times* and broadcast outlets in the broader metropolitan media market for local government coverage. The *LAT*, which covers Los Angeles County's 88 cities, has felt the same economic pressures affecting metro newspapers across the country.

The Bell case encapsulates the crisis facing local watchdog journalism. Newspapers across the country are facing a broad economic pressure, which has led to fewer, or sometimes no, reporters, to cover city hall and other local institutions. Holdover public policies designed to prevent corruption and benefit the media industry in its former incarnation often exacerbate the

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situation. Reporting saves taxpayers money, yet newspapers can never directly capture that benefit. Meanwhile, the public suspects that other acts and patterns of malfeasance go unreported on and, thus, go unknown and unstopped.

News is a public good in the economic sense. The facts journalists discover and make public are both nonrival and nonexcludable, and their discovery generates positive externalities; watchdog reporting increases the accountability of public officials and institutions. The toolbox of possible policy interventions—by government, by foundations and nonprofits, and through public-private partnerships—is a known quantity. What existing research has not established is at what level of government those policies may have the most impact, and where the civic need for information policy intervention is greatest.

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

To determine which policies will address the market failure, we must better understand the scope and dimension of this failure. This requires an examination of the gap between the optimal level of accountability coverage and the coverage produced. While it is not possible to do a full cost-benefit analysis, we must examine the difference between the coverage that is produced and that which is the socially optimal amount. Which stories go untold?

Data and Methods (p. 18)

This study examines which features of a community are associated with lower levels of local accountability news coverage. It employs a multi-phase qualitative analytical process to form hypotheses about which community characteristics and related factors contribute to a gap between the current level of local accountability coverage and the ideal level, in an economic sense. Asking officials with an insider's view of relevant issues in the community provides insight into what that level of coverage would be, how it compares to the level produced, and how the answers to those questions differ according to community characteristics.

Phase 1: Site selection and community characteristics

Using U.S. Census and other publicly available data, I selected selecting four communities at the periphery of the Raleigh-Durham media market: Mebane, Siler City, Apex, and Garner. A dashboard of descriptive statistics (see Table 1, p. 24) compares each community by population, distance from Raleigh, total land area, household income, poverty, educational attainment, and languages spoken at home other than English.

Because literature demonstrates that suburban or exurban communities receive systematically different coverage and that socioeconomic status, education, and race contribute

to awareness of civic information, the dashboard includes information about the socioeconomic and racial composition of those communities. Because literature also demonstrates difficulty in providing adequate news coverage across bodies of local government jurisdiction, two of the chosen communities, Mebane and Apex, straddle county lines and two, Mebane and Siler City, straddle media markets.

Phase 2: Stakeholder survey of information needs

I identified a set of stakeholders in the community who could provide qualitative insight on the communities' information needs. The people surveyed are be the same people a journalist would turn to as *sources* for information about what is, or should be, news. I chose one town or city council member, one local government employee, and two stakeholders from organizations that play prominent roles in the community. Each stakeholder was asked a set of survey questions about the most significant problems, events, and challenges that the community has faced in the past two years. Questions were worded to avoid leading respondents to comment on what has been covered in the media until after key issues were identified. Questions about media coverage and outlets for public debate came after questions about issues.

Stakeholders' responses were then compared in order to determine the most significant specific issues in each of the four communities: the stories that should be covered. Asking both elected officials and politically engaged people who are not in public decision-making roles may correct for the biases of any single perspective and triangulate issues that are likely to be significant to all members of the community.

Phase 3: General assessment of information provision

Follow-up questions with stakeholders solicited their opinions about the general availability of news and information in their communities and the coverage of the stories and decision points they identified.

Additional interviews with representatives from local news outlets (and other community members, when appropriate) provided additional explored the role they believe their outlets play in providing local news, in covering the identified topics and decision points, and in providing a forum for public debate.

Conclusions (p. 97)

In small communities at the periphery of the media market,

- **Broadcast and metro outlets fail to provide consistent coverage of municipal and local affairs.** For those communities "in the crack" between media markets, there is an inverse relationship between access to media and the number of stories about communities' major challenges. The coverage may also be diffused across more sources, with no one source pulling together news from the multiple bodies of jurisdiction, providing a big picture view of a small community.

- **Weekly print newspapers are the main sources of local news.** This was true in all four communities. The papers vary in quality, depth of coverage, and readership. In Garner, closest to Raleigh of all the communities examined, stakeholders referring to a locally owned outlet, *The Garner Citizen*, as the only truly local news source among three weekly papers. It is unclear what the *Citizen's* apparent demise means for future coverage of Garner. In Siler City, *The Chatham News* aspires to a more enterprising role than do papers in Mebane or Apex. In all cases, stakeholders note the limitations of the weekly format and limited staff resources. Demand for daily news about topics of great significance, such as the Townsend plant in Siler City, creates a vacuum filled by unverified information.
- **Information exchange and debate between stakeholders tends to be informal.** Public officials view informal, non-mediated exchanges with community members as important tools for understanding and representing public concerns. Stakeholders often learn information from unofficial sources before it hits the news. But informal information exchange poses a problem when information goes unverified. In Siler City, stakeholders cite rumors and speculation as a negative consequence of the lack of daily journalism on fast-moving issues, such as the Chatham County schools reorganization. In Mebane, a representative of a disenfranchised community viewed informal information exchange as a means of excluding the views of those outside the "old boy" network.
- **Blogs and other digital media are virtually non-existent and do not provide significant outlet for news or public debate.** The notion of bloggers as citizen journalists, providing independent coverage of public affairs, is non-existent in the communities this study analyzes. Yet there is evidence in these communities that online media can be powerful. In Mebane, a community group's website allowed it to bypass intermediaries to tell the story of the 119 bypass in a way that generated subsequent debate and news coverage. In Chatham County, the Chatham County BBS and Chatham Chatlist are popular forums for debate, but that debate is often fed by information that is unverified and presented selectively for the purpose of advancing political points of view. As a result, many stakeholders have little respect for online blogs and forums, especially those that allow anonymity, and they have little interest in participating.
- **Media outlets have little interest in online media, though public officials show an interest in improving their governments' websites.** *The Garner Citizen* was the only local media outlet with a highly developed, consistently updated website. Other media outlets, notably the weekly newspapers, have limited web presences and lack either the interest or capacity to develop them further. This means that, online, local journalism outlets are being displaced by government websites and, to some extent, Facebook, as go-to sources for information. In Apex, the city government provides a significant amount of information online and recently hired a public information officer to expand its web presence. The Apex Chamber of Commerce is a significant online information source. In Mebane, city officials plan to offer video of council meetings online. In Siler City, the town manager participates in listservs with other officials and uses email to communicate with other officials, agencies, and community service providers.

Content and quality

- Broadcast coverage focuses on crime, disaster, and soft event coverage.
- Print weeklies provide the only reliable coverage of standing public meetings. Print weeklies do little to no enterprise or investigative coverage and rely heavily on official sources. Stories tend to be driven by events and public meetings.
- Online outlets, if they exist, tend to reflect informal communication rather than reporting. Content tends toward unsubstantiated rumor and speculation rather than facts.
- Official stakeholders (city/town officials) complain of a lack of positive coverage, while unofficial stakeholders feel marginalized by a lack of viewpoint diversity.
- In identifying significant story threads, official stakeholders identify infrastructure needs and economic development, while unofficial stakeholders identify contentious issues over public resources and/or decisions with distributional consequences.

Next Steps (p. 100)

Using the case approach:

This qualitative case study method was designed to provide a framework that others may use to inform future study, particularly quantitative analysis of news coverage. Before quantitative metrics can be employed, it is necessary to reflect on what is useful to measure, and how. The most significant issues facing a community can and should be drilled down to specific topics that relate to specific places, people, and decisions facing local government. The narrative thread of any given topic extends from the community's past (such as its racial history and the development of its built environment) into a set of connected decisions in the present day (such as the municipal and/or county budget and decisions about economic development and financial incentives for businesses). The narrative thread becomes increasingly complex the more bodies of governmental jurisdiction are involved (such as with Apex's wastewater treatment facility and with the Jordan Lake rules affecting Mebane). These complex elements comprise the context of a story, and providing that context is what enables a reader to understand the decision from multiple points of view and to investigate further, should he or she desire to do so. Measuring the degree of context in news coverage would provide the best proxy for measuring quality.

This study finds that some decisions local governments face are more consequential than others, therefore a comparative study across municipalities should recognize that not every council agenda is of equal significance. A comparative study should also take into account that the flow of information moves in multiple directions at once, particularly in communities that receive little news coverage. Official stakeholders (such as elected officials and town staff), unofficial stakeholders (such as community activists), and community members may influence the media as much as they are influenced by it. Professionals in conventional media, particularly print weekly newspaper reporters, see verifying the information that flows through informal channels as part of their role in the media ecology. Studies of nonconventional media, such as

blogs, forums, and other online sources, should examine the extent to which those outlets drive coverage in conventional media and how well either the conventional or unconventional sources filter information to check its reliability.

Comparative content analysis:

Conclusions at the end of each of four community profiles provide examples of further analysis into the content of news coverage, specific to the community context and the nature of the stories themselves.

In general, a content analysis could examine coverage of the specific storylines identified in this study's stakeholder interviews. Metrics should provide a way to establish some sense of depth and quality as well as quantity of stories in various outlets. Those measures of quality could be used as an outcome variable, while community characteristic could serve as independent variables. Based on the findings in this paper, the most relevant independent variables would likely pertain to population size, distance from the center of the media market (in this case, Raleigh), educational attainment, household income, and the percentage of residents who speak Spanish at home.

The preliminary hypothesis of this study is that such analysis would find lower quantity and quality of local news coverage in municipalities with lower educational attainment, lower income, further distance from the center of the market, and higher percentage of Spanish speakers.

These methods would not allow findings of causation, but they would better inform policymakers about the level of democratic governance at which the market failure for news is most acutely felt, and the policies and interventions that best address local community information needs. Such interventions may include better mechanisms for local government transparency and digital access to public records; a consideration of the costs and benefits of laws requiring local governments to purchase public notice advertisements in local media; a reconsideration of public interest requirements for licensed broadcast license stations; and subsidies to fund journalism, either at existing institutions or at new organizations.

Policy Question

What levels of government should address the market failures relating to public affairs coverage and accountability journalism at the local level?

Research Question

Which community characteristics contribute most to the market failures relating to local accountability coverage?

Introduction

In July, 2010, the citizens of Bell, California, a community of fewer than 40,000 residents in suburban Los Angeles, were outraged to learn that their public officials had been spending taxpayer dollars to pay themselves salaries as high as \$787,637. Investigative reporters at the *Los Angeles Times* uncovered the corruption by obtaining public records, which list public employee salaries. Once the story broke, hundreds of citizens stormed city hall and forced the resignation of the city manager, assistant city manager, and police chief.¹

What stunned the general public about the Bell story was not the corruption itself but the fact that officials' 12% annual pay raises went undetected for years. What took the reporters so long? It turns out that the self-dealing began after the community newspaper that covered Bell and its neighbors, *Community News*, was sold to a chain and ceased covering local news. Bell then relied on the *Los Angeles Times* and broadcast outlets in the broader metropolitan media market for local government coverage. Up until the 2010 revelations, such coverage was sparse. The *LAT* was in no position to take on more of the load of covering Los Angeles County's 88 cities, as the paper felt the same economic pressures affecting metro newspapers across the country. With print circulation plummeting, the paper's ownership changed hands and its staff and number of pages were slashed.²

In the aftermath, *LAT* media columnist James Rainey wondered, "How many more Bells are out there?" With newspaper circulation and ad revenue dropping, there are half as many reporters covering Los Angeles County as there were 15 years ago, Rainey said. Yet even with its newsroom so reduced, the *LAT* uncovered the story because it had the resources to do so. It turned out that citizens had requested the salary records before, but told reporters that city officials had not complied. "A big newspaper like The *Times* can't be so easily dissuaded,"

Rainey noted. "As they waited for the records, the reporters frequently reminded city officials they didn't want to have to take them to court."³

It took the institutional power of a newspaper to apply pressure that made public policy function as it should. That was not the only policy failing in the Bell case. Open government advocate Terry Francke noted that California's open-meetings law for local government, the Brown Act, "even if perfectly complied with, does not make it hard for Bell-like excesses to creep in." Loopholes allow the government to avoid posting public notices or making note of substantive policy making in meeting agendas. Francke laid the blame for this policy not only on the state but on the "newspaper industry," which had "cultivated" the policy on the assumption "that newspaper reporters will be on hand to use it in scrutinizing government behavior. But even reporters require a bit of periodic training to help them decode agendas and read between the lines of official meeting bureaucratese that the Brown Act is just vague enough to permit as barriers to ordinary citizens."⁴

The Los Angeles Times won the Pulitzer Prize for Public Service in 2011 for its coverage of the Bell scandal, after winning the IRE Medal, Investigative Reporters and Editors' top prize, earlier that year.⁵

The Bell case encapsulates the crisis facing local watchdog journalism. Newspapers across the country are facing a broad economic pressure, which has led to fewer, or sometimes no, reporters, to cover city hall and other local institutions. Holdover public policies designed to prevent corruption and benefit the media industry in its former incarnation often exacerbate the situation. Local officials fail to comply with the law either because their wrongdoing goes undetected or because they are not brought to account, thanks to insufficient policies governing

information about their actions. Yet even though newspapers have significantly fewer resources, once those resources are applied, they prove uniquely effective in uncovering corruption. Once the *Los Angeles Times* reported the story, news spread among the citizens of Bell, and the community mobilized to hold their officials accountable. Reporting saves taxpayers money, yet newspapers can never directly capture that benefit. Meanwhile, the public suspects that other acts and patterns of malfeasance go unreported on and, thus, go unknown.

News is a public good in the economic sense. As Hamilton and others have pointed out, the facts journalists discover and make public are both nonrival and nonexcludable.⁶ News generates positive externalities; watchdog reporting, the function of journalism this study is concerned with, increases the accountability of public officials and institutions. Throughout most of the 20th Century, the business model of advertising-supported journalism and content bundling corrected to some degree the market failure for the public good of accountability journalism. A number of public policies have been put in place since the nation's founding to bolster the provision of news content, yet the profitability of private media companies and concern over government interference have prevented widespread public interventions. The Internet unbundled different types of content and unbundled content from advertising, making it more economically difficult for newspapers to provide watchdog reporting at previous levels.

The crisis of the business model for news is well known. Federal agencies such as the Federal Communications Commission and the Federal Trade Commission are currently considering well-publicized policy recommendations.⁷ The toolbox of possible interventions—by government, by foundations and nonprofits, and through public-private partnerships—is a known quantity. What existing research has not established is at what level of government those policies may have the most impact, and where the civic need for information policy intervention

is greatest. Early study of environmental policies demonstrated that the impact of externalities, both positive and negative, ignores the boundaries of policymaking. Similarly, there may be downstream effects of information or its absence. There may be interaction effects among policies, unintended consequences, or contradictions.

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

To determine which policies will address the market failure, we must better understand the scope and dimension of this failure. This requires an examination of the gap between the optimal level of accountability coverage and the coverage produced. While it is not possible to do a full cost-benefit analysis, we must examine the difference between the coverage that is produced and that which is the socially optimal amount. We must establish the counterfactual: Which stories go untold?

This study examines which features of a community are associated with lower levels of local accountability coverage. It employs a multi-phase qualitative analytical process of site selection and description, stakeholder interviews, assessment of information provision, and comparative analysis across the selected communities with recommendations for future content analysis. Assessing which community characteristics contribute to a market failure for news and

giving that market failure qualitative dimension, should enlighten policy makers as to the levels of government intervention—and, by extension, which policies—may best correct it.

Literature Review

The economics of news

News, particularly when produced in a conventional newsroom, requires high fixed costs for paper, ink, delivery, and for reporters and editors, in terms of both salaries and time. Yet the marginal cost of a news story is zero, be it one more print copy, an additional over-the-air viewing or hearing, or an additional impression online (Hamilton, Shapiro and Varian).⁸ There are some increasing returns to scale in a large news organization in term of capital: buildings, computers, a printing press or broadcasting facility, etc. The costs of newsgathering, however, demonstrate little in the way of economies of scale. Reporting requires an expenditure of time to familiarize oneself with the bodies of jurisdiction in a community, to build relationships with sources, to sit through public meetings and to examine public documents on an ongoing basis. The transaction costs of this labor may be higher in local communities that do not provide public information on the web.

In a competitive market where price equals marginal cost ($P=MC$), it is difficult to recover those fixed costs.⁹ The traditional role of the media has been that of market intermediary, connecting buyers (the audience) with sellers (the advertisers). As a result, media is a two-sided marketplace in which the production and consumption of news depend not only on the audience that consumes information, but also on the appeal of audience demographics to advertisers.¹⁰ The sale of advertising effectively subsidizes the price of news for consumers. Even now, the business model for most for-profit and even many nonprofit media outlets depends on

advertising revenue to cover most of the costs of production. Recouping the cost of local reporting is all the more difficult in that the demand for those stories is limited to the local audience. The "total market coverage" model has allowed media outlets to monetize their reach to every advertiser in a given geographic market. This model is often referred to as "hyperlocal," a term with various definitions, but which usually refers to coverage with a specific geographical community in mind, and which appeals exclusively to residents of that community. In that model, advertisers find value in reaching every household, and the price advertisers are willing to pay to reach every household exceeds the amount that the media organization could make through subscriptions to only those households that were willing to subscribe. Therefore, in that model, the audience's demand for news contained on those papers is difficult to discern.

Demand for news and information can be divided into four categories: consumption (information that improves consumer choices), production (information we need to do our jobs and earn money), entertainment (information that amuses), and voter (information that influences civic engagement).¹¹ Downs observed a market failure for voter information due to rational ignorance. The statistical probability that learning about a particular candidate or policy will allow an individual to have any effect on an election or a piece of legislation is effectively zero; therefore, a rational analysis of costs and benefits will lead that person not to expend the time, energy or money to learn that information. Hamilton points out that news reporting often seeks to appeal to other forms of information demand through "diversion and drama," which leads to soft news coverage.

Documenting the positive externalities of news

Accountability news reporting performs a community watchdog function. As Paul Starr notes, journalists prevent public corruption by keeping an eye on public officials. "[F]rom a

political standpoint, news contributes to a well-functioning society inasmuch as it enables the public to hold government and other institutions accountable for their performance."¹² A study of countries on The World Bank's annual index of political corruption found that the lower a nation's "free circulation of daily newspapers per person," the higher that nation rates on the corruption index.¹³ The strong association indicates a relationship between press coverage and accountability.

There is also a large body of literature documenting the impact of local news, or its absence, on voter behavior and civic engagement. A well-documented correlation exists between higher socioeconomic status and awareness of civic information. Tichenor, Donohue, and Olien summarized these findings and further proposed that the structure of mass media contributed to a failure to inform the public, particularly citizens with low socioeconomic status. The authors hypothesized that the introduction of each new medium (e.g., radio, television, Internet) increased the "knowledge gap."¹⁴ Jerit builds on knowledge gap research by looking not only at the structure of media but also at content. Her study examines how differences in the way media cover political issues affect the distribution of political knowledge and engagement. Using survey data and media content analysis, she finds that higher levels of expert commentary in news stories reinforce the socioeconomic gaps in political knowledge, while contextual coverage helps to close the gap.¹⁵

Chaffee and Wilson analyzed the divide between "media poor" and "media rich" communities, defining as "media poor" communities without multiple, competing daily newspapers. (It is a sign of the times that most places in the country would qualify as "media poor" today.) Their surveys tested the hypothesis that the media richness of a community — as measured by the number of different daily newspapers locally published and circulated — "is

associated with greater diversity in the public problems agenda held by citizens of that community."¹⁶ A more recent study by Gentzkow, Shapiro, and Sinkinson found that the entry of a newspaper into a media market significantly increased voter turnout in presidential and congressional elections. The study found that the first newspaper had the greatest effect; the introduction of competition had a much smaller effect.¹⁷

Trounstine sought the source of political candidates' incumbent advantage, a well-documented but not well-understood phenomenon. Using data from more than 7,000 cities, she found that environments with low levels of information about candidates had a higher proportion of incumbents who run for reelection and win. Furthermore, policy in low-information environments tends to move toward the incumbents' preferences.¹⁸

When national news is available, consumers often substitute it for local news, which has negative spillovers on local democracies. In communities where *New York Times* home delivery became available, George and Waldfogel found that fewer residents subscribed to local papers and that subsequently municipal elections saw lower voter turnout.¹⁹

Access to local government information, in the form of news focused on local public affairs, affects turnout in municipal elections.²⁰ Comparing survey data from the Public Policy Institute of California of residents in the Los Angeles media market with the availability of weekly and daily newspapers in municipalities surrounding Los Angeles, Filla and Johnson showed that voters are less likely to turn out when local news is absent.²¹

Additional studies support the hypothesis that when more local news is provided, voter turnout goes up. The availability of local Spanish-language news increased Hispanic voter turnout by 4 percentage points, according to a study by Oberholzer-Gee and Waldfogel. When local news was available in Spanish, about one in four Hispanics in the Los Angeles media

market watched it and one in five voted; yet these audiences did not spend more time watching news. The authors saw this as evidence of positive spillovers in an economic sense, which justify the FCC policy of promoting localism in broadcast content.²²

Yet the principles behind localism as a policy are difficult to operationalize. Braman found a disconnect between the assumptions behind the FCC's localism policy and the evolution of local communities as "nodes within a global society."²³ Her essay examines the gap "between the ideal and the real" by considering where local television is produced, the content of news and public affairs programs, the viewers who watch it, and the impact on local decision-making. She concludes that while the location of a TV station within a community does encourage the selection of news stories based on the proximity of events, this incentive is overwhelmed by the financial pressure to minimize the cost of news production and the incentive to please advertisers. She also found that categorizing stories by genre (such as crime, economy, etc.) was an insufficient measure of whether the story was meaningful to local decisions. "[W]hile the ideal is that local news production would be driven by the need for news in support of local decision-making, in the real world a large proportion of the content of these programs come from other places and deals with matters that do not touch the community."²⁴

Examining local news

To determine gaps in local coverage, we must consider what local news consists of and who produces it. We must also consider gaps in that research that this study might fill.

PEJ's Baltimore study examined the "information ecosystem" in an American city's news coverage. Researchers identified a set of local narratives and analyzed the stories produced by all local news outlets about those narratives over the course of one week. They found that most stories contained no original reporting, but merely repeated or repackaged previous reports. Of

stories that did contain new information, 95% came from traditional media, and most of those from newspapers. The study also included figures about the decline, over time, of the total number of newspaper stories since 1991. The authors concluded that "new media has not yet come close to making up the difference." The traditional media "still set the narrative agenda."²⁵

While the Baltimore study broke new ground in tracing the flow of information in a community, the research sample was criticized for not being inclusive of non-traditional media outlets that report new information and possess some agenda-setting power. For instance, one of the six selected narratives, about a historic theater, was the topic of repeated attention by a local blogger before the newspaper reported on the story; yet the blog was not included in the sample of media outlets.²⁶

A National Science Foundation-funded study of local reporting in 77 suburban cities and 98 Metropolitan Statistical Areas finds the majority of news about local government still comes from newspapers, but in suburban communities it is weeklies, not dailies, providing the most coverage. Researchers measured "the nature and extent of local government coverage and examine[d] the factors that predict variation in coverage."²⁷ The findings confirmed PEJ's observation that the bulk of news coverage comes from newspapers. Baldwin et al. found that television news coverage tended to focus on central cities rather than suburbs, and that suburbs are more reliant on weekly newspapers than on daily newspapers for municipal coverage. Topics differed as well, with more "city government, human interest, and community news" in the suburban coverage, while cities saw more coverage of crime, courts, accidents, and business.

The NSF study has two major shortcomings. Baldwin examined news coverage on the day of and the day after a randomly selected city council meeting in a given three-month time frame. Researchers did not consider whether the meetings were of any particular importance. A

comparison of coverage among cities may be of limited meaning given that there is no qualitative basis for choosing the meetings. A related problem is that this study uses topic categories to assess news coverage, and topics offer no information about narrative depth or quality of coverage.

In their study of press coverage and political accountability of members of Congress, Snyder and Stromberg offer insight into the problem of press coverage of communities with multiple bodies of jurisdiction. "[T]here is often a poor fit between media markets and political jurisdictions, making coverage of some jurisdictions too costly," the authors wrote.²⁸ The study measured this fit, called congruence, between media markets and congressional jurisdictions, and found that where congruence was high, there was greater press coverage of members of congress; voters were better informed and more likely to vote in elections; members were more likely to pursue constituents' interests, stand witness before committee hearings, and vote against the party line; and federal money was more likely to be spent in that district.

A 2009 study for *New Jersey Policy Perspective* considered the high levels of corruption in the state by cataloging the "inadequacies" of journalism statewide, "particularly in relation to the number of governmental units."²⁹ New Jersey is distinctive in both respects." There are 566 municipalities and 593 operating school districts, with separate governing bodies and budgets, due to the state's "home rule" tradition. As elsewhere, the number of reporters has declined in recent years, but the problem predates the current industry crisis. "New Jersey has faced a chronic news deficit because of peculiarities of its geography and economic development," Weingart wrote. "From the time of the nation's founding, the state has developed in the shadow of the two great cities across its borders, New York and Philadelphia, and failed to develop a major urban center of its own. Today, New Jersey's largest city, Newark, is home to just 3.2

percent of the state's population, and rather than serving as an independent media center, Newark falls within the larger New York media market. So instead of watching local news-casts devoted to New Jersey issues, people in the northern part of the state watch TV news oriented to New York City, while southern New Jerseyans watch stations based in Philadelphia. Many New Jersey residents also listen to out-of-state radio stations and read out-of-state newspapers. As a result, they know less about their own state's news than citizens of other states know about theirs."³⁰

This author's own case study on the Triangle's information community provides a broad overview of the ways in which residents in many different Triangle communities access and engage with news and public affairs information about their communities.³¹ The report demonstrates that there are a number of small or sparsely populated communities within or at the periphery of the Raleigh-Durham media market. Most are within the range of one or more daily newspapers that aim to cover the entire market. Weekly community newspapers serve most small communities in the Triangle; very few small communities have locally oriented blogs or online forums of significance. As the study notes, the dominant newspaper in the market, *The News & Observer*, covers 21 municipalities but has lost more than half of its editorial staff in the past 10 years through layoffs, buyouts and attrition. It has significantly fewer reporters covering local beats. The executive editor has invested reporting resources in state-level investigative projects that have had significant impact, including the conviction of the former governor. Meanwhile, the paper has expanded its community weekly papers from six in 2008 to nine in 2010. They are distributed free according to the total market coverage model. N&O executives say they are financially successful. Yet those same papers employ few reporters, in some cases fewer than the number of municipal jurisdictions they cover, and have closed newsrooms within communities

such as Durham and Cary, consolidating offices to cut cost. Meanwhile, most other weeklies in the market are owned by chains, such as Heartland Publications and Womack Publications, which operate sets of papers, sometimes consolidating operations in a single newsroom.³²

The MPI NAF study of Triangle media offers limited insight into the interaction of media organizations and information needs at the municipal level in any small community. This study is designed to provide deeper insight to fill that gap.

Policy Tools

The tools of media policy intervention are evolving, yet those that currently exist are known in the field. This study does not attempt to break new ground in the area of policy prescriptions. In providing information about the nature of market failure for local journalism, it should inform policymakers about which levels of government have the greatest need for intervention and, by extension of that government's authority in making policy, which policies best address the problem.

Current federal, state and local policies explicitly designed to impact the provision of public affairs information are noted in Hamilton and include the following:

- **Public information:** The Freedom of Information Act (federal), state-level public records laws, and local public information policies; public meetings laws (state); government websites and publicly available databases (all levels of government); public information officers (all levels); campaign finance reporting and the government provision of campaign finance information (federal, state, and local).

- **Government subsidies:** These include postal subsidies for print publications (federal); public notice requirements (in which governments, companies or citizens are required to buy newspaper advertising to publicize public notices)(all levels); tax-exempt nonprofit status for noncommercial media (federal); intellectual property protections, including copyright (federal).
- **Broadcast regulations:** Spectrum licensing for radio and television broadcasters (federal); FCC public interest requirements (federal); low-power FM station licenses for noncommercial broadcasters (federal); the must-carry policy that requires cable TV companies to provide local broadcast stations in channel lineups (federal); cable franchising agreements, including channel set-asides and funding for public access, educational and government (PEG) channels (federal, state, and/or local); cross-ownership restrictions (federal).
- **Public media:** funding for the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (federal); National Public Radio and the Public Broadcasting Service (non-governmental); licensing and governance of public television and radio stations (state governments, public and private universities and other non-government organizations).
- **Telecommunications and Internet:** Subsidy of scientific advancements in technology and the Internet (federal, potentially state and local); network neutrality rules (federal); subsidy and/or public provision of broadband Internet infrastructure (federal, state, and local); subsidy of Internet access (federal, state, local, and non-governmental); provision of Internet access in public libraries and other public spaces (federal, state, and local).³³

Innovations that would expand or alter the above policies are also well known and widely debated. The Knight Commission on the Information Needs of Communities in a Democracy

provides a set of 15 broad recommendations that do not target specific policy-making bodies so much as frame solutions to the problem around three major concepts: "Maximizing the availability of relevant and credible information, enhancing the information capacity of individuals, and promoting public engagement."³⁴ These concepts also frame the Federal Communications Commission's current media inquiry.³⁵

Samplings of more specific recommendations are listed in the New America Foundation's joint filing to the Federal Communications Commission³⁶ as well as Chapter 9 of Hamilton. in Free Press,³⁷ in Downie and Schudson,³⁸ Kramer,³⁹ Kramer and Sawyer,⁴⁰ and the discussion draft of the Federal Trade Commission.⁴¹

Some of these prescriptions include:

- A significant increase in funding for public media, coupled with a restructuring of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting that would increase investment in local news.⁴² Proposed public finance mechanisms range from spectrum auction to taxes on electronics to increased funding from state and local government and from non-governmental organizations such as community foundations.
- Additional government subsidy for information provision that would lower the cost of reporting. Such proposals include greater provision of public information in digital formats,⁴³ a subsidy to employ reporters in a system similar to AmeriCorps,⁴⁴ and subsidy for technological research and development, particularly of software, that may be applied to journalism.⁴⁵
- Clarification from the Internal Revenue Service that journalism qualifies as a tax-exempt enterprise.⁴⁶ This would bolster existing nonprofit journalism organizations and encourage others to incorporate as low-profit L3C corporations.⁴⁷

- Changes to intellectual property laws and enforcement. Such policy proposals include a "hot news" doctrine that would allow intellectual property rights over facts for a limited time, and a licensing scheme for news content similar to that used in the music industry. Both are designed to allow content creators greater opportunity to monetize their investments.⁴⁸ These proposals run contrary to simultaneous lobbying on the part of open-source advocates, who would like to see fewer copyright restrictions on information so as to maximize the positive externalities of its flow.⁴⁹
- Changes to FCC public interest requirements. These include increasing the requirements by requiring public file documents be published online for greater scrutiny, or doing away with public interest requirements in favor of a payment that would fund public media.⁵⁰
- The above policy options concentrate mostly on the federal government, as that typically has been the arena of discourse. As such, they may not fully address the potential for state and local policies to address the market failure for news. Yet even federal policies have implications for the states and local governments, and federal authorities can direct local bodies of jurisdiction to set their own policies. In any event, this paper seeks not to evaluate the wisdom of specific policies, but to provide criteria for policy makers who do so by examining the market failure those policies should address.

Data and Methods

Approach

The general approach of this paper is to use qualitative research methodologies alongside descriptive statistics to form hypotheses about which community characteristics and related factors contribute to a gap between the current level of local accountability coverage and a more ideal level, in an economic sense. The goal is not to test hypotheses, but to bring a qualitative understanding of community information needs to bear on other researchers' past and future hypotheses and on policies designed to serve those needs.

Analysis of the media gap can be done in essentially three ways: past versus present, one place versus another, and ideal versus real. This paper employs primarily an ideal-versus-real approach, but it combines elements of the other two methods. I use a multi-step qualitative analytical process, informed by Patton;⁵¹ King, Keohane and Verba;⁵² and Brady and Collier;⁵³ to analyze the role media outlets play in different small municipalities at the periphery of the Raleigh-Durham media market. By interviewing stakeholders about the most pressing issues facing their communities in the recent past and immediate future, I identify specific topics or narratives. A comparison of places allows for an examination of identified variables. I expect to find through stakeholder interviews that news coverage of the communities has declined over time, with more stories earlier and fewer later in whatever time period the issue or story is covered.

The first step involves selecting communities according to a dashboard of descriptive statistics. The second involves qualitative interviews with stakeholders in those communities, to gather information about relevant local policy issues and local news coverage. The third step involves identifying specific stories – decisions, events, challenge – that emerge from

stakeholder interviews as the community's most significant stories. The fourth step involves conversations with media producers in those communities to discuss their coverage of the identified issues and the role their outlets play in the community's information landscape.

In selecting and describing communities, I created a dashboard of characteristics such as population, population density, socioeconomics, educational attainment, and boundaries of governmental jurisdiction (such as the match-up between town government, county government, and legislative district). The tentative hypotheses are that communities with smaller populations, lower population density, and residents with lower socioeconomic status and educational will have less accountability coverage and lower quality coverage, because advertisers will find those audiences less desirable and thus media organizations will not be able to recoup the investment in journalism. Multiple jurisdictions require significantly greater reporting resources to cover adequately, which necessitates greater costs of newsgathering. Thus, if a community straddles a jurisdictional boundary, it is likely to experience a bigger gap.

The notion of ideal coverage does not imply endless amounts of information; it should take into account both the direct costs and the opportunity costs of accountability journalism and the fact that the public interest is an undefined concept in economics. Chapter 9 of Hamilton acknowledges the challenges to a full cost-benefit analysis of journalism, while offering analytical tools, such as contingent valuation, that may help determine those costs and benefits within a real-world, economic framework. "Part of the difficulty lies in estimating the impact of a lack of information," Hamilton wrote. "Since information is part of an instrumental good valued because it influences many types of decisions, analyzing news markets also requires an examination of how political markets work."⁵⁴ News judgment necessarily involves weighing opportunity costs. Reporters and editors who choose to devote time, resources and pages or

airtime to covering one story cannot cover another simultaneously. Breaking local, national, or even international may require those resources in the place of a perfectly legitimate local story. With those limitations in mind, however, it is possible to identify a level of coverage that would significantly impact the political, civic, and economic choices community members face, particularly in the area of public accountability. It is possible to identify the direction of externalities, if not to quantify their magnitude.

The task of this study is to establish what that level of coverage would be, how it compares to the level produced, and how the answers to those questions differ according to community characteristics. By asking officials with an insider's view of relevant issues in the community over a period of time spanning one to two years, I hope to correct for that flaw. The people surveyed are the same people a journalist would turn to as *sources* for information about what is, or should be, *news*. Asking both elected officials and politically engaged people who are not in public decision-making roles may correct for the biases of any single perspective and triangulate issues that are likely to be significant to all members of the community. Survey responses provide a sense of specific stories or topics local media serving each community would ideally cover. This provides a normative benchmark sense of what optimal coverage would include.

Most importantly, the interviews yield insights about the ways civic leaders in a given community access and engage with information. Those insights provide a framework for explaining the findings of the community and content analysis, providing a deeper understanding of the role media and information play in communities in which accountability journalism is in varying levels of supply.

Data Collection and Analytical Methods

Phase 1: Site selection and community characteristics

I used U.S. Census Data, data from the North Carolina Office of State Budget and Management, and other publicly available data to select four communities.

All four communities are at the periphery of the Raleigh-Durham media market. Because literature demonstrates that suburban or exurban communities receive systematically different coverage⁵⁵ and that socioeconomic status, education, and race contribute to awareness of civic information,⁵⁶ the dashboard includes information about the socioeconomic and racial composition of those communities, as well as population, population density (high/low) and bodies of local government jurisdiction (city/county/legislative, etc.).

Phase 2: Stakeholder survey of information needs

I then identified a set of stakeholders in the community who could provide qualitative insight on the communities' information needs. I chose one local government official, such as a town council member; one staff member in the local government, usually the town/city manager or assistant manager; and two stakeholders from community organizations that play a prominent role in the community. Comparing different communities makes it difficult to come up with like comparisons across time and topic significance. Qualitative assessments help to inform an improved "apples to apples" approach.

Each respondent was asked a standard set of survey questions about the community's information needs and the extent to which they are met. Survey questions were worded in order not to lead respondents to comment on what *has* been covered in the media, but to topics that may or may not have received media coverage. The questions reflect the notion of diversity in agenda holding⁵⁷ by asking about the "most important problems" facing the community.

Questions that seek to identify which media outlets are significant in the community came after questions about content.

Phase 3: General assessment of information provision

Using the report I wrote for the New America Foundation as a starting point,⁵⁸ as well as responses to the stakeholder interview questions, I determined which media outlets and information providers serve each of the four local communities. These include conventional print newspapers, licensed broadcast stations, government web sites, significant blogs or online community forums, and any other institution that provides information needs, as broadly defined by the Knight Commission.

In each community, I have used stakeholder interviews to identify specific narratives or decision points, beyond discussion of general issues. PEJ's 2010 Baltimore study provides an example of how to organize analysis around narratives of key interest.⁵⁹ After an initial set of questions designed to solicit those specific stories independent of the notion of media coverage, I have followed up with a set of questions about the most reliable sources of information available and the extent to which media provide trustworthy news coverage and opportunities for public engagement.

Stakeholder questions

- 1) What do you believe is the most significant decision [the town or city] has faced in the past year to two years?
- 2) What was the most significant event for people living in [the town or city] in the past year to two years?
- 3) What is the most significant problem the community has faced in that time?
- 4) What do you consider to be the three biggest challenges facing [the town or city] in the coming year?
- 5) How do people in [the town or city] engage in public debate?
- 6) What do you consider to be the most trustworthy source of information about [the town or city]?
- 7) What sources do you, in your capacity as a public official, turn to for news about the community?

- 8) Where do you believe people in [the town or city] get most of their news about the community?
- 9) Is there a blog or website that is a popular source of information about [the town or city]?
- 10) Is there a media outlet that provides a forum for public discussion?

To the extent that time has allowed, I have interviewed editors or reporters at local media outlets, or other stakeholders with a media background, to get a sense of the extent to which those outlets have covered the specific story threads stakeholders identified, and what sort of coverage and news judgment were involved. I have asked questions about staffing, duties, and the sense respondents have about the role of their media outlet, or media outlets more broadly, in the community.

Community Profiles

The communities investigated in this study are Mebane, Siler City, Apex, and Garner. They differ from each other in certain systematic ways. See Table 1, below, for a comparison of community characteristics. Chart 1, below, provides a breakdown of the racial and ethnic composition of the communities.

Nielsen Media Research ranks the Raleigh-Durham-Fayetteville area the No. 25 designated market area in the country as of 2010, with more than 1.3 million television households.⁶⁰ The Triangle media market centers around Raleigh, the state capitol and Wake County seat. Raleigh is the 43rd largest U.S. city in terms of population. It has more than 403,892 residents and covers nearly 150 square miles, giving it a population density of 2,826 per square mile.⁶¹ Median household income in 2009 was \$53,370, slightly higher than the national average.

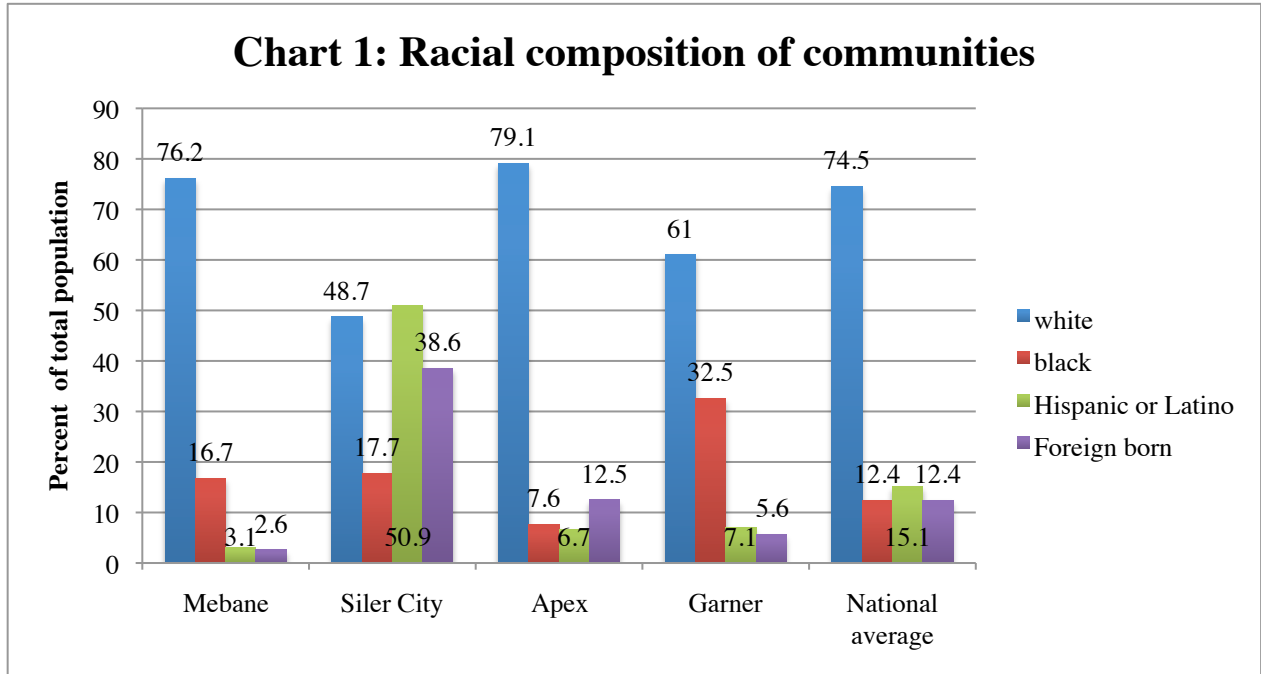
The population of the Combined Statistical Area (CSA) of Raleigh-Durham-Cary was more than 1.7 million as of 2009.⁶²

Table 1: Community characteristics

	Mebane	Siler City	Apex	Garner
Population	10,258	8,453	34,700	25,500
Distance from Raleigh	50 miles (31 miles from Greensboro)	51 miles (33 miles from Greensboro)	15 miles	6 miles
Total land	5.9 sq. miles	6.08 sq. miles	10.6 sq. miles	13.6 sq. miles
Population density	1,739 / sq. mi.	1,390 / sq. mi.	3,274 / sq. mi.	1,875 / sq. mi.
Median household income	\$48,164	\$30,281	\$82,522	\$57,730
Families below poverty level	12%	21%	2%	5%
Educational attainment	88.7% high school or higher 34.1% BA or higher	49.1% high school or higher 9.5% BA or higher	95.6% high school or higher 57.9% BA or higher	89.3% high school or higher 32.6% BA or higher
Languages other than English at home	6.7% 4.8% Spanish	45% 41.5% Spanish	13.7% 4.8% Spanish	8.9% 6.4% Spanish

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2005-2009 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates; Google Maps (distance); Author's calculation (density).

Distance from Raleigh is a proxy for a community's relationship to the Triangle media market. Mebane straddles the Alamance and Orange County border, allowing for a consideration of the impact of multiple bodies of jurisdiction. Apex and Garner are suburbs of Raleigh, and both share the larger body of jurisdiction, Wake County. Yet they differ systematically in terms of population density, affluence, educational attainment, and racial composition.



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2005-2009 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

Siler City stands out on several counts, notably for its socioeconomics. Siler City has the lowest educational attainment and household income and highest poverty rate of all communities in this study. Hispanics and Latinos make up 50.9% of its population.⁶³ Siler City is in the western part of Chatham County; while it does not share the split jurisdiction issue that Mebane does, stakeholders often refer to a cultural divide within the county. Both communities are approximately the same distance from Raleigh and from Greensboro, center of the Triad media market.

I. Mebane: Growing "in the Crack"

Overview

Mebane police were busy in the kitchen of the Mebane Arts & Community Center, dishing out spaghetti at the Special Olympic fundraiser, while district court judges, fire fighters

and city staff waited patiently to be served at long tables set with salad, dessert, and lemonade. Councilwoman Patty Philips stood up to say hello to Karen Carter, executive editor for the *Mebane Enterprise*, seated two tables away. Carter had good news to share: an advertiser for the rival weekly, the *Alamance News*, had just decided to drop ads in the Alamance paper and stick exclusively with the *Mebane Enterprise*. This news brought a smile to Phillips' face. The *Alamance News* once ran a story with the headline, "Clueless in Mebane," which accused Philips of a conflict of interest over a council decision regarding historic downtown Mebane, where Philips owned a historic home at the time.

Journalists at a metro newspaper may be inclined to wonder why an editor would discuss advertising contracts with an elected official. Yet in a small town – or, as Mebane's mayor refers to it, a "small city" – exchanges such as this one demonstrate the powerful currency of personal relationships that mark its leadership and the exchange of information.

Mebane is a prosperous town by the standards of much of America, particularly the post-industrial south. Its population grew 127% between 2000 and 2009, from less than 5,000 to more than 10,800. About 30% of residents are employed in educational services, health care and social assistance industries, with 12% each in retail trade and arts, entertainment, recreation, accommodation and food services. Fifteen percent of residents and 16.5% of related children under 18 lived below the poverty line.⁶⁴

Approximately 50 miles from Raleigh, 24 from Durham and 32 from Greensboro, Mebane is experiencing growth both as a bedroom community to the Triangle and the Triad, but also as an industrial center. While more than 80% of its 10,000 residents reside in rural, conservative Alamance County, a growing number live in Orange County, to the east, home to Chapel Hill, the liberal, academic center of the state.⁶⁵

Mebane Stakeholders

- Patty Philips, Town Council Member since 2003⁶⁶
- Amy Pendergraph, Center Coordinator, Mebane Arts & Community Center⁶⁷
- David Cheek, Assistant City Manager and Finance Officer⁶⁸
- Omega Wilson, founder and Executive Director, West End Revitalization Association (WERA)⁶⁹

Media Interviews:

- Karen Carter, Editor, *Mebane Enterprise*⁷⁰
- Taylor Sisk, Managing Editor, *Carrboro Citizen*⁷¹

Mebane's Recent History

Mebane's downtown is in transition. The railroad and U.S. 70 run parallel through the middle of town. On the north side sit city hall, in a converted bank building, and the library, housed in a renovated brick hosiery mill. Philips is proud of the city's adaptive reuse of historic structures. Yet on the south side of the tracks, the 240,000-square-foot brick White Furniture Co. building, sits vacant. White Furniture was a leading North American furniture manufacturer for more than a century. Its closure in 1993 marked the end of an era in North Carolina's renowned industry.⁷² Tom Niemann, a commercial real estate developer from Durham, purchased the property and in 2007 was granted city approval to renovate it into a mixed-use anchor for downtown.⁷³ But the developer's financial problems have kept the property in a holding pattern, an emblem of the Piedmont region's broader economic uncertainty.⁷⁴

Part of that uncertainty pertains to the trend toward big-box retail, which has created

anxiety among downtown and smaller local merchant and has driven changes to development patterns, particularly in terms of transportation. Wal-Mart opened a Supercenter store in Mebane in January 2006, after three years of heated protest.⁷⁵

Mebane's Top Stories

The most significant event stakeholders identified was the siting and opening of the **Tanger Outlets** of Mebane, a 317,000-square foot shopping center on the 52-acres site that once was home to a golf course along Interstate 40/85 in Alamance County.

The most significant challenge facing the community is the **Jordan Lake rules**, requirements placed upon local governments upstream from the lake by the N.C. Department of the Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) in order to bring the state into compliance with federal regulations concerning water quality.⁷⁶ Jordan Lake is a 14,000-acre reservoir that provides drinking water to many communities in the Triangle, and it is also a popular recreation destination. The rules require several local communities, including Mebane, to retrofit their stormwater and water treatment facilities to reduce the amount of nitrogen and phosphorous flowing downstream. Local governments have opposed the rules, saying they create heavy burdens to taxpayers.⁷⁷

David Cheek estimated that, over the next five years, Mebane's capital improvements to the Forest Ridge Pump Station would cost \$3.3 million, and upgrades to the wastewater treatment plant would cost \$7.5 million. "Dealing with those rules is the most significant [challenge facing Mebane] from a financial standpoint," he said.

Philips agreed, offering the city's point of view on the matter: "The state has placed the bulk of the burden on improving the quality of Jordan Lake on the municipalities that are

upstream from that, and there's been some question about whether the data really supports the requirements they're placing on those wastewater treatment plants, and whether it can actually justify the tremendous costs that are going to be passed on to the residents of those cities."

Cheek and Philips also discussed the challenge the city faces in **balancing infrastructure maintenance and capital improvements while keeping the city's tax rate low**. From a public official's point of view, Philips said, "I think the most difficult decisions to make are the ones about **incentives for businesses** that are relocating to our area." Such decision points surfaced recently with Tri Vantage, a subsidiary of the Burlington fabric manufacturing company Glen Raven that opened a distribution center in Mebane,⁷⁸ and Nypro, a plastics manufacturer that received \$500,000 in incentives, including \$350,000 from the city and county, to move its facility from Graham to Mebane, instead of overseas.⁷⁹

Beyond these stories about recent development and its relative costs and benefits is another, longer term controversy that connects Mebane's history with its present-day pressure to grow. In 1994, it came to light that Mebane, Alamance County, and N.C. Department of Transportation officials had been planning for a **bypass for Highway 119** that would cut through the West End and White Level neighborhoods, which are predominantly African-American and low-income. Many homes lacked city water and sewer services. The purpose was to direct traffic away from the city, but the impact would have required demolition of 77 homes, a historic church founded in 1893 by former slaves, and a Masonic Temple.⁸⁰ Community members began to organize in 1994 as the West End Revitalization Association (WERA), beginning a long, contentious process that involved public hearings, complaints to the Civil Rights Office of the Federal Highway Administration and the U.S. Department of Justice, and a moratorium on federal highway funds designated for construction of the bypass.⁸¹ Seventeen years later, the

bypass had not yet been built, and public discussion continues over which route the bypass should take, which properties will bear the brunt of relocation, whether old plans for the route take into consideration present-day traffic patterns, and whether the bypass should be built at all.⁸²

Pendergraph cited the 119 bypass as the most significant decision and the most pressing issue facing Mebane in recent years. "I think probably most pressing is the Highway 119 issue, the placement of it, and how it's going to affect the people who are going to have to [move]." Pendergraph has two reasons to be highly aware of the 119 bypass: DOT hearings have taken place at the center she manages, and her drive to work is affected by traffic along the highway. She cited the management of traffic generated by growth as part of the broader challenges Mebane faces in the future. These growth concerns extend to all development at the town's periphery. "For lack of a better word, there's a struggle between the downtown merchants and the growth that's taking place on the outskirts of Mebane, taking people from the core. There are some folks who are very loyal to the downtown area and want to see revitalization in that area, but when you've got people building and bringing in business, they obviously want to put them where the traffic is, which then brings up a whole other issue of traffic concerns." When asked about the long-term impact of Wal-Mart on downtown businesses, she replied, "They've been here long enough now that it is what it is and everybody's gotten used to it." She said Tanger Outlets had worked with Mebane's downtown business association on cross-promotion.

Philips didn't mention the 119 bypass story during an initial recorded interview, but discussed it, unprompted, afterward. She pointed out a map of the Mebane stretch of the highway posted on a wall inside city hall, noting the neighborhoods affected by the bypass. During a dashboard tour of the city's downtown, residential development, and industrial park, she drove

through the West End neighborhood, noting that the houses stood just half a mile from downtown.

Philips, a relative newcomer both to downtown and to Mebane, demonstrates an awareness of the hardships facing the West End. But community activist Omega Wilson describes a very different attitude on the part of city leaders, particularly in the early years of his work. The saga, as described in detail on the West End Revitalization Association's website,⁸³ involved severe distrust between public officials and residents. Wilson said WERA felt it could not be heard through the conventional means of public input, such as council meetings. "The way regular white citizens do it is not the way we do it. Before we came along, it was very unusual for a person of color to speak up in a public meeting," he said. "We had to file complaints with the DOJ because there was no communication. They make decisions like it's the 1800s and the Civil War is going on. It's the old South, white male type of approach. It's been that way for 17 years."

News Sources in Mebane

Being a small town in between two metropolitan areas has made Mebane an attractive bedroom community, yet its geographical straddling presents challenges as well. This is particularly true with regards to media and information. Residents receive broadcast and cable channels from both the Greensboro/High Point/Winston-Salem market and the Raleigh/Durham/Fayetteville market, and subscribers to daily newspapers choose from the *Greensboro News & Record*, the *Raleigh News & Observer*, and the *Burlington Times News*. Yet in spite of the availability of media, there is little coverage of Mebane.

There are no broadcast stations licensed in Mebane. The weekly *Mebane Enterprise* is the

town's sole newspaper. It is owned by Womack Publishing, a family-owned chain based in Chatham, Virginia, that owns 15 newspapers in Virginia and North Carolina.⁸⁴ The paper has a circulation of approximately 2,400 and employs two full-time editorial and two full-time business staffers. It is jointly managed by Editor Karen Carter and General Manager Jackie Brown. Subscriptions cost \$26 per year to residents living in Alamance and Orange Counties, and \$36 per year outside the counties. The nearby daily newspaper *The Times-News* of Burlington provides coverage of Alamance County government and some coverage of Mebane. But no one source provides daily coverage of local government and civic concerns of the municipality and its two respective counties.

"We're in the crack" between Greensboro and Raleigh, Philips said. "*The N&O* goes all the way to Hillsborough [the Orange County seat], and it kind of stops at the county line, which is 200 feet away [from Mebane City Hall]. They don't cover Mebane. And the Greensboro *News & Record* is the same way, to the west. So we really are not getting a lot of coverage in the big papers." One notable exception to this was the opening of the Tanger outlet mall, which both papers covered. "But regular daily news doesn't get covered."

When asked if full coverage of issues facing Mebane would require coverage of both Alamance and Orange County governments, Philips strongly agreed. "And they're worlds apart," she said. This will be all the more true in the future, as growth continues toward the city's east end, where transportation, water, and sewer infrastructure are built out. One large subdivision is in Orange County, and the industrial park is poised to grow in that direction, as well. "I think a large percentage of our growth in the future is going to end up being in Orange County rather than Alamance," she said.

Carter said the *Enterprise* covers both Alamance and Orange County Commissioners'

monthly meetings, as well as Mebane's city council. As one of two editorial staffers, she writes approximately eight stories per week. She covers Orange County and Mebane City Council and Planning Board as well as Mebane schools, local business, and religious life. Prior to joining the paper five years ago, she was a teacher for 34 years and wrote freelance on the side. She believes her strength is feature writing.

“We represent and document what’s going on in Mebane,” Carter said. She describes her paper’s role in terms of “the principles of community journalism, which is good journalism, but it’s a whole different philosophy than daily newspapers.” She described the paper as “the only place where a parent can see their child winning an award at school. That photo would never be broadcast on TV or put in a daily newspaper.” Community papers do cover school board, city government, and planning board meetings, she said, but also include coverage of high school sports, festivals, garden clubs, and other community events, as part of “the broader scope of representing the community.”

Womack designs its staffing to maintain a clear division between advertising/business and editorial –the "wall," as journalists often refer to it. While the office manager also does page layout, Clark is careful not to involve her two business colleagues in editorial decisions or writing stories. However, true to the community journalism model, as editor, Clark also plays a public role in community affairs that traditional daily editors would not, such as attending Chamber of Commerce events. She said the paper covers local business because it is popular with readers and appeals to the local advertising base. “Our bread and butter is local advertising.” Asked if an advertiser had ever objected to the newspaper's coverage, Clark said no. “We don’t have those issues,” she said. “I think that’s because our advertisers are local advertisers. First Savings and Loan’s on page 5 of the newspaper every week. They’ve been in

business for 100 years,” she said. “No advertiser we have would even think of calling us on the phone and saying, ‘I’m going to pull my ad because you covered a topic I didn’t like.’ The only issue we’ll have there is somebody calls and they want a free advertisement.” Carter mentioned that Brown is a native of Mebane and heavily involved in community organizations. “It’s not like all of us don’t have a tie to Mebane.”

Clark describes her paper's capacity to report news in humble terms. She said staff writer Stephen Mills is a special asset to the paper thanks to his daily journalism experience. Mills moved back to Mebane to be near his aging mother. “We wouldn’t have him otherwise, he’s that good.”

“We’re not going to be known for investigative reporting,” Carter said. In a conversation after our recorded interview, Clark conveyed that she does not regard breaking news as part of the *Enterprise's* role, either. She said she is surprised on the occasions when the *Enterprise* reports news before the *Burlington Times News* does, and that those occasions draw her attention to the paucity of news coverage Mebane receives.

Coverage of Top Stories in Mebane

The opening of Tanger Outlets received significant coverage, both by the *Enterprise* and by metro media in the Triad and Triangle media markets. Carter said she was proud of being the first reporter to get an interview with Tanger’s CEO by phone when plans to build the shopping center were first announced. “Usually we’re the last to cover the news,” she said. “But I worked hard to get sources and credibility worked up with the marketing department at Tanger.” Brown, the *Enterprise's* general manager, has developed a relationship with the Mebane manager of Tanger. “You know, that’s the thing about community journalism. It’s all about building

relationships. People will talk to you because of a relationship. You're not a third party. We feel people's tragedies, we feel people's joys, because we're part of the community. Of course the big thing there, too, was that Tanger advertised with us. So then we covered everything, the groundbreaking in 2010. A feature on Kathy Hackshaw when she became general manager. It was a big topic in the town." Tanger coverage also included a job fair, during which 3,000 people applied for 800 jobs, updates on construction, and questions about whether downtown businesses felt threatened. The ribbon cutting was featured on the *Enterprise's* front page with a photo of traffic snaking around the Interstate for miles, with the headline, "Good morning, Mebane."

Incentives to businesses, including Nypro and Tri Vantage, are an issue the *Enterprise* covers through city and county government and through coverage of growth, which Carter describes as "a perennial topic." She foresees a time when Mebane could extend so far into Orange County that it might annex the unincorporated community of Efland.

Carter said the *Enterprise* "hasn't done a lot" with Jordan Lake rules beyond coverage of the city council discussion. "Back when it all first broke, I tried to do a news feature. But I couldn't gather enough to get it. So as far as doing investigative reporting, no." The Jordan Lake rules have been covered extensively in both the Greensboro market and the Triangle market. There is information available through the NC DENR website⁸⁵, the Piedmont Triad Council of Governments,⁸⁶ and public interest groups such as the N.C. Conservation Network.⁸⁷ Those sites contain primary documents, maps, background on environmental science and watershed preservation, and position statements from the various parties involved. The depth and volume of information may make it difficult for non-subject matter experts to independently weigh the issues at stake.

Wilson said that WERA's efforts have been the subject of numerous articles over the years, including in the *Enterprise*. But he added that many reporters have complained to him that their stories were either spiked or heavily edited due to concern over advertisers' and town leaders' responses. "I've even had reporters come to me and sit in front of me and shed tears because they were working their hearts out, but [the full story] didn't get out."⁸⁸

The *Enterprise* has covered the 119 bypass story both before and since Carter became editor in 2006. The paper's coverage included public meetings held by the DOT and ongoing council decisions. Carter said the paper has also run "feature stories on how it affects people in different communities and that kind of thing," such as from the point of view of the Woodlawn Community, which successfully sought historic preservation status to keep the bypass out, and the point of view of Omega Wilson and WERA. The bypass is also a factor in other stories about roads and growth, such as the preservation of a historic farm that may be in its path.

In 2008, the *Carrboro Citizen* provided contextualized coverage of the 119 bypass story.⁸⁹The *Citizen* is an independently owned weekly newspaper based in the Orange County town of Carrboro, adjacent to Chapel Hill. Managing Editor Taylor Sisk, one of three editorial staffers who report for the paper, wrote about WERA's efforts to oppose the 119 bypass as part of a larger series on environmental justice. The series focused on the historically black Rogers Road community, where residents who had lived near a landfill for 40 years publicly opposed a proposal to build a waste transfer station at a nearby site.⁹⁰

Contacts at the community development organization MDC, Inc. and at the Black Farmers for America put Sisk in touch with Omega Wilson, who had built a national reputation for outspoken community organizing around environmental justice. "It was [Wilson's] personality that first attracted me" to the 119 issue, Sisk said. "Then I started to read about what

happened there, and I thought, this is just wrong, that these people were not told what was going on, that they were going to run this road right through a hundred-year-old graveyard." Sisk found WERA's story relevant to the Rogers Road struggle. "They were a source not only of inspiration but of instruction on how to mobilize."

The materials Sisk alluded to reading came mostly from WERA's website. A "clip search" of published articles came up with a paucity of coverage, and even that coverage seemed driven by WERA's activism. "I found little or nothing about the bypass prior to when Omega and those guys raised it as an issue." This led Sisk to another conclusion about the 119 bypass story. "The local press had missed out on it," he said. "I think the media did a disservice to everybody by not sufficiently covering this story, and not doing what they could to give voice to this community." Wilson's use of the Internet to go around the traditional channels of communication was crucial to correcting that failure.

Sisk said he encountered no opposition from anyone in Mebane to discussing the situation; he noted that he was reporting on it "after the fact." "By the time I was there, pretty much everybody had come to acknowledge that the process had been handled very poorly," he said, "and by then, Omega even had made a lot of amends with people he had previously considered to be hostile to his community."

Reluctant to speculate about why Mebane's media outlets "missed out" on the 119 story, Sisk noted that reporting on controversial news is difficult for community newspapers. "It would have been hard to do, and it certainly would have pissed off the people [that] the folks who work for the newspaper were having lunch with. I think that what was true there is true in so many places. This was literally and figuratively a disenfranchised community. They have no official voice. They had no collective voice until they formed WERA. It probably just didn't occur to

people that there was something important to be said from that community."

Public Debate in Mebane

None of the stakeholders in Mebane cited conventional media as a forum for public debate, though Philips noted that the letters to the editor section of the *Enterprise* and *Alamance News* become more active during election cycles.

Carter said she believes Mebane's growth as a bedroom community is changing its identity. Some residents work elsewhere, while some people who work in Mebane live elsewhere. Town leaders are working to preserve Mebane's historical buildings downtown while growth continues near the Interstate. Carter wonders what impact these trends will have on the way people spend their time and money, which affects the newspaper's future. "It's an interesting question for the future of community journalism," she said.

But if the *Enterprise* does seek to explore a new role in civic engagement, it will not do so through the Internet. The newspaper has sold e-edition subscriptions, emailed PDF copies of the print paper, since December 2010 and currently has about 100 subscribers. (One-year's subscription buys either the print version, the digital version, or both; out-of-county rates apply to the e-edition.) But Carter said neither she nor the newspaper's owners are interested in expanding the *Enterprise's* online edition. In fact, she said not to consider information about the *Enterprise* on its own website to be accurate. "We don't really have a web; that's just a presence," she said, "it's not a bona fide website." When pressed for what she meant by "presence," she did not articulate her meaning. This lack of interest is partly due to a lack of staff capacity, but even moreso to a sense that moving online would cannibalize the paper's revenue base of print advertising and subscriptions. The *Enterprise* does not sell a significant amount of advertising

online, Carter said. "The web is not a revenue project," she said. "If we put everything on the web, and it's for free, then we've put ourselves out of business. Why have a newspaper if you can go to the web for free?" She added that the appeal of the *Enterprise* is limited to current residents of Mebane, suggesting that the web was better suited to information with a broader audience.

The city recently conducted an online survey to gauge interest in online video archives of council meetings. Forty-nine people completed the survey. Of those, 74% said they had not attended any council meetings in person in the past year, 53% had accessed minutes of the meetings online, and nearly 86% said they would be interested in video of the meetings if it were made available online. Philips said the impetus for this survey had come from citizens' requests to council. "We meet at 6 o'clock on the first Monday, and 6 o'clock is a difficult time," she said. "A lot of parents have kids in soccer practice or baseball practice or whatever, and a lot of people work in the Triangle or the Triad and they're not getting back home until after 6 o'clock." Cheek said he and some of the younger town staff are exploring the possibility of creating a Facebook presence for the City of Mebane, something other cities have done, but they want to consider carefully the staff's capacity to maintain it. "It seems like it would be an excellent forum to get input back and forth," he said, "but the actual logistics and process to pull it off, what kind of questions you're going to get, what kind of responses, and do you have to funnel those through the city manager and city council? We've got a really small staff here, and we're not literate related to doing Facebook as some people might be. I mean, I have a Facebook account, but if I'm the one who's most used to it here, we're in trouble."

Informal communications still rule the day for stakeholders. Philips, Cheek, and Pendergraph all said "word of mouth" was a trusted source of information. "I'm involved in a lot

of different things around the community," Philips said. "I go to soccer practice with my daughter. I go to school functions and talk to people at school. I talk to people at the local churches. I think because it's a small community, there's a lot of interaction between folks." Cheek added that town staff is accessible on an informal basis. "Most people can pick up the phone and call and get an answer very quickly about any issue, whether it be through the department heads, or these girls up front who man the collections windows, they field a lot of questions," he said. Carter said she has never experienced problems with government transparency during her five-year tenure at the *Enterprise*.

But for those who feel disenfranchised from the official sources of town government and leadership, this informal communication feels like a means of exclusion. Asked about the most trustworthy source of information, Wilson responded, "It's still the grapevine. We still know that most public decisions are not made at the city council meeting, but on the 19th hole at the golf course, which is the bar where they go to talk after the game." Wilson said he trusts neither the media nor public comment at council meetings. "You don't get the truth there," he said. "Even when you get newspaper articles, we actually know that is not the story. Things that may happen of significance may not be reported on at all."

Findings: The Stories Not Told in Mebane

The 119 bypass story went untold until community residents directly affected went around the intermediaries of local government, filing federal complaints that triggered news coverage, and around the intermediaries of local media, putting their story and primary documents relating to the issue on a website.

A content analysis could demonstrate this by checking the timeline of the news stories on

the bypass published in the *Enterprise*, the *Burlington Times News*, and other sources: did coverage pre-date or follow disclosure of the issue by WERA? Did the coverage include document-based research, or did it rely on quoted sources for analysis of the legal issues involved? In other words, was any news organization able to provide independently verified explanations of the issue within the time period when decisions were being made?

Growth and development issues are complex, involving decision points around infrastructure improvements, economic incentives to potential employers and corporate taxpayers, traffic management, economic hardships on small businesses, and environmental impact. None of these issues is easy to report on, nor is it as widely appealing as a straightforward story about the opening of an outlet mall. This distinction represents the different demands for information – on the one hand, voter-demand information that could inform complex and difficult decisions, or provide the public with material on which to base their feedback to public officials, and on the other hand, consumer-demand information for people interested in new shopping options. The former involves a significant investment of time and resources and could potentially alienate advertisers; the latter can be written with little more than a press release in-hand, and would likely encourage advertisers.

A content analysis of coverage of Tanger Outlets could investigate which of the above approaches is taken by considering 1) the timing of the reporting, whether it was undertaken before or after key public decisions had been made 2) whether the story included information about the effect of the facility on infrastructure systems 3) whether sources in the story included local merchants and small businesses that could be financially affected by the new commercial development at the edge of town.

To test the hypothesis that communities "in the crack" between media markets receive

less news coverage, a content analysis could analyze one of the stories identified in Mebane with a comparable story in Raleigh and/or Greensboro, where the story would be of concern to a reader in the core audience area, and compare the amount and depth of coverage across those two stories and communities.

II. Siler City: The disenfranchised majority

Overview

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

Politics in Chatham County have grown more contentious over the years as the split between the rapidly growing northeastern part of the county, including the county seat of Pittsboro and bedroom communities to the Triangle, diverge, culturally and economically, from the traditional, agrarian, industrial westerns part of the county, which is suffering acutely from the economic downturn. While rural western Chatham is primarily a farming economy, Siler City is industrial, with 40% of the employed population working in manufacturing as of 2009 Census surveys.

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

Siler City stakeholders

- John Grimes, Siler City Commissioner⁹¹
- Joel Brower, Town Manager⁹²
- Angie Brady-Andrews, Principal, Siler City Elementary School⁹³
- Hernan Sedda and Sandra Forrester of El Vinculo Hispano (the Hispanic Liaison of Chatham County)⁹⁴

Media interviews

- Barry Hayes, Owner, WNCA AM radio⁹⁵
- Randall Rigsbee, Managing Editor, *The Chatham News* and *The Chatham Record*⁹⁶
- Paul Cuadros, Siler City soccer coach, author, UNC-Chapel Hill journalism professor⁹⁷

Additional interviews⁹⁸

- Ilana Dubester, former Executive Director of El Vinculo Hispano⁹⁹
- Randy Voller, Mayor of Pittsboro¹⁰⁰

Siler City's Recent History

In 2000, former Ku Klux Klan grand dragon David Duke came to Siler City for a rally against the influx of Hispanic immigrants.¹⁰¹ More than 10 years later, that event is etched into the collective consciousness of the town. The fact that local residents organized a race-baiting event that drew more than 300 supporters in a town of 6,000 is a reminder of the cultural fault lines that continue to exist as Siler City struggles to adapt economically and culturally.

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

The poultry plants recruited scores of Latino workers, which changed the town's demographics. Today, more than half of the community is Latino; 41.5% speak Spanish at home, according to the U.S. Census.¹⁰² That concentrated growth is making Siler City a Latino hub, according to Paul Cuadros, a Chatham County resident who coaches soccer at Jordan Matthews High School. "Not everybody works at the poultry plant. A lot of Latinos are bedroom Latinos. They live in Siler City, but they don't necessarily work in Siler City. They're working in Asheboro, they're in Sanford, in Greensboro. They're driving to work." They're also having children, which means Siler City is growing even as surrounding communities see their young people disperse and their median age rise. "These small towns that used to be traditional factory

towns are dying out because the young people have left, the jobs have left, and all that's left are old folks,” Cuadros said. “Siler City doesn't suffer from that problem. Siler City's problem is one of growth.” Yet the town’s political leadership continues to maintain a traditional mindset that views outsiders, especially those who speak a foreign language, with suspicion. Cuadros chronicled these tensions in his 2006 book, *A Home on the Field: How One Championship Soccer Team Inspires Hope for the Revival of Small Town America*.

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

Siler City’s Top Stories

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

So when news came that the Delaware-based parent company of Siler City’s largest employer, **Townsend poultry processing plant**, filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy in December 2010, local leaders were eager to find some solution that would keep the plant running and the

workers employed. All stakeholders agreed this was the most significant event or problem to face the community in the past two years. “If this plant had shut down, that would have been the end of Siler City.” Cuadros said.

In February 2011, Townsend announced it had sold its North Carolina division to Omtron, an affiliate of the Ukrainian egg producer Agroholding Avangard, for \$24.9 million, and that the Siler City plant would continue to operate.¹⁰³ “Some Ukrainians bought it,” Grimes said. “We got together with the county and offered some economic incentives for them to make it appealing to them to purchase the plant.” Grimes described “attracting new industry” as the “No. 1 challenge” in the coming year.

During a retreat in January 2011, the Chatham County Board of Education considered a **proposal to redistrict K-8 schools** in Chatham County. Five K-8 schools operate in sparsely populated areas such as Moncure and Silk Hope. Operating these schools requires a higher per-pupil expenditure than conventional elementary and middle schools require. Moving rural K-8 students to Siler City and Pittsboro schools would have saved an estimated \$900,000 annually. In public meetings, parents voiced strong disapproval of the plan, and the board voted to abandon it in February.¹⁰⁴

Siler City Elementary School Principal Angie Brady Andrews sends her own two children, aged 8 and 5, to the school where she has worked for 11 years. Her husband is a farmer in Silk Hope, and both are lifelong Chatham County residents. Siler City is a Title I school, with 83% of students economically disadvantaged. Between 60% and 65% speak Spanish at home. She said that by creating a two-way Spanish-English immersion program, the school “created an opportunity to offer something extraordinary to both groups of children.” UNC-Greensboro sends student teachers to Siler City and provides professional development resources to school

staff, which Brady Andrews cites as another challenge turned into opportunity for the school community. But she is concerned that the school board's decision to abandon its K-8 restructuring plan leaves her school at a disadvantage she can't compensate for with creativity. "These smaller schools, which are predominantly white and more economically advantaged, are getting additional services paid for out of local funds," she explained. "It's not all equal."

Nor is it all about money. In his 2000 account of the David Duke rally for Salon.com, Cuadros noted that the influx of Hispanic children to public schools, Siler City Elementary in particular, was a flashpoint that led up to the event. "White and black parents are afraid their children are not receiving a quality education because many of the Hispanic children do not speak English," Cuadros wrote. "This fear sparked an angry school board meeting last September, attended by more than 100 people, that was a first step toward the February rally."¹⁰⁵

In 2011, when Republicans took control of the North Carolina state legislature for the first time since Reconstruction, they also took charge of the Chatham County board of commissioners. Among their first orders of business was a drastic spending cuts, including the elimination of two staff positions from the county budget, **Human Relations Executive Director** and Sustainable Communities Director.¹⁰⁶ Hernan Sedda, Executive Director of El Vinculo Hispano, said that was the most significant recent decision that has affected Latinos in the Siler City community. "I believe that position is very important to any community."

County government typically provides social services, and the absence of the human relations position means the Vinculo must provide for even more of the needs of Chatham's Latino residents. Sedda is an American citizen from Panama who lives in Greensboro and recently joined El Vinculo. He and his colleague Sandra Forrester explained the many roles their organization plays. One program includes walk-in assistance for basic needs. "If you consider

that there's a language barrier,” Forrester said, “everything that people need to survive, whether it's food stamps or a literacy problem as well, Social Security, just guiding them, helping them through daily stuff, whether it's connecting them to electric services, paying bills, referring them to a lawyer.” The second program is youth leadership development and gang prevention. The third, funded by a Governor’s Crime Commission grant, assists the victims of crimes. “We do a lot of interpreting,” Forrester said. “I think it's a challenge also for law enforcement when there's no one bilingual in the office, when you have half the population in Siler City Hispanic. I can imagine [that must be] quite a nightmare for the police. And also when you have undocumented people, maybe there's a tendency not to report crime because they don't want to speak with the police for fear of getting deported or arrested. That's quite a unique challenge, I imagine, for a city administration.”

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

In 2009, Siler City completed a new drinking water **reservoir**,¹⁰⁷ part of a \$19 million infrastructure improvement package that present a challenge to leaders who are trying to keep taxes low. Siler City faced an intense drinking water shortage for many years that created another

difficulty for attracting businesses and industry. Joel Brower, Siler City's Town Manager, cited the decision to "spend that kind of money" as the most significant decision the town has had to face in recent years. "We felt it was important, that we needed adequate water supply for the community," Brower said. Making payments on \$16 million in debt over the next 18 years will be difficult without raising the tax rate. Yet Grimes and Brower say that keeping tax rates and water rates low is crucial to attracting employers.

News Sources in Siler City

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

The Chatham News is Siler City's only dedicated print newspaper. It is one of two weekly editions published by the Chatham News & Record Publishing Company, based in Siler City and owned by Alan D. Resch, who serves as Editor-Publisher. A staff of one editor, three reporters, and one sports writer/photographer produce both the News and the Pittsboro edition, the *Chatham*

Record. The two papers have a combined circulation of 7,000, with slightly more than half distributed in Siler City.

Randall Rigsbee is managing editor and has been with the *News* and *Record* since 1996. He assigns and reports news and writes a weekly editorial. “We wear a lot of hats here,” he said after a morning of inserting ads into the print edition and coordinating office maintenance. Rigsbee explained that the two editions are “very much the same.” Resch wants all stories to appear in both editions, so the difference is in placement of the stories on pages A1 and A2, “the front and jump pages.” The papers cover Chatham County government, Siler City and Pittsboro town government, and occasionally Goldston, a town of fewer than 400 residents. “I actually cover the Chatham County commissioners, so I spend a lot of time at those meetings,” Rigsbee said. He said he tries to cover the Chatham County Planning board. He often writes hard news, meeting coverage, and features for a single week’s paper. “It really is just a matter of how many hours there are in the day.”

Rigsbee loves his job, but he is honest about what he sees as the paper’s limitations. He wishes the paper did more enterprise reporting and magazine-style news features of the type the *Independent Weekly*, a Durham-based, metro-oriented free weekly newspaper, is known for.¹⁰⁸ “A lot of times, people will call me and say, ‘I read this in the *Independent*. How come y’all aren’t doing this kind of reporting?’ It’s because I just spent six hours in a county commissioners meeting, you know?” About a year ago, the paper lost its only Spanish-speaking reporter. “I felt a lot more comfortable having him on the staff,” Rigsbee said, “but we get by fine.” Perhaps the most notable limitation of the newsroom is its production side; the *News* and *Record* are still produced using paste up, rather than desktop publishing. Wax-coated photos, ads, and headlines adorn the walls of the production area, mementos of past editions. The presses are through

double doors, in the back of the building.

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

Asked whether the weekly deadlines are a frustration when it comes to reporting breaking news, Rigsbee replied, “Sure, I could give you all kinds of examples. The *News* and *Record* do have a website¹⁰⁹ and occasionally breaking news is urgent enough to merit online updates. “We’re not all that geared toward our online presence,” Rigsbee said. “We’ve actually won some [North Carolina] Press Association awards for it ... but it’s hardly my focus.” Capacity remains an issue.

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

Asked where most people in Siler City get news about the community, Sedda said, “50% *La Conexion* and *Que Pasa*, because 50% are Latinos.” *Que Pasa* is a weekly Spanish-language newspaper with Charlotte, Greensboro, and Raleigh-Durham editions. It circulates more than 67,000 copies statewide, with about 800 copies of the Greensboro edition in Siler City.¹¹⁰ *La Conexion* is a Raleigh-based Spanish-language weekly, independently owned and published by an immigration attorney, with a circulation of 7,000.¹¹¹ Dubester said *Que Pasa* covers state issues and laws that affect Latinos. “It’s a regional newspaper, so there’s only so much time that

their reporters can devote, but they are always on the lookout for stories and do a good job of staying in touch with local leaders. If they're told about an event or story, they'll often cover it."

WNCA radio is the only daily media outlet dedicated to Siler City. The AM station is owned by Barry Hayes, who provides daily morning news commentaries from 6 to 9 a.m. Asked what he believes to be the station's role in reporting on pressing issues, Hayes responds, "As the only daily, even hourly news source in Siler City, WNCA's responsibility and duty to report is major, and it is incumbent upon us." Hayes employs five announcers who provide a few minutes of news and commentary during breaks from the beach music programming. The station also airs hourly updates from the N.C. News Network, a statewide news operation owned by Raleigh-based Curtis Media.¹¹² Hayes said he attends town commission meetings and then reports on them the next day, but he doesn't send any of his staff. "I can't afford to have the staff go there," he said. Nor does Hayes record audio of the meetings to play on the radio. "I have tried recording, and it's more trouble than it's worth. Plus," he added, "I think it intimidates the commissioners, and they don't speak freely."

About 45 to 50 minutes of Hayes' morning program is his "live, local news," and additional 10 to 15 minutes is listener calls. More than half an hour is N.C. News Network programming.¹¹³ Asked what mix of news and commentary comprise his news portion of the show, Hayes replied that "It's about 90 percent content and 10 percent commentary."

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

"I love Barry Hayes, he's a great guy, he's really smart," Rigsbee said. "But his [show] is so much opinion. He gets away with murder. He'll say things that just turn out not to be the case."

But I tell ya, I hear from his listeners. He does have a big audience, and they'll call and say, 'Is this true?' We'll check it out. Sometimes it is; sometimes it's not."

There is no text or audio archive of Hayes' morning programs. The only record available for research was the "issues and programs" report, which Hayes made available upon request, as per the Federal Communications Commission's regulations 73.3526 requiring commercially licensed broadcasters to maintain a file for public inspection.¹¹⁴ The regulations state that the issues and programs list should be produced quarterly. "The list must briefly describe both the issue and the programming during which the issue was discussed, including the date and time that each such program was aired and its title and duration."¹¹⁵

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

10-1-10 Town is still experiencing a drop in reservoir level. County elections coming up has reached fever-pitch among county commissioners candidates.
1-3-11 Town went back on water restrictions near end of November due to receding water levels in town reservoirs. Townsend, Inc. the largest employer and water user, has declared bankruptcy. Community is greatly concerned that plant will close.

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

Dubester, who was executive director of El Vinculo at the time, recalled the matter

differently. She said the organization paid Hayes \$400 to \$450 per month for a half-hour show from 7 to 7:30 p.m. weeknights. Some nights were aimed at teenagers, others were call-in programs. She said El Vinculo was reluctant to do business with Hayes. “We broadcast via WNCA because it was the only choice, not because we wanted to support the station. Barry Hayes makes no secret of the fact that he doesn’t like immigrants,” she said. (Items in Hayes’ issues and programs report support this statement.) Then in 2006, immigrants and their allies marched through Siler City. “Thousands of people came from all over the state,” Dubester said. “Workers felt empowered and several called the [United Food and Commercial Workers International] for help in organizing poultry workers.” El Vinculo was not involved in union organizing, which took place in 2007, but the organization decided to allow union representatives on the air, Dubester said. “We debated internally and decided to allow them to present on our radio show because the information was important for the community, and many clients had questions about what was happening. Union organizing is a legal and protected activity.” Dubester said Hayes had learned some Spanish and listened in on the program. “He was very concerned about what we were saying on the radio, and he wanted to monitor it. After that show, he banned us from the radio station. We couldn’t work out our differences, so we spent a month rebroadcasting because he wouldn’t let us into the studio.”

El Vinculo’s program ended in 2007 after a dispute over control of content. “He was demanding censorship rights over our programs,” Dubester said. “We were paying for our air time, censorship was uncalled for and out of the question as far as we were concerned. After about six years of broadcasting, we canceled the contract and the programs.” She said Hayes called back a few months later, “but he still wanted to have control over the topics discussed in our program. His list of ‘censored’ material was so broad that it would be useless for us to try to

accommodate, even if we were willing, which we were not.” (Hayes’ entry on the matter, dated 10-2-07, reads: “‘La Charla’ [the name of the program] does not wish to continue program unless they can have ‘free-reign’ to politicize beyond the boundaries of public-affairs. Also possible budgetary constraints.”)

The third main source of information in Siler City is not a conventional news source. Gene Galin owns and operates the Chatham County Online BBS,¹¹⁶ an online bullet board system, and the Chatham Chatlist, a subscriber-based email list.¹¹⁷ Galin also owns a monthly print shopper publication, Chatham Journal,¹¹⁸ but his online properties have considerably more reach. Chatham Journal Weekly,¹¹⁹ repurposes some posts from the BBS and Chatlist and includes timely posts of county commissioner meeting minutes and short posts about high-school theater, sports, and community events.¹²⁰ Residents use the Chatlist to exchange information, buy and sell items, and post questions. A digest of email posts is delivered daily. “It’s really good,” Forrester said. “People are making continuous comments, whether it’s government, politics, lost animals, everything goes on there, and it comes out every day. I think it’s got pretty wide reach to people in the county.”

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

us or whatever.”

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

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

Informal communication is a significant source of information in town, according to stakeholders. Forrester said she hears of news through word-of-mouth, inter-agency exchange, rumors from clients that you follow up on.” Brady Andrews said she believed most people in

Siler City get their news about the community from the Sidewalk Cafe, a downtown eatery and gathering place, and “the barbershop,” followed by the Chatham News and WNCA. “I think because we only have a paper that comes out once a week, it lends itself to us just having conversations. That's probably where some misinformation gets spread, too, because it's not always coming directly from the source,” she said.

Coverage of Top Stories in Siler City

Coverage of the Townsend story illustrates the lack of timeliness and reporting capacity among conventional news outlets. Townsend filed for bankruptcy on December 19, 2010. The news appeared on the front of the December 23 issue of *The Chatham News* (ill-timed, as it appeared next to the banner headline, “Merry Christmas!”). There was no mention of Townsend in the December 30 paper, which was mostly dedicated to year-in-review content.¹²¹ On Friday, February 18, Townsend’s sale to Omtron was announced. *The Chatham News* ran a front-page story on the sale the following Thursday, February 24. On Friday, February 25, *The News & Observer* published a story about the sale. Cuadros pointed out that *The N&O*’s story “was probably the most comprehensive work that was done. But that was a week late.”

The impact of the sale is an ongoing issue for Siler City. In its February 24 story, *The Chatham News* reported on incentives that state and local leaders offered Omtron and quoted local leaders, including Brower, saying they were told by the new owners that the plant would continue to operate without job losses. The following week, the paper quoted the state agriculture commissioner saying that Omtron would “ensure that an estimated 1,500 jobs stay in our state.”

There has been little follow-up since then. A search in Lexis-Nexis Academic and America’s Newspapers showed only March 17 story in *The News & Observer* about Omtron’s

business strategy to export dark meat, and a March 23 guest opinion article in the *Durham Herald-Sun* urging government officials to protect the Rocky River from the plant's effluent.

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

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

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

The Chatham County Schools redistricting plan received coverage in the Chatham News as well as metro publications such as *The News & Observer* and WRAL-TV.¹²² Coverage was

driven by public meetings and quotes from parents unhappy with the proposal. “We covered that pretty extensively,” Rigsbee said. “It was hard not to, they had so many community meetings on this. And the outrage over the proposal.”

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

Cuadros said conventional media could not keep up with the pace of the debate over the school redistricting issue. “It became a huge, conflated issue, all of which was driven by the blogs, certainly not by the traditional media here. Not by the radio, certainly not by the newspaper. The newspaper's too slow to really capture what was happening.” Hearings took place over a period of several days and drew hundreds of people. The issue was moving fast, he said, “So the bulletin board was abuzz with commentary of people discussing what the plan entailed, how much it would cost, what it would mean for the schools, how people felt about it and so forth.” Cuadros observed that people posted details of the proposed school system budget, trying to determine areas that might be cut. One called Cuadros, asking for help to determine why someone in the central office of the school system was affiliated with the North Carolina High School Athletic Association and was paid more than \$100,000. “It's a good question,” Cuadros said. So he called the employee and asked. The employee explained that the athletic association provided his salary to the school system. “So Chatham County Public Schools is not paying a dime for this individual. It's just a pay-through. But the bloggers thought this to be like a sinister thing. So when I told this person this is just a pay-through, the person said, ‘Well, I

never would have found that out.’ And I said, all you've got to do is call the guy. It took me 10 minutes to do. They said, ‘That’s not what I do. I'm not a reporter.’ ... What that says to me is that the bloggers are snatching information on the web, trying to interpret it in the way that they can, using each other to interpret this information, but not actually going to the source.”

The Chatham BBS was not the only online source of information about the schools story. The Chatham County Schools provided some updates on its own blog and website.¹²³ And a group of concerned residents started an open group on Facebook that has more than 900 members.¹²⁴ Brady Andrews was aware of the group and said, “One of our board members was a member of that group and tried, at times, to post information to clear up the misinformation that was being stated, or just to provide more information.” Cuadros found it interesting that Facebook emerged for the first time as a significant forum for civic discussion in Chatham. He believes the lack of anonymity made a difference. “It still suffers from the same symptoms, a lack of vetting, reportage, fact-checking, confrontation. It still suffers from the same blogging problems. But it's at least people have to own their content, so generally it's less nasty than the bulletin board. That discussion was very, very different in tone than Gene's bulletin board, where people are anonymous and can say crazy things.”

Coverage of the human relations position was mostly limited to coverage of the overall budget cuts. Rigsbee said the cuts were “no surprise,” since the Republican majority had campaigned on the issue. “There were a lot of folks who were not happy with that decision. And a lot who were.” Rigsbee’s January 6 news story on the commissioners’ meeting quoted one Pittsboro resident who spoke against the decision. Rigsbee wrote an editorial on the issue the following week titled, “Cuts sometime painful but bottom line matters,” in which he concluded that “The three new commissioners cannot be faulted for fulfilling campaign promises. The

timing was right, too.” Hayes said he covered the story “as part of the bigger picture of cutting expenses and redundant positions in the efforts to return to constitutional government.” Dubester said *Que Pasa* covered the issue for the Spanish-speaking community.

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

Public Debate in Siler City and Chatham County

Most stakeholders said they didn't know of a forum for debate beyond public meetings. Brower mentioned that serving on volunteer boards was an avenue for citizens to “express their opinions and concerns.” John Grimes said citizens provided feedback to him in person. “They stop you on the street,” he said. He said interacting with citizens “in the public arena, meeting in the cafe, restaurants, church, wherever you come across” was an important source of information for him as a public official. Sedda and Forrester said there are few opportunities for public debate among the Hispanic community outside of church.

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

content of the paper for an advertiser.”

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

Hayes’ program allows call-ins from citizens. But WNCA can be heard only in Siler City and parts of southern Orange County, depending on the weather. Hayes’ commentaries sometimes address county government issues, but residents in the county seat of Pittsboro can neither hear nor respond. This, combined with the lack of any archive, is a source of tension among those he criticizes. “Once, our Board member asked for the transcript of the news,” Dubester said. “He was saying some very nasty things about El Vinculo and about me during the time when the United Way withdrew our funding. A board member of ours heard it on WNCA and called the station to try to get a transcript, and the answer was something like, ‘It’s not for public information. We don’t share that.’ Even though they just broadcast it live in the air, the transcript is not available to the public.”

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

“One could sit here and say, is that license being used to its best effect?” Cuadros said. “The public airwaves? You own it, I own it. The answer probably is no, in the sense that it's not really providing any information. The answer might be yes, given the size of the community. It

doesn't really reflect a lot of the community here, in the sense that Siler City is 50% Hispanic now, and it doesn't reflect that. It may reflect Barry Hayes, what he wants to do. He's got the license, he's got the broadcast equipment, and it reflects his personality.”

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

Anonymous authors historically have made contributions to the "progress of mankind." There are benign reasons that an author may choose to remain anonymous: fear of retaliation or reprisal, the desire to avoid social ostracism, the wish to protect privacy, or the fear that the audience's biases will distort the meaning of the work. "Anonymity is a shield from the tyranny of the majority" without which public discourse would certainly suffer.

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

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

From that point on, Voller could no longer log in to the BBS from any of his computers, at home or at work. Anyone who had ever used Voller’s WiFi network (which uses Voller’s IP addresses) was also banned, as well, meaning that many of the county’s progressive politicians were now unable to engage in conversation on the BBS. “Basically what he did was cut off anyone who had a moderate to progressive voice from posting on there.” Voller tried to interest local media in writing a story about his expulsion. Hayes declined to have him on the air to discuss the matter, Voller said, and Resch at the *Chatham News and Record* said he wouldn’t consider the event newsworthy unless Voller filed suit. Already feeling marginalized by the tenor of the debate on Chatham BBS, political progressives took their outrage over Voller’s excommunication and launched a rival site, Chathamist.¹²⁵ Both sites continue to operate as of April 2011.

Brady Andrews said Siler City is lacking in opportunities for truly inclusive debate. “I don’t feel that there’s an ongoing dialogue between different stakeholders in the city and the local government,” she said. Asked if there were an online forum, she did not mention the BBS or the Chatlist, but expressed concern that an online forum might not be “comfortable” for older residents. She said including immigrants and first-generation U.S. citizens in discussion is an important challenge, and she expressed concern that the county’s minority African American population may feel increasingly marginalized.

“I’m concerned by the lack of understanding and the tolerance,” particularly with regard to conversations about immigration issues, she said. “I worry about the acceptance of our

children and what the future's going to be like for them growing up in a society and a world where they are marginalized and where they feel like they don't have a voice.... I feel like what's happening here is an example of what's happening in lots of rural areas all across the country, and maybe even in suburban areas too. It just doesn't bode well for the future of our city, county, state, nation, when we still struggle so much with having an understanding of people who are different from us.”

Findings: The Stories Not Told in Siler City

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

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

In a town where the majority of residents are Hispanic or Latino, there is no Spanish language outlet for local news. The newspaper has no Spanish-speaking reporters, and while Spanish-language papers do cover state issues that affect Latinos, there is no consistent coverage of town and county government bodies available in Spanish. Latinos feel disenfranchised from

Hayes' station. There is no Spanish-language BBS. "The Latino community here is completely voiceless, powerless, and has no representation whatsoever in local government," Cuadros said. While many Latinos are U.S. citizens, their median age is 25, and few are registered to vote. It's unclear what consequences this mismatch of population and political representation will have when political districts are redrawn this year. Given that research by Oberholzer-Gee and Waldfogel (2009) demonstrated that the availability of Spanish-language news increased Hispanic voter turnout, one could hypothesize that Spanish-language media coverage of local affairs in Siler City and Chatham County could increase political participation among Hispanics there.

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

The Townsend story remains untold. While basic facts of the sale were reported, that information came from official sources, such as company and government officials. A content analysis of the story would examine 1) whether workers and social service workers were interviewed about the sale and about ongoing conditions at the plant and 2) whether any coverage investigated rumors that plant workers had been fired and told to reapply for their jobs. Given that Townsend is the town's largest employer, contextual coverage is necessary to assess the economic outcome of the plant and of the town itself.

A content analysis of the Chatham County Schools redistricting story would examine 1) how much was reported in the period between the presentation of the proposal and the school

board's vote against it 2) how many stories were coverage of public meetings and how many provided objective analysis of budget needs 3) how many quoted sources were parents speaking against the plan compared to those speaking in favor and 4) whether coverage examined equity in per pupil expenditures.

A content analysis of the human relations director story would examine 1) whether coverage explained the role the human relations director plays and whether that position was "redundant," as those who voted to eliminate the position described it and 2) whether coverage included Latino perspectives about the impact of the decision.

A content analysis of the driver's license story would examine whether coverage 1) described the economic implications for Latinos and 2) examined the commuting patterns of Latinos to consider which communities and neighborhoods may be most affected.

Analysis of the reservoir story would consider whether coverage 1) examined the opportunity cost of public debt to finance the project 2) examined construction contracts and water quality (to ensure the project was properly executed and 3) placed the project in the broader context of economic development and environmental concerns.

III. Apex: The Fox and the Henhouse

Overview

Apex is a fast-growing, highly affluent area with high levels of educational attainment. Between 2000 and 2009, its population grew 580%, from 5,000 to 34,000 residents. It is a bedroom community for high tech workers in Research Triangle Park and research universities such as UNC-Chapel Hill, Duke, and N.C. State. According to U.S. Census surveys, 19% of its

employed residents work in professional, scientific, management, and administrative services and another 19% work in educational services, health care, and social assistance. It is a highly educated community, with more than 40% holding a bachelor's degree and 18% holding a graduate or professional degree. Many of these residents come from out of state or abroad. While 14% spoke a language other than English at home, only 35% of those spoke Spanish.

Political leadership in Apex is decidedly conservative. Mayor Keith Weatherly is active in Wake County's Republican Party and works as a legislative assistant to N.C. Rep. Paul "Skip" Stam, a longtime state GOP leader representing Apex and western Wake County.

Yet Apex's growth may be shifting its political dynamics, observed Rick Beech, Executive Director of Apex United Methodist Church. "Apex would probably follow suit with the county as far as leaning more Republican," he said. But as more people move from Asia, India, and other parts of the world to work at Research Triangle Park, "That changes the dynamics of a place. Your classic Southern Democrat that's very conservative, that's not Apex at all anymore. You have a more diverse population, a more educated population, more resources." He noted that while Apex is growing more diverse racially and religiously, "it's more monolithic economically."

The key issue facing Apex is managing growth carefully and responsibly. In 1990, the town's population was 5,000; by 2000, it had jumped more than 300% to 20,200; as of 2009 estimates, it was 35,000, another 73% increase. "Managing growth has been the issue for a couple of decades," Beech said. "It's a highly desirable place to live, and how to manage that growth is an ongoing challenge." Those challenges include the impact of so many new residents on traffic patterns, water and sewer infrastructure, and public safety.

Apex Stakeholders

- Bruce Radford, Town Manager¹²⁶
- Bob Crowley, President of the Kiwanis Club, etc.¹²⁷
- Rick Beech, Executive Director, Apex United Methodist Church¹²⁸
- Brenda Steen, Executive Director, Apex Chamber of Commerce¹²⁹
- (Multiple efforts to reach an identified stakeholder on Apex Town Council were unsuccessful.)

Media Interview

- Janet Kangas, Managing Editor, Heartland Publications' Western Wake newspaper group, including *The Apex Herald*¹³⁰

Apex's Recent History

In 2006, a fire broke out at the EQ chemical storage facility, causing the evacuation of 17,000 residents. The event raised concerns about the pattern of Apex's development, and whether the town had provided proper oversight of that growth to protect residents.

When the EQ plant was originally approved and permitted, "there was nothing there," said Bob Crowley, president of the Kiwanis Club of Apex, who has lived in Apex for 16 years. By 2006, residential subdivisions and schools had been built nearby, creating complications for evacuation. "It was really a tremendous burden," he said. "We just didn't keep an eye on it and plan properly, to not build homes close to it. That's also an issue, though, because a lot of people wanted to live in that area. It was close to Cary, it was close to transportation. It was hard to say no."

Town Manager Bruce Radford believes part of the burden for keeping an eye on

development lies with the residents themselves. He mentioned that a natural gas distributor named Motiva has recently requested permission to increase the size of their plant. The request received significant push-back from nearby residents. “People were concerned about this company that had been there for 47 years wanting to expand because they live adjacent to it,” he said. “Funny thing is, when they moved there, the plant was already there. We often tell people that sometimes they make bad housing decisions. In this case, some of them must have because they were concerned about the existence of this facility and expanding it. Well, there's already enough gasoline there to create problems for them if there's a major catastrophe. So if they were that concerned they made a bad decision.” Radford was sympathetic to citizens’ desire to have a say in the expansion proposal, however, and he said the town was put in a difficult position due to state law, which required a quasi-judicial process for site plan expansion, such as the Motiva case, which permits only “qualified opinions” to be taken into consideration. “One of our legislative agenda items this year is to have that law changed,” Radford said, “because we think the, if you will, the soccer mom and the soccer dad do have a feeling for what overburdens a street or what creates a concern for them if something goes boom in the night.”

Apex Mayor Keith Weatherly has been outspoken in the debate over Wake County Public Schools’ diversity assignment policy. Weatherly opposes busing and was one of many GOP leaders who vocally supported the Republican candidates who won election to the board of education in 2010. Weatherly also responded to state legislative debates over public coverage of abortion services by proposing to strip abortion coverage from Apex town employees’ health plan. Only one out of five members of the town council, Democrat Bill Jensen, responded with a counter-proposal to debate the issue. Under Weatherly’s leadership, national political issues find an outlet in local decision-making.

(This fact had some impact on the methodology of the Apex community profile in this paper. Town Manager Bruce Radford suggested that Mayor Weatherly be selected as the council stakeholder for this project, but no mayors were selected in other communities. The Mayor Pro Tem, Brian Gossage, is also active in state-level Republican politics. In order to keep the focus of this research project on local issues, attempts were made to identify town council members who were not as active in national or state-level politics. But repeated calls and emails to other council members went unreturned.)

Top Stories in Apex

Apex town leaders are in the process of considering a proposed development that would double the population and commercial tax base of Apex. **Veridea**, a planned mixed-use "green" development, would develop 1,000 acres of currently undeveloped land into 8,000 homes, 10 million square-feet of office space, 3.5 million square-feet of retail, and 2 million square-feet of industrial space. The buildout of the site is expected to take 20 years. But first comes the long process of negotiation between the town and the developer, Lookout Ventures, owned by Raleigh banker Tom Hendrickson.

There is much at stake for the town. Most of Apex's growth has been through the construction of residential subdivisions. The town's tax base is currently 81% residential and 19% industrial, commercial, and retail, according to Steen. The economic downturn and the housing market crisis mean that ratio presents a problem, and town leaders are trying to court commercial and industrial growth. Financial projections estimate the project would generate \$19 million annually in *ad valorem* taxes once completed and provide net fiscal benefits over \$256 million for the town.¹³¹ "We currently have a \$4.2 billion tax base and they would increase it by

\$5 billion,” Radford said. “It’s taken us 140 years to get to \$4.2 billion, and they propose to do it all over again in 20 years.”

Those benefits don’t come without cost, however. Apex would also need to hire more than 100 employees to provide services to Veridea, according to financial estimates. Hendrickson has asked the town to partner on special assessment bonds, part of a complex plan to finance the project and related infrastructure. Doing so would set a new precedent in North Carolina.¹³²

“You don’t double the size of your town virtually overnight without having a major impact,” said Crowley, who sees managing growth as the biggest challenge facing Apex.

“Watching over that, making sure that it’s done properly, that it isn’t just suddenly thousands of people, thousands of homes, that’s a major issue, and one we really have to control.”

Steen said Veridea, a member of the Apex Chamber, would help Apex head “in the right direction” toward a more balanced tax base, but she said zoning approval has been “a very long process, and I don’t see an end in sight.” Many complex issues must be worked out for a development of that size. “Some of them are just fundamentally hard for the developer to control, and even more difficult for the town to control.” For instance, town councilors want the developer to set aside land for three public schools on site. That requires input from Wake County and the Wake Board of Education, yet those bodies are embroiled in heated questions about school assignment county-wide.

Apex is part of a consortium of municipalities, the Western Wake Partners, that have been seeking for several years to build a new **wastewater treatment plant**. Planners selected a site in the unincorporated community of New Hill, near Sanford, which became a source of controversy after a group of citizens organized in opposition to the plant on the grounds of environmental and economic justice. New Hill is near the Shearon Harris nuclear facility, and residents argue they

already bear the burden of regional infrastructure projects that primarily serve other, more affluent communities. After several years of public hearings and investigation by federal agencies, Western Wake Partners settled with New Hill community leaders, agreeing to pay \$500,000 for a community center. The plan itself is expected to cost \$325 million. “Regulatorily, it has been an absolutely mind-boggling trip,” Radford said. Steen said the project is four to five years delayed as a result, which presents a problem for future growth. “That’s not something most residents are aware of, because they turn on their faucets and they get water and it’s clean,” she said.

Apex has been hit less severely by the **economic downturn** than have other communities in North Carolina. Radford said the biggest challenge from a government perspective has been to **maintain services without increasing taxes**. “We have operated for a number of years where there was significant growth, and each year we were a little behind in hiring the number of people that it took to do the work,” he said. Crowley praised the town’s ability to avoid layoffs of public personnel. But cost-of-living-adjustments to town staff salaries have been frozen for three years, and spending on needs such as new police cars and capital projects are difficult to prioritize. “I have people in closets in public works,” Radford said. “But a new public works building is \$4.5 million, money I don’t have. Debt service on \$4.5 million is \$450,000 a year, that has to come out of your pocket some way, somehow, for 20 or 30 years or whatever terms you take on. I will not see an increase in revenue town-wide of \$400,000 in the coming year. I’m not into deficit spending.”

“Maintaining the current tax rate is going to be an incredible challenge because of that business-to-residential ratio,” Steen said. “We have the second lowest tax rate in Wake County, and preserving that is going to be a challenge.”

The impact of the economic downturn has many facets. Given the community's relative affluence, that overall impact may be qualitatively different in Apex than in other places. Beech, however, sees the effects of what he calls "hard times" more closely than others do because of his work with the church. "People come in off the street looking for assistance from us and other churches," he said. Apex UMC works with other congregations, nonprofits, and social service agencies, such as the Western Wake Crisis Center, to provide the "comprehensive array of services" clients need. This includes substance abuse care, care for grief and divorce, elderly services, and a variety of services for Latino immigrants. "How people are supporting each other, I think that's a huge story," he said. "There are a lot of folks being deported, and the kids stay behind. There are some really heart-wrenching stories that I guess we have the privilege of hearing and are haunted by."

In May 2010, a man entered a Target store in Apex with a handgun and shot and killed his former girlfriend, who was an employee at the store, then killed himself during a standoff with police.¹³³ Only one stakeholder, Steen, identified the incident as a "significant event," noting the reassuring responsiveness of law enforcement. But several stakeholders mentioned the incident when discussing media coverage.

News Sources in Apex

The only dedicated news source in Apex is a weekly newspaper, *The Apex Herald*, part of a group of five newspapers in western Wake County (*The Fuquay-Varina Independent*, *The Garner News*, *The Cleveland Post* and *The Holly Springs Sun*) owned by Heartland Publications. Heartland is a Connecticut-based chain that owns 50 community newspapers across the United States. The office for all five Heartland papers in western Wake County is in Fuquay-Varina, and

the papers share one general manager and one managing editor, Janet Kangas. Each of the five papers employs one full-time editor who reports many of stories, but there are no full-time reporters. Correspondents are paid on a per-story and per-photo basis. Other contributors submit opinion pieces for free. “We really are very much a community newspaper, because we depend so much on the community to help us,” Kangas said. The editor of *The Apex Herald* is Shawn Daley, and he covers town council and breaking news, as do his counterparts in the other communities. “But we go to print on Mondays and Tuesdays,” Kangas said, “and if we have something break on those days, we have to try to get a correspondent to cover it.”

The website for each of Heartland’s western Wake papers is essentially identical to the others, with content repurposed across the five editions and little news coverage specific to any one municipality. The site does not list a newsroom masthead and only one phone number is given for the central office. Kangas said the paper can and does use the web to post breaking news stories. She credits a freelance correspondent and web editor with taking the lead in those situations. She mentioned a recent story in Fuquay-Varina in which a missing person was found on a Tuesday, too late for the print edition, but a post on the site had 12,000 hits within two days. “That’s way bigger than our print circulation,” Kangas said. “It’s wonderful that we *can* put breaking news online every day,” but she added that staffing resources make it difficult to do so often.

Stakeholders indicated that *The Apex Herald* was not a major presence in the town. One called it “pretty modest.” Crowley said he respects the editor, “one of the most honest people I know,” and said that, “if there is a major issue, it is reported.” But there was a strong sense that the paper failed to provide much local news content and that it had limited reach. “People are very frustrated with the local paper because of the lack of real content,” Steen said. “But I know

the local paper suffers” from the industry-wide decline in print advertising.

Kangas said Heartland used to employ more editorial staff, including two full-time reporters, when she joined the Wake papers two years ago, but that those positions were cut due to financial pressure. “We’ve actually been very lucky that we’re still here,” she said, but the lack of reporting capacity is frustrating. “There are some things we don’t cover in the community because we don’t have the investigative power.” Kangas said town government, leaders, and police were “all very cooperative,” and that those relationships helped the paper to do its job. “We really couldn’t do it without that kind of cooperation. We don’t have the staff to beat the streets. We need to be able to pick up the phone.”

Southwest Wake News is one of nine free weekly community newspapers published by The News & Observer Publishing Company. It covers Apex, Fuquay-Varina, and Holly Springs. The parent company, Sacramento-based McClatchy, took on significant debt to purchase the Knight-Ridder chain for \$4.5 billion in 2006. The N&O’s news staff has declined significantly due to layoffs, buyouts, and attrition. As of February 2011, the total newsroom staff numbered 103, down from more than 250 before the sale to McClatchy.¹³⁴ But the community weekly newspaper model has been financially successful for The N&O, according to its management. While many of The N&O’s community weeklies have been publishing for many decades and were acquired by parent company, *Southwest Wake News* began publishing in January 2009 as part of an expansion of the weekly community papers. Some news content is repurposed from the community papers to *The News & Observer*’s metro edition, and vice versa.

Stakeholders complained that coverage of Apex in metro media outlets is rare, and rarely flattering. “We’ve always said that we have to have either phenomenally good news or a horrible catastrophe to get into *The News & Observer*,” Radford said. “They’re our local paper. It’s the

paper I read every morning, cover to cover ... But I can't get a full-blown article in the newspaper about being selected by CNN Money magazine as being the 14th best place in America to live and the best place in North Carolina. Can't get that done. You talk about your fluff pieces. A thousand words on that would be just right ... I can get lots of press when we blow up a chemical plant in town, day after day after day, and I understand that. I don't have a problem with that. The story needed to be told.” Steen shares the frustration, but noted limited capacity on the part of metro outlets. “*The News & Observer* doesn't cover the things we think they should cover, but they’ve got 12 municipalities.” She also mentioned the effect of declining advertising revenues on newspapers. “*The News & Observer* has laid off people, and all of those newspaper outlets don’t have the staff. So as a result the reporting is less, because they simply don’t have the writers they used to have.”

Crowley said municipal affairs in Apex receive little media coverage, and he’d like to see that change. “If there's a major thing like the shooting at Target, everybody covered that. That hit national news. The chemical fire that hit national news. But they put in a traffic light here – that's important to people who live here. It may not be national news, and it may be boring to some folks, but it's part of your community, it's part of what you're about. If you go to *The News & Observer*, it's all Raleigh, Raleigh politics ... It’s like there's no life beyond the beltline.” Broadcast offers even less, Crowley said. “As far as radio, television? We don’t have it.” He mentioned one short-lived exception: In 2008 and 2009, NBC 17, a local television network affiliate, experimented with hyper-local web-first news project called MyNC. One multimedia reporter was stationed in each of approximately 20 communities throughout the Triangle, including Apex. The reporter posted at least one story per week to the MyNC website. A story from each community was then broadcast to the Triangle-wide audience at least once a month.

“So you had a place you could go and read about Apex,” Crowley said. “Now, that's the kind of thing we need.” The station’s parent company, Media General, began to cut news staff and eventually ended the enterprise.

Crowley’s resume of community service is so extensive that it’s somewhat inaccurate to refer to him by any one affiliation. He moved to Apex 16 years ago from New Jersey to work for a small consulting firm that was sold for \$42 million. He now works part time and devotes most of his time to volunteering. He is president of the Kiwanis Club and the Apex Arts Council, serves on the boards of the N.C. Historical Society, Chatham County Economic Development Commission, the Apex Downtown Business Association, the Apex Chamber of Commerce, and contributes to other groups too numerous to name. He wants to add to that list by starting a radio station in Apex. He's investigated Low-Power FM (LPFM) licenses, but believes their non-commercial restriction might be too limiting. He's following the narrowbanding process the FCC is undertaking as part of spectrum reform. "I know where there's a license available," he said. I just haven’t been able to raise all the cash yet.” He estimates the license, equipment, and other technical requirements would cost about \$500,000. “We want just a little attention. There's something that happens out here that's worth reporting each week.”

The most prominent source of local information in Apex is not a conventional news source. The Apex Chamber of Commerce publishes a monthly magazine, available for free at local businesses, and maintains a website with announcements and events. “We do try to be the voice of the business community,” Steen said, “so what we communicate, we communicate to help them grow their businesses or help them understand either a law or an entity that affects their business. We only reach a small percentage of all of Apex, but we are trying to be that credible, unbiased source of information.” The website includes demographic data and a

downloadable interactive map of ongoing development projects in town.¹³⁵ “Email blasts from the chamber have been really good for us,” Beech said. While most Apex Chamber members are businesses, “a handful” are individual community members or nonprofit organizations. Veridea is a member and a major sponsor and advertiser.

Because of its accessibility, the Apex Chamber serves a number of community information needs. “We’re the 411 of Apex,” Steen said. People who are considering moving to Apex often drop in to the office, which is located downtown. She said two people called the office the Monday after tornados ripped through Wake County, trying to reach loved ones. “Those are things that we do that we’re not paid to do, but we do them anyway,” she said. “When someone calls and they’re distraught and they need help, it’s hard to say no. We have a reputation for helping people because that’s our attitude.”

Stakeholders said they personally turn directly to official sources for reliable news and information about Apex. Radford replied that “the Apex planning department” was the source of information he considered to be the most trustworthy; Steen answered, “Town staff.” Asked where most people in Apex get news, stakeholders cited informal communication. “Their neighbors,” Steen said. “I think they get it pretty much word of mouth,” Crowley said. Beech mentioned homeowners associations, community centers, and parenting groups as sources for most people in Apex. He also relies on digital and in-person communication with a network of pastors in the area. The fact that his congregation includes former council members and a former mayor helps keep Beech in the loop on town business.

Steen said social media, particularly Facebook, have overtaken conventional news sources in Apex in some ways. She gave an example of a soccer coach who died of a heart attack, saying news spread virally across Facebook before the death was reported in the media.

“If it’s a big issue people find out about it electronically; the media coverage is after-the-fact. It’s old news by the time it comes across your yard.” Crowley also mentioned that social media are playing an increasing role in Apex. “This town has gone Facebook crazy,” he said, adding that all prominent town leaders (except Radford) are active on the site.

Radford said the town recently reorganized its personnel in order to hire a Public Information Officer. The town’s website has a prominent section labeled “Transparency,” with links to digitally formatted budget and financial documents, meeting agendas and minutes, planning documents, and other public records.¹³⁶

Coverage of Top Stories in Apex

Veridea’s developer has hired a public relations firm to promote the development with a website and ads in the Apex Chamber’s magazine. “They have a publicity machine of their own,” Radford said. “Mike Davis is their paid consultant and he has spun up quite a few numbers of stories.” *The Apex Herald* has covered discussion of the development in town council meetings. But metro media have done very little coverage of the proposed development.

Not all residents of New Hill opposed the proposed siting of the wastewater treatment plant, but the vocal, protracted protest of those who did generated news coverage and significant negative publicity for Cary, Apex, and the other Western Wake Partners.¹³⁷

“I don't know that we could have done a better job of making our side better known, because it's such an emotional issue,” Radford said. “When somebody plans to build the largest wastewater plant constructed in the state in a very long time, probably the second largest in 20 years, there's not much that you can feel good about if that's in your backyard. And I understand that.” He said the *The Apex Herald* did “a pretty balanced job of covering the issues, and they ran

the requisite number of letters to the editor, pro and con, and that's good.” Other media, he said, presented the issue as a good guy vs. bad guy situation. “There’s such a diversity there between the reality and the perception,” Radford said of the controversy. “We’ve been portrayed as Apex and Cary going down there and walking on the little guy, which is not what we intended to do at all. We picked the best site that, from an engineering perspective, was the cheapest to operate over a long period of time. I’ll never sell that message. I’ll never get that story told to the point that the people of New Hill will believe that.”

There are many examples of coverage of the broad issue of the economic downturn. But Beech noted one aspect that is rarely told: the impact on Latino families, who are already facing hardship due to immigration issues. “We try to get that story out,” Beech said, adding that *The Apex Herald* had run a story on the topic. “I bet you, the deporting issues in the Latino communities, I bet you if they really ran that story from the perspective of the people left behind, the personal stories ... We have some folks in our congregation who would say, enforce the policies. But that personal story, if that got out ... maybe it could address some policies on that. It may increase sensitivity to those things.”

Public Debate in Apex

Stakeholders said people in Apex feel comfortable engaging in public debate when there is an issue that concerns them, but that such debate is rare, at least in public forums. “We have little public debate,” Radford said. Apex Town Council meets twice a month. “It is a rare, rare event that we fill the council chambers for any particular event. The last time we filled the room was six years ago. That was in the aftermath of the Environmental Quality explosion, when people were concerned about their health. And then it wasn't much debate,” he said. “It was about gathering answers people had about environmental safety.” Steen saw the lack of news

coverage in Apex and the lack of public debate as two sides of the same coin, as residents have little interest in following municipal issues. “They’re comfortable,” he said. “They have a low tax rate, there’s very little crime, 91% commute out of Apex to their jobs, so they spend their day in RTP or Durham or Raleigh or Chapel Hill, and until they’re hit with a tax increase or there’s a murder in their neighborhood or a rape, they don’t really pay attention. Obviously there are people who really do care. But I attend every single town council meeting, and unless there’s an issue in their backyard, there’s very few people who (are there). That means the residents are happy; otherwise, that would be their venue to go and complain.

Most public debate is informal, Crowley said. He spends much of his time working on his laptop at the Common Ground Cafe on North Salem Street, Apex's main downtown thoroughfare. People know Crowley, and they come to him to talk about any number of concerns and ambitions. During an interview at the cafe, a cafe patron, seemingly engrossed in his own work, popped his head up to assent this is true. “You’ll hear a lot of public debate happening on the street,” Crowley said. “People will meet together here in this coffee house, at some of the other places around here, and then you’ll have these debates springing up.” It’s these personal conversations in public places that provide a forum for Apex residents, he said. “Eventually, it winds up at the town council. One of the things I’ve noticed about Apex, as opposed to other places I’ve lived, is that no one in this town, and I mean no one, is shy about going to a town council meeting and opening their mouth.” Public officials are “very, very accessible,” Crowley added. “You walk into the town hall and it’s not like you have to walk through 14 secretaries and administration to get to someone. I can walk into the town managers office right now, and it’s not a matter of a formal thing, it’s just plop yourself down and say, ‘Hey Bruce, let’s talk.’ And it’s that way.” Nor do politics present a barrier to communication, Crowley said. Despite his political

differences with the mayor, “when we talk, it's just Bob and Keith talking, we have a great old time.”

The Apex Herald is not a forum for public debate, stakeholders said. “Our newspaper is not a place where there is any sort of public debate at all,” Radford said. “They never generate or engender any sort of division. It's just not where people go to have their say, for whatever reason.” Crowley said the paper does serve that function in a limited way for “significant people in the town” who read it, “but we need to have more and more *people* reading it,” he said. “I don't think enough people use it. I think there are a lot more things that could be done with it, and that's a matter of people understanding its there and understanding what it could be.”

Findings: The Stories Not Told in Apex

Despite high levels of educational attainment, wealth, and proximity to Raleigh, and a larger population than other communities in this study, Apex has little dedicated media coverage. The weekly newspaper, *The Apex Herald*, is owned by a national chain that makes very modest investments in newsgathering. One full-time editor/reporter provides nearly all of the available coverage of town council and other municipal affairs. Metro media tend to do spot news coverage of disasters and crime, such as the EQ explosion and the shooting at Target. The Apex Chamber of Commerce fills many of the town’s information needs, including news about business and economic development and upcoming town council decisions that affect businesses. The chamber also fills basic information needs that do not pertain directly to businesses. Its publications are free, and are the most prominent media outlet in town.

The Veridea development demonstrates the problem with relying on the Apex Chamber of Commerce for local news and information: Veridea is a member of the Chamber and a major

advertiser. As an organization, the Chamber exists to serve those members, not to provide objective accountability news coverage.

A content analysis of the Veridea development would examine whether reporting included 1) analysis of the specific tax incentives or waivers the development was asking for, 2) the impact on infrastructure and traffic patterns, 3) whether unofficial sources that did not stand to benefit directly were quoted, 4) whether coverage previewed upcoming council decisions or reported on those decisions after-the-fact and 5) whether metro media outlets provided any coverage that examined Veridea in the context of metropolitan planning and infrastructure impact.

A content analysis of the Western Wake Partners' wastewater treatment plant would examine 1) whether reporting explained, clearly and in depth, the regulatory issues and processes involved 2) the balance of perspectives among sources quoted, including their geography and socioeconomic status and 3) whether reporting provided an objective analysis of the social justice complaints and engineering arguments around the site selection.

Apex's business leaders place high value on the town's low tax rate; meanwhile, continued growth in the town will require additional revenue to provide public services. A content analysis of coverage of the economic downturn in Apex could examine whether and how this tradeoff was examined.

IV. Garner: A Short-Lived Exception to Local Media Trends

Overview

Garner is 6 miles south of Raleigh and is the closest municipality to it. Unlike more

affluent Wake County communities to the west, such as Cary and Apex, Garner's proximity to Southeast Raleigh means it is often lumped together with that area's lower-income neighborhoods and higher crime rate. Garner is more ethnically diverse and has a lower household income than its western neighbors. Thirty-three percent of its 15,000 residents have a bachelors degree or higher, 27% have a high school diploma (or the equivalent), and 11% did not complete high school.¹³⁸ Five percent of families and 11% of related children are below the poverty rate. Nine percent of people spoke a language other than English at home, and 71% of those spoke Spanish.¹³⁹

In the 1950s, U.S. Route 70 was widened, and a bypass was created that directed traffic away from downtown Garner, creating economic problems that its downtown has never quite recovered from. But residents of Garner describe it as an affordable, family oriented community with convenient access to Raleigh and Research Triangle Park, and they believe it is well positioned for the future.

“Garner is considered low-income, kind of where the rednecks go,” explained Nilesh Surti, a board member of the progressive political organization WakeUp Wake County.¹⁴⁰ Surti has lived in Garner for eight years. He said when his wife initially suggested moving to Garner, he resisted, concerned they would be the only Indian-American family. “I had those misconceptions,” he said, “but now we love it and we have a great neighborhood we live in. It does have a nice small-town feel. It's not like Cary that's booming and has congestion and traffic.” Cary, a town of 140,000, has grown more than 200% in the past 10 years, while Garner has grown roughly 85%.¹⁴¹ “They're two different worlds. They call Garner the armpit of Raleigh. Cary is the other armpit, but they have deodorant and we don't.”

Garner Stakeholders

- Kathy Behringer, Town Council Member¹⁴²
- Rodney Dickerson, Assistant Town Manager¹⁴³
- Nilesh Surti, WakeUp Wake County Board Member¹⁴⁴
- Travis Horton, Manager, Southeast Regional Library of Garner¹⁴⁵

Media Interviews

- Barry Moore, Founder and Editor, *The Garner Citizen*¹⁴⁶
- Janet Kangas, Managing Editor, Heartland Publications' Western Wake newspaper group, including *The Garner News*¹⁴⁷

Garner's Recent History

In June 2009, a ConAgra foods plant exploded, killing two people and injuring dozens, and shutting down a major employer in the town. More than 400 people lost their jobs. The town worked with ConAgra in the midst of the disaster, turning over its senior citizen center to allow the company to run its operations for several weeks. “We waited on them hand and foot, just giving them everything they needed,” said Rodney Dickerson, Garner’s Assistant Town Manager. “It was the right thing to do. It was in the wake of a disaster and they were in a crisis situation and they’re one of our corporate citizens.” ConAgra eventually moved its manufacturing operations to Ohio, but it left property rights to the site, valued at \$9 million, and \$3 million in cash to the town. Of that amount, half a million was designated to help the town market the site to new prospective tenants. The rest was designated for a community center.¹⁴⁸

In 2011, Garner residents have a source of national pride: Scotty McCreery, a 17-year-old known locally as a bag boy at the local Lowe's Food Stores, is a finalist on *American Idol*. The

local teen's success on national television has given Garner residents a positive sense of collective identity to rally around.

Garner's Top Stories

At the time of stakeholder interviews in early March, Garner was facing an existential threat. The North Carolina Turnpike Authority had long planned to build a southern extension of **Interstate 540**, the “outer loop” around Raleigh. Town planners and developers had been working on the assumption that a proposed route, known as the “orange route,” would be built. But new regulations required the NCTA to consider more than one route. The Environmental Protection Agency expressed concern that the orange route would disturb dwarf wedge mussels. Planning documents suddenly included a “**red route**” for consideration, which would cut a path through 13 subdivisions and the town’s industrial park. Original plans had the route cutting through the newly opened White Deer Park, a 44-acre, \$44 million park with a LEED certified recreation center that opened in 2010. “It will kill the town,” Behringer said, echoing the remarks of other stakeholders. While the red route was far from a certainty, Behringer expressed frustration with the time frame of the EPA’s decision making process. The decision deadline was mid-2012. “We have a client who is seriously looking at putting a business in Greenfield Industrial Park and bringing 225 jobs here, but not if he can't get some assurance that that route's not going to kill his business. The governor is saying, ‘Bring jobs, bring jobs, bring jobs,’ and we're saying, ‘Help us!’” The urgency of the situation led the town to devote considerable resources to lobbying state and federal officials, including U.S. Rep. Renee Elmers. “Our town manager probably spends 60-plus hours a week on this alone,” Behringer said. The town also hosted a series of public meetings and enlisted residents to lobby officials, as well.

In Mid-March, the N.C. General Assembly passed a resolution saying that the red route would not be pursued, which Governor Bev Perdue signed into law.¹⁴⁹ Days later, Garner officials announced that a Memphis-based company Strategic Behavioral Health business had signed on to become a tenant in Garner's business park.¹⁵⁰

“This is unheard of, where you're passing a bill to fight a federal agency doing what they have to do,” Surti said of the process. “But that's where this has led to. People fired up, politicians fired up.” Surti hopes town budget pressures won't tempt leaders into spending the \$2.5 million ConAgra designed for a community center on some other need.

The Town of Garner is facing increasing **budget pressure**. “It's a matter of balancing economic conditions beyond our control with services we are required to provide,” Behringer explained. “But every municipality will probably tell you the same thing. For us, locally, we're dealing with some capital improvements that need to be done that are pressing but we don't have the money.” She said the town's police and public works departments are working in conditions so overcrowded that productivity is becoming an issue. “I think a lot of times, the public, and I myself was like that, thinks that the town has money hidden somewhere, and we truly don't. So that's always a challenge and an opportunity to be transparent to the public and help them understand what we can and cannot do. We always hear, ‘Don't raise our taxes, don't raise our taxes,’” she said. “Of course we don't want to raise taxes, but taxes pay for the services people want ... When you need an ambulance, you want it to come.”

In some cases, those capital improvements are necessary to attract businesses that could in turn increase town revenues. Economic incentives and other means of attracting industry are among the most pressing challenges facing Garner, stakeholders said. “We have a lot of good plans,” Dickerson said, “but we need for development and homebuilding to come back and

expand our tax base.” Behringer is particularly worried about the number of vacant commercial real estate developments and empty shopping centers. Among the decisions Garner’s leaders have faced is whether to build a road that would extend U.S. 70 to **White Oak Shopping Center**, a relatively new development that is largely unoccupied.

Surti, who works as a traffic engineer for the state, said the approval of that road project has been a long process, “with local officials fighting for it.” Now the questions facing leaders are what sort of developments to seek out or approve along that corridor. “Some people think we need affordable housing, but some want upscale development” of a type that doesn’t currently exist in Garner, Surti said. “The town council wants to upgrade Garner a little bit. But if we bring in 300 half-million-dollar houses, what kind of problems may that cause?”

In January 2010, Wake County officials considered a proposal to close the **Southeast Regional Library** in Garner as part of a plan to cut a required 7% from the county budget.¹⁵¹ Surti said the proposed closure generated petitions and signatures that ultimately convinced the county government not to close it. He said the library provides crucial access to information and Internet use for low-income residents. “We got it stopped through all these efforts. Because if they close it, that’s all we got. It’s almost like our community center, because that’s where people meet, get together, read, use the Internet, look for jobs.”

Travis Horton, who manages Southeast Regional Library, said the branch fills a need for public space in Garner. “A lot goes on in churches and community clubs, the Chamber of Commerce, and Kiwanis club, but this is the *public* place.” He noted that not all patrons are from the Garner community, since the branch is open to all Wake County Library patrons. Southeast Regional is one of the busiest in the system, with popular reading materials, computer use (including free WiFi) and children’s services the most popular programming. Horton said the

branch projected to serve 90,000 computer sessions by the end of the year, compared to 125,000 during the same period at the Cameron Village branch in Raleigh, the county's busiest site.

Each stakeholder mentioned **Scott McCreery's showing in the American Idol contest** as a significant event for the town. "The whole town's proud of him and rallying around him," Surti said. "It's been a very positive thing."

News Sources in Garner

Garner has three weekly newspapers, but only one of them was truly considered by Garner's stakeholders to be local. *The Garner Citizen* was founded in 2007 by Barry Moore, a retired police officer, and his sister, Debbie Moore Rodwell. Neither had a journalism background, but they were dissatisfied with the media that served their town. Moore launched the *Citizen* as a print weekly, then launched a website in 2009. Moore hired a staff of young, web-literate reporters and editors and won an impressive 34 N.C. Press Association awards in categories from investigative reporting to feature writing to online breaking news. The paper also enlisted "citizen journalists," paid freelancers, to write occasional pieces about community affairs.

Stakeholders cited the *Citizen* as the news source they believed most people in Garner relied on, along with "word of mouth." It was also mentioned as a popular online source of information. Behringer said that the other two weekly newspapers with Garner in their name in fact provide comparatively little coverage of the town. "They give us some nice press occasionally, but they don't really cover Garner." Travis Horton, head of the Southeast Regional Library, said he turns to all three newspaper for news about the community. "From the three of

those you can generally divine the true feelings of the community,” he said.

Then in mid-March, after stakeholder interviews for this research paper, the paper published its own obituary.¹⁵² Moore’s March 15 column explained that the *Citizen* would continue online with a considerably smaller staff. The award-winning reporters and online editor have been let go. “For those who will be disappointed at not having a printed issue, I share your sentiments and then some,” he wrote. “Being able to hold *The Garner Citizen* each week gave me a feeling that you don’t get with the online version. But with the economy slow to recover, raising prices of gas for deliveries, print costs and everything that goes with staffing an office, it’s more than the business can support.” Moore suggested that the now relatively empty office, located next to a coffee shop and restaurant, would be transitioning to a kind of co-working space. “[W]e will be opening our offices to any aspiring writers, photographers and others that need a little space to sit and do some work. Anyone wanting to contribute to our efforts is welcomed.”¹⁵³ Without its staff reporters and web editor, it’s unclear what level of coverage the *Citizen* can maintain.

Many ads in the *Citizen* were public notices from local government. These include notices of public meetings and notices of proposed re-zonings, annexations, and amendments to the unified development ordinance. Debby Connelly-Jones, an administrator in the town’s planning department, provided, upon request, the town’s budget for public notices. According to town policy, notices are purchased in two different newspapers to run two separate weeks. While budgeted amounts rose from \$6,900 in 2006-2007 to \$10,700 in 2008-2009, the actual amount spent was considerably lower: \$3,421 in 06-07, \$5,474 in 07-08, and only \$2,822 in 08-09, due to the economic downturn. “Expenditures have changed in the recent years as the downturn in the economy has resulted in fewer applications for review and that reduces the actual number of

legal advertisements which reduces the actual cost to the town of Garner,” Connelly-Jones wrote.¹⁵⁴

Given the budget pressures local governments are facing, municipalities have lobbied to be excused from state laws that instruct them to purchase legal notices such as these. In 2007, N.C. Senate Bill 350 authorized the towns of Apex, Garner, and Knightdale (all in Wake County) to use “electronic means” to publicize public hearings. The North Carolina Press Association has been tracking and lobbying against such legislation.¹⁵⁵ Connelly-Jones wrote that while only Apex has taken advantage of this law, Garner intended to follow suit “to alleviate the expenditure of printed newspaper advertising.” For now, she said, the town continues to place ads with *The Garner News*. Asked about the issue, Town Clerk Judy Bass said she recently discovered that the town had purchased an online ad on the Garner Citizen website. “This will not be common practice,” she wrote in an email, “because I feel if someone is going to look on a website for that type of information, it will be ours!”¹⁵⁶

The Garner News is owned by Heartland Publications, a Connecticut-based chain of community newspapers.¹⁵⁷ (See the description of *The Apex Herald*, p. 74). Its editor, Kelly Griffith, covers town council and writes most news content. Janet Kangas, Managing Editor of Heartland’s five weekly newspapers in western Wake County, said *The Garner Citizen* posed competition to *The Garner News* in terms of advertising, but that “they took a different approach to covering news. We do a lot more human interest and community organization-based stories. They seemed to like things that were more sensational or more exciting, and they made an effort more at hard news,” she said. “They seemed to enjoy stirring the pot.” A *Garner Citizen* reporter filed a public records request for access to town hall emails, which Kangas said she regarded as a fishing expedition. “There was no reason to do that. It’s not like there was some big subterfuge

going on,” she said. “We’re a small community, and we depend on the people who work the town, and to create antagonism by doing something like that is counterproductive. I mean, you might stumble on to something because you’re going through the emails all day, but you could just as easily find that stuff out by building relationships.” Kangas said town staff aired their complaints about the request to her, which created a burden for staff, but also created ill will. “Anytime someone solicits your emails, there’s a feeling of being watched, and nobody wants to feel like they’re being watched,” she said. “Technically, he didn’t do anything wrong, but in the context of a community and a community newspaper, he created a position of antagonism that was unnecessary.”

The Citizen often requested public records and published stories about the results of those requests, educating readers about the status of municipalities’ compliance with public records law. Reporter Paul Tambusco requested an index of all the databases kept by 30 different municipalities, including Garner.¹⁵⁸ State law requires that cities, towns and other public agencies maintain a comprehensive listing of the types of data they track and make that index available to the public upon request. In January 2010, Tambusco reported that Garner, along with most of the other municipalities, had failed to comply. The article explained the law in depth, as well as the burden compliance placed on municipalities.¹⁵⁹ A few days later, the town manager provided the *Citizen* with a disc containing the requested material and simultaneously posted the documents to the town’s website.¹⁶⁰

In 2009, the Town of Garner hired a Public Information Officer (PIO) in and launched its public access cable TV channel the same year. WTOG provides mostly government programming, including town council meetings and Wake County government meetings (provided by its Raleigh counterpart, Raleigh Television Network), along with taped programs

and public service announcements provided by citizens and nonprofit groups.¹⁶¹

Coverage of Top Stories in Garner

Coverage of Scotty McCreery's *American Idol* bid was extensive, in national, metro, and local media. Television news programs featured stories about McCreery's progress, and *The News & Observer* featured a front-page sidebar update following each week's vote. *The Garner Citizen* wrote some features about McCreery and also maintained a blog,¹⁶² linked from the home page, with a collection of posts from other media sources. The blog also embedded YouTube video produced by the *American Idol* program.

The red route was covered extensively in metro and local media outlets. *The Garner Citizen*'s website features links to two of the top stories in the navigation bar: I-540 coverage.¹⁶³ *The News & Observer*, WRAL, WTVD, and WUNC public radio also covered the story.

The Citizen covered the Southeast Regional Library story extensively, with ongoing updates about public petitions to keep the branch open. The coverage won two awards from the N.C. Press Association in 2010, one first place award for online breaking news,¹⁶⁴ and one second-place award for best online multimedia feature for audio slideshows about the library and its history.¹⁶⁵ (*The Citizen* swept all three awards in that category with three different stories.)¹⁶⁶

Coverage of a town budget is always a challenge for news organizations. Media outlets covered the budget by previewing the budget hearings and council discussion. But Dickerson said lack of media coverage of the meetings themselves frustrates the town's efforts to involve the public in decision-making. "I know one thing our council has been disappointed in on numerous occasions is, we'll have a meeting on something really important, like the budget, and sometimes the newspaper's not even there. A lot of times no citizens are there, but on top of that,

no media is there to cover it. Or it might be limited media ... It seems like you have to have some type of controversy to get media coverage.”

Public Debate in Garner

Most stakeholders said there was little public debate in Garner, yet they presented examples of specific issues that drew large attendance at public meetings.

“We really don’t have that many people who come to our public meetings unless it’s something that affects them directly, which is a little disappointing,” Dickerson said. He added that the town had a very active set of volunteer community boards and an active Chamber of Commerce. “But other than that, it’s mainly civic clubs and churches.” He said the town has been frustrated with the lack of public participation. “Just last week, we had a public hearing on the budget, where anybody can come in and speak on anything they’d like to see in the budget, or a certain direction they’d like to see it go,” he said. “I’ve been here 10 years, and it may have been one or two times when we had *anybody* speak during that session. In this last week, we didn’t have anyone ... Basically, the only input we typically get on the budget is, ‘Don’t raise my taxes.’ We don’t get too much more than that.”

Behringer said the town makes efforts to involve the public in the process, but sometimes there is a disconnect. “Sometimes folks will say, ‘We don’t know what’s going on.’ Well, we make it available. The minutes are published here at town hall on a computer out front, and we have the PEG channel and they can see [video of council meetings] anytime ... If folks don’t know what’s going on, it’s because they haven’t availed themselves of the information.”

The town’s efforts to rally citizens to oppose the red route paid off. “I’ve never seen Garner more energized about a thing,” Surti said. “We had a town meeting the other day where

the auditorium holds 400 people; we had 1,100 people there. That means not only was the auditorium full, but the lobby was full. You had more than 600 people outside the hall listening."

Asked whether any media outlet provided a forum for public discussion, stakeholders replied that the *Citizen* did. The *Citizen* allows comments and posts on its stories. *The Garner Times* does not. The *Garner-Clayton Record* and *The News & Observer* do. But the *Citizen*'s comments are more aggressively moderated. The following policy is posted at the bottom of every story:

Commenting policy *We believe that reader interaction is a valuable feature on our website and aim to foster an online community that is enriching, robust and respectful. We reserve the right to remove any comment that contains profanity or obscenity; is an advertisement for services or a solicitation of funds; contains a personal attack or a threat; or is unrelated to the story. If you believe a comment has violated this policy, please flag it. If you have questions about our commenting policy, e-mail editor@garnercitizen.com.*

A cursory look through the site found that most stories have only one or two comments; all were civil.

Findings: The Stories Not Told in Garner

By the standards of community response and democratic engagement, *The Garner Citizen* was a success. The paper's financial failure raises more questions than it answers. It's unclear why there was a mismatch between the paper's reputation as the only truly local news source, its penetration to community stakeholders, and its ability to sustain itself financially.

If reduced spending in public notices is a contributing factor, it points out a natural tension between the financial sustainability of the community weekly newspaper business model and the budgetary pressures facing local governments. That tension also raises the question of how best the public is served by the explicit purpose of public notice laws, to inform the public of the information therein.

According to the managing editor of its rival newspaper, *The Citizen's* style of news reporting and its aggressive pursuit of public records violated the norms of community journalism. While community papers such as *The Garner News* provide benefit to their readers, that benefit may not always relate to local government oversight or accountability news reporting. Public records requests undoubtedly place a burden on public staff. But if the editor of a community weekly finds that burden to be “unnecessary,” it may be fair to wonder whether that paper is willing or able to hold local officials to account.

A enlightening content analysis of Garner media would focus more on the impact of the *Citizen* in the information marketplace than necessarily on any one story. One question to investigate is whether coverage of Garner increased or decreased in metro media outlets, such as *The News & Observer* and WRAL, or among competing weekly newspapers, following the *Citizen's* launch. Another consideration would be to do a pre/post study, before and after the *Citizen* ceased to publish a print edition, to determine whether coverage of Garner decreases, both in the *Citizen* and across all media outlets.

A content analysis of the red route story would examine 1) whether coverage was driven by public meetings and 2) whether stories investigated the environmental concerns about the dwarf wedge mussels.

A content analysis of the town's fiscal struggles would examine whether 1) the proposed budget and open budget hearings were covered in local media, and by which outlets; 2) whether reporting presented the content of the budget in a way that allowed readers to consider the trade-offs and funding priorities.

Overall Conclusions

In small communities at the periphery of the media market,

- **Broadcast and metro outlets fail to provide consistent coverage of municipal and local affairs.** For those communities "in the crack" between media markets, there is an inverse relationship between access to media and the number of stories about communities' major challenges. The coverage may also be diffused across more sources, with no one source pulling together news from the multiple bodies of jurisdiction, providing a big picture view of a small community.
- **Weekly print newspapers are the main sources of local news.** This was true in all four communities. The papers vary in quality, depth of coverage, and readership. In Garner, closest to Raleigh of all the communities examined, stakeholders referring to a locally owned outlet, *The Garner Citizen*, as the only truly local news source among three weekly papers. It is unclear what the *Citizen's* apparent demise means for future coverage of Garner. In Siler City, *The Chatham News* aspires to a more enterprising role than do papers in Mebane or Apex. In all cases, stakeholders note the limitations of the weekly format and limited staff resources. Demand for daily news about topics of great significance, such as the Townsend plant in Siler City, creates a vacuum filled by unverified information.
- **Information exchange and debate between stakeholders tends to be informal.** Public officials view informal, non-mediated exchanges with community members as important tools for understanding and representing public concerns. Stakeholders often learn information from unofficial sources before it hits the news. But informal information exchange poses a problem when information goes unverified. In Siler City, stakeholders

cite rumors and speculation as a negative consequence of the lack of daily journalism on fast-moving issues, such as the Chatham County schools reorganization. In Mebane, a representative of a disenfranchised community viewed informal information exchange as a means of excluding the views of those outside the "old boy" network.

- **Blogs and other digital media are virtually non-existent and do not provide significant outlet for news or public debate.** The notion of bloggers as citizen journalists, providing independent coverage of public affairs, is non-existent in the communities this study analyzes. Yet there is evidence in these communities that online media can be powerful. In Mebane, a community group's website allowed it to bypass intermediaries to tell the story of the 119 bypass in a way that generated subsequent debate and news coverage. In Chatham County, the Chatham County BBS and Chatham Chatlist are popular forums for debate, but that debate is often fed by information that is unverified and presented selectively for the purpose of advancing political points of view. As a result, many stakeholders have little respect for online blogs and forums, especially those that allow anonymity, and they have little interest in participating.
- **Media outlets have little interest in online media, though public officials show an interest in improving their governments' websites.** *The Garner Citizen* was the only local media outlet with a highly developed, consistently updated website. Other media outlets, notably the weekly newspapers, have limited web presences and lack either the interest or capacity to develop them further. This means that, online, local journalism outlets are being displaced by government websites and, to some extent, Facebook, as go-to sources for information. In Apex, the city government provides a significant amount of information online and recently hired a public information officer to expand its web

presence. The Apex Chamber of Commerce is a significant online information source. In Mebane, city officials plan to offer video of council meetings online. In Siler City, the town manager participates in listservs with other officials and uses email to communicate with other officials, agencies, and community service providers.

Content and quality

- Broadcast coverage focuses on crime, disaster, and soft event coverage.
- Print weeklies provide the only reliable coverage of standing public meetings. Print weeklies do little to no enterprise or investigative coverage and rely heavily on official sources. Stories tend to be driven by events and public meetings.
- Online outlets, if they exist, tend to reflect informal communication rather than reporting. Content tends toward unsubstantiated rumor and speculation rather than facts.
- Official stakeholders (city/town officials) complain of a lack of positive coverage, while unofficial stakeholders feel marginalized by a lack of viewpoint diversity.
- In identifying significant story threads, official stakeholders identify infrastructure needs and economic development, while unofficial stakeholders identify contentious issues over public resources and/or decisions with distributional consequences.

Next Steps

This qualitative case study method was designed to provide a framework that others may use to inform future study, particularly quantitative analysis of news coverage. Before quantitative metrics can be employed, it is necessary to reflect on what is useful to measure, and how. The most significant issues facing a community can and should be drilled down to specific

topics that relate to specific places, people, and decisions facing local government. The narrative thread of any given topic extends from the community's past (such as its racial history and the development of its built environment) into a set of connected decisions in the present day (such as the municipal and/or county budget and decisions about economic development and financial incentives for businesses). The narrative thread becomes increasingly complex the more bodies of governmental jurisdiction are involved (such as with Apex's wastewater treatment facility and with the Jordan Lake rules affecting Mebane). These complex elements comprise the context of a story, and providing that context is what enables a reader to understand the decision from multiple points of view and to investigate further, should he or she desire to do so. Measuring the degree of context in news coverage would provide the best proxy for measuring quality.

This study finds that some decisions local governments face are more consequential than others, therefore a comparative study across municipalities should recognize that not every council agenda is of equal significance. A comparative study should also take into account that the flow of information moves in multiple directions at once, particularly in communities that receive little news coverage. Official stakeholders (such as elected officials and town staff), unofficial stakeholders (such as community activists), and community members may influence the media as much as they are influenced by it. Professionals in conventional media, particularly print weekly newspaper reporters, see verifying the information that flows through informal channels as part of their role in the media ecology. Studies of nonconventional media, such as blogs, forums, and other online sources, should examine the extent to which those outlets drive coverage in conventional media and how well either the conventional or unconventional sources filter information to check its reliability.

Comparative content analysis:

Conclusions at the end of each of four community profiles provide examples of further analysis into the content of news coverage, specific to the community context and the nature of the stories themselves.

In general, a content analysis could examine coverage of the specific storylines identified in this study's stakeholder interviews. Metrics should provide a way to establish some sense of depth and quality as well as quantity of stories in various outlets. Those measures of quality could be used as an outcome variable, while community characteristic could serve as independent variables. Based on the findings in this paper, the most relevant independent variables would likely pertain to population size, distance from the center of the media market (in this case, Raleigh), educational attainment, household income, and the percentage of residents who speak Spanish at home.

The preliminary hypothesis of this study is that such analysis would find lower quantity and quality of local news coverage in municipalities with lower educational attainment, lower income, further distance from the center of the market, and higher percentage of Spanish speakers.

These methods would not allow findings of causation, but they would better inform policymakers about the level of democratic governance at which the market failure for news is most acutely felt, and the policies and interventions that best address local community information needs. Such interventions may include better mechanisms for local government transparency and digital access to public records; a consideration of the costs and benefits of laws requiring local governments to purchase public notice advertisements in local media; a

reconsideration of public interest requirements for licensed broadcast license stations; and subsidies to fund journalism, either at existing institutions or at new organizations.

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