

THE COMMUNITY STANDARD: TOWARD A MODEL
OF COMMUNITY JOURNALISM DECISION MAKING

by

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Abstract

This study describes and maps the process journalists employ when deciding issues of coverage, content, and treatment of news at community newspapers within the context of community standards. Much scholarship has been devoted to how journalists should make ethical decisions of news judgment in accordance with moral, ethical, and social responsibility theory. But little has been done in the way of describing and mapping how journalists – specifically, community journalists – actually make these on-deadline news decisions and how the concept of community standards plays into those decisions.

Through the use of naturalistic inquiry methodology, in this case, a triangulation of qualitative depth interview methods – informant and ethnographic – within the context of society, this research describes the factors considered by community journalists when faced with decisions of news judgment, how that process takes place, and how and where community standards fit into that process. Data indicate that values and value-based moral and ethical reasoning are tempered by at least three considerations in the decision-making process: (1) how coverage and treatment will affect the journalist, (2) how coverage and treatment will affect others, and (3) the public instructional value, before being filtered through a screen of community standards prior to the final rendering of a news judgment decision. Furthermore, findings offer a base on which to construct a model of community journalism decision making, useful for study and discussions of ethical decision making among community journalism scholars, instructors, and students, and for its applications in practical situations by future or novice community journalists.

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Dedication

For Amber Lessman – my friend, my partner, my soul mate. Now and forever.

CHAPTER 1 - Introduction

Every day, in community newsrooms across the country, print journalists grapple with questions pertaining to news judgment. These questions include whether and how to cover and how to treat and present news for a particular audience. Despite attempts by associations of professional practitioners to regulate and standardize these decision-making processes through the development and adoption of codes of conduct, news councils, and ombudsman systems, and attempts by scholars to explain or guide these processes through moral, ethical, and social responsibility theory, actual on-deadline news decisions are often made on a case-by-case basis after consideration of a variety of factors. These decisions – especially in the case of smaller-circulation, locally driven publications known generally as community newspapers – often involve attempting to strike an appropriate balance between fair and accurate reporting on one hand and concern for the community the newspaper serves on the other.

This study explores the process community journalists employ, and the factors they consider, when making decisions about news coverage, content, and treatment, as well as how community standards figure into that process. This introductory chapter illustrates the importance of the topic by highlighting gaps in the literature of the field and its effect on related educational resources and implications for practical applications, introduces the theoretical framing of the study and research methodology, and sets definitional parameters of the terms “community,” “community newspaper,” “community journalism,” and “community journalist,” followed by explication of the concept of community standards. The second chapter features a review of literature outlining scholarship in the area of theory-based, normative, ethical newsroom decision making,

including moral and ethical theory, the social responsibility theory, and communitarianism, followed by an overview of previous study of the nuances of actual, on-deadline decision making, including values. A theoretical framing of the study within the tenets of the social influences theory follows, as does a review of previous scholarship of the subject rooted in that theoretical background. The chapter concludes with three research questions drawn from the literature and the social influences theory. The third chapter outlines the methodology with which data were collected. The fourth chapter presents findings and the fifth chapter features discussion of those results, conclusions drawn from them, the proposal of a data-based conceptual model, identification of limitations, and suggestions for future research. This study adds to the literature of the discipline, equips educators with information vital to the instruction of community journalism, and helps to familiarize future or novice journalists – most of whom will spend at least part of their careers at a community newspaper – with how decisions of news coverage, content, and treatment are made and balanced with the standards of the communities they serve.

Pervasiveness of the Problem

Gaps in the Literature

Much of the scholarship of newsroom decision making is normative, focusing on how journalists should make decisions regarding coverage, content, and treatment of news, in accordance with moral, ethical, and social responsibility theory. Fewer studies have attempted to map the processes journalists actually employ when faced with on-deadline decisions of news judgment and what factors figure into those decisions. Both approaches have yielded a number of decision-making models, frameworks, and

checklists. However, such research is almost exclusively based on or geared toward journalists at the mass media level, meaning the bulk of academic research into the decision-making processes of print journalists focuses on those employed at large metropolitan newspapers. Little has been done in the way of mapping the decision-making processes of journalists engaged in the small-scale, locally driven type of journalism generally referred to as community journalism. And still less work has examined the effect of social influences – especially audience or community influences – on decision making at these community newspaper operations, the type of setting in which such influences, including the perceived standards of the community the newspaper serves, are most likely to have an effect.

Implications

The dearth of research into how journalists at small, locally-driven newspapers actually make decisions of news judgment and how the notion of community standards plays into those decisions is startling, in light of the fact that these smaller-circulation publications dominate the newspaper landscape. Lauterer (2006) identified 9,321 newspapers being published and circulated in the United States in 2004. Of those, 9,104 – about 97 percent – were considered “small” (circulations less than 50,000) by the American Society of Newspaper Editors (*Implementing the Impact Study*, 2004). The *2005 Editor and Publisher Year Book* identified 6,692 community weekly newspapers (those based in a geographic community, printed less than four times per week) in the United States as of February 1, 2005, compared to 1,457 dailies. When alternative, ethnic, gay/lesbian, military, religious, senior, and shopper newspapers are counted with those weeklies, the number of community newspapers in the United States grows to

9,328, more than six times the number of domestic dailies. It is obvious, then, that most newspaper journalists will spend at least some, if not all, of their careers at one or more of these “small” community publications.

It is these “small” community publications that are thriving, even as mass-market print media continue to face sliding circulations and financial hardships (Freeland, 2006). Circulation trends of the nation’s weekly newspapers are telling: in 2005, the nation’s 6,692 community-based weeklies boasted a circulation of more than 49.8 million (*Editor & Publisher*, 2005). When other types of community newspapers are considered (e.g., ethnic, gay/lesbian, military, religious, senior, shopper), that figure more than doubles to nearly 166.4 million (*Editor & Publisher*, 2005), a near all-time high in readership, according to the National Newspaper Association (as cited in Lauterer, 2006). In contrast, daily newspaper circulations in 2005 totaled 54.6 million (*Editor & Publisher*, 2005). In terms of “small” and “large” newspapers, as defined by the American Society of Newspaper Editors (*Implementing the Impact Study*, 2004), statistics reveal the nation’s “small” newspapers reach nearly three times more readers than the nation’s “large” newspapers (*Editor & Publisher*, 2005).

Despite the importance of small, locally driven newspapers in this country, educational resources geared specifically toward the type of journalism generally practiced at such newspapers are in short supply. As mentioned earlier, available academic research based on or geared toward community journalists is limited. Accordingly, conceptual models and frameworks that map or guide decision-making processes derived from such research are not specifically tailored to community journalists. Lack of research leads to gaps in the education and training of future

community journalists at the trade-school, community-college, and university levels. In the field, various codes of ethics touted by associations of professional practitioners attempt to regulate and standardize ethical decision-making processes, but very few are tailored specifically to community journalists. Furthermore, as indicated by Anderson, Dardenne, and Killenberg (1994), the very existence of ethical codes suggests a somewhat narrow approach to the ethical decision-making processes of all journalists at all levels, encouraging the notion of a single ethical answer to every question – a clear-cut standard or principle to be applied to every case. Such a preoccupation with various ethical codes is further testimony of the normative tradition of journalism ethics and the disregard for interpersonal sensitivity or consideration of the broader ethical context for public life, both in the field and in the classroom. A study of how decisions of news coverage, content, and treatment in community newspapers are actually made, and how that process is tempered by the concept of community standards, then, would be of value to scholars, educators, students, and in-field practitioners.

Study Overview

Several theoretical bases have been employed in research of decision-making processes of journalists in news media, including a myriad of moral and ethical theories, the social responsibility theory, communitarianism, and the social influences theory. This study considers each of these theoretical approaches, but is grounded in the tenets of the social influences theory. The social influences theory, as it relates to news media, holds that external social influences have a greater effect on a newsroom decision than individual, value-based reasoning. In other words, social influences, stemming from the context and community in which the journalist works, exert more of an influence on a

decision than do the journalist's individual values or value-based moral and ethical reasoning. In fact, the theory posits, those individual values and principles are filtered through a web of social influences, at which point they may be altered or blocked. Though the theory has been applied to the study of assorted types of journalists employed in a variety of levels of various news media, this study applies the theory to research of print journalists at smaller, locally-focused operations.

This study investigates community journalism in its classic form, the small-town weekly newspaper. Employing qualitative depth interview methods, this research seeks to answer three basic questions that stem from a review of normative and applied decision-making literature and the social influences theory: (1) what are the factors that figure into a community journalist's decision-making process, (2) how do those factors come into play as a decision is crafted, and (3) how and where does one of those influences in particular – community standards – fit into the process? It is hoped that answers to these questions – along with a pictorial representation of those answers in the form of a community journalism decision-making model – will help scholars understand the process as it actually happens in newsrooms across the country, educators better instruct students of community journalism and community journalism ethics, and future or novice community journalists become familiar with how decisions of news coverage, content, and treatment are made outside the walls of the classroom.

Definitions

Community

To understand the concepts of community journalism and community standards, it is first necessary to understand community. The concept of community has been studied

through various perspectives stemming from a host of academic disciplines. German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies differentiated “community” (*gemeinschaft*) and “society” (*gesellschaft*) in his 1887 work *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* (Baran & Davis, 2006). While society is bound together by weak social institutions based largely on rational thought, Tönnies argued, community is bound together by strong ties of family, tradition, and social roles, in other words, a “dense network of personal relationships based heavily on kinship and the direct, face-to-face contact that occurs in a small, closed village” (Fukuyama, 1999, p. 57). In 1986, psychologists McMillan and Chavis identified four elements of community: membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection. Crow and Allan (1994), Lee and Newby (1983), and Willmott (1986) wrote of a community of place, a community of interest, and a community of communion. Stamm and Fortini-Campbell (1983) also identified three domains of community: community as a place, community as a social structure, and community as a social process.

Though centuries of scholarly inquiry have revealed many of the nuances of community, including the vitality of interpersonal relationships, the concept defies generalization. When looking to place parameters on the concept for the purposes of empirical research, scholars often plunge it into the field of rural sociology. Monk (2007) argues that “rural” in this context is not to be confused with “small” (p. 155). Indeed, social science researchers Tolbert, Irwin, Lyson, and Nucci (2002) define a small town as one having a population between 2,500 and 20,000; Beaudoin and Thorson (2004) set the population range of a rural town between 20,000 and 40,000. McCleneghan and Ragland’s 2002 study of small towns included those with populations between 4,000 and

42,000. The U.S. Census Bureau (2007) draws the line between small towns and micropolitan areas at the 10,000-person population level. A number of studies of small communities, including one by Pong, Chan, Crichton, Goertzen, McCready, and Rourke (2007) adhere to this government standard of 10,000 people or less. Wall (1999) studied small towns with populations less than 6,000, as did Kansas community journalism scholar Coble-Krings (2003). To meet the minimum definitional standards of these scholars, this study focuses on towns with populations less than 6,000.

Community Newspaper

Like “community,” a universally accepted definition of “community newspaper” is elusive in the literature of the field. Byerly’s classic 1961 definition relies heavily on circulation as a defining factor, which he capped somewhere between 10,000 and 30,000. Another early definition focuses more on specific geographical coverage as a definitional requisite (Janowitz, 1967). Lauterer (2006) blends circulation and geographical parameters with coverage emphases in his definition: “A community newspaper is a publication with a circulation under 50,000, serving people who live together in a distinct geographical space with a clear local-first emphasis on news, features, sports, and advertising” (p. 1).

Others discuss community journalism in terms of rural journalism or small-town journalism, though sociological literature indicates those are two separate and distinct concepts (Monk, 2007). The American Society of Newspaper Editors considers any newspaper with a circulation less than 50,000 to be a “small newspaper,” regardless of the size of city in which it is based (*Implementing the Impact Study*, 2004).

Still other sources disregard circulation completely when discussing community journalism, instead focusing on frequency of publication as a definitional requisite. Janowitz (1967) argued that only weekly newspapers can be community newspapers. The *2005 Editor & Publisher International Year Book* equates weekly publishing status (any publication printing less than four times per week) and geographical parameters (based in and covering and serving a specific geographical area) with community journalism. This definition excludes alternative, specialty/niche, shopper, and zoned publications from the realm of community newspapers. Recognizing that community is often defined by sociologists as including community of place, community of ideas, and community of communion (Crow & Allen, 1995; Lee & Newby, 1983; Willmott, 1986), or community as a place, community as a social structure, and community as a social process (Stamm & Fortini-Campbell, 1983), Lauterer (2006) chooses to include alternative and specialty/niche newspapers within the realm of community newspapers.

However, others, including Coble-Krings (2005) and Hollander, Stappers, and Jankowski (2002), argue that community newspapers are not defined by circulation or geographical parameters, but – much as community itself – by relationships. “The difference between specialized mass media and community media lies in the nature of relationships between senders, audiences, and messages,” write Hollander et al. (p. 23). Indeed, relationships are a key component of Lauterer’s 2006 definition of “community journalism,” which he terms a philosophy of news reporting practiced by weeklies and small dailies “with an intensely local focus” (p. xviii). Community journalism takes place, Lauterer (2000) asserts, when journalists intimately involve “themselves in the welfare of the place, the civic life of their towns” (p. xiv), and flourishes when journalists

are active members of the community they cover. Relationships also figure into Waddle's 2003 definition of community journalism (as cited in Coble-Krings), one factor of which is the "bonding between reader and newspaper that occurs" as a result of a "genuine caring relationship" (p. 4), and into Gilmore's (2000) definition, in which she touts connecting people to each other and holding a community together as definitional requisites.

In breaking from strict circulation and geographic restraints and building upon the notion of relationships in defining community journalism, Hollander et al. (2002) add a social element to the mix, arguing communication between community media and community members takes place only within a "distinct social setting" (p. 20). In this case, they argue, reception of the communication "will be limited and is intended to be limited because the messages are, in terms of content and/or form, intended for a limited audience interested in specific topics" (p. 23). Smethers and Jolliffe (1998) further ground community journalism within the realm of specific audience characteristics or community standards, asserting the community journalism paradigm "embraces the idea that media are ... a unifying force in their communities" (p. 138) that reflect and promote regional and community values. And, in another vein, Bunton (1998) discusses the definition of the "local," "small-town," or "community" journalist in the context of communitarianism, "a social and political philosophy emphasizing connection, community, and common good over individualism, rights-based language, and cost-benefit analysis" (p.232).

Thus the terms "community newspaper," "community journalism," and "community journalist" remain universally undefined – a "definitional jumble" (p. 168),

as Altschull (1996) aptly declares. For the purposes of this study, the definition of a “community newspaper” will attempt to meet the minimum of all measurable criteria identified above. Because relationships cannot be measured with any great degree of certainty or accuracy, this study’s definitional parameters of the term “community newspaper” will center on circulation, geographic space in which it is based and which it serves, an intensely local coverage focus, and publication frequency. For the purposes of this study, then, a “community newspaper” is defined as a smaller-circulation newspaper (less than 10,000), based in a small community population-wise (less than 6,000), with an intensely local coverage focus (no wire-service copy), and a strictly weekly publishing status (once per week). Accordingly, “community journalism” will be defined as the type of journalism practiced at such a newspaper, and a “community journalist” as one who works to produce such a publication.

This study applies the aforementioned definitional parameters to a specific geographic area of the Midwest, namely, northeastern Kansas. The newspapers studied and their respective towns are as follows: the *Frankfort Area News* in Frankfort, KS, the *Marysville Advocate* in Marysville, KS, *The Onaga Herald* in Onaga, KS, *The Prairie Post* in White City, KS, the *Riley Countian*, in Riley, KS, *The St. Marys Star* in St. Marys, KS, *The Wabaunsee County Signal-Enterprise* in Alma, KS, the *Wamego Times* in Wamego, KS, the *Washington County News* in Washington, KS, and the *Westmoreland Recorder* in Westmoreland, KS.

Community Standards

Media scholars have employed a wide range of nomenclature when discussing the concept of community standards. Berkowitz and Limor (2003), for example, call them

“standards of the society” (p. 785) and “ideological dimensions of a society” (p. 784). Day (2006) refers to them as the “social and cultural context within which the media operate” (p. 55). Voakes (1997) calls them “perceptions of audience reaction” (p. 18), and Husselbee and Adams (1996) refer to them as “perspectives of community members” (p. 41) and “community values” (p.49). Others have used the terms “state of the public mind” (Banfield, 1973), “common values” (Janowitz, 1967), “communitywide values” (Anderson et al., 1994) “collective representations” (Janowitz, 1967), and “community characteristics” (Hollander et al., 2002). Smethers and Jolliffe (1998) call them “local expectations” (p. 146); Christians, Fackler, and Rotzoll (1995) call them “community mores” (p. 7); and Coble-Krings (2005) and Lauterer (2006) term them “community standards.” Whatever the choice of nomenclature, it is clear that community standards are one thing – difficult to define.

Christians et al. (1995) offer a two-word definition for what they call “community mores”: reader expectations. Janowitz (1967) defines his “collective representations” as “symbols and attitudes which are of crucial importance for guiding social action in that they reflect significant patterns of shared values and group goals” (p. 15). Hollander et al. (2002) write “community characteristics” is the notion that “communities that differ in certain descriptive aspects may also differ in communication structures” (p. 36). Perhaps Lauterer (2006) offers the most parsimoniously complete definition of the notion of community standards: “... a shared sense of what is acceptable and what is over the line” (p. 267). This study employs both Lauterer’s term and definition.

CHAPTER 2 - Literature Review

In his seminal review of 50 years of scholarship in media ethics, Christians (1977) distinguishes between the wealth of academic inquiry into normative ethical decision-making processes and the somewhat scattered scholarly forays into how decisions of news judgment are actually made. “Ever since Xenocrates included ethics as a division of the Platonic Academy in 330 B.C.,” Christians wrote, “thinkers have treated *to ethikon* as a science, that is, an intellectual construct fashioned into refined categories” (p. 20). To that end, the study of media ethics has largely centered on how ethical decisions in the newsroom should be made – “a philosophical examination of principles, an intellectual inquiry into ‘oughts’” (p. 20). Receiving vastly less study is a field of inquiry borne of the notion that perhaps ethics should be viewed not as theory, but as behavior and practice – not as abstract moral principles, but as point-of-action practical applications.

What follows is a review of the literature of both fields, beginning with the wealth of previous scholarship on normative media ethics, that is, how scholars believe ethical decisions should be made according to principle or standard. The literature covers a vast number of theoretical perspectives developed and refined over a vast number of centuries, from the ancient golden mean of Aristotle to the agape principle stemming from Judeo-Christian religious traditions, from Kant’s Enlightenment-era categorical imperative to the utilitarianism of Mill, and from Rawls’ veil of ignorance born in the midst of the American cultural revolution to the relativism of today. The review will conclude with an in-depth look at the supposed definitive theoretical perspective in normative media ethics – the social responsibility theory. The normative review will be followed by a summary of academic inquiry into applied media ethics – how in-field

practitioners actually make ethical decisions on a day-to-day basis, through a complex mix of personal values, journalistic values, and a host of external influences.

Normative Media Ethics

A great deal of research has yielded various theories, models, frameworks, and checklists that attempt to guide newspaper journalists' decisions regarding coverage, content, and treatment of news. From moral theory to ethical principles, from Day's (2006) SAD framework to the Potter Box model of moral reasoning, from the social responsibility theory to communitarianism, it seems there is no dearth of theory-based, normative inquiry into the decision-making processes of journalists.

Moral and Ethical Theory

Moral theory is a systematic, normative approach to making ethical decisions (Day, 2006). Merrill (1997) asserts that although ethical theories differ, adherence to any one of them in the course of a decision-making process deems the decision ethical, despite the fact that final determinations may differ among journalists. The paramount consideration, Merrill asserts, is not the reasoning behind the action, but rather the drive to be ethical.

As Merrill (1997) states, "authors place various ethical systems or theories in a number of different categories" and "these are not always in agreement. There are probably as many labels given to ethical theories as there are people who discuss them" (pp. 54-55). For the purposes of this review, the labeling and grouping schema outlined by three recent and renowned – though incongruent in perspective – works in the field of media ethics will be discussed, beginning with the five ethical theories identified by

Christians et al. (1995), followed by the three families of ethical and moral theories as grouped by Day (2006), and concluding with Merrill's (1997) ethical systems dichotomy.

Christians et al. (1995) identify and define five ethical theories they believe may serve as decision-making guidelines and means of justification for journalists: Aristotle's golden mean, Kant's categorical imperative, utilitarianism, Rawls' veil of ignorance, and Judeo-Christian persons as ends.

Aristotle's Golden Mean

Aristotle's moral philosophy is based on the theory of the golden mean, the concept that virtue may be found between two extremes. As it applies to ethical decision making, Christians et al. (1995) write "virtue stands between two vices" (p. 13).

Cunningham (1999) terms the golden mean a "principal ethical theory that models such journalistic values as balance, fairness, and proportion" (p. 5), as well as moderation. As it is often construed – wrongly, Cunningham asserts – as a weak consensus or middle-of-the-road compromise, the theory has been shown incapable of universal applicability, especially in the case of dilemmas in which one side is clearly wrong.

Kant's Categorical Imperative

This theory posits that what is right for one is right for all (Christians et al., 1995), that is, man should act only in a way and upon principles he or she deems fit to be applied universally. According to the tenets of the theory, truth is the rule and the rule must be obeyed, to the disregard of all conceivable consequences. Accordingly, the ends – no matter how virtuous they may be expected to be – do not justify means that depart from the rule of truth. In other words, "one has a duty to tell the truth, even if it might result in harm to others" (Day, 2006, p. 58). Though this theory establishes concrete rules for

moral and ethical decision making, Day (2006) and Christians et al. (1995) criticize it for its absolutist tendencies and disregard for consequences. Day states the Kantian approach to ethical decision making is “too uncompromising for the complex world in which we live and would thus not provide a sound theoretical foundation for moral reasoning” (p. 62). Christians et al. concur, and add that the categorical imperative and related deontological theory does not apply well to decision making in the newsroom as it refuses to take into account societal or community standards. The theory holds, they state, that “categorical imperatives must be obeyed even to the sacrifice of all natural inclinations and socially accepted standards” (p. 14).

Utilitarianism

Utilitarianism seeks the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people (Christians et al., 1995; Day, 2006; Merrill, 1997). The prevention of pain and promotion of pleasure are the desired ends, rendering the means of obtaining such ends secondary. Christians et al. assert that utilitarianism as a theory of moral or ethical decision making “provides a definite guideline for aiding” (p. 15) journalists’ ethical choices. To apply the theory, the journalist would first calculate possible consequences of the available options and evaluate how much benefit and how much harm would result in the lives of all affected, including the journalist. The only ethical choice, the theory states, is the one that promotes the most pleasure or prevents the most pain for the most people. Though seemingly straightforward in its applicability to newsroom decisions, Christians and his colleagues assert, the theory does not recognize that happiness is not universal and therefore cannot be the only desired goal.

Elliott (2007) has offered a slightly different take on the concept of utilitarianism, arguing that the theory has been misinterpreted as a quantifiable majority-wins-type equation for too long. Elliott argues that rather than calculating the amount of good for a number of people, the journalist should instead calculate what is good for the community as a whole. In other words, utilitarianism as an ethical principle should focus not on the arithmetical good, but rather the aggregate good. Such a philosophy stresses the importance of valuing all people involved, Elliott asserts, rather than implying that the happiness of the majority is of more importance than the happiness of those potentially harmed by the decision.

Rawls' Veil of Ignorance

Rawls' justice as fairness theory, or "veil of ignorance," (Christians et al., 1995, p. 16), holds that justice emerges when people negotiate absent social differentiations. In other words, judgments should be made as if people involved were unknown – as if they were hidden behind a veil. Rawls (1971) advocated a moral responsibility to perform acts and make decisions that ensure equality of opportunity for all. At issue is not what is best for the majority, Christians and his colleagues argue, but what is morally appropriate. Though this theory is applicable to newsroom decision making, Christians et al. say, it does not take into account certain definitions of what constitutes news.

Judeo-Christian Persons as Ends

Based on the words recorded in the Jewish Torah and the Christian Bible instructing people to love their neighbor as themselves, this theory is also known as the "agape principle" or "principle of other-regarding care" (Christians et al., 1995, p. 9). The theory focuses intensely on the social responsibility theory's notion of the dignity of all

people and the media's role in promoting that concept. Accordingly, all moral and ethical decisions in the newsroom should be based on a respect for people. Christians et al. assert that the agape principle is especially applicable to media treatment of social injustice, invasion of privacy, and violence.

Though Day (2006) bases his review of moral and ethical theory on approaches and perspectives similar to those of Christians et al. (1995), a review of his differences in theoretical groupings is appropriate. Day regards the Greek-based virtue ethics, including Aristotle's golden mean, as a philosophical foundation of moral theory, as well as an ethical theory in itself. He groups Judeo-Christian theory, or the agape principle, and other theological ethics under the heading "care-based ethics" (p. 57) and classifies it as an ethical perspective or tradition. Kant's categorical imperative, utilitarianism, and Rawls' veil of ignorance theory, among other related ethical theories, are grouped with feminist ethics under the same classification.

Also included by Day is the concept of relativism as an ethical or moral perspective in newsroom decision making. Day states that "Relativists believe that what is right or good for one is not necessarily right or good for another, even under similar circumstances" (p. 61). In other words, one can judge adequately what is right for himself or herself, but not for another person. Elliott (1988) wholeheartedly disagrees with Day on this point, admitting there exists a "smattering of various ethical theories," though "relativism is not one of them" (p. 31). A related concept is that of situation ethics, an informal and loosely planned way of treating ethical questions in which one is morally or ethically justified to decide on a case-by-case basis whether it is proper to break from normative ethical principles or guidelines (Christians, 1977). Though Berkowitz and

Limor (2003) identified the use of situational ethics in newsroom decision-making processes and Christians (1977) goes so far as to reprimand those who oppose the practice, Day cautions against its use, terming it “ad hoc decision making at its worst” (p. 61), a view shared by Dickson (1988) and Merrill (1997), among others.

Following are three families of ethical and moral theories identified by Day (2006):

Deontological (Duty-Based) Theories

These theories build on Kant’s approach to ethical decision making, which posits that truth is the rule and the rule must be obeyed no matter how virtuous the expected consequence. At the center of this theoretical family is the notion that duties have moral value inherent in them (Meyers & Appreciating, 2003). Day (2006) identifies the primary shortcomings of deontological theories as their inapplicability in the face of conflict existing between two “equally plausible rules” (p. 62).

Teleological (Consequence-Based) Theories

Standing in stark contrast to deontological theory, Day (2006) asserts, is the family of teleological theories, which posit that the ethically correct decision is the one that leads to the most positive conclusion or yields the best results. Day subdivides this theoretical category into two variations: the egoists (who maintain good results for oneself are the desired ends) and the utilitarians (who, as noted earlier, maintain that good results for the greatest number or bad results for the least number, including oneself, are the desired ends). Day praises these theories as “rational means for extricating ourselves from the confusion of rule conflict” (pp. 63-64), but also criticizes them for relying too

much on unknown results and potentially biased or inaccurate predictions by decision makers.

Virtue Theories

This family of theories, according to Day (2006), is where the Greek concepts of moral and ethical reasoning fit into the newsroom decision-making process. Day is critical of most of these theories, including Aristotle's golden mean. Though he does concede some applicability within the realm of media censorship, he maintains newsroom use is limited.

Before launching into discussion of the three families of ethical and moral theories as Day (2006) does, Merrill (1997) subsumes various ethical systems as he sees them into two categories: pragmatic ethics and humanistic ethics. Merrill's category of pragmatic ethics is a form of teleological ethics concerned with success, first and foremost. Philosophically, he offers as an exemplar the work of Florentine historian Niccolò Machiavelli, a staunch advocate of what Merrill terms "success-oriented," or "egoistic teleological" ethics (p. 59). When applied to news media, Merrill states, the theory has the journalist using conventional practices and ethical standards when they work, but not ruling out the use of any practice or standard should it be deemed necessary for success.

The three classes of ethical theory that comprise Merrill's humanistic ethics category nearly mirror Day's trio of theoretical families; in fact, his discussion of deontological and teleological ethics does, aside from a further division of utilitarians into altruists, who focus on what is best for others, and egoists, who focus on what is best for themselves. But unlike Day, Merrill includes the agape principle in his third class, or

family, which he terms “personal” or “subjective” (p. 63) ethics. In addition to inclusion of the agape principle, Merrill also adds the perspectives of antinomianism and existentialism to the mix.

It should be noted that some scholars see deontological and teleological theory not as polar opposites, as Day (2006), but as interlocking links of a practical and useful theoretical ethical decision-making chain (Ross, 1930). Lambeth (1992) terms this linkage, in which a journalist, guided by certain rules derived from principle, takes into account potential consequences of his or her decision while making it, “mixed rule deontology” (p. 24). Merrill (1989) identified essentially the same system in his discussion of deontelic ethics. More recently, Meyers and Appreciating (2003) concluded that Ross’ theory of linkage is useful in helping to resolve dilemmas.

Meyers and Appreciating (2003) also discuss Ross’ (1930) linking of duty-based and consequence-based theories in the context of feminist theory, which emphasizes the importance of relationships, both in “how they affect context and the determination of actual duty and in how duties’ residual force reflects and reinforces their strength” (p. 81). As for feminist theory, Anderson et al. (1994) argue that women rely more on relationship and emotional context than principle and fact when faced with ethical decisions. Though men tend to discuss ethics in terms of what to do and say, women approach moral problems from a vantage point of listening and caring.

As evidenced above, a number of theories, perspectives, approaches, and principles may be applied to the process of deciding ethical issues of news coverage, content, and treatment in community newspapers. However, none comes with explicit instructions of how to apply the theory or theories to decision-making processes, nor

directions of which theory or theories to use in which types of situations – thus the need for moral and ethical models and frameworks.

Moral and Ethical Models and Frameworks

Models and frameworks can take sometimes scattered and abstract theoretical concepts and place them in a more understandable pictorial form. This reduction to diagram not only increases comprehension, but offers direction of progression and facilitates consistent practical application. It may initially seem that moral and ethical decision-making models and frameworks are similar to codes of ethics, but Hestevold (as cited in Husselbee & Adams, 1996) draws a distinct line between the two, arguing that codes of ethics tend to be sets of specific guidelines with regard to established occupational practices, whereas a moral or ethical model or framework calls for a systematic application of normative ethics.

Following are a sample of decision-making models and frameworks developed from and using ethical and moral theoretical concepts previously discussed:

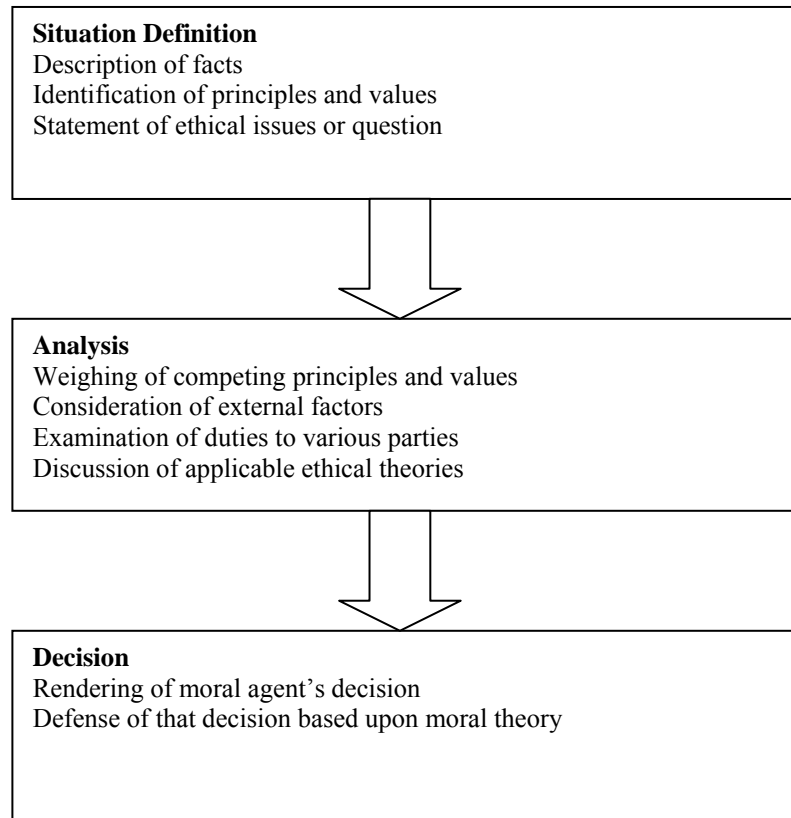
SAD Model

As previously noted, moral reasoning is a systematic procedure that involves a number of considerations. Day's model of moral reasoning (2006) groups these considerations into three categories: situation definition; analysis of situation, including the application of moral and ethical theories; and the decision. He refers to the model as the SAD model or SAD formula (see Figure 2.1).

The first step in the model, to define the situation, is designed to isolate the ethical issue and consider the principles and values that may figure into the decision-making process. The second step, analysis and application of theory, requires a great deal of

cognitive exertion on the part of the decision maker, as he or she is tasked with examining the question at hand and evaluating every conceivable ethical or moral alternative. Though Day (2006) admits there is no limit to considerations at this point, he does suggest at least four: (1) weighting various conflicting values and principles, (2) examining external factors that could influence a decision, (3) examining people who could be affected by the decision, and (4) applying ethical and moral theories. The final step includes the decision and a defense of that decision based on ethical and moral theory.

Figure 2.1 Day's SAD Model



Though the SAD model is grounded in theory and simplistic in design, it has certain limitations. First and foremost, the model does not allow for feedback from those affected by the decision, nor does it allow for that feedback to be funneled back into the model for reapplication. Accordingly, construction of decision-making policy on the frame of the SAD model is difficult.

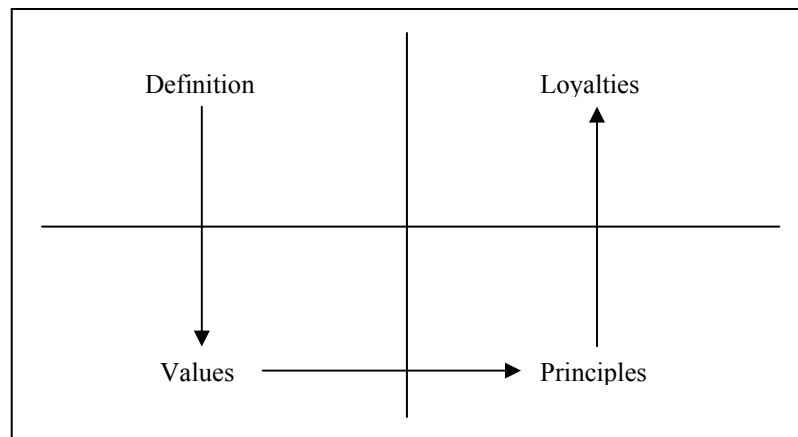
The Potter Box Model of Reasoning

The Potter Box model of moral reasoning and later modifications of it by Christians et al. (1995) address some of the shortfalls of the SAD model. Though developed by a Harvard Divinity School professor, Christians and his colleagues assert the Potter Box is a model useful in newsroom decision making. The model, they write, proposes four dimensions of moral analysis along which decision makers can construct action guides en route to a morally and ethically defensible decision (see Figure 2.2).

Like the SAD model, the first dimension calls for a clear definition of the situation. Unlike the SAD model, which is linear in orientation, the Potter Box is diagrammed as a box, with the first dimension in the top left quadrant and the second in the lower left quadrant. The second dimension requires identification of values. Christians et al. (1995) place great emphasis on this step, as “Each value influences our discourse and reasoning on moral questions” (p. 4). The third dimension, located within the lower right quadrant, is the point at which ethical principles, or moral and ethical theories, are applied. Again, like the SAD model, this step requires a great deal of cognitive exertion on the part of decision makers, as it is incumbent upon them to consider the gamut of alternatives. The fourth dimension, in the upper right quadrant, asks the decision maker to consider his or her loyalties and how those loyalties affect the

decision. Christians et al. term this dimension the one that usually demands the closest scrutiny, as it “forces us to articulate precisely where our loyalties lie as we make a final judgment or adopt a particular policy” (p. 5).

Figure 2.2 The Potter Box Model of Moral Reasoning



The actual decision is separate from the original four-quadrant model, Christians et al. (1995) write, though later modifications of the Potter Box include the decision, or judgment or policy, within the model and funnel audience feedback with regard to the decision back into the first quadrant. If action guides are constructed as the decision maker moves along the four quadrants, Christians et al. argue, the Potter Box can serve as a framework on which to construct guiding policy for future decisions.

Though Day’s SAD model (2006) and the modification of the Potter Box (Christians et al., 1995) can be applied to media decisions, the fact remains that they, like other decision-making models, frameworks, and checklists – including Kidder’s ethical decision-making checklist (Baker, 1997), the doctrine of the Trinity (Hickey, 2003),

Bok's model of ethical decision making (1989), the centuries-old just war doctrine (Brislin, 1992), and Elliott's guidelines for ethical reflection (Patterson & Wilkins, 1994) – were not developed solely for use in media-specific decision-making processes, let alone print or community news-specific situations.

Social Responsibility

No study of decision making or the factors that affect decision making regarding news judgment would be complete without a discussion of the theory that has attempted to guide that process in American newsrooms for more than a half-century, the social responsibility theory. Bunton (1998) argues that the social responsibility theory charges all newspapers – large and small, broad in scope of coverage and relentlessly local – with the ethical responsibility to not only “uphold basic precepts of good journalism, such as balance, fairness, and accuracy, but to make an extra effort to provide socially responsible coverage that gives voice to multiple perspectives in their communities” (p. 232). Indeed, Bunton continues, community newspapers – often the only source of local news for readers – have an even greater ethical obligation to provide socially responsible coverage and content than larger publications.

A concept that has been traced back to ancient Greek philosophers, the idea of social responsibility as it relates to media practitioners began to develop around the turn of the last century as a counterpoint to the concept of media libertarianism, which embraced the “buyer beware” philosophy of the industrial revolution (Day, 2006; Merrill, 1997). Generally regarded as a product of the 1947 report of the Hutchins Commission (Commission of Freedom of the Press), the social responsibility theory balances the constitutional freedom of the press with a responsibility to focus on the public good and

on broad-based reporting about important and newsworthy current events (Baran & Davis, 2006). The Hutchins Commission challenged the press to use its constitutionally guaranteed freedoms to provide citizens with diverse sources of information, a variety of opinions, and a clear reflection of society's goals and values (Bunton, 1998).

The commission outlined five functions it claimed were needed for a socially responsible press:

- Provide a truthful, comprehensive, and intelligent account of events in a meaningful context;
- Provide a forum for the exchange of comment and criticism;
- Provide a representative picture of the constituent groups of society;
- Provide a method of reflection of the goals and values of society; and
- Provide a way of communicating the day's intelligence to every member of society.

Out of these functions and the reasons offered by the commission for them grew the social responsibility theory. McQuail (1987) offers a summary of the basic tenets of the theory:

- The media should accept and fulfill certain obligations to society.
- The media's obligations to society should be met through the establishment of a set of professional standards of informativeness, truth, accuracy, objectivity, and balance.
- The media should be self-regulating within the law and their own institutional codes.

- The media should avoid dissemination of that which might lead to crime, violence, or civil disobedience, or give offense to minorities.
- The media should be pluralist and reflect the diversity of society, providing access to various points of view and to rights of reply.
- Society has a right to expect high standards of performance, and intervention can be justified to secure the public good.
- Media representatives should be accountable to society, their employers, and the market.

Altschull (1990) argues that the theory places certain moral and ethical burdens on journalists. According to McQuail (1987), the social responsibility theory holds that media have the responsibility to not only present facts and the truth behind the facts, but to also offer themselves as a forum for public debate, comment, and opinion.

But the theory does not just stop at outlining responsibilities; it also provides for controls charged with enforcing those obligations if they are not met. Severin and Tankard (1988) identify a number of such controls, which include professional ethics and community opinion. In other words, journalists are obligated to not only present facts and the truth behind the facts, but to be accountable to colleagues and members of society if that does not happen. Likewise, if decisions made by journalists in some way impede the public's "right to know," the journalist or journalists responsible may be subjected to the scrutiny of the denied public. Thus, a system of controls in the form of professional decision-making guidelines and more informal decision-affecting public opinion appears to be provided for within the fabric of the social responsibility theory.

Further work in the vein of social responsibility theory and the relationship between the media and society has focused on the role of the media in informing and educating citizens (Christians, 1986; Jordan, 1989). This research has expanded on the Hutchins Commission's assertion that the press should be available to and present the ideas and opinions of the masses. Bunton (1998) points out that this "imperative to cultivate citizenship" (p. 235) connects to Rawls' 1971 justice as fairness theory, or "veil of ignorance" theory (Christians et al., 1995, p. 16), which identifies action that ensures equality of opportunity for all as a moral responsibility, and Walzer's (1983) spheres of justice theory, which likewise identifies extension of membership in a community to all as a moral responsibility.

Communitarianism

Rooted in the social responsibility theory is the notion of communitarianism, "the social and political philosophy emphasizing connection, community, and common good over individualism, rights-based language, and cost-benefit analysis" (Bunton, 1998, p. 232). From an ethical perspective, communitarianism is a philosophy offering the notion that the individual is dependent on the community (Coleman, 2000). Under a communitarian perspective – to which some community journalists subscribe as a guide in ethical decision making – Christians, Ferré, and Fackler (1993) argue, the press has a key role to play in recreating a sense of community and common good.

Bunton (1998) terms communitarianism a "radical form of social responsibility theory" (p. 232), a view supported, at least in part, by a number of scholars, including Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, and Tipton (1985, 1992). Others, including Merrill (1997), argue communitarianism is a philosophy separate and distinct from social

responsibility, as its roots can be traced back to the ponderings of the ancient Greek philosopher Plato. Merrill identifies five normative desires communitarians have for the news media:

- Publish what would bring people together, not fractionalize them;
- Give members of the community what they want, not what journalists would want them to have;
- Refrain from publishing anything that would tear down community spirit;
- Agree on common ethics; and
- Refrain from embracing situational or relativistic ethics.

Merrill asserts that communitarians seek a community-based ethic, believing that ethics is relational, that is, concerned with connections and interactions. Like the concept of social responsibility, this stands in stark contrast to the personal or individual ethics endorsed by those who adhere to a libertarian perspective.

If the debate is heated over the beginnings of communitarianism and its relationship to social responsibility, it is even more so over the merits of the philosophy. Altschull (1996) makes clear his disdain for communitarianism when he decries it as the “open use of the press as an avowed instrument of propaganda” (p. 168). Waters (2001) views it as one of two competing moral visions within the realm of advocacy journalism. Conversely, work by Craig (1996) indicates communitarian journalism is not as radical a departure from social responsibility theory and practice as some believe. In fact, Hodges (1996) argues that communitarian thinking is a valid response to the fractures that characterize modern society. He calls for journalists at all levels to embrace more of a communitarian outlook based on the acknowledgment of human interdependence. “We

can establish a realistic ethic for journalism,” he writes, “only if we explore the professional implications of human interdependence” (p. 133).

Absent endorsement or denouncement, Bunton (1998) asserts that the danger of communitarianism is the fine line community journalists who subscribe to its tenets must walk between reflecting or creating a sense of community and what Lauterer (2006) refers to as “giddy boosterism” (p. 201). This is the real frontline of community journalism, Lauterer asserts, that is, sorting out the degree to which community newspapers function as boosters or watchdogs. Anderson et al. (1994) concur, stating a communitarian approach, in which connecting with community is a crucial step, “presents complications associated with boosterism and conflicts of interest. Knowing where to draw the line becomes difficult” (p. 113).

If communitarianism is indeed a form of social responsibility theory as argued by Bellah et al. (1985, 1992) and Bunton (1998), it follows that journalists who apply it in practice should be held to the same standards of accountability by the same set of controls as dictated by the social responsibility theory, professional ethics and community opinion. In accordance with these controls, Day (2006) asserts that media can acquire attitudes of social responsibility through two steps: (1) promoting a positive corporate image of responsibility and (2) community involvement.

A positive corporate image of responsibility can be attained by adoption of and adherence to any or all of a number of existing self-regulatory mechanisms, including codes of conduct, news councils, and media ombudsmen. Most prevalent in community newsrooms, which normally operate on budgets incapable of supporting news councils and ombudsmen, are professional codes of conduct. Proponents of such codes, many of

which are derived in part from the social responsibility theory, argue that “a written statement of principles is the only way to avoid leaving moral judgments to individual interpretations” (Day, 2006, p. 46). Opponents say an ethical framework is not logically derived from the social responsibility theory on one hand (Helteng, 1976; Lambeth, 1992), and on the other, that such frameworks or codes are a form of self-censorship, are often contradictory, and are even detrimentally authoritarian in nature (Lloyd, 1991). Those who fall somewhere in the middle appreciate the guidelines codes provide, but realize they are necessarily general and vague and therefore “incapable of confronting the fine nuances of the ethical skirmishes that occur under specific circumstances” (Day, p. 46). Even members of the Hutchins Commission itself, in their struggle to rectify some of the philosophical problems they confronted, realized any code of ethics or framework derived from their suggestions could, at some point, conceivably conflict with practical restrictions (McIntyre, 1979).

It is when these codes fall short of specific answers to specific questions in the decision-making process that journalists turn to Day’s (2006) other means of acquiring a socially responsible attitude, community involvement. Involvement with community members facilitates the development of a socially responsible attitude, Day asserts, by familiarizing the journalist with the standards of that community.

But how does a journalist, guided by codes set forth by the social responsibility theory and well aware of the perceived standards of the community which his or her newspaper serves, balance the two when making a decision regarding the coverage, content, or treatment of news in the newspaper? As Lambeth (1992) admits, the literature generated by the Hutchins Commission “contains little that would assist individual

journalists in daily ethical judgments” (p. 7). Though codes of ethics and community controls are both derived, at least in part, from the social responsibility theory, nowhere does the theory or the codes or the community dictate in which situations full disclosure of truth outweighs concern for community. In such cases, Day (2006) argues, journalists first turn to their own personal set of values to help them make ethical decisions of news judgment. It is at this point when the normative is set aside and the media practitioner enters the practical realm of applied ethics.

Applied Media Ethics

Day (2006) terms applied ethics the “vital link between theory and practice, the real litmus test of ethical decision making (p. 5). Starck (2001) states that research of actual decision-making processes, as opposed to normative work, and instruction based on such research, are necessary to more properly prepare future or novice journalists for the rigors of the newsroom. As Starck points out, a great deal of progress in the teaching of journalism ethics has been made since the turn of the last century, especially with regard to the production of classroom materials. However, “scholarship remains largely undeveloped,” in that “large gaps separate the practical from the theoretical and the realm of the classroom from that of the newsroom” (p. 133). Voakes (1997) argues that academic inquiry into how journalists make decisions of news judgment and the addition of such scholarship to the body of knowledge enhances “not only the social scientist’s understanding of the values that drive media processes but also the ethical and legal scholar’s appreciation of the realities surrounding that work” (p. 19). Following is a review of the scholarship of this two-pronged approach to actual ethical decision making,

beginning with values and concluding with a discussion of the “realities” Voakes maintains surround that work.

Values

It is commonly held that the actual process of ethical decision making is governed in no small part by one’s set of personal values: “Most of us are obedient disciples of the values we learned in childhood” (Day, 2006, p. xvii). A moral value is something “esteemed, prized, or regarded highly, or as a good” (Angeles, 1981, p. 310). Values are the building blocks of attitudes, “the learned emotional, intellectual, and behavioral responses to persons, things, and events” (Day, p. 13). Day identifies three components of values-based attitudes: (1) affective, the emotional side of beliefs about a situation; (2) cognitive, the intellectual side of an attitude or what is known about a situation; and (3) behavioral, the predisposition to respond. As values are the building blocks of attitudes, Day asserts, values and attitudes are the building blocks of ethical behavior.

Value scholarship dates back centuries, from the early work of the great philosophers Plato and Aristotle, who approached the study of human values much as philosophers of today do, that is, by attempting to discern what is considered good (Day, 2006; Viall, 1992). Considering the centuries of philosophical work in the area of value scholarship, the science of human values is relatively new, as social scientists began attempting to actually measure values only around the turn of last century. If identification of human values by philosophers led to measurement by social scientists, then measurement and analysis of resulting data have naturally led social scientists to a search for a certain set of values possessed by all humans, that is, a set of baseline human values.

“A society or nation cannot survive and progress without some common basic values and common moral principles” (p. 11), argues Sichel (1982). Rokeach (1973) proposed that all humans possess the same values, just to differing degrees. Freud (1950) maintained that all societies establish which values should be emulated and which should be avoided. This elevation of certain ideals and establishment of taboos by one society or culture, Freud stated, separates it from another. In other words, if humans share certain values, groups of like-minded humans may also share certain values. Thus emerges the concept of a value system.

The identification of value systems, “an enduring organization of beliefs concerning preferable modes of conduct of end states of existence along a continuum of relative importance” (Rokeach, 1973, p. 5), allows social scientists a tool with which to measure values in relation to one another. Such a value system, Viall (1992) concludes, assists humans in resolving conflicts and making decisions.

Journalistic Values

As humans, journalists, then, may be expected to draw upon their individual values and value systems when faced with ethical decisions in the newsroom. “Personal values and their demographic factors contribute to a web of context through which journalists view their roles and make decisions” (p. 833), assert Plaisance and Skewes (2003). Friend and Singer (2007) agree, but assert that there are “overarching ethical norms of particular relevance to humans as communicators,” adding that “the ways in which those norms are articulated do vary according to a person’s occupational role and the social context surrounding that role” (p. 41).

MacDonald (1975) suggests journalists make value judgments based upon education, religion, childhood, family life, social and economic background, friendships and associations, nationality and culture, emotions, past experiences, and reason. However, Viall (1992) states journalists also “work within another layer of values that are salient to the occupation: journalistic values, inherent in the journalistic product or its production” (p.45). Plaisance and Skewes (2003) agree, adding, “The values that journalists hold ... constitute the engine that drives many discussions about the behavior of media practitioners” (p. 833).

Elliott (1988) posited that journalists share three “essential values” (p. 29), which, it should be noted, mirror three responsibilities outlined by the normative social responsibility theory: (1) news accounts should be accurate, balanced, relevant, and complete; (2) news accounts should be published without hurting people; and (3) journalists should strive to give consumers information they need. If all journalists share these values, as Elliott posits, then it follows, asserts Viall (1992), that all journalists would make the same decisions in specific ethical situations. However, numerous studies, including one by Meyer (1983), in which 700 publishers, editors, and reporters were asked questions regarding ethics, reveal no clear pattern. Elliott accounts for such findings, while maintaining her belief in the three essential values, when she admits conflicts often arise “between the essential shared values of journalism and the values of the community” (p. 31), a conflict also identified by Day (2006). Dennis (1988) suggested journalists have different standards that “reflect different values and appeal to different outlooks and views” (p. 351). Day (2006) and Viall (1992) agree, proposing that journalists share common values, but accounting for differences in ethical decision

making by recognizing certain outside factors, or social influences, including community standards and organizational or occupational influences, may affect the prioritization or ordering of those values. In other words, though the literature suggests print journalists share the same basic values, data indicate that differences within value systems lead to different ethical decisions.

Voakes (1997) and Borden (2000) have conducted research, both quantitatively and qualitatively, in support of the idea that social and community influences often play a greater role in the decision-making process than value-based reasoning through ethical and moral theory. Voakes does not condemn the use of moral or ethical theory or the normative models and frameworks derived from it, but does assert that “such an intense focus on personal moral reasoning risks losing sight of the larger social context of ethical decision making” (p. 18). What about the influence of newsroom co-workers, editors, competitors, or perceptions of audience reaction, he asks. It is reasonable to assume, Voakes asserts, that perhaps journalists do not solve ethical problems in social vacuums, “relying only on internal moral reasoning” (p. 18), but also weigh, consult, and utilize a complex and ever-changing conglomeration of social influences. Indeed, findings by Voakes and Borden support a theory of social influences on ethical decisions of journalists.

Social Influences Theory

One common thread that separates this work on actual on-deadline, journalist-specific decision making from academic study of normative ethical decision making discussed earlier is its preoccupation with the social influences that many scholars (e.g., Anderson et al., 1994; Berkowitz & Limor, 2003; Berkowitz, Limor, & Singer, 2004;

Borden, 2000; Day, 2006; Husselbee & Adams, 1996; Janowitz, 1967; Reinardy & Moore, 2007; Viall, 1992; Voakes, 1997) believe figure into journalists' decision-making process. "Ethical decisions are always made in a specific context, which includes the political, social, and cultural climate" (Day, 2006, p. 6). Though the context does not always determine the outcome of an ethical judgment, Day continues, "it exerts an influence that cannot be ignored" (p. 6).

Voakes (1997) identifies values as the key linkage between media sociology and media ethics grounded in social responsibility theory and moral and ethical theory. He recognizes the influence of these values on journalists' decision-making processes, but posits that they alone are not directly responsible for the decisions made in the newsroom: "Values are the fundamental basis of moral judgment, but values alone do not guide the moral agent; they simply describe the agent's social and moral referents" (pp. 19-20). Voakes posits that values must be "filtered through one or more social determinants of behavior before they can actually influence a decision" (p. 20). In fact, social influences may "facilitate, filter, or block out values and principles" (p. 26).

This theory of social influences has its beginnings in the very first challenge by communication scholars of Lasswell's (1948) classic communication formula: Who says what to whom with what effect. Social influences theory scholars shuffle Lasswell's formula, focusing not on how media influence audiences, but on how audiences and other social factors influence media. In other words, the preoccupation shifts from who says what to whom with what effect to how whom affects who so that what can be modified (Janowitz, 1967). Katz and Lazarsfeld (1954) took early steps forward in this vein, studying not only the flow of information, but also the flow of influence. By the 1960s,

some scholars began to see communication not as one-way transmission, but as “an interactive process involving both senders and receivers of messages” (Hollander et al., 2002, p. 21). Work by McQuail (1983) found participants in community communication were not so much an audience formed as a result of media content as they are an independent and already-existing social category. Janowitz (1967) offered early support of the theory of social influences as he concluded that at every point in the operation of a newspaper – no matter what the size, circulation, or readership – its mass communication aspects are “inextricably interrelated with the personal communications and social contacts which link the newspaper’s personnel, the community leaders, and the readership clientele” (p. 158).

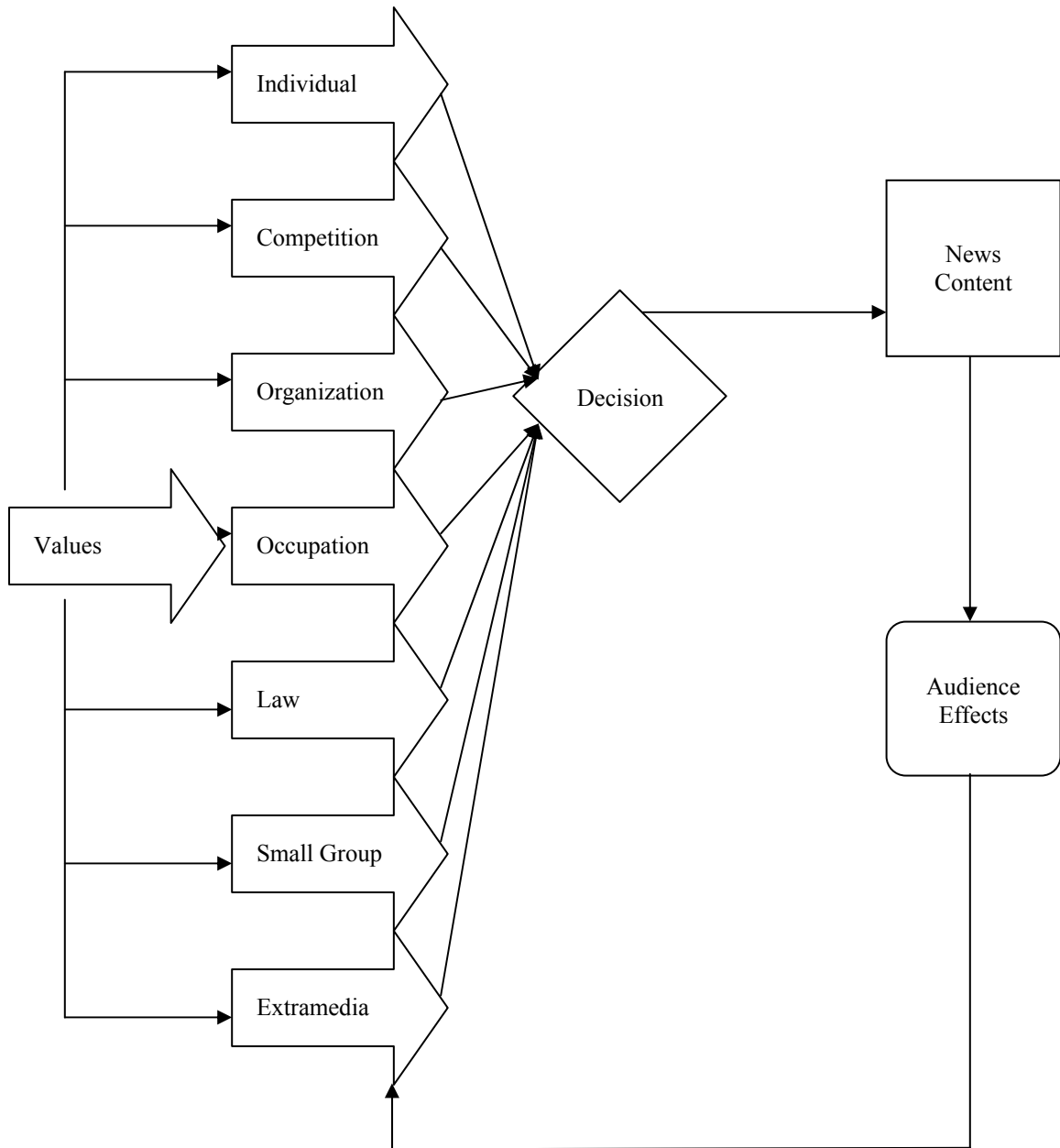
Many scholars have attempted to compile a list or even diagram the screen of social influences through which values and principles are filtered during the ethical decision-making process. Anderson et al. (1994) proposed a list including influences relating to laws, codes of ethics and guidelines, and pressures from special interest groups, critics, and peers in the newsroom. Day’s (2006) list of “stakeholders,” those potentially most affected by journalists’ ethical decisions, includes individual conscience, objects of moral judgments, financial supporters, the institution, professional colleagues, and society (p. 32). Reinardy and Moore (2007) include on their list of influences those relating to newsroom norms, competitive pressures, and “society’s rules” (p. 163), the last of which, they admit, sometimes conflict with moral principles. Borden’s qualitative focus group and case-study research (2000) tested a model of social influences on decision-making, which she based on a number of theoretical perspectives and models.

Focused exclusively on small-group ethical decision making, results indicated the presence of organizational, cognitive, and professional influences.

Berkowitz and Limor (2003) expanded on this idea of social influences on journalists' decision-making processes in their survey-based study of ethical decision-making processes at large daily newspapers. Results indicated that ethical decisions vary by context and also illustrated how social, professional, organizational, peer-group, and individual influences played parts in the decision-making processes. The researchers concluded that the data supported the notion that ethical decision making is a relatively situational process, affected in no small part by a web of social influences.

Voakes (1997) submitted that the screen of social influences through which personal values are filtered is comprised not of random factors, but rather of a hierarchy of social influences relating to the individual, competition, organization, occupation, law, small group, and extramedia, the last of which includes influences from sources and audience. He diagrammed this hierarchy-of-social-influences screen in a conceptual model (see Figure 2.3) based on a model of media influences proposed by Shoemaker and Reese (1996). Using a quantitative survey approach, Voakes tested his model of ethics and the social determinants of newsmaking for applicability and to discern the relative importance of each determinant in influencing a particular journalistic behavior. He found that of the seven social influences included in his hierarchical model, five were significant predictors of the decision. Notably, individual influence – where values and personal moral reasoning fit in – was the weakest of the seven, despite its prominence in the literature.

Figure 2.3 Voakes' Model of Ethics and the Social Determinants of Newsmaking



A 2004 study by Berkowitz et al. lent further credibility to the notion that social influences may block or even trump personal values or individual moral autonomy during the ethical decision-making process. Employing a survey methodology, the researchers

explored how the social dimensions of a reporter's world shaped actual ethical decisions. Regression analysis of data revealed startling results – that neither personal nor professional factors were related to ethical decisions, only the social context element, in this case, concern for the anticipated reaction to the coverage by people living in the area of practice.

A 1996 case study of an isolated ethical news-judgment decision within the realm of community photojournalism by Husselbee and Adams found personal values and individual moral autonomy – along with all moral and ethical considerations – unequivocally trumped by the perceived public instructional value of publishing a photograph. Admitting such a determination is subjective at best, the researchers proposed that in the absence of clear instructional value, the decision must hinge on the potential of the image to cause undue emotional distress or unnecessary harm to members of the community. The study led to the development of a justification framework based on the concept of instructional value.

Related to the study by Husselbee and Adams (1996) is one by Gevorgyan (2005), which found Kansas community journalists make decisions of news coverage, content, and treatment based in large part on the perceived needs and preferences of their audiences. Coupling the social influences theory with the media market orientation model in analysis of data, Gevorgyan concluded that community newspaper content is often adjusted to make it more appealing to the target audience's information needs.

Such an apparent disregard of personal values and individual autonomy on the part of the journalist and preoccupation with societal influences identified in studies by Berkowitz et al. (2004), Husselbee and Adams (1996), and Gevorgyan (2005) excite

Ferré (1988) and Christians (2005), who have long argued that news reporting suffers from a “misplaced faith in individual autonomy, a faith that resists a sense of social duty” (Ferré, p. 18). Ferré further argues that this “overemphasis on individual autonomy corrodes the social basis of ethics” and that the field of journalism is in need of a new moral theory that takes into account “community and personhood as fundamental human characteristics essential to ethical decision making” (p. 18). Christians writes, “Individual autonomy has been the axis of classical theory. Universal human solidarity, its radical opposite, ought to be the centerpiece of ethics now” (p. 3).

Work by Berkowitz and Limor (2003), Berkowitz et al. (2004), Borden (1996), Gevorgyan (2005), Husselbee and Adams (1996), and Voakes (1997) is valuable in that it attempted to study, describe, and report how newspaper journalists actually make decisions regarding coverage, content, and treatment of news in print, not how they should make them according to ethical, moral, or social responsibility theory. Furthermore, each study found that social influences, including the notion of community standards, play a definite role in the decision-making process. However, few of the aforementioned studies focused exclusively on newsroom decision makers or the decision-making processes at community newspapers. Furthermore, the studies gave little regard to the effect community standards in particular may have on the decision-making processes of journalists or where they may fit into the decision-making process, instead considering the concept as almost a peripheral afterthought or after-the-fact audience-feedback control.

Few studies do consider the notion of community standards as it fits into the decision-making processes of journalists. Culbertson (1989) attempted to test the notion

quantitatively, inquiring as to whether certain journalists find it preferable to follow or lead audiences when deciding issues of news judgment. An experimental study by Wilkinson and Fletcher (1995) posited that the quest for hard-hitting news should be tempered with the knowledge that some viewers are adversely affected by such coverage and treatment. Lind and Rarick (1995) used a focus group to gather data on the ethical sensitivity of audiences. Parsons and Smith (1988) employed qualitative methods to extract a thematic category regarding concern about what the audience would want or would accept. Again, however, none was exclusively focused on newsroom decision makers or the decision-making processes at community newspapers and all failed to pinpoint exactly where community standards “fit” in the actual decision-making process: at the end of the process in the form of audience feedback, or in the midst of the host of other social influences at work.

Viall (1992) draws a distinct line between the social influences at work on journalists at large, metropolitan newspapers and small, community newspapers. Influences mapped by Voakes (1997), including individual, small group, and occupational influences (all termed “occupational influences” by Viall) and organizational and competitive influences (both termed “organizational influences” by Viall) are of far more significance in shaping an individual journalist’s hierarchy of influences at a large, metropolitan newspaper than a community newspaper. The reason? The metropolitan, or cosmopolitan, journalist – working in large companies with many other journalists – will encounter these influences more when ranking values than will community journalists “who work in more professional isolation” (Viall, p. 49). “We’re isolated in our communities,” writes longtime Wyoming community journalist Bruce

Kennedy (1974), “fighting problems unique to us” (p. 4). In other words, while journalists at major metropolitan newspapers potentially struggle with a host of social and professional influences, the lone editor of a small-town newspaper is likely to face a more limited social-influence structure.

Viall (1992) makes the distinction between the two settings quite clear:

Cosmopolitan journalists are in daily contact with others in the profession. ...

Community journalists, however, commonly belong to small staffs. Friends and workers seen on a daily basis are not necessarily journalists. There is less chance for a strong, perpetual reinforcement of specific values. Organizationally, community journalists also differ. A larger corporation finds ways to encourage behavior that leads it to success. Community journalists have little “organization” to work within. Encouragement by the organization is usually not in the same form as for large corporations. Values encouraged are more likely to be in line with community values. (p. 49)

In other words, in the absence of professional or organizational structures, often the list of potential social influences at work in the community journalist’s ethical decision-making process is reduced to a single one, the standards of the community the newspaper serves.

Community Standards

Research indicates that coverage, content, and treatment of news in community newspapers are influenced by a set of community standards (Berkowitz & Limor, 2003; Berkowitz et al., 2004; Coble-Krings, 2005; Edelstein & Larsen, 1960; Hollander et al., 2002; Husselbee & Adams, 1996; Janowitz, 1967; Reinardy & Moore, 2007; Voakes, 1997). In other words, journalists engaged in production of local news content for a

community of which they are a part tend to report, write, and present news in a way that reflects and upholds the values and standards of the community (Christians et al., 1995; Day, 2006; Ferré, 1988; Kennedy, 1974; Lauterer, 2000, 2006; Merrill, 1997; Overduin, 1986; Smethers & Jolliffe, 1998; Viall, 1992).

Print journalists are continuously subjected to a “strong pull” toward social or community conformity (Merrill, 1997, p. 44). In response to this pull, meeting local expectations has traditionally been a factor in defining community media content (Smethers & Jolliffe, 1998). Janowitz (1967) writes: “The community press’ local community audience conditions its content, determines its appeal, and facilitates its impact” (p. xxi). His research backs that assertion. Janowitz hypothesized that the “community press acts as a mechanism which seeks to maintain local consensus through the emphasis of common values rather than the solution of conflicting values” (p. 11). His data, collected through a triangulation of research methodologies, revealed incidences of coverage being shaped by the status quo, leading him to conclude that content of community newspapers represents the values and aspirations present in the community, or, more specifically, that content is actually designed to emphasize the values of which there is a “high level of consensus in the community” (p. 60). Janowitz’s work is supported by Berkowitz and Beach (1993), who assert that community newspapers tend to support the status quo, as opposed to intentionally introducing controversy.

Newspaper journalists covering, writing, and treating news for a certain audience, Berkowitz and Limor (2003) assert, take into consideration the “standards of the society within which they work” (p. 785). Community journalists understand that social values need to be considered when making news decisions, they continue, “so they take into

account their community” (p. 784) when crafting decisions regarding coverage, content, and treatment of news. Voakes (1997) concurs when he writes “perception of audience reaction” (p. 18) is among the influences on community journalists’ decisions of news coverage. The influence is also documented by Hollander et al. (2002).

Community standards were initially studied as an influence on journalists’ ethical decision-making processes not long after human values entered the realm of science in the early 1900s. Royce coined the term “provincialism” in 1908, which he defined as the tendency of a socially united and traditionally independent area to hold fast to its own customs, ideas, beliefs, and aspirations. These areas, Royce, and later others (Lehman, 1986; Merton, 1950; Park, 1929; Vergeer, 1992), asserted, often develop a unique set of values in support of these customs, ideas, beliefs, and aspirations. Though more easily and commonly an attribute of smaller, rural communities, Royce maintains certain degrees of provincialism are possible in larger cities and metropolitan areas, most often among members of a certain community within a community, as was the case with immigrant communities within American urban areas in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Indeed, Janowitz (1967) points out, today’s community journalism being actively shaped by community standards parallels the immigrant community press of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when publishers – and therefore news coverage, content, and treatment of news on the pages of the newspapers – identified closely with the local immigrant community and its ethnic values.

Ziff (1986) and Merton (1950) contrasted Royce’s (1908) concept of provincialism with the notion of “cosmopolitanism,” as discussed by Viall (1992), a distinction, Ziff asserts, which most often exists in larger cities in which there can be no

reasonable expectation of a set of community values. Journalism in such a setting, Ziff states, must appeal to a wide variety of individuals belonging to various value systems. Bottom line, different loyalties lead to different decisions by provincial or cosmopolitan journalists in ethical decisions.

Some have argued the difficulty of gauging community standards or even challenged the notion that such a concept can be realistically considered, maintaining that people – even in small, homogenous communities – are all different, with various sets of personal values. True, Anderson et al. (1994) admit, “While it is impossible to connect with all who reside in a community, it is possible to reasonably characterize and even represent the community” (p. 111). “Even in its diversity, a community can have a discernible character. ... A penetrating diagnosis of the community will sweep journalism into the churning waters of values reporting, testing a news organization’s commitment to community. Values reporting means elucidating and questioning the fundamental beliefs, attitudes, and behavior of the community and its people” (p. 112).

Community standards do not only guide decision-making processes, write Husselbee and Adams (1996), Janowitz (1967), and Lauterer (2006), they are also reflected on the pages of the newspaper. Husselbee and Adams go so far as to term the reflection of values and reality as perceived by members of small communities as a “role” of the community newspaper (p. 40), much as the Hutchins Commission did 50 years earlier, when it identified painting a representative picture of constituent groups of society and presenting and clarifying society’s goals and values as two of the five requirements of a socially responsible press (Merrill, 1997). Janowitz agrees, calling the reflection or indication of community standards by community newspapers a

responsibility. Overduin (1986) writes of the “importance of community beliefs, expectations, and values to the news-making process” (p. 229). Lauterer concurs: “Every community has a shared sense of what is acceptable and what is over the line” (p. 267) and “different communities have different standards” (p. 268); the task of community journalists is to properly gauge those standards, make news decisions that reflect those standards, and be prepared to justify those decisions to members of the community when those standards are not met, all while reporting news in a fair and accurate way. Edelstein and Larsen (1960) echo that sentiment, asserting that newspapers in small communities should seek to create, reinforce, and extend feelings of interdependence and identification held by members of the community.

Strict adherence to community standards and the will of the people one is serving, Ferré (1988) asserts, could result in a pluralistic press under local control. In such a situation, “news would be defined by the needs expressed by the entire community” (p. 26). Such an idea repulses Barney (1996), who admonishes journalists who let the notion of community standards in any way guide coverage, content, or treatment. He argues that making news judgment decisions within the context of a set of community standards “assumes that community’s view of the world is correct and should neither be challenged nor subject to change” (p. 148). The coverage and publication of information necessary to conform to or maintain community values, he asserts, only serves to fortify the status quo, a phenomenon documented, but not condemned, by Janowitz (1967).

However, Christians et al. (1995) assert that community standards must be considered when rendering an ethical decision in order for a conclusion to be deemed morally justified. Day (2006) concurs when he states that audience is an important

consideration in making ethical judgments: “Morality involves taking into account the interests of others; an entirely selfish person cannot, by definition, make ethical judgments” (p. 12). Though they stop short of stating that ethical decision making is simply a process of adjusting to community standards, they do hold the concept in high regard, especially as it pertains to print media: “The newspaper’s readers have certain expectations” (Christians et al., p. 5); any journalist faced with a decision of news content, coverage, or treatment needs to determine if such expectations should be met.

Janowitz (1967) goes where Day (2006) and Christians et al. (1995) will not, when he suggests that ethics of community journalists establish their own validity in the requirements of the community. In other words, decisions regarding news coverage, content, and treatment are, in fact, “ethical” in the eyes of the community as long as they adhere to the community’s standards; such decisions that depart from the standards of the community, then, are “unethical.” Accordingly, degree of adherence to community standards correlates with degree of ethicality in decision making. It follows then, Janowitz continues, that adherence to community standards ensures the viability – even the survivability – of the community newspaper. “The community newspaper’s emphasis on community routines, low controversy, and social ritual are the very characteristics which account for its readership” (p. 130), he asserts. Adherence to community standards, then, “not only influences contents but also increases credibility and impact” (p. 215).

Value of Research

Media ethics literature is littered with attempts to develop, refine, and test various decision-making and justification models, frameworks, and checklists, both normative and practical in nature (e.g., Borden, 2000; Christians et al., 1995; Coleman & Wilkins,

2004; Day, 2006; Gauthier, 2002; Harless, 1990; Hill & Thrasher, 1994; Husselbee & Adams, 1996; McManus, 1997; Northington, 1992; Overduin, 1986; Shipman, 1995; Voakes, 1997). However, not all media scholars agree that journalism ethics or newsroom decision-making processes can be reduced to diagram.

Findings from Borden's qualitative focus group research (2000) support the notion that decision making in newsrooms could actually be more situational than consistent. In other words, Borden considers decision making both contextually situational and variable among journalists. Berkowitz and Limor (2003) expanded on the idea, positing that perhaps social influences – including concerns for the public interest and standards of society in which they work – play such a large part in the decision-making process that the notion of a shared decision-making framework among journalists is more illusion than reality. Conversely, though Husselbee and Adams (1996) agreed that concern for public interest and standards of the community the newspaper serves are primary factors in the decision-making process, they remained supportive of the notion of a shared decision-making framework among journalists and even proposed a four-step community journalism justification model for photojournalists based on the factor of instructional value.

Despite differences of opinion on the validity of a common decision-making framework or model among journalists, the development of a model or framework illustrating the general decision-making process and how and where community standards fit into the process would benefit scholars, instructors, students, and practitioners of community journalism. Christians et al. (1995) stress the vitality of framework or model development, if possible. Taylor (1989) concurs, writing “A

framework is that in which we make sense of our lives...” (p. 18), and adds to not have a framework is to fall into a state of senselessness. Day (2006) argues a pictorial representation of the ethical decision-making processes of community journalists may be useful in the education of future or novice community journalists, as ethical conduct often drifts to the situational in the absence of a moral framework to guide journalists in making judgment calls. With a framework, “Some consistency in decision making will result, thus replacing the case-by-case approach...” (p. 55). Moreover, Husselbee and Adams (1996) assert, perhaps such models and frameworks need not be universally applicable as Berkowitz and Limor (2003) maintain they are not. Perhaps, Husselbee and Adams argue, a generally applicable framework or model that simply explains how such a task is generally completed and potentially assists another journalist in reaching a conclusion is the desired end of such research for the benefit of scholar, instructor, student, and practitioner of community journalism.

Research Questions

In light of the dearth of community newspaper-specific research in this area, including little in the way of scholarship applying community standards to the decision-making processes of this type of journalist, a descriptive, qualitative approach to an initial study of this process and relationship is appropriate. Furthermore, qualitative methods are suited for applied research and evaluation, one purpose of which is to enhance practical decision making (Patton, 1990). In accordance with this qualitative approach, and stemming from the preceding discussion, three research questions have been developed:

RQ1: What factors are considered by a community journalist when deciding if or how to cover, write, and treat news for a particular audience?

RQ2: How and at what point are those factors considered within the community journalist's decision-making process?

RQ3: How and at what point do community standards fit into the community journalist's decision-making process?

CHAPTER 3 - Method

This chapter will describe in detail the methodology employed in the collection of data with which to answer the three preceding research questions. The extent of detail is driven by two factors: (1) a desire to present the research methodology in such a manner that it may be precisely replicated, and (2) a desire to lend credibility to the selected methodology. What follows, then, is a description of sampling techniques and the sample garnered from the methodology, how the study was instrumented, and the data-collection procedure, including data analysis techniques and validity checks. The chapter addresses the credibility of the selected methodology by presenting each aspect of it within the context of past research and respected methodological literature.

Sample

As the current research is of a descriptive and non-generalizable nature, the sample is purposive, one of convenience, consisting of a number of participants selected by the researcher based on strict adherence to several criteria. This triangulation of purposive sampling approaches – convenience sampling and criterion sampling – allows flexibility, meets multiple interests and needs, and contributes to the validity and credibility of the sample (Patton, 1990). In accordance with previously defined criteria, all participants are practicing community journalists, have been engaged in the field of community journalism for at least three years, and currently live in or near the communities in which they work. The newspapers at which these community journalists are employed also had to meet several criteria. They must have circulations less than 10,000, be based in towns with populations less than 6,000, and be the primary source of local-only print news for residents of the community. The towns also had to be located

within a three-hour driving distance from Kansas State University in Manhattan, due to time and financial constraints.

Town demographics, general information about the newspapers provided by the Kansas Press Association and newspaper staffers, an expressed willingness to participate on the part of publishers and/or editors, and advice from the Kansas-based Huck Boyd National Center for Community Media led to the decision to study the *Frankfort Area News* in Frankfort, KS, the *Marysville Advocate* in Marysville, KS, *The Onaga Herald* in Onaga, KS, *The Prairie Post* in White City, KS, the *Riley Countian*, in Riley, KS, *The St. Marys Star* in St. Marys, KS, *The Wabaunsee County Signal-Enterprise* in Alma, KS, the *Wamego Times* in Wamego, KS, the *Washington County News* in Washington, KS, and the *Westmoreland Recorder* in Westmoreland, KS. The newspapers in this study ranged in circulation from 745 to 5,255. The populations of the towns in which these newspapers were based ranged from 518 to 4,246. Specific information regarding each newspaper included in this study is detailed in Appendix A.

Instrumentation

An interview guide was developed for this study consisting of a number of questions designed to garner narrative data from participants with which to answer the research questions. In the interview-guide approach to interviewing, topics and issues to be covered are specified in advance in outline form and the interviewer decides the sequence and wording of questions in the course of the interview (Patton, 1990). A draft interview guide consisting of more than 20 open-ended questions drawn from the social responsibility, moral and ethical, and social influences theories was pre-tested on three practicing community journalists at newspapers meeting the sample criteria but not

included in the sample. These series of pre-tests served to extract repetitive or confusing questions, refine those deemed retainable, and establish a general order and flow. The final interview guide used in this research consisted of 16 questions (see Appendix B).

Procedure

Data for this study were gathered via naturalistic inquiry methodology, in this case, a triangulation of qualitative depth interviewing methods – informant and ethnographic – within the context of society. Derived from the interpretive paradigm, naturalistic inquiry methodology allows behaviors, meanings, and social actions of people to be studied and understood in their own contexts (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002).

Qualitative depth interview methodologies have been used in the social science fields for years and often yield more solid descriptive data than other qualitative or quantitative research methods (Coble-Krings, 2005). Lindlof and Taylor (2002) argue that interviews are “particularly well suited to understand the social actor’s experience and perspective” (p. 173) and are one of the most effective means of eliciting explanations of behavior. Informant interviews in particular, assert Lindlof and Taylor, provide the researcher with information about “key features and processes of the scene” (p. 176). Data garnered from interviews consist of direct quotations from participants about their experiences, opinions, feelings, and knowledge (Patton, 1990).

Qualitative communication research in general and news media research in particular often employ depth interview methodologies. Interviews also have been used extensively in the study of specific areas of news media research, including community journalism (e.g., Coble-Krings, 2005; Coleman, 2007; Hansen, 1994; Kurpius, 2000; Ray, 1995), audience effects on newsroom decision making (e.g., Larkin & Grotta, 1979;

Lind, Rarick, & Swenson-Lepper, 1997; Morrison & Svennevig, 2007), model development (Kurpius, 2000), and news media ethics (Boevink, 1998; Lind et al., 1997; Mogavero, 1982; Voakes, 2000). The depth interview methodology is especially valid in the study of media ethics, as it has been tested and refined over the course of two and a half millennia, beginning “nearly 2,500 years ago when Socrates, according to his faithful student Plato, roamed Greece probing and challenging his brethren’s ideas about such abstract concepts as justice and goodness. This Socratic method of inquiry, consisting of relentless questions and answers about the nature of moral conduct, has proved to be a durable commodity...” (Day, 2006, p. 3).

Informant Interviews

Ten informant interviews, instrumented through an interview-guide approach, were conducted with practicing community journalists in decision-making positions, one from each community newspaper identified previously. These participants constituted primary subjects, that is, those who have long experience in the cultural scene and can serve as reliable sources; those who have served the scene in different roles and can speak knowledgeably about roles and responsibility and how the social parts work together; those who are respected by peers, superiors, and subordinates; and those who are fluent in local language forms (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002), in this case, experienced publishers or editors of community newspapers. The field research, carried out within a three-week period in the fall of 2007, consisted of the researcher traveling to the newsrooms on actual news days and interviewing participants face to face. Interviews with the 10 publishers and/or editors were conducted at their convenience. The average interview lasted about 75 minutes. Responses were recorded mechanically, accompanied

by careful note taking, and questions and responses were transcribed verbatim for purposes of analysis (see Appendix C).

Informant interviews are one of the most-used depth-interview strategies, as evidenced by the method's frequent application in communications research (e.g., Bardhan, 2003; Fortunato, 2001; Hyland, 2001; Palan, 1998; Peterson, 1994). Strengths of this approach, according to Patton (1990), include the establishment of a fairly conversational and situational tone and flexibility in direction, while maintaining a somewhat systematic flow and high level of data comprehensiveness.

Ethnographic Interviews

Twenty ethnographic interviews were conducted through an informal-conversational approach with both primary subjects and secondary subjects at the community newspapers identified previously. In this case, secondary subjects consisted of supporting community journalists or others involved in the production of the community newspaper. According to Lindlof and Taylor (2002), "the ethnographic interview – also known as the informal conversational interview or a situational conversation – occurs while the investigator is in the field" (p. 176). Many such interviews are spontaneous. In this approach, there is no predetermination of topics, questions, or wording. Instead, questions are spawned from the immediate context and are asked in the natural course of events (Patton, 1990). In this study, data gleaned from this approach were recorded via careful note taking and used to validate or invalidate informant data.

Qualitative communications researchers have traditionally relied on ethnographic depth interview techniques (e.g., Alperstein, 1991; Baxter & Goldsmith, 1990; Chang,

2006; Clark, Demont-Heinrich, & Weber, 2004; Dannels, 2005; Kleinman, 2006; Lindsley, 1999; Maso-Fleischman, 1997; Paterson, 2001; Pearson, 2007; Prentice & Kramer, 2006; Sandel, 2002; Seiter, 1989; Weinstein, 2007; West & Gastil, 2004). Strengths of this approach, according to Patton (1990), are salience and relevance of questions, the fact that questions often sprout from direct observation, and the ability to tailor the interview to varying participants and circumstances.

Data Analysis

Following collection of data, recorded informant interviews were transcribed. The narrative transcripts were analyzed and recurring thematic categories were identified through open coding techniques according to the tenets of grounded theory. These categories were labeled and paired with corresponding verbal data to be used as exemplars.

Validation

Data and findings were subjected to member validation – that is, a cycling of data back through participants to ensure accuracy and that data weighting, evaluation, and reconstruction were done fairly and accurately. Such a check is considered a means of validation by qualitative research methodologists, including Lindlof and Taylor (2002) and Fortner and Christians (2003).

Furthermore, Lindlof and Taylor (2002), Fortner and Christians (2003), Patton (1990), and Berg (1998), among others, endorse the strategy of triangulation as one way to increase descriptive validity (the factual accuracy of reportage) and interpretive validity (the accuracy of explanation of social actors' meaning) of qualitative studies. This study employs four-way triangulation: triangulation of sampling approaches,

triangulation of methods, triangulation of sources, and triangulation of theory and perspectives in the analysis of data. As mentioned earlier, the triangulation of purposive sampling approaches allows flexibility, meets multiple interests and needs, and contributes to the validity and credibility of the sample (Patton, 1990). Method triangulation provides a check of the consistency of findings obtained via differing data-collection methods and helps ensure the collection of a wealth of data, reducing the possibility of missing vital data or collecting aberrational or non-contextual data. This use of multiple data-gathering techniques to investigate the same phenomenon is generally understood by researchers to be a means of “mutual confirmation of measures and validation of findings” (Berg, p. 5). The importance of the strategy, then, is not so much in the collection of different forms of data, but “the attempt to relate them so as to counteract the threats to validity identified in each” (Berg, p. 5). Triangulation of sources, also known as accurate assessment of secondary sources, provides a check of the consistency of different data sources within the same method. Method and source triangulation allow the verification and corroboration of evidence, increasing the validity and credibility of the findings. As for analysis of the findings, triangulation of theory and perspectives in data analysis allows more open and unbiased evaluation of data by researchers. Such an approach to analysis is in line with what Chen and Rossi (1987) advocate, namely, a theory-driven approach to validity of evaluation.

External validity of qualitative methodologies, defined by Fortner and Christians (2003) as the representativeness of cases to the social unit to which they belong, is addressed by the selection criteria of participants and newspapers from the Midwest, a region documented as relatively homogenous in culture, attitude, and characteristic

(Shortridge, 1989; Smethers & Jolliffe, 1998; Waitley, 1963; Walker, 1972). Internal validity of qualitative methodologies, defined by Fortner and Christians as the genuineness of features of the situation under study, is addressed by the practical nature of the questions, which delve into a process employed by participants on a daily basis in the very setting in which it happens.

One final means of validation for this study that departs from generally accepted protocol for empirical research is the identification of participants and their association with the data they provided. Such means of validation were utilized only after receiving approval and express written permission from the researcher's sponsoring institution and from the participants themselves. Findings from research involving human subjects that offers identification of data sources – a journalistic norm – contain a degree of validity and credibility not realizable in studies that interpret data collected from anonymous subjects unknown and unknowable to consumers of that research.

CHAPTER 4 - Findings

Findings are presented by research question in the order they were previously posed and then supported by exemplars. The first research question sought the factors considered by a community journalist when faced with a decision of whether or how to cover, write, and treat news for a particular audience. The second research question sought to determine how and at what point those factors are considered within the community journalist's ethical decision-making process. The third research question sought to determine how and at what point community standards fit into the community journalist's decision-making process. All findings reported were validated by ethnographic interview data.

RQ1: The Factors

The first research question sought to ascertain factors considered by a community journalist when faced with a decision of whether and/or how to cover, write, and treat news for a particular audience. Analysis of transcribed informant interview data revealed at least three factors that emerged in the form of thematic categories validated by ethnographic data gleaned from both informants and secondary subjects: (1) how coverage or treatment would affect the journalist, (2) how coverage or treatment would affect others, and (3) the perceived public instructional value of coverage or treatment.

The following concerns each of these three factors:

Consideration of Self

One factor community journalists consider when faced with an ethical decision of news judgment is how the coverage or treatment of a potential news item will affect the

journalist. As Joann Kahnt, publisher and editor of *The Prairie Post* in White City, KS, put it:

I mean, you're the one that's going to suffer the consequences. If I put something in the paper that people don't like, they can't blame anyone else. I can't blame the printer. I can't blame anyone else. The buck stops here, so that's what you have to make your decision on... How much do I care about what other people say? And that's what it boils down to. And how important do I think this issue is? Is it important enough for me to offend people? Is it important enough that I might lose friendship over it? And my answer is probably going to be no. I – luckily – haven't had too many of those experiences... But you also have to look at it from a financial end of it. The post office just has started gouging us, and so finances is [*sic*] a big thing now – bigger than it ever was before, 'cause our expenses skyrocketed 27 percent when the post office just had this increase a few weeks ago. ... But bottom line is the buck stops here. I know in the big newspapers, the buck basically stops with the editor-in-chief, but – let's face it – he don't [*sic*] see half of what is actually put in the paper. He has this person and this person that's [*sic*] in charge of this department and this department. Well, there's [*sic*] two of us here... And I own the newspaper; I'm the editor, so it's all on my shoulders.

As indicated by Kahnt, this consideration of self is manifest in a number of variants.

Analysis of data and identification of thematic categories revealed at least four, listed in approximate order of prevalence: (1) social, (2) moral, (3) physical, and (4) economic.

Social

This consideration involves how the journalist's friendships, associations, contacts, or membership in community may be affected by the decision.

When faced with a decision of whether or not to call the grieving mother of a recently deceased student athlete from her community, Donna Sullivan, publisher and editor of the *Riley Countian* in Riley, KS, considered how such a telephone call could make her look: "And so then I'm sitting here thinking, 'If I call her, am I going to look just like a news shark trying to get a different angle on somebody?'" The social-effect personal consideration enters into any decision Sullivan makes with regard to potentially controversial news coverage, content, or treatment: "By nature, I'm a people-pleaser. And as soon as controversy enters in, you know that there's going to be some people that are going to hate you and disagree with what you said..."

Being hated – even disliked – also bothers Dan Thalmann, publisher and editor of the Washington, KS,-based *Washington County News*: "And I feel really bad, because I really want to be friends with everyone. It's just my nature. But there's [*sic*] times where I'm definitely not going to be and that hurts my feelings. ... You don't want people hating your guts." Thalmann also asserted that the social-effect personal consideration is not so prevalent in the decision-making processes of large, metropolitan newspaper journalists as it is at the community journalism level: "I know every single – not every single person – but I'm going to run into these people that I cover. The big-city daily doesn't..." For example, Thalmann said he was not looking forward to seeing the board of county commissioners, who he expected would not react kindly to an editorial in the previous week's newspaper:

But I know Monday I'm going to run into those commissioners and they aren't going to be too happy with me and neither is the economic development director, who is really behind this whole thing. And so, that's the hardest part, is having to run into those people the week after...

Connie Musil, publisher and editor of the *Frankfort Area News*, based in Frankfort, KS, agreed, saying this consideration often prevents her from covering controversial news:

But that's one of the reasons why we don't do controversial things ... because you're going to see these people. It's not like you're going to write about these people and never see them again. You have to live here. So we just avoid the controversy...

John Roche, publisher and editor of the *Westmoreland Recorder* in Westmoreland, KS, who said he does not avoid all controversy, but limits it, concurred: "... there are things that are going to come up that you have to put in that are going to damage friendships. Even as it stands with no more controversy than I write, I mean, I get glares from people..."

Steve Tetlow, publisher and editor of *The St. Marys Star* in St. Marys, KS, said that is a choice the journalist has to make, adding that some simply do not care about such social implications. Others, like Tetlow, do:

Now, if you are so thick-skinned that you're willing to do that and you feel comfortable walking into the restaurant and the bar and eating by yourself and getting bad-mouthed ... and you can live with that, you can live with yourself, and you can live by yourself, and you don't care what people think about your

wife, and you don't care what people think about your kids, and if that's the way you want to do 'er, then that's the way it is, because I can cite you a newspaper that does that. Nobody cares for the guy.

Moral

This consideration usually manifests itself in the form of a general question the journalist poses to himself or herself along the lines of "Could I live with myself if I did this?"

Sullivan identified herself as a "conservative Christian." She said the question she often poses to herself when deciding issues of content, coverage, and treatment is, "How do you handle it fairly without compromising your own deeply held beliefs?"

Thalman cited a decision he made based, in part, upon what he "felt comfortable with." In one instance, he said, he knew he "should" write a news article on survey results garnered by a community-based committee on which he served. "But I'm on the committee," he reasoned. "This is uncomfortable all the sudden." He did not write the article. "I do my best to consider what's good and right," he said. "Maybe I make the right decision; maybe I don't, but so far, I can live with myself."

Ervan Stuewe, publisher and editor of *The Wabaunsee County Signal-Enterprise* in Alma, KS, considers this personal, moral effect in terms of his journalistic integrity – "I'm not going to put my integrity in question..." – as does Joe Harder, publisher and editor of *The Onaga Herald* in Onaga, KS, who listed appearing "crooked" as one such personal consideration. Musil related an instance in which she decided not to publish a photograph of a motor-vehicle accident, in part, because she "just didn't really feel good about it."

Physical

This consideration relates to how a decision of coverage, content, or treatment could affect how easy or difficult it becomes for the journalist to physically cover, write, or treat a news item in print.

For example, Stuewe said he routinely covers positive, promotional, community-boosting-type news over and above more hard-line, watchdog-type news, in part, because “it’s a lot easier to report on those items and there are a lot of them, too.” Roche adheres to the same philosophy of tending toward positive booster-type coverage rather than hard-line, watchdog-type news as “that’s what I prefer to write.” Harder agreed, asserting that “it takes more energy to investigate stuff and dig out the dirties” than to write more positive, promotional pieces. Tetlow discussed this consideration in terms of sources:

You have to decide – I guess – decide for yourself. ‘Cause these are not renewable, replenishable resources. ‘Cause once you burn them, that’s it. A town of 3,000, you go through them and that’s about it. You’ve got to choose wisely, prudently. And if it’s fair, it’s fair, but you may have to live with the consequence.

Economic

This consideration concerns how a decision of coverage, content, or treatment could affect the decision-making journalist economically – in the form of subscriptions, newsstand sales, or advertising.

According to Harder, one question he considers when faced with a decision of coverage, content, or treatment is, “Will it hurt my business? Obviously, in a small town,

you have to think about that.” Tetlow agreed, saying he has “mouths to feed,” as does Kahnt, who said the factor “has to be” considered. Thalmann added: “I try really hard not to do any of my judgments on money. And that’s tough, ‘cause I know there’s [sic] times that this might be really painful...” Harder qualified this consideration, however, when he stated:

It just kind of goes around. If I make a good living in here, each organization gets more of a donation every time they come walking in the door. And believe me, they do. Every time there’s a church auction or a church something going on, they walk in the door and want something. And I’ve got no problem – I give back to the community.

Consideration of Others

Another factor community journalists consider when faced with an ethical decision of news judgment is how the coverage or treatment of the potential news item will affect others – an individual, a family, or the community as a whole.

Harder listed the factor as his first consideration: “Well, of course, the first thing you have to think about is what are the consequences of my decision. Are the consequences of what’s in the paper going to hurt a person? If it’s a youngster, how will a negative news story help that youngster become a better citizen?” Harder offered an example:

We had a young man – he’s a showoff. He was carrying a knife at school – at a school function. He was jumping; his knife fell out of his boot. Nobody had to know it was there – he wasn’t showing it off; he didn’t pull it on anybody. It fell out of his boot. Well, that’s a news story in [larger city] or [larger city] – this 15-

16-year-old boy has a knife at school. In Onaga, Kansas, it's not. ... So I chose not to do anything with it... I didn't want to encourage him to show off any more. I was hoping that just that incident alone would take care of itself and just let it go. ... And if I can spare a reputation, I will. By the same token, I will try to help someone's reputation.

Using an example of a motor-vehicle crash, Harder applied the same consideration to families:

I consider – even going to cover a wreck story – I consider is it going to hurt the family. ... We had a guy just recently ... hit by a train. It killed him. It didn't injure him severely; it killed him. Well, I didn't sensationalize it nothing [*sic*]. I just reported what the Highway Patrol and the county gave me. I didn't go down and take pictures of the train and the body laying [*sic*] there. I just reported the story as the facts were presented to me. It served absolutely no purpose to go down and take a picture of a train and the area where he was killed and it certainly wouldn't have helped the family at all of the guy that was hit. So, no. I considered that. ... That all goes in to how I make my decisions on what to put in the paper.

As evidenced by Harder's examples, consideration of how the news item could affect people, families, or the community comes into play in decisions of whether or not to cover a potential news item. The consideration also figures into decisions of how to cover and how to treat news in the newspaper.

Decisions of Whether to Cover

In rendering a decision of whether to include a news article about the son of a local couple serving time in federal prison for attempted murder, Sullivan said she

considered whether “one family [was] just going to be further humiliated and hurt and embarrassed by having that kind of story in the paper.” She concluded they would and the story was never written.

In a case of missing city funds, Roche said he faced a decision of whether or not the damage publication of the information would cause the accused, her family, and the community was worth it:

Because it would cause more damage than what the information was worth, I just let it ride. I didn’t do it. ... Damage to the people that were on the City Commission. Damage to the family of the woman that was behind all the stuff that was going on, and – she’s got family here and she is part of the community and a lot of small-town communities don’t have the ability to forget stuff...

In some cases, concern for others even extends to the deceased. When deciding whether or not to publish a photograph of a fatal motor-vehicle wreck, Howard Kessinger, publisher of the *Marysville Advocate* in Marysville, KS, said he considered the effect such a decision would have on “the guy’s mom and his family and friends,” but was also mindful of the deceased. Kessinger said he did not publish the photograph, in part, out of “respect for the person, even though he was dead. He mostly had led a good life.”

Decisions of How to Cover and Treat

For Stuewe, more often than not, concern for the effect of the news item on others figures into decisions of not whether to cover an event, but how: “I think you can still report what’s going on without embarrassing somebody.” Using an example of an allegation by a concerned parent that a city employee had assaulted her son in a quasi-

sexual manner, Stuewe said, “I report[ed] what happened, but I didn’t get into some of the gory details.” The same basic principle applies to his coverage of motor-vehicle crashes: “We always put it in print. We talk about what has happened, but I don’t put pictures or anything like that.” Another example illustrated his point:

Well, I think that when you’re a small community, everybody knows each other and everybody’s either family or friends or whatever and if you’ve got a lady that – here a while back – got caught under a farm implement. She was drug to death and... I mean, it just tore her apart. ... Everybody was aware of what happened... But we put in the paper that she was drug under a farm implement and died of multiple injuries. I don’t feel like that family has to relive that over and over and over, and I guess that for me... I try to put myself in that position, and maybe I’m not being a good journalist because of that, but I don’t feel like it’s really necessary to hurt those people again ... I mean, it’s bad enough that it happened, that you can put in the paper what did happen, but I don’t know that they need the details.

Stuewe said this alteration of coverage or treatment differentiates community newspapers from major metropolitan newspapers. He offered another example:

I saw something here two weeks ago that I thought was pretty tacky... This little boy – or he was [a] 9-year-old or 12-year-old, or whatever he was – boy from [city] that fell in the river and drowned and the [metropolitan city] paper covered that quite a bit and that was fine. But when they finally had their funeral service, I mean, they had the picture of the mother and the father and the two children. I think that was... It was a Catholic Church and they were kneeling in the front of

the church and it looked like this camera guy practically crawled up in the pulpit and took a picture of them. I don't know. I just felt like that was kind of tacky and I feel like people need to have a little dignity...

Tetlow covered the same story for his community newspaper, as the incident took place near his community. However, he, too, thought the metropolitan newspaper's coverage was uncalled for and handled his coverage completely differently:

It was on the front page [of the metropolitan newspaper] every week – every day. Of fathers – the Reverend Father so and so and at Mass and the fathers – the dads, I mean – on this slot right here, full color. And about how [victim's name]'s not found, about this, about that. And so the *Star* – one article – said that “[victim's name] had drowned and he's not found. There will be a requiem Mass on Saturday morning at 10 a.m.” And that's all we did. I got more thanks from that than anything that I've practically ever done as a newspaper person because that was it. Now, if they should ever find young [victim's name]'s body, I will record the fact that that's what happened. ... 'Cause there was [*sic*] no photos. There was no priest in robes and their dad. ... And that was harsh enough – those brief words. So much less was so much more on that occasion, that this boy and his buddies and a couple of his brothers and that dad, the sandbar broke away and everybody was going everywhere and the dad grabs all of these brothers, but it's like – it's like a mother and her cubs. I mean, how much can you grab? One got away. You don't have to say a lot about that. As a journalist, you don't have to put it in full color. If you've any imagination at all, and you can put down in some brief words, “They were on a sandbar. It broke away. Dad was grabbing.” ... It wasn't a

bloody train wreck. And it was the editor trying to be sensitive of the family and the extended family beyond that. You have immediate family, but ... the community can be your family.

Roche, who listed this consideration as one of the most important in his decision-making process, also draws a distinction between community newspapers and metropolitan newspapers and agrees that community can be one's family. He said he asks himself:

How do I deal with this and find out what the facts are and, because people in small towns are – that's their neighbor that you're talking about. It's their mom or their dad or their cousin that you're talking about. Where in a big city, it's some abstract person obscurely on the other side of the state that they really couldn't care less about one way or the other.

Roche said he draws a line between journalistic ethics and concerns for the audience “when people start getting hurt.”

Kahnt used an example of a decision of whether to run a photograph of a fatal motor-vehicle accident on the front page or inside to illustrate how she takes into consideration a concern for people:

There wasn't any sense in those people having to open up their front – open up their paper and it's the first thing they saw. They know their kid had died in a car wreck. ... That was just a concern I had for the – and compassion – for the people that were going to be hurt the most, was going to be these parents, so that was my decision making there...

Public Instructional Value

A third factor community journalists consider when faced with an ethical decision of news judgment is the perceived public instructional value of certain coverage or treatment, in other words, the perceived public benefit or lack thereof of coverage or treatment.

Stuewe said he considers the public instructional value of a potential news item every time he covers city council meetings. He said the factor is a driving one when he is faced with decisions of whether to report a news item or not:

I go to four different city council meetings and ... I always see council members and mayors say things under their breath that are stupid. And I have a good relationship with all those communities and I know that there is nothing going to be served by making those dumb comments public and I just overlook it. If it's something that really pertains to an issue, then I go ahead and report it. I guess that, in time, you learn to use good judgment about what you can and can't use. ... At the meeting in Paxico, there was a little exchange over... Oh there were a few barbs thrown and some of the little dumb things that came out, I didn't really write, but then there were a couple things where the one guy said, "I really don't agree with that," and I felt like it had some substance to it, it was important, so I went ahead and reported that.

Thalman said public instructional value can deem a potential news item reportable, even though it may be uncomfortable to do so:

And sometimes it's because maybe I need to make sure there's an awareness out there. If there's a pedophile out there, as uncomfortable as that is to stick on the

front page, especially if it's someone everyone knows, I make sure and go ahead and do it. And, unfortunately, a recent one was Pastor [name] sex exploitation – sexual exploitation case, and this happened to be my former pastor and my parents' current pastor. And boy, was that sure awkward when that came across the district court filing. ... You have to make sure something is relevant rather than you're only doing it for the shock value. And that's why I say like for crime, I will do sex cases, murder, those sorts of big things, but if there's a domestic or something, I'm not going to talk about – I just don't see the reason behind documenting a big old divorce fight or some civil matter or something like that.

Mark Portell, publisher and editor of the *Wamego Times* in Wamego, KS, said the perceived instructional value of a news item or photograph to his readers is the paramount consideration in his decision-making process. He used the example of news coverage of a serious motor-vehicle accident to illustrate this. "I will take pictures of a car accident," he said, but added, "I won't take photographs of a person who's laying [sic] there injured on the ground." When asked why, he responded:

Well, I guess it serves no purpose – to see a mangled and bloody body laying [sic] there on the ground. ... Now, I suppose if it served a purpose to show someone there bleeding on the ground, it would be different. But I don't see what that purpose is."

Analysis of data also indicates that community journalists sometimes attempt to weigh consideration of public instructional value against the two preceding factors, potential effect on self and potential effect on others. Sullivan stated, "I guess part of my decision-making process is will it serve the greater good or will it actually have more of a

negative effect than a positive?” In one case in particular, she said she found herself weighing how well the community would be served by the news item against the potential harm, humiliation, and embarrassment publication of the news item could cause a family in the community.

Roche said he did the same in rendering a decision not to publish a news article about embezzled city funds. Because he realized that “everybody knew what the details were,” he decided “the amount of damage it would cause was far above the value of the information they would gain. ... The amount of news value from it would have been far less than the amount of damage it would have caused.”

Kahnt said the public-instructional-value factor figures prominently in her admittedly situational decision-making process:

Well, I guess I just take every instance separately and try to think through what good is this going to do. Do the people really need to know this? Is it something so important that it's important enough that if somebody's feelings get hurt over it, it's more important to put the article in than the person's feelings?

Even so, Kahnt said, public instructional value does not trump all: “Do they want controversial? Sometimes, yeah. And sometimes, that's good, because it makes people think about opinions and how they really feel about something. Now, if it was full of controversy, no. Then it wouldn't be it.”

Harder said he also considers the public instructional value of a potential news item when faced with ethical decisions of news judgment. In the case of a knife-wielding student, he reasoned, “Everybody in town knew about it anyway.” In the case of a fatal train accident, “I didn't go down and take pictures of the train and the body laying [*sic*]

there. I just reported the story as the facts were presented to me. It served absolutely no purpose to go down and take a picture of a train and the area where he was killed...” In the case of an alleged embezzlement of city funds, “I just dropped it. Would it have accomplished anything more? ‘Cause it was all over town.” In all three instances, the consideration influenced Harder’s decision of whether or not to cover or how to cover community news.

Musil said the lack of public instructional value helped her decide to not run photographs of motor-vehicle accidents in her newspaper – ever:

Why do we think about putting that stuff in? It doesn’t really benefit anything to put that kind of stuff in. And so it just made me stop and think a little bit that if we can – if we do put them in the paper, it should be for something good, not something bad, unless it’s just necessary for the community to have that information. Well, if we put a car wreck in the paper, what good does that do? Unless maybe just someone could be more careful driving, which they are...

RQ2: The Decision-Making Process

The second research question sought to determine how and at what point the aforementioned factors are considered within the community journalist’s ethical decision-making process. None of the community journalists interviewed could identify a systematic decision-making process to which he or she consistently adhered.

Sullivan said she goes through a mental checklist when making an ethical decision of news judgment, but in no particular order:

I mean, I don't have a list of criteria that I sit there and say, "OK. Does it meet this, this, this, or this?" I don't go through that process, but mentally it's kind of like I kind of go through a little checklist...

Roche dismissed the idea that the decision-making process is systematic or orderly in any way, saying it more closely resembles what he termed "mental gymnastics," that is, when "each thought leads to another thought leads to another thought, and as you dig through it, OK, what about this and what about that? ... I don't have in my notebook one, two, three, four."

Kahnt said a systematic decision-making process is not realistic in the world of community journalism as "every instance is different" and needs to be considered situationally, a fact Kessinger identified as one of the more enjoyable aspects of the job: "That's one of the neat things about newspapers is everything's different and every Monday morning, things are – you're going to have different things..."

Tetlow agreed, recognizing the value of teaching "very structured journalism and very structured decision-making process[es] in the classroom," but acknowledging that such processes are not always conducive for practical application. "You can take [those] teachings," he said, "but there's going to be a point when you deviate from it... If you are truly what you're in the profession to do, as a journalist, it will occur to you the proper path to take."

RQ3: Community Standards

The third research question sought to determine how and at what point community standards fit into the community journalist's decision-making process. Underlying nearly all of participants' responses to questions, anecdotal examples, and

descriptions of associated thought processes was one constant: nothing is covered, written or photographed, or placed in a community newspaper without some consideration – albeit unstructured, informal, and even subconscious – of how the news item or treatment of the news item could be received by members of the community.

Some community journalists immediately recognized the prominence of the influence of community standards in their ethical decision-making processes. Sullivan, who said community standards influence decisions of news coverage, content, and treatment “quite a bit,” and termed conformity to community standards by the community newspaper “pretty important,” stated that it is difficult for her to differentiate between journalism ethics and community standards:

There’s just not that big of a disparity between them. I think that, in general, that the standards that the people hold journalists to are miles apart from the standards journalists hold themselves to. And so I figure, if I adhere to their standards ... I’m going to be way far ahead...

Nothing is covered, written, or placed on Sullivan’s newspaper pages without some consideration of community standards, and those standards can and do influence decisions of news judgment. For example, though a carefully written feature story about a local man’s success in a poker tournament made the cut, “if some young lady was to all the sudden become a porn star or something, I’m not going to cover that. I mean, I would know – OK – that people are not going to think much of this.” The basic question Sullivan asks herself when testing a potential news item against the standards of her community is:

Does it reflect the flavor of our community? ... That's pretty important, because if you don't know your community well enough to have a feel for what they would take as acceptable and wouldn't take as acceptable, then you've got a problem much deeper than that. You better know the town that you're putting a paper out for and representing.

Kahnt agreed that not only consideration of, but adherence to community standards is vital. "Probably every newspaper gets their standards from their community," she said, adding, "You conform because you've got to... You have to give the people what they want." And she does. In fact, Kahnt said, she judges the ethicality of decisions within the standards of the community:

I've never had journalism training, so nobody's ever really told me what I'm supposed to do and what I'm [not] supposed to do. The community has been much more of a tool for that. ... I guess my training came from high school English class and not from the professional journalism angle, so my decision making is more about what I perceive our community wanting and how I feel about our community and things that I look at as being more important more so than the standards for journalism. ... It is knowing the sense of the community.

Roche also recognized that news coverage, content, and treatment in his newspaper were "fairly heavily" influenced by the standards of his community:

I mean – good grief – ultimately, it comes down to the fact that if you ignore your subscribers, you won't have subscribers. ... I think that's where you basically got [*sic*] to tailor your newspaper to the community and know what they're looking for. ... You've got to kind of put in what they want to hear.

Harder explained the importance of conforming to community standards in no uncertain terms: “I think if it doesn’t conform to the standards of the community, you’re not going to be in business very long.” So community standards do play a critical role in the decision-making processes of community journalists. “Absolutely,” Harder said. “It has to.” Harder said he was uniquely qualified to speak on the subject, as a quarter-century ago, he watched then-owners of his newspaper reject the standards of the community and nearly drive the newspaper into the ground. “I think the people were very dissatisfied with the way they were producing their newspaper,” he said. “I think it has to influence the way you run a newspaper – what the public, how the public perceives you.”

Musil said she was also able to speak with authority on the importance of adhering to community standards, as her newspaper was founded in 1990, shortly after the community’s historical newspaper folded in the wake of community outrage at an outsiders’ neglect of the standards of the community. “I think it’s probably pretty important to give people what they expect,” Musil said. “For example, the newspaper that didn’t make it. He tried to do something different. . . . I guess the community in a way spoke that that was not what they wanted as a newspaper.” Meanwhile, Musil said she always considers community standards when writing or placing news in the newspaper. She said she does not cover intercommunity controversy, as it is not in line with the standards of the community she serves. She said she does cover controversial news, as long as it is for the benefit of the community and the community is cognizant of that: “I don’t think anything else hard-line that’s not of benefit to the community would go over.” That’s not to say the standards of the community do not conflict with journalistic ethics or personal values, she said, but they may be – and often are – trumped by community

standards: “There may be sometimes where we say ‘I’d really like to print that,’ but I know we shouldn’t...”

Other community journalists were not so quick to recognize the influence of community standards on their ethical decision-making processes. However, after relating anecdotes of past decisions; dissecting various examples of coverage, content, and treatment examples from their past; and responding to interview-guide questions and follow-up inquiries, the influence was realized.

Initially, Thalmann was adamant that his ethical decisions of news judgment were made independently of community standards, adding that “conformity is basically the community telling me what my job’s going to be without me deciding.” After a few more questions and discussion of past decisions, however, Thalmann did realize his judgment is based heavily on the perceived and actual reaction of his audience to newspaper content and treatment of that content:

I guess that’d be very important, then. I mean, I guess my judgment’s made on how is the reaction... So I guess, in that case, very important, ‘cause all I do is respond to what I feel is going on and that sort of thing. I’d almost have to look at the negative. If I’d be getting constant negative, would I still try to stick to what I think is the right way to do it? No. ... I’d try to find out what I could do to please them and still be accurate. So I probably took your [question] wrong in the first place...

Community standards influenced a number of decisions of news judgment offered by Thalmann, including the decision to be vague, rather than specific, when describing graphic charges leveled against an accused rapist; not to publish a photograph of a bloody

motor-vehicle crash; and not to pursue a potential series of news articles on small-town rivalries:

There should probably be some stories that I do that would really reflect that, but I don't, because I just – I know that Washington folks just wouldn't care for me writing about them that way. ... I'm sure there are stories that I could be doing, but because the local standards are very pro-themselves, I find other stories to do instead.

Tetlow also initially asserted that decisions of news content, coverage, and treatment were not influenced by community standards to a large extent. However, shortly after making the assertion, he related the following anecdote:

We had an ongoing case of an instance that should be vehicular manslaughter, which should probably end up with some kind of a diversion, and I've been hitting on that thing for over a year just absolutely trying to overstate that situation to the point where maybe it may border on maybe not fair. But it's not not fair, because it is fair, because a woman drifted over the center line and she was proven drunk and killed this 66-year-old man and maimed his wife. He's dead. She's permanently and physically scarred, and this woman still walks free. Well, what influences me is the fact that not only [have] those lives been affected, but virtually the whole community has been affected, 'cause they've been engaged in some way with these people and their lives were changed and ruined and lost in a split second and through a night of indiscretion.

In this case, it seems the decision to heavily cover this news item was driven by the interests and outrage of the community – the standards of that community at the time.

Tetlow later stated that, “We are in the Midwest and I’m a Midwesterner, so what’s my thinking? ... My thought process is generally congruent with [the] community’s,” adding shortly after, “so you really can’t second-guess your readers.”

Portell was also adamant that he did not conform to community standards, asserting that the “news that I cover, the events that I cover, or the way that I cover them, I don’t believe have ever been influenced by people in the community.” However, when asked to identify the factors he considers when faced with a decision of whether to cover something, how to cover something, or how to treat something in his newspaper, the lone one identified was the perceived interest of his readers – the members of his community. And as for the effect social ties to members of the community have on decisions of coverage or treatment, Portell commented:

Well, it shouldn’t affect them at all. I’m not going to say that it doesn’t or never has. In the small town, unless the newspaper editor is a recluse, he’s going to know some of the people that, at one time or another, he’s going to be writing about.

In contrast to the notion of news coverage, content, and treatment being shaped or influenced by community standards, some community journalists suggested that perhaps community standards – or reader expectations – are shaped or molded by consistent editorial practice. The journalists who spoke to this notion were either longtime publishers or editors in the community or were knowingly following in the footsteps of longtime predecessors.

In Thalmann’s case, he said his readers knew what to expect from their former longtime publisher and know what to expect from him: “We have a good history here of

publishers and editors who have done their job, and so, therefore, I think they expect that from me constantly.” In turn, Thalmann said he strives to offer consistency of coverage, content, and treatment, so as to align with the prior standard and the one formulating around his four-year editorial tenure. Using an example of a sexual assault story, Thalmann said:

Those sorts of things are the hardest to do – anything sexual in nature. And frankly, what I’ve found is that in those sorts of uncomfortable stories, I protect myself by being consistent. I cover it. I do the facts. People know I’m going to cover it, so they don’t – at this point, they’re not even trying to tell me not to anymore. And it’s worked out real well.

Stuewe, who has published his newspaper for nearly two decades, said his long tenure has actually affected the way he considers community standards when rendering an ethical decision of news coverage, content, or treatment. When asked to what extent community standards influence these decisions, he replied, “Oh, I don’t think to a large extent, or else I don’t perceive it as being that way any more. Maybe it did in the earlier years, but I don’t seem to think so any more.” Indeed, early on in the interview, he stated, “I probably handle them a lot differently now than I did 17 [or] 18 years ago. I think that I probably avoided a lot of things when I first started just because I knew that maybe it was unpopular.” When asked the reason for the change in consideration of community standards, Stuewe spoke of dual conformation:

I think everybody kind of figured out where we were all coming from – me, as far as figuring out what people expected and they figured out what they could expect from me, I guess. ... As far as how far I go with some of these things ... Don’t

expect me to get too far out of line with some of the reporting and we all kind of have an understanding anymore.

In light of this dual-conformation realization, Stuewe then termed adherence to community standards “real important,” and offered as an example his hesitance to publish “gory details” because “You can kind of get a feeling for what the tone is – what they expect from you...”

Kessinger spoke of community standards requiring “good taste” in the coverage and treatment of news in the newspaper and posited that that standard was formulated, in part, by past editors and publishers: “I think they really expect it here, because it’s a long-standing tradition...” Tetlow also spoke of the editor’s ability to “train” readers.

Portell, the longest-tenured single-newspaper community journalist interviewed for this study, said at this point, he is not sure what his readers expect, except for what he provides them. That standard was set long ago, he said, and has remained consistent for nearly three decades:

I don’t know if I became aware of the community standards. I know what my standards are as a journalist, and I’ve been here for a little over 27 years and you pretty much need to decide up front once you start what your standards are going to be – what you’re going to cover and what you’re not going to cover. And once you go down that path, you need to stick to it.

One other facet of community standards considered by community journalists is the differences in standards from community to community within the coverage area or – in some cases – within a single community. Thalmann’s newspaper is the county

newspaper, which covers a number of small communities. All have slightly different standards, he said:

This is the county seat, so this is a hodgepodge of cultural history. There's not one unifying... I mean, the thing about Washington County is Hanover is pretty much all German – in town, Catholic, out of town, Lutheran. Linn-Palmer, all German Lutheran. Go northwest, it's another kind of hodgepodge, but they're really small, off the main corridors, so they have a different perspective on the overall economy. And then Greenleaf and Barnes, I mean, there's... So, it's just so different. So, in town here, we kind of have a little bit of everything. So we have a very conservative situation in some parts, but we also have a very liberal area, too. I mean, this county's – what – number four on the most Republican counties in Kansas, and I'm a very conservative person, too, but I see varied – a lot of versions of that in politics and that sort of thing and Washington just has the full range... Gosh, I don't know. I don't know if I could even give a proper judgment of Washington standards, because they're so different. ... As far as standards go, I'll say social standards, and... Like there's [*sic*] a couple church communities here in town that are so conservative, yet this is also the town with probably the least church-going population in the county. ... And that's why you can so easily stereotype what a Linn-Palmer person will do, because they're pretty much going to be a German, Lutheran, conservative farmer. You can pretty much pinpoint Hanover, because they're going to be German, Catholic... Germans like to drink, too. Doing a beer garden in Linn and Hanover, they'd be pissed if you didn't have one at the festival. But then when they try to get a beer garden here in town for

their festival – a whole, controversy. Oh my gosh. “I’m not going to do business with you if you support that beer garden.” ... And I say that’s probably how it’s been for the last hundred years...

On the other hand, Tetlow said he has found himself in the midst of two differing community standards within the same community. He said he finds himself struggling to at least consider – and ideally adhere to – both.

This town is very divided ... and I did not know it when I got here. There is a traditional Catholic group that are from the academy and then there’s the rest of us. And the town looks like it’s 3,000; in actuality, it’s two communities of 1,500. And that’s called a schism. And I’m not a brilliant man, but I don’t – I don’t know – I don’t just out of the gate try to take one side or the other. I try to balance both sides, ‘cause there are both sides. And if you play it right, you can get along with both sides.

In the case of an apparent youth drowning near his community, Tetlow said he was able to meet both standards. His restrained coverage, which contrasted sharply with a metropolitan newspaper’s in-depth, illustrated coverage, found common ground between both standards:

And so the *Star* – one article – said that “[victim’s name] had drowned and he’s not found. There will be a requiem Mass on Saturday morning at 10 a.m.” And that’s all we did. I got more thanks from that than anything that I’ve practically ever done as a newspaper person because that was it. Now if they should ever find young [victim’s name]’s body, I will record the fact that that’s what happened. I think that’s what the community expects. And that was from them. ... This little

town has us and them and I try to be we. I had no idea – I thought I was just doing the right thing – but I had no idea it would be recognized, because the parents from that community called and said, “We normally don’t do this, but thank you.”

CHAPTER 5 - Discussion

The purpose of this study is to describe and map the process journalists employ when faced with questions of coverage, content, and treatment of news at community newspapers within the context of community standards. To that end, three research questions regarding the factors that figure into such a decision, the process of decision making, and how and where community standards fit into that process were posed. Results indicate at least three factors figure into a decision of whether to cover, how to cover, and how to treat news for community newspapers: (1) a consideration of how the potential news item or treatment of the potential news item will affect oneself, (2) how the potential news item or treatment of the potential news item will affect other people, and (3) the perceived instructional value of the potential news item. Results further indicate that the decision-making processes regarding news judgment at the community journalism level are not systematic in nature, nor consistent. Finally, results indicate that nothing is covered, written or photographed, or placed in a community newspaper without some consideration – albeit unstructured, informal, and even subconscious – of how the news item or treatment of the news item could be received by members of the community.

All findings have parallels in the literature of media ethics, the social influences theory, and community journalism. What follows is discussion of results by research question, how results support or contradict existing literature and theory, the development and proposal of a data-based model of community journalism decision making, a discussion of the ramifications and implications of the current research, suggestions for

future research, a discussion of strengths and limitations of this study, and conclusions drawn from this work.

RQ1: Consideration of Self, Others, Public Instructional Value

Data indicate that three primary influences compete for consideration when a community journalist is faced with a decision of news judgment: (1) consideration of how coverage, content, or a certain treatment of the potential news item will affect the journalist, (2) consideration of how coverage, content, or a certain treatment of the potential news item will affect others, and (3) consideration of the perceived public instructional value of a potential news item. These factors have varying degrees of support in media ethics and social influences literature, as well as within the body of knowledge regarding community journalism.

Consideration of Self in Literature

Media Ethics Literature

Consideration of the potential effects of a decision to oneself align with the tenets of a number of teleological theories. For example, the journalist is called to consider oneself, along with others, when rendering an ethical decision according to a utilitarian perspective. Though altruist utilitarians focus on what is best for others, egoist utilitarians rely solely on consideration of oneself, as positive results for oneself are the only desired ends. Like the egoists, consideration of the good a decision of coverage, content, or treatment will yield for the journalist is a central factor of pragmatic ethics, as discussed by Merrill (1997).

Consideration of oneself is also required in order to make an ethical decision in accordance with the Judeo-Christian persons-as-ends, or agape, theory. This theoretical

perspective is employed when the journalist puts himself or herself in the place of others potentially affected by coverage, content, or a certain treatment of news.

Relativism as an ethical or moral perspective in newsroom decision making also calls for consideration of oneself, but to a degree not realized in other ethical theories or perspectives. As Day (2006) argues, under a relativist perspective, one can adequately judge what is right for himself or herself, but not for others.

Social Influences Theory Literature

In his discussion of the social influences theory, Voakes (1997) includes as an influence one he terms “individual.” “There are influences that each person brings to journalistic work from sources unrelated specifically to work – sources that reside intrinsically in decision-making processes,” he writes (p. 22). Voakes splits the individual influence into two categories: (1) personal moral reasoning, and (2) personal attitudes, values, and beliefs. “Each emphasizes the qualities in individual decision making that may act independently of external, socially shared influences” (p. 22). Voakes operationalized the two categories by the statements “I like to reason these things out on the basis of my own logic and feelings” and “I rely on my own personal values in situations like this” (p. 22).

In their test of the social influences theory, Berkowitz and Limor (2003) also identified an individual influence, “where a journalist considers his or her own sense of values and standards” (p. 788). They also operationalized the concept via two statements: (1) “I would consider my decision according to my logic and feelings,” and (2) “I would base my decision on my personal professional values” (p. 788).

Community Journalism Literature

Consideration of the potential effects of a news judgment decision on the journalist socially, morally, physically, and economically is consistent with the nuances of community journalism. Community journalists are connected to their communities, involved in their communities, and completely reliant on their communities for their very physical existence, both in terms of news content and economic health (Coble-Krings, 2005; Gilmore, 2000; Hollander et al., 1992; Kennedy, 1974; Lauterer, 2000, 2006; Smethers & Jolliffe, 1998). Community journalists know many or all of the people in the community and are often involved with those people in the promotion and well-being of the community, rendering the maintenance of positive social ties vital. Furthermore, as community newspapers are generally local in nature of coverage, it is the members of the community that provide news content for the newspaper, rendering the ability of the journalist to perform his or her job another vital consideration. Finally, without advertisements, subscriptions, and newsstand sales, the community newspaper would not exist, rendering the economic consideration especially valid.

Consideration of Others in Literature

Media Ethics Literature

Consideration of how a decision may affect others as a factor in community journalists' decision-making processes has much support in the literature of news media and communication ethics. Much as with consideration of oneself, this factor aligns with a number of teleological theories and perspectives, including utilitarianism. Utilitarianism seeks the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people. The prevention of pain and promotion of pleasure are the desired ends, rendering the means of obtaining such

ends secondary. At issue is how much benefit and how much harm would result in the lives of all people affected. As mentioned earlier, an altruist utilitarian in particular is concerned only with what is best for other people (Merrill, 1997).

The potential effect a news item or treatment of a news item may have on others is the sole consideration required by the Judeo-Christian persons-as-ends, or agape, principle. The theory holds as paramount the dignity of all people and the media's role in promoting that concept. The theory calls for all decisions in the newsroom to be based on a respect for other people.

Other people, namely society as a whole, are to be considered according to the social responsibility theory and the notion of communitarianism. The Hutchins Commission called for the press to provide citizens with diverse sources of information, a variety of opinions, and clear reflections of society's goals and values. The social responsibility theory, then, offers as a control accountability to society, that is, accountability to others. As for communitarianism, the philosophy holds that ethics is relational, concerned with interactions with and connections to other people.

Consideration of others when rendering a news judgment decision also has much support in the literature of applied media ethics. One of Elliott's (1988) three "essential values" (p. 29) she asserted all journalists share is the belief that news accounts should be published without hurting others. In the absence of clear instructional value, Husselbee and Adams (1996) assert, decisions of news coverage and treatment must hinge on the potential of the news item to cause undue emotional distress or unnecessary harm to others.

Social Influences Theory Literature

Consideration of how a decision of news judgment may affect others has parallels in the social influences theory, as well. Included in Voakes' (1997) theoretical model of social influences is one termed "extramedia," (p. 25) a category comprised of varying dimensions including perceived reaction to the news item or treatment of the news item by sources and members of the audience. Voakes operationalized this influence via two test statements: (1) "I wonder what the subjects or sources will do or think when they see the story," and (2) "I wonder what our readers (or viewers) will think when they see this story" (p. 25).

Community Journalism Literature

A consideration of others when making a decision of news judgment is consistent with the nuances of community journalism, as well. Scholarly definitions of "community journalism" reveal a preoccupation with relationships – relationships between journalist and readers, between newspaper and community (Coble-Krings, 2005; Gilmore, 2000; Hollander et al., 1992; Kennedy, 1974; Lauterer, 2000, 2006). Accordingly, the maintenance of a healthy relationship between the journalist and readers requires consideration of the needs and feelings of those readers. The maintenance of a caring relationship between the newspaper and the community requires a genuine concern for that community.

Consideration of Public Instructional Value in Literature

Media Ethics Literature

Nowhere is the consideration for the instructional value of a news item to the public more emphasized than within the fabric of the social responsibility theory. Indeed,

it is the theory that calls for a balance between the constitutional freedom of the press and an obligation to focus on the public good by conveying truthful information about newsworthy and important happenings. The theory also provides a control to ensure the enforcement of this instructional value obligation, namely, community opinion.

In arguing for a new perspective on the idea of utilitarianism as an ethical principle, Elliott (2007) seems to touch on this consideration of public instructional value as well. Elliott views the utilitarian call to do the greatest good for the greatest number as an appeal for the aggregate good. Elliott's argument seems to have support in the data, especially when community journalists spoke of weighing the public instructional value against the harm publication of a news item could cause themselves or others.

In the field of applied media ethics, Husselbee and Adams (1996) tout the perceived public instructional value of a news item as the paramount consideration in the decision-making process of journalists. Their research led to the development of a justification framework based on the concept of instructional value.

Social Influences Theory Literature

The consideration of the perceived public instructional value of a potential news item has parallels in the social influences theory. In fact, social influences theory scholars Berkowitz and Limor (2003) posited that the influence comprises the societal-level consideration, "where journalists consider the broader implications of their actions" (p. 789). To test the theory, they operationalized the influence in the form of the following statement: "I would consider to what degree my decision would serve the public interest" (p. 789). Gevorgyan (2005), who studied community newspapers in light of the social

influences theory and the media market orientation model, found that the information needs of a particular audience can cause community journalists to alter content.

Community Journalism Literature

Perhaps not so distinctly a consideration of community journalism as opposed to metropolitan journalism, actual consideration of the perceived public instructional value of a potential news item often differs in nature between the two. Community journalists can more accurately predict reader interest or instructional value among their readers as there are relatively few of them (Viall, 1992). Metropolitan journalists, on the other hand, find that task more difficult when dealing with tens or hundreds of thousands of readers (Viall, 1992; Ziff, 1986).

Other Considerations in Literature

Literature of the field – and especially that of the social influences theory – indicates that other influences, including organizational, competitive, and occupational influences affect decision-making processes regarding news judgments. Berkowitz and Limor (2003) suggest that small-group-level influences and competitive influences flow from other organizational influences, which include those factors relating to management, policies, and organizational socialization. Though Berkowitz and Limor tested small-group, organizational, and occupational/professional influences separately, including competitive influences within the organizational level, and Voakes (1997) tested small-group, organizational, competitive, and occupational influences separately, social influences scholars agree that the influences are closely related and often stem from a single source.

That said, this study found no support for organizational influences and little support for either occupational or competitive influences. The reason for this lies within the fundamental differences between metropolitan journalism, on which the vast majority of news media research is based, and the little-studied realm of community journalism. Community journalists tend to be relatively isolated, both in terms of organization and market. Many community newspapers are independently owned, negating the potential influence of external superiors. In fact, many community newspapers are owned, published, and edited – in some cases, even wholly staffed – by a single person, negating the consideration of any small-group or organizational influences. Additionally, data indicate community journalists have very little association with other journalists on a regular basis, rendering occupational influences virtually nonexistent. For example, Sullivan stated: “I don’t really meet up with a lot of other journalists ‘cause I’m just so busy...” Stuewe said, “I don’t visit with many other small-town newspaper people. I just don’t.” Furthermore, many community newspapers operate as the sole local news medium of the community, negating the potential influence of competitors.

RQ2: No Systematic Consideration

Data in this study indicate that decision-making processes regarding news judgment at the community journalism level are not systematic in nature, nor are they consistent. In other words, community journalists do not consider the factors outlined earlier in a certain order, do not consistently place more or less emphasis on certain factors, and judge each decision on a case-by-case basis. This phenomenon has parallels in the literature of media ethics, social influences, and community journalism.

Situation Ethics in Literature

Media Ethics Literature

An informal and loosely planned way of treating ethical questions, situation ethics has received much attention from scholars with various and differing opinions of the practice. Some, including Day (2006) and Dickson (1998), caution against its use. The more practically minded Christians (1977), however, reprimands scholars who oppose it.

Merrill (1997) touches on situation ethics when he discusses the concept of antinomianism. Those who subscribe to this division of personalist ethics, Merrill argues, are philosophically against ethical rules. They prefer to play ethics by ear. In other words, what comes naturally at the moment is right.

Social Influences Theory Literature

Practically, much empirical research, including studies in the vein of the social influences theory by Berkowitz and Limor (2003), Borden (2000), and Coble-Krings (2005), has documented the use of situation ethics in newsroom decision-making processes. Berkowitz and Limor even praised Borden for realizing that actual ethical decision making is “both situational by context and variable among journalists,” terming this a “strength” (p. 785) of her research.

Community Journalism Literature

Many community journalism scholars realize that ethical decision making in the community newsroom is situational and they embrace that fact. Anderson et al. (1994) even praise the practice as opposed to the supposed systematic and consistent decision-making processes of those in metropolitan journalism who purport to adhere to a strict

code of ethics. Such a preoccupation, they assert, encourages the disregard of interpersonal sensitivity or consideration of the broader ethical context for public life.

Other Considerations in Literature

Much literature of normative media ethics promotes a systematic and consistent decision-making process and offers as aids various codes of ethics and normative decision-making models and frameworks. However, this study found decision making in community newsrooms to be situational and contextual, with community journalists considering decisions of news judgment on a case-by-case basis. One potential explanation – a lack of familiarity with or instruction in the use of journalism ethics – does not suffice, however, as both those educated as journalists and those not educated as journalists confirmed the decision-making process is situational and contextual. The other obvious potential explanation is the same as proposed earlier – that community journalism differs fundamentally from metropolitan journalism. Additionally, the isolation of community journalists discussed earlier also conceivably factors into this, as often decisions of whether to cover, how to cover, and how to treat news in the newspaper are made by only one person, negating the need for a code of ethics or an end-all decision-making model.

RQ3: The Screen of Community Standards

Data indicate that nothing is covered, written or photographed, or placed in a community newspaper without some consideration – albeit unstructured, informal, and even subconscious – of how the news item or treatment of the news item could be received by members of the community. In other words, everything that appears in a community newspaper has been filtered through the screen of that community's

standards, real or perceived. If the potential news item or placement or treatment of the potential news item deviates from community standards, it is subject to alteration or elimination. Accordingly, all factors that figure into a community journalist's decision-making process, in addition to personal and journalistic values and moral reasoning, stand to be trumped by the standards of the community the newspaper serves. The concept of an all-trumping consideration of community standards within the decision-making process of community journalists has support within the literature of media ethics, social influences, and community journalism.

Community Standards in Literature

Media Ethics Literature

Though the notion of an all-trumping screen of community standards has significantly more support in the literature of applied media ethics, parallel thought is easily identifiable within the more theoretical realm of normative media ethics. The Hutchins Commission, the originator of the normative social responsibility theory, outlined five functions it claimed were needed for a socially responsible press. At least two of them have parallels with the notion of an all-trumping screen of community standards: (1) provide a representative picture of constituent groups of society and (2) provide a method of reflection of the goals and values of society. Day (2006) asserts that media can acquire attitudes of social responsibility through two steps, one of which is community involvement. Involvement with community members facilitates the development of a socially responsible attitude, Day asserts, by familiarizing the journalist with the standards of that community.

Support for this screen of community standards can also be found in communitarian literature. Under a communitarian perspective, to which some community journalists subscribe as a guide in decision making, the press has a key role to play in recreating a sense of community and common good (Christians et al., 1993). In other words, the communitarian seeks a community-based ethic (Merrill, 1997). Indeed, one of the core beliefs of the communitarian journalist, Merrill asserts, is to give members of the community what they want, not what journalists would want them to have. Other communitarian beliefs, as identified by Merrill, lend further support to the prominence of community standards in community journalists' decision-making processes.

Social Influences Theory Literature

The notion of an all-trumping screen of community standards is backed by a wealth of applied media ethics literature, much of which is in the vein of the social influences theory. Voakes (1997) and Borden (2000) conducted research in support of the idea that community influences often play a greater role in the decision-making process than value-based reasoning through ethical and moral theory. Voakes posited that values must be “filtered through one or more social determinants of behavior before they can actually influence a decision” (p. 20). In fact, social influences – including perceptions of source and audience reaction – may “facilitate, filter, or block out values and principles” (p. 26). A study by Berkowitz et al. (2004) revealed that neither personal nor professional factors were related to ethical decisions, only a concern for the perceived reaction to the coverage by people living in the area. Viall (1992) proposed that occupational and organizational influences play little to no role in the decision-making processes of community journalists, as such small-scale journalists often work in professional and

organizational isolation. In the absence of such structures, she asserts, often the list of potential influences at work in the community journalist's ethical decision-making process is reduced to a single one, the standards of the community the newspaper serves.

Much empirical research in the vein of the social influences theory (e.g., Berkowitz & Limor, 2003; Berkowitz et al., 2004; Coble-Krings, 2005; Edelstein & Larsen, 1960; Hollander et al., 2002; Husselbee & Adams, 1996; Janowitz, 1967; Reinardy & Moore, 2007; Voakes, 1997) backs assertions by other scholars that coverage, content, and treatment of news in community newspapers are influenced by a set of community standards (Christians et al., 1995; Day, 2006; Ferré, 1988; Kennedy, 1974; Lauterer, 2000, 2006; Merrill, 1997; Overduin, 1986; Smethers & Jolliffe, 1998; Viall, 1992). Christians et al. and Day assert that community standards must be considered when rendering an ethical decision in order for a conclusion to be deemed morally justified. Though they stop short of stating that ethical decision making is simply a process of adjusting to community standards, Janowitz (1967) does not. He suggests that ethics of community journalists establish their own validity in the requirements of the community. In other words, decisions regarding news coverage, content, and treatment are, in fact, "ethical" in the eyes of the community as long as they adhere to the community's standards; such decisions that depart from the standards of the community, then, are "unethical." Accordingly, degree of adherence to community standards correlates with degree of ethicality in decision making.

Community Journalism Literature

An all-trumping consideration of community standards within the decision-making process of community journalists has support within the nuances of community

journalism. As Hollander et al. (2002) state, community media serve a “distinct social setting” (p. 20) in which reception of the communication “will be limited and is intended to be limited because the messages are, in terms of content and/or form, intended for a limited audience interested in specific topics” (p. 23). Therefore, the community journalism paradigm embraces the notion that the community newspaper can and should act as a mirror to the community, offering a reflection of community values or the standards of that community.

Toward Model Development

The three categorical considerations listed earlier, coupled with data regarding how the notion of community standards figures into the community journalist’s decision-making process, provide a base on which to construct a model of community journalism decision making. Though findings support the assertion by Borden (2000) that decision making in newsrooms is contextually situational and variable among journalists, and conclusions drawn by Berkowitz and Limor (2003) that social influences play such a large part in the decision-making process that the notion of a shared decision-making framework among journalists is more illusion than reality, the argument by Husselbee and Adams (1996) that a generally applicable framework or model simply explaining how such a task is generally completed and potentially assists other journalists in reaching a conclusion seems to validate such model development.

Values and Value-Based Moral Reasoning

Applied media ethics research has documented that individual values, consisting of both personal and journalistic values, play a part in ethical decision making (Day, 2006; Dennis, 1988; Elliott, 1988; MacDonald, 1975; Plaisance & Skewes, 2003; Viall,

1992), a fact supported by this research. However, data also indicate that one's values, attitudes, and beliefs, as well as one's value-based reasoning through ethical and moral theory, are not the sole determinants of a decision of news judgment, a finding supported in the literature (Berkowitz & Limor, 2003; Berkowitz, Limor, & Singer, 2004; Borden, 2000; Coble-Krings, 2005; Edelstein & Larsen, 1960; Hollander et al., 2002; Husselbee & Adams, 1996; Janowitz, 1967; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996; Viall, 1992; Voakes, 1997) and touted by media scholars (Christians, 2005; Day, 2006; Ferré, 1988; Lauterer, 2000, 2006). Indeed, data support Voakes' assertion that values and value-based reasoning through ethical and moral theory are filtered through a screen of social influences before they can affect a decision and that these social influences may "facilitate, filter, or block out values and principles" (p. 26).

The Factors

Instead of community journalists rendering decisions of coverage, content, and treatment based solely on personal values and value-based reasoning through ethical and moral theory, data indicate they first consider at least three social factors: (1) how coverage or treatment of a potential news item will affect themselves, (2) how coverage or treatment of a potential news item will affect others, and (3) the perceived public instructional value of the potential news item. If coverage or treatment of the potential news item is expected to adversely affect the journalist socially, morally, physically, or economically, it is subject to alteration or elimination. If coverage or treatment of the potential news item is expected to adversely affect others – an individual, family, or community as a whole – it is subject to alteration or elimination. If the perceived public instructional value of a potential news item is deemed sufficiently low, it is subject to

alteration or elimination. Data also indicate that often these factors are weighed against one another. For example, if the perceived public instructional value of a potential news item is deemed less than the amount of harm it could cause to the journalist or another person, it is subject to alteration or elimination.

Community Standards

Prior to a decision of news judgment being reached in the community newsroom, one additional – and often guiding – factor is considered: the real or perceived standards of the community the newspaper serves. Data indicate that nothing is covered, written or photographed, or placed in a community newspaper without some consideration – albeit unstructured, informal, and even subconscious – of how the news item or treatment of the news item could be received by members of the community. In other words, everything that appears in a community newspaper has been filtered through the screen of that community's standards, real or perceived. If the news item or placement or treatment of the news item deviates from community standards, it is subject to alteration or elimination. Accordingly, all factors that figure into a community journalist's decision-making process, in addition to personal and journalistic values and moral reasoning, stand to be trumped by the standards of the community the newspaper serves.

Audience Feedback

An important feature of Voakes' (1997) practical hierarchy-of-social-influences conceptual model, which he based on a model of media influences by Shoemaker and Reese (1996), is the inclusion of an audience-effects-feedback mechanism. Many normative models, including Day's (2006) SAD model and early versions of the Potter Box, are limited by their neglect of feedback from those affected by the decision or

ability of that feedback to be funneled back into the model for reapplication.

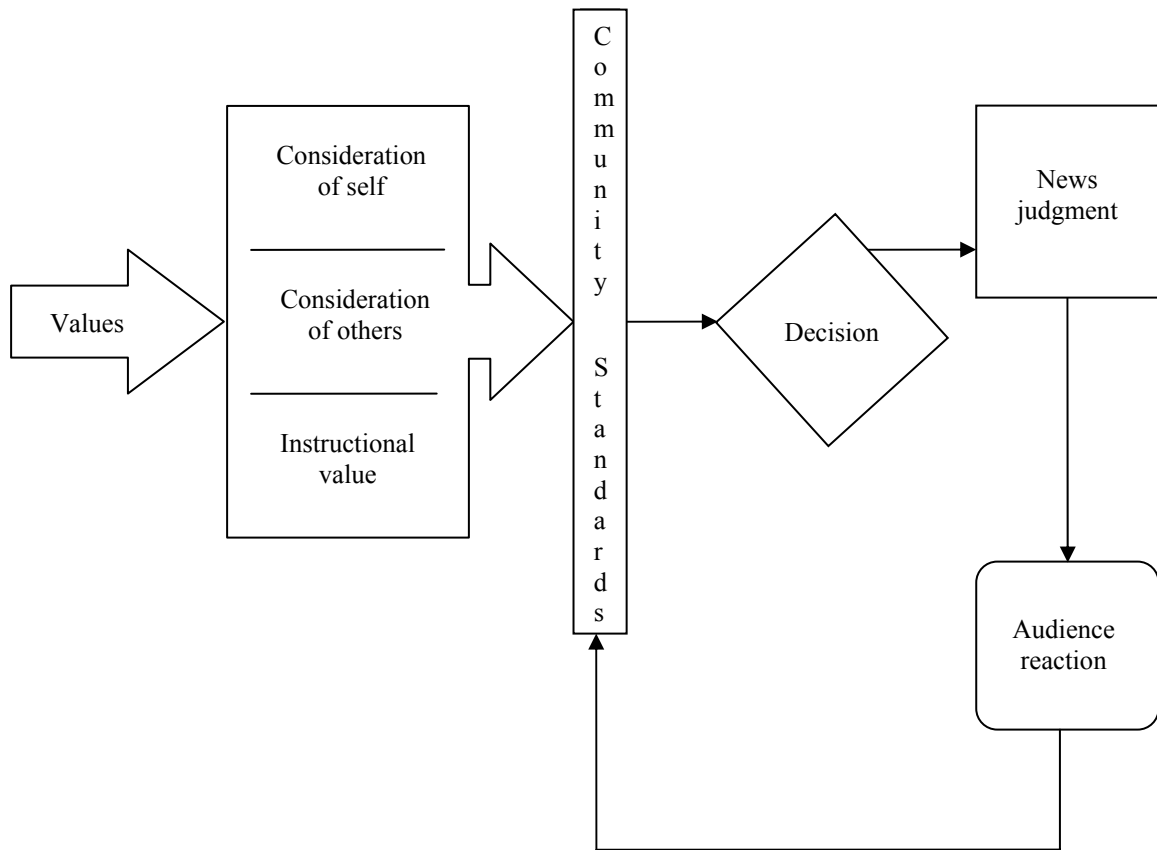
Accordingly, construction of decision-making policy on the frame of such models is difficult.

Data collected in this study indicate that community standards are realized, in part, by audience feedback. Stuewe said he became aware of the standards of the community his newspaper serves “from the people’s reaction.” Tetlow agreed. Roche put it this way: “Repetitively being told. Phone calls – anonymous, left on the answering machine. Letters. E-mails. Comments in passing – standing in line at a checkout. That pretty well covers the whole spectrum.” Though not the only means of becoming aware of community standards – others included “just living here” and “because I grew up here,” among others – audience feedback evidently contributes to the perception of the community standard and is therefore a necessary component of any community journalism decision-making model.

The Model

Data, interpreted through various normative and applied ethical theories and perspectives, most notably the social influences theory as discussed by Voakes (1997), Berkowitz and Limor (2003), and Gevorgyan (2005), suggest the following model of community journalism decision making:

Figure 5.1. Community Journalism Decision-Making Model.



Model Application

A community journalist's personal values, journalistic values, attitudes, and beliefs, as well as his or her value-based reasoning through ethical and moral theory when faced with a decision of news judgment, is tempered by consideration of three factors: (1) the potential effects of the decision to oneself, (2) the potential effects of the decision to other people, and (3) the perceived instructional value of the potential news item. As mentioned earlier, coverage, content, and treatment stand to be altered or eliminated if the effect to oneself or others is deemed too harmful or if the perceived public instructional value is too low, or a combination of any one of those factors when

weighed against another. Also tempering the decision is consideration of community standards, an all-trumping consideration that may also alter or eliminate coverage, content, and treatment. Should the news item – in whatever form – pass muster and earn publication, the model allows for audience feedback to be funneled back into the framework through modification of the screen of perceived community standards. At that point, the audience feedback becomes part of the framework of the model and is utilized in that respect the next time the community journalist is faced with a decision of whether to cover, how to cover, and how to treat news for that particular audience.

The Model in Literature

As evidenced above, the various components of the community journalism decision-making model have numerous parallels and varying degrees of support in the literature of normative and applied ethics, as well as community journalism. But what of the model as a whole? The bulk of ethical decision-making models are normative. Many of those that are not were not developed solely for use in media-specific decision-making processes, let alone print or community news-specific situations. Though the framework developed by Husselbee and Adams (1996) is geared toward journalists at a community-news level, it is based only on one of the factors identified in the data and is for use specifically in the realm of community photojournalism.

Where, then, is there academic support for such a model that calls for journalistic consideration of self, others, and public instructional value in the context of the standards of the community the newspaper serves when one is faced with a decision of whether to cover, how to cover, and how to treat potential news items for a specific audience? Where is there scholarly research to back such a pictorial representation of the process

community journalists employ when faced with ethical decisions of news judgment? Where in the literature of the field exists backing for a decision-making model so concerned with interpersonal relationships and community? It seems the community journalism decision-making model proposed, as a whole, has no direct parallel in literature. In light of that revelation, the model must be considered in one of three ways: (1) as unfounded, (2) as an aberration, or (3) as groundbreaking. Kuhn (2007) suggests the accuracy of the third: “Generally, communicative models that facilitate relationship and community building are more authentic and morally preferable” (p. 25).

Future Research

This model is a starting point in the development of a community journalism decision-making model. Further research, employing larger samples of more diverse community journalists and multiple qualitative and quantitative methodologies, are needed to refine and test the model. Qualitatively, this could include the use of a modified Delphi method study, much as Richards and Curran employed in their 2002 study seeking a consensus definition for the term “advertising.” A sample of community journalism experts – including experienced practitioners, educators, researchers, and heads of community journalism centers from around the country – could be asked to participate in the three-wave study. From there, the model could be applied to a real-life case study in order to test its applicability to actual in-field circumstances.

Following these qualitative refinements, the model could finally be tested quantitatively, much as Voakes (1997) tested his proposed model of ethics and social determinants of newsmaking. Using a telephone survey of a probability sample drawn from journalists in southern Wisconsin, Voakes tested his model by asking respondents to

rate the salience of several reasoning statements in the context of three hypothetical decision-making scenarios. Voakes then compared the means of the responses, ran correlations, and collapsed data in order to run a summary analysis. Berkowitz and Limor (2003) opted for a similar quantitative methodology in their study of the decision-making processes of newspaper journalists. Experimental methods could also be employed in an attempt to determine statistically significant causality.

Strengths

The current study boasts several methodological strengths, including the utilization of time-tested qualitative research methodologies, triangulation of sampling approaches, and an underlying preoccupation with heightened validity through member checks, triangulation of methods and sources, and consented identification of data sources and association of those sources with respective data. Validity was further increased through a triangulation of theory and perspectives in the analysis of data, allowing more open and unbiased data evaluation and interpretation.

Another strength of the current study is its practical nature. Though established theory is utilized for interpretational considerations and the data and resulting model offer support for a theory of social influences, the sample, data, and model are centered around and based on actual practitioners of community journalism – their opinions, anecdotes, recollections, and experiences. This study offers an in-depth look at decision-making processes in the newsroom as they actually happen, not as they should, according to normative scholars or theoretical ethicists.

Limitations

However, the study is also limited by several factors. Obviously, the study was limited by time and financial constraints. Potential methodological limitations include possible respondent bias in the form of poor recall or the alteration of answers in an attempt to improve image or provide responses the researcher wants to hear, despite controls for this, and researcher or construct bias in the form of biased questions or inadequate explication of key concepts.

Concerning the sample, all community newspapers studied were independently owned. This was not a sample criterion, but rather a factor of chance. Inclusion of chain-owned community newspapers within the study could have altered or added to data, especially with regard to the aforementioned organizational influence. Conversely, setting definitional parameters of a “chain-owned” community newspaper could be challenging in itself. Still, it is a variable that merits consideration.

Conclusions

Despite the limitations of the study in general and of the data-gathering methodology on which the present model is based in particular, the proposed model is of value, as it reflects an initial attempt to describe and map the process community journalists employ when faced with a decision of whether to cover, how to cover, and how to treat potential news items in print for a specific audience. Though the components of the proposed decision-making model have numerous parallels in the vast literature of normative media ethics and offer support for a number of theoretical approaches, including the social influences theory, the real value of the present model is practical, in that it is based solely on how practicing journalists actually make decisions of news

judgment, not how they should, according to moral, ethical, or social responsibility theory. Furthermore, the study and resulting data-based model reflect how a distinct type of journalist makes such decisions, differentiating the community journalist from his or her metropolitan counterpart. Accordingly, this research and the present model are not only valuable in terms of support of theory and contributions to the ever-expanding bodies of applied media ethics literature and community journalism literature, but also as a tool for instructors, practitioners, and students of community journalism

Even while explaining how actual on-deadline decisions of news judgment are made on a case-by-case basis within the context of the community they serve, all journalists interviewed for this study spoke at one time or another in terms of “shoulds,” “oughts,” or “maybe-I’m-wrongs.” This is further testimony to the normative tradition of journalism ethics, as described by Anderson et al. (1994) and Christians (1977), both in terms of scholarly research and classroom instruction. Starck (2001) has pointed out the necessity of integrating applied media ethics – how journalists actually make decisions, not how they should – into the classroom, in order to prepare future or novice journalists for the rigors of the newsroom, arguing that “large gaps separate the practical from the theoretical and the realm of the classroom from that of the newsroom” (p. 133). Indeed, Reinardy and Moore (2007) state that “when journalism practice meets theory, the individual journalist no longer has the benefit of speaking in absolutes.” Furthermore, when normative ethics are taught only in the context of metropolitan journalism with little or no regard for the complexities of community journalism – the realm of industry in which most journalists will find themselves employed at some point in their careers – that gap only widens.

There exists in the world today a disconnect between the writings of media ethicists in the idealistic world of academia and the decisions that affect the writing that appears in the community newspaper, a fissure between how journalism students are taught to make decisions of news judgment and how those decisions are actually made by community journalists, a gap, as Starck (2001) asserts, between the university classroom and the community newsroom. This research is an attempt at rectifying that disconnect, bridging that fissure, and filling that gap. It is hoped future research similar to or building upon this study will continue this worthy quest.

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Appendix A – Newspaper Information

1. The *Frankfort Area News*, published on Tuesdays, is based in Frankfort, KS, a city of 855. At the time of the study, the newspaper's circulation was 749, and it employed five people: one full-time employee and four part-time employees. It was owned, published, and edited by Connie Musil, a six-year owner, publisher, and editor.

2. The *Marysville Advocate*, published on Thursdays, is based in Marysville, KS, a city of 3,271. At the time of the study, the newspaper's circulation was 5,255, and it employed 24 people: 14 full-time employees and 10 part-time employees. It was owned, published, and edited by Howard and Sharon Kessinger of Marysville, KS, 32-year owners, publishers, and editors, and 50-year community journalists.

3. The *Onaga Herald*, published on Thursdays, is based in Onaga, KS, a city of 704 people. At the time of the study, the newspaper's circulation was 1,130, and it employed two people: one full-time employee and one part-time employee. It was owned, published, and edited by Joe D. Harder, an 11-year owner, publisher, and editor, and a 22-year community journalist.

4. The *Prairie Post*, published on Thursdays, is based in White City, KS, a city of 518 people. At the time of the study, the newspaper's circulation was 887, and it employed two people: one full-time employee and one part-time employee. It was owned, published, and edited by Joann Kahnt of White City, KS, a 12-year owner, publisher, and editor, and a 14-year community journalist.

5. The *Riley Countian*, published on Fridays, is based in Riley, KS, a city of 886 people. At the time of the study, the newspaper's circulation was 1,139 and it employed three people: two full-time employees and one part-time employee. Two freelance writers

also contributed to the newspaper. It was owned and published by Donna and Ken Sullivan and edited by Donna Sullivan of Riley, KS, a two-year owner, publisher, and editor, and a 16-year community journalist.

6. *The St. Marys Star*, published on Wednesdays, is based in St. Marys, KS, a city of 2,198 people. At the time of the study, the newspaper's circulation was 1,716, and it employed three people: two full-time employees and one part-time employee. It was owned, published, and edited by Steve Tetlow, a two-year owner, publisher, and editor, and a 24-year community journalist.

7. *The Wabaunsee County Signal-Enterprise*, published on Thursdays, is based in Alma, KS, a city of 797 people. At the time of the study, the newspaper's circulation was 1,520 and it employed five people: one full-time employee and four part-time employees. It was owned and published by Ervan D. and Pamela K. Stuewe and edited by Ervan D. Stuewe of Alma, KS, an 18-year owner, publisher, and editor.

8. *The Wamego Times*, published on Thursdays, is based in Wamego, KS, a city of 4,246 people. At the time of the study, the newspaper's circulation was 1,481, and it employed five people: three full-time employees and two part-time employees. It was owned, published, and edited by Mark Portell, a 27-year owner, publisher, and editor, and 32-year community journalist.

9. *The Washington County News*, published on Thursdays, is based in Washington, KS, a city of 1,223 people. At the time of the study, the newspaper's circulation was 2,783, and it employed seven people: four full-time employees and three part-time employees. It was owned, published, and edited by Dan Thalmann of

Washington, KS, a one-year owner and publisher, a four-year editor, and a seven-year community journalist.

10. The *Westmoreland Recorder*, published on Thursdays, is based in Westmoreland, KS, a city of 631 people. At the time of the study, the newspaper's circulation was 745, and it employed one full-time person. It was owned and published by John and Sandy Roche and edited by John Roche, a one-year owner, publisher, and editor, and four-year community journalist.

Appendix B - Informant Interview Guide

This first set of questions will be in regard to the factors you consider when faced with an ethical decision of news coverage or treatment and how that decision-making process takes place.

1. What factors do you consider when faced with an ethical decision of whether to cover, how to cover and report, and/or how to treat news in your newspaper?
2. Are those factors considered systematically, or in a certain order?
3. Walk me through your ethical decision-making process.

This next set of questions will be in regard to perceived standards of the members of the community with regard to what they expect from their newspaper or what they expect to see or not see in their newspaper.

4. What is a newspaper's role in a small community?
5. What do you think people in this community expect from their newspaper?
6. Do you think – and if so, how do you think – people in this community want tough or controversial news stories covered and treated?
7. How do social ties to the community affect decisions about coverage or treatment of coverage?
8. In general, how do community journalists handle social pressures?
9. Do people in this community prefer positive community boosterism over hard-line, watchdog-type news coverage, or the opposite?
10. How did you become aware of what the standards of this community are?
11. To what extent would you say news coverage, content, and treatment are influenced by community standards?
12. How important is it for news coverage and treatment of news in a community newspaper to conform to these community standards?
13. Give me an example of an instance when coverage or treatment of coverage was knowingly shaped by interests of the community or your perception of how the community would react to the news item. Why did you do that? What goes through your mind as you consider which photograph to run, how to write a controversial story, how to head a controversial story, or where to place a controversial story?

14. Give me an example of when something you wrote or placed with community standards in mind did not hit the mark. Was there community feedback? If so, what were some of the comments? In hindsight, would you have handled it differently? How? Why?

15. How do you balance journalistic ethics with community standards?

16. How and where does a community journalist draw the line between journalism ethics and demands of the audience?

Appendix C – Informant Transcripts

Connie Musil
Publisher/Editor
Frankfort Area News
Frankfort, KS

- Researcher: OK. You were saying that the standards of the community change?
- Musil: No. I... This newspaper actually started in 1991. And before that, we had had a family that had owned it. It was the *Frankfort Index* then – and they had owned the paper – oh – for decades. And then all the sudden, they decided to get out of the newspaper business. They were doing some other... The cost of printing was too... Actually, they were planning to go in a little bit different direction. And the man who bought it was named (name). And he started printing a more-his-political-views-type thing and less community news, so people got really, really fed up with that after – oh, he probably had it for a few years. In fact, that's why we had to change the name from the *Frankfort Index* to *Frankfort Area News*, was because he still had the copyrights and still owns – as far as I know – the *Frankfort Index*. It's just kind of sad deal, 'cause we could be a century newspaper, whatever, but there was that little glitch in there and we had to start over. But (name) who I bought the paper from in 2001, was one of the original owners – she had worked at the *Frankfort Index* and they just got tired of the political views and not the community paper and so a group of four ladies – three or four... Joan, do you know? I'm not sure if it was three or four. Anyhow, they just started a paper from scratch. You should see the first one. And it was more community... There's volume one. It was just... And this one's all been cut up; I don't know why. But it tells about them starting it and they... It went to newsprint from there, but it just... It was just a community need, I think, that they do something different.
- Researcher: Sure. That's neat. OK. I tell you what, I sort of have a list of questions here that I might throw out and we'll keep it conversational.
- Musil: OK.
- Researcher: But the first set of questions are going to be in regard to those factors that you consider when you're faced with a decision of news coverage or treatment in the newspaper and how that process takes place. So, first of all – general – what are the factors you consider when you're faced with a decision of whether to cover something, how to cover something, and how to treat it on the pages of your newspaper?

Musil: We cover everything that we think is community related that we can and that we know about. A lot of times, you just don't know about something going on. You hear about it later. But the school is one thing we try to cover as much as we can – on our school, and... Whatever is brought to us and asked for us to consider printing, we usually pretty much do. A lot of – in a small-town paper – a lot of it comes in the door. You don't have to go out looking for it. We do try to do some feature stories that we just heard something about, but a lot of it just walks in and we just put it in the paper.

Researcher: All right. So, really, what people are interested in or what they bring to your attention.

Musil: Uh-huh.

Researcher: OK.

Musil: We encourage our readers all the time – in fact, we have a little filler thing that says, “We welcome your community news; call, e-mail or fax.”

Researcher: Good. So any other factors that figure into that?

Musil: We try not to put... We don't really consider ourselves... We've been called the “good news newspaper,” which we kind of take as a compliment. But then there's sometimes I have that feeling that should we be covering the bad stuff, too? Like I know the previous paper a lot of time covered car accidents and had photos of that kind of stuff, and we have never really done that kind of stuff. We may have a little mention of it, but as far as going out and really aggressively taking pictures and stuff, we have not done that. I don't know if people appreciate that or would rather see that stuff, but we... It's just something we have chose not to do.

Researcher: OK. And what factored into that decision – to not run that kind of stuff?

Musil: Well, this is kind of going to be a long story, but... One day I happened to be coming to work when a young man – it was just an accident – he had reached down for his cup of coffee going to work and had hit a bridge and totally mangled his vehicle, but... His dad was there and I had to stop and wait and I had the camera, of course – I always have the camera – and took a few pictures. And I was talking to him later and he thanked me for not putting that in the paper, 'cause I just didn't really feel good about it. And there wasn't a serious injury or anything, but he said, “I always hope that if you get in the paper, it will be for something good.” And so I thought, “Why do we think about putting that stuff in?”

It doesn't really benefit anything to put that kind of stuff in." And so it just made me stop and think a little bit that if we can – if we do put them in the paper, it should be for something good, not something bad, unless it's just necessary for the community to have that information.

- Researcher: OK. You said doesn't really benefit anything. Can you be more specific? Doesn't really benefit... Benefit who?
- Musil: Well, if we put a car wreck in the paper, what good does that do? Unless maybe just someone could be more careful driving, which they are that. It's just, I would rather put news in that is of a beneficial nature to someone and will do more good than just covering things that aren't necessary – that are just of interest, but not... I mean, if anything, it would probably hurt someone, 'cause who wants your moment of lapse in the paper for everybody to see?
- Researcher: OK. All right.
- Musil: I guess.
- Researcher: Any other thing? And as we go along, I'm going to ask for some more examples of stuff that you've done in the past and if any other factors that come up to your mind, just toss them out at me, too.
- Musil: OK.
- Researcher: So, when you're faced with a decision like this, do you consider factors in a certain order, or systematically?
- Musil: No.
- Researcher: OK.
- Musil: There's really no system, but we do have – I have four part-time ladies that work here – I'm the one full-time person – and we bounce stuff of each other all the time and... Oh, see that paper over there in that tray? I will – like if something comes through and we're not sure if we want to print it – it's like stuff that's e-mailed or faxed or even brought in – I will put "filler" and it's just something that we all have to look at and see if we think it's important. Or if we have space. Space is a very big issue with a small paper.
- Researcher: And then, sort of trailing from that question... I mean, you've kind of done this already, but walk me through your ethical decision-making process, if you could. And maybe if you want to use that accident as an example again...

- Musil: I... Well, I firmly believe that your paper should be good for your community. It... There's one thing we got from the Kansa Press Association years, probably, ago that I keep here in my tray that's getting too deep to find that says it very well. Hold on. OK. Here's what... This is from – I'm not sure – the Kansas publisher, maybe. It says, "The newspaper publisher should try to instill some pride in his or her hometown. The publisher has the responsibility to be in a leadership person – or position. Furthermore, they should attempt to get dozens or maybe hundreds of names in the paper each week, which will show every subscriber how important he is to be part of this community." And I can copy that for you if you want later. But it's just that the paper should reflect the community in a positive way, I guess is what I'm saying.
- Researcher: OK. The next few questions I have are in regard to the perceived standards of the members of this community with regard to what they expect to see in the newspaper or maybe expect not to see in the newspaper. So, first of all, to get into that, what is a newspaper's role in a small community? And you may have just answered that for me.
- Musil: Well, I think – and I've read it in a lot of my stuff – that it's got to be a cornerstone of your community. Some of the information that I've read says you need your school, bank, grocery store, and newspaper – that's your four cornerstones that you've got to have, and I just hope that the paper could be one of those.
- Researcher: And the, stemming from that, what do you think people in this community expect from their newspaper?
- Musil: They're all different. Joan could tell you this, too. Older people get tired of seeing so much school stuff, unless they have grandkids in school, and then they really, really like it. But we feel like the school is one of the main things that we want to cover and be proud of and, hopefully, everybody has a child or grandchild or someone that goes through the school at some point and they all get their chance to be in the spotlight a little bit. Club news – everybody wants their club news, and – oh – like right now we have construction going on around town, just to keep them updated on things like that. They do not want – and we've learned this the hard way on a couple things – national news. Even some of our statewide things – that's not what they consider this paper to be about, so we pretty much stay... Once in a while we'll have a – oh – your political newsletters and updates and stuff like that – we'll have that stuff in, but for the most part, it's just local, community news. I'm going to look in this week's issue and see if have anything state or... Nope. The front page is harvest.

Researcher: 'Tis the season.

Musil: Yeah. And there... You can look at that, or you can take a copy with you, but it has to be pretty much local news and we spread out every once in a while, but basically local.

Researcher: OK. Do you think – and if so, how do you think – people in this community want tough or controversial news covered?

Musil: We actually – and I, maybe I would be surprised – but we don't do much opinionated stuff, and I know... Did you talk to (name)? He is very controversial. Oh, I get a kick out of him – and he's really been nice to be when I – since I took over. But he is a staunch Democrat in a Republican county. He is anti-gun, which... Where are you going to find more gun-loving people than rural Kansas? Anyhow, he takes some stands that he really gets hit hard for. We hardly ever have a letter to the editor – very seldom do we have those issues come up. And it's just... We mostly report news that has happened or things that are going to happen. We don't really take stands on controversial news. And I don't know if I'm doing my part as an editor by not doing that very often, but I think it's just a little nicer route to take.

Researcher: And that's... That's kind of in regard to... You said, "don't take stands on controversial issues." What about basically reporting that kind of stuff?

Musil: Well, we try to stick to the facts. We just don't very often run opinionated people, or if opinions come into play, we just stick to the facts. Joan, can you think of anything that we ever had controversy over? I can't ever think of an article that was of a controversial nature that...

Researcher: And then, is that practice in line with what the people who read the newspaper expect?

Musil: I think so. I don't think they want the paper to be anybody's opinion. They just want it to be community events, what's happening, what's going to happen. They can go to the coffee shop if they want to argue with someone.

Researcher: How do social ties to the community on your part affect decisions about coverage and treatment of coverage?

Musil: Well, you've got to be involved in your community to know what's going on, that's one thing. And... That's one thing that worries me also, because my youngest child graduated from high school this past

spring and I've had to tell the school that I'm not going to know everything that's going down now, so you're going to have to be a little more – a little better about telling me what's going on and... Sometimes our school is very hard to cover. They're all busy, just like everybody else, and they don't get things in on time and we have to bug them about things. They're all very, very nice people, but... You have to be involved a little bit. Like, I'm involved in a church. My... But we have four or five churches that we're willing to cover. And community organizations so that you know a little bit what's going on and have a real handle on what you need to be covering.

Researcher: And then, in general, how do you think community journalists handle social pressures?

Musil: Well, in a town this size, everybody knows everybody. So if they have a problem with something, you're probably going to hear about it. But that's one of the reasons why we don't do controversial things is because you're going to see these people. It's not like you're going to write about these people and never see them again. You have to live here. So we just avoid the controversy and keep it pretty much factual and... I don't know that I've ever had much of a problem – maybe once or twice had somebody complain about something that was in the paper, but very, very seldom. We just avoid that.

Researcher: All right. And we talked about this a little already, too. If you have any more thoughts... Do people in this community prefer positive community boosterism over more hard-line, watchdog-type reporting?

Musil: Well, I would think so, because we've never done the hard-line, watchdog stuff, so I would hope so. I think they would be very disappointed in their newspaper if we took that stance. Now, if there's something that was really, really questionable – for instance, I'm really thinking about writing an article on our cell phone coverage in this area, which is next... Our... We don't have a tower; our coverage is horrible. And I just spent I don't know how long on the phone this morning with (cellular company) because of that. And I'm really thinking of taking a stance and writing an editorial on something like that, but no one here will get – that's something that should benefit the whole community and that's the kind of stands we should be willing and able to take. I don't think anything else hard-line that's not of benefit to the community would go over.

Researcher: How did you become aware of what the standards of this community are?

- Musil: I never did. You made me think about that a little bit, because I don't know that I ever really thought about... I think it's a personal thing. You just have to use your own standards, and hopefully you're right for the job. But it is – it's a very important thing to consider and maybe we do need guidelines.
- Researcher: OK. And you lead so well into my next questions. It's amazing. To what extent would you say news coverage and content and treatment are influenced by members of this community?
- Musil: Well, probably... I'm tempted to say "not at all" or "very much so." But I think it's mainly because we all kind of think alike. Small towns are struggling right now, so we're all very interested in our small town staying viable and still being here two or three decades from now. So the idea that whatever we can do through the paper or through the bank or whatever to benefit our town, everybody is pretty supportive of, I think. I don't know if that's the kind of answer you were wanting, but everybody's looking out for the same big person, being our community – the same big reason.
- Researcher: And then how important is it for news coverage and treatment of news in a community newspaper to conform to these community standards?
- Musil: Well, you can surprise everybody every now and then, but on the basis of every day, I think it's probably pretty important to give people what they expect. For example, the newspaper that didn't make it. He tried to do something different. And if he would have kept his views in along with the political – or the community news – maybe that paper would have made it. But it pretty much dwindled to nothing because he chose not to do that. But I've never really thought about it that much, either. I know that was a failed paper, but that was kind of before I was at all interested in it. And this has been our paper for – what, 17 years, almost 18, so... I guess the community in a way spoke that that was not what they wanted as a newspaper.
- Researcher: OK. OK. Give me an example when coverage or treatment of news coverage was knowingly shaped by the interests of the community or your perception of how the community would react to the news item.
- Musil: Well, we just did a huge playground. I don't know if you drove at all – you probably came down on Highway 9, 99. We just did a huge playground and our... I don't know. It's a firm from New York. (Name) set it up and it was a very big deal. We did fund-raisers for a year and the paper donated like half of the advertising that they did throughout this whole year-and-a-half-long process to cover that. But people didn't really understand it; it was something that had never been

done before and so we tried to cover it as much as we could with articles and pictures and meeting minutes and stuff to accomplish this. And I don't know how without the newspaper that would have ever been a done deal. I don't think people would have ever understood the magnitude of it. It took hundreds of people to put that all together. And the committee did work very hard, but there was just a lot of misconceptions and people not understanding and people talking without the right information, and so we tried very hard to get the right information out there. But it was a major project.

Researcher: And then, on the flip side of that, how about an example of when something you wrote or placed in the newspaper with community standards in mind maybe didn't hit the mark?

Musil: Flopped? I know I've had people get upset about things a couple times, but for the life of me, right now, I can't think of what those were. But I don't think there's ever been anything that we've been told, "You did a horrible job of covering that," or that we've really affected the failure of something in the way we covered it. I don't know what it'd be. Maybe it'll come to me before we're done.

Researcher: OK. How do you balance journalism ethics with community standards?

Musil: What I think is... That's kind of what I said before, too. It's just as much a personal ethics. I think you have to have good people working for you with high ethical standards, and I feel very comfortable with everybody that's in here. And I think the paper reflects that. But you just have to have the right people doing the work to have an ethical paper – or a product. And that would be the same with any product. If you have ethical people performing, you're going to end up with an ethical product.

Researcher: How do community journalists in general draw the line between ethics – journalism ethics – and demands of the audience?

Musil: I have no clue. I suppose... That's... I still don't think journalism ethics are that much different than personal – what your personal ethics should be. And I really don't... There may be sometimes where we say "I'd really like to print that, but I know we shouldn't," or... But it's just as much a personal ethical issue as it is journalism. And maybe that's just... And I think probably that in a bigger office, maybe you'd have to be more concerned with your journalism ethics. But here, it's as much personal as it is it journalism, I would say. So you don't really see any... I can't see any difference, really.

Researcher: Between?

Musil: Journalism ethics and personal ethics. It's just the whole package.

Researcher: OK. And then, the audience fits in there?

Musil: My readers, you're thinking? Well, I don't know. I think we have a community of good people and I think in a small town, it's a lot harder to not be a good person, because everybody knows you and is watching you, and... In bigger towns, you can get away with it, because you're not known. So I think that our – my audience and readers, in general, are the same type of people that people putting the paper out – that I am or the ladies that work here – are. So it's just an expected ethical treatment and no one would expect different, I don't think. That sounds confusing, but...

Researcher: All right.

Howard Kessinger
Publisher
Marysville Advocate
Marysville, KS

Researcher: So the first set of questions I have are in regard to the factors that are considered when you're faced with a decision of news coverage or treatment and how that process takes place. So, first of all, what are some of the factors that you consider when you're faced with a decision of whether to cover something or how to cover something or how to treat something in the newspaper?

Kessinger: Well, honestly and fairly, and those two words can get in each other's way, but... We just make an effort to be as thorough as we can. We have excellent editors here for a small paper. Sharon and Sally, they both really are good and we run things by them, we run things by each other. We rely heavily on two lawyers in Topeka that the Kansas Press Association has set up for newspapers – member newspapers. And we'll call them and run things by them and see what they think. And that includes letters to the editor, as well as other things. I'm a little more liberal on letters. If... They can call me on anything they like, and some of the NRA members do, but I think the other gals – if they're editing letters – they're a little more cautious. And we are... We always go to great pains – it galls me to pay what we have to pay for libel insurance. It's better than 2,000 a year, now. And we've never been sued. We had people threaten to sue us. That's part of the industry, but... We've never had... We've never been in court, so... We're lucky, I guess.

Researcher: So, honesty and fairness?

Kessinger: Yeah. And thoroughness, yeah.

Researcher: All right. Any other ones?

Kessinger: No. We used to always try to kick things around and talk them over before we run them, and we always call people and tell them if we're not going to run their letters or there's something we're leaving out of the paper.

Researcher: All right. And as we go through, I might ask for a couple of examples of some past stories that you've worked on and if any more of those factors come to mind, just throw them out and I'll scribble them down.

Kessinger: OK.

- Researcher: So when you're making a decision like this, are these factors considered in a certain order or is it just kind of more in a general sense?
- Kessinger: That's one of the neat things about newspapers is everything's different and every Monday morning, things are – you're going to have different things, and... We always just try to adhere to those principles and things work. I don't know, does that answer?
- Researcher: Uh-huh. OK. So, walk me through, if you can, the process of making a decision like that – when you're faced with a decision of whether to cover something or how to cover something or how to put it in the newspaper. What... How's that process take place?
- Kessinger: Well, we had a guy here who was mayor and got sent to prison for child pornography. We ran... He was really popular – a charming guy, he charmed us all like a snake. He was really something. And I know a couple of people who moved back here and thought everything the guy said was right. And he had some fairly – couple of good people running for mayor with him and we had to bring back – go back and run a story 10 years earlier that he'd been sent to prison. He got out and he got in trouble again. He had marijuana growing in the backyard. Well, people... We ran his letters to the editor when he was criticizing the city administrator and the City Council. And the mayor was kind of out in left field. He was an old guy – older than I am – and just hardly knew what was going on. So it was a zoo around here for a while, and... We kept editorializing for somebody to run for mayor and a guy who is very capable, had graduated from K-State and been in Vietnam and was really a well-respected person ran and beat (mayoral candidate). But (mayoral candidate) won the primary by just a couple of votes. There were two other candidates – three others – with them, and... That looked bad for the town and... Somebody called the (metropolitan newspaper) and they ran a story on it. And they called us and got all kinds of information. They didn't bother to come out here – kind of a typical thing. The big-city paper doing a job on us and we, of course, we had gotten – we should have run a story on it before, but everybody was busy doing all kinds of things and Sharon actually came down here and worked through the weekend and wrote stories. And they were very comprehensive and we checked with the attorneys on what we could and couldn't use – that sort of thing, and... It was amazing. There were... I think most of the people understand and (mayor) won by a huge majority in the election, but there were people that really... (Mayoral candidate) went over to the old folks' home over here and sweet-talked people and helped carry their – helped them sit down at their table at lunch. They have lunch over there every day and it's a nice thing. And a lot of those people were really angry. And we

editorialized all the way through and they were really... It was embarrassing for them to start with to have cousins from other places and... One of the gals in our church said her ex called her from Missouri and said, "You live in where?" She said, "Marysville." He said, "Marysville, Kansas? Is that right? You've got a pornographer who's won your primary for mayor, and..." He was... One of the things he was convicted on was child pornography, so that was always an area... They always take the spiciest thing and run it in the small stories about... The guy was a cad and he still is. He was up there to his tricks on other stuff that we had on him. It just... A woman from out of town was going to press charges against him and this county attorney said, "Look; you're going to ruin your mother's name." So, that was a big consideration, 'cause her mom was dead and she'd had this dementia – and she was an attractive gal – and (mayoral candidate) had escorted her around and the daughters were really alarmed because of this, and they said she should stay away from him. She thought everything was cool. Well, what he was doing was filming them doing – having sex and another guy in Washington County in the action, and... So we knew he hadn't reformed, but he was telling all these people – including some of our friends – that "Oh, it's... They're just doing a number on me." And finally, things like this got around and enough people realized that he would really be poison. But that was quite an ordeal, and we got some hot letters to the editor and I probably still have some people mad at me over that we ran those, these things and their family in other towns are embarrassed reading about it, so... I think people forget. I suppose if they didn't, all the newspaper people would be hanging in trees.

Researcher: OK. The next few questions I have are in regard to the standards of the members of the community with regard to what they expect to see in the newspaper and maybe what they expect not to see in the newspaper. So, first of all, to get into that, what is a newspaper's role in a small community?

Kessinger Well, to inform people. Number one, to get the facts right and be honest and fair. And those two don't always overlap, so... But people – after you're here a while – they understand. They respect the fact that you try to do the right thing and I think it's that simple.

Researcher: OK. What do you think people in the community expect from their newspaper?

Kessinger: Honesty. Fairness. Good taste. I think they really expect it here, because it's a long-standing tradition here that...

Researcher: And talk a little bit about fairness. How do you judge what's fair and what's not fair?

Kessinger: We try to treat everyone with respect and... When they... I get unreasonable, they shout around. And that's pretty rare. I... We used to get more of it than we get now, and maybe it's just 'cause I'm getting old and they just don't want to shout at an old man.

Researcher: OK. Do you think – and if so, how do you think – people in this community want tough or controversial news stories covered?

Kessinger: The same way. Fairness. Restraint. There's no sense in... If somebody's... If you don't go out... Before we came here, why, they had had so many DWIs and so many people killed in traffic accidents by drunk drivers, the editor just said, "This is nuts." So they had a wreck and this guy is hanging from the car upside down, blood all over him, out there on the highway south of... It was down by Blue Rapids, and... That really upset people. It was a big picture right there in four...

Researcher: He put the picture in?

Kessinger: Yeah, right there on the front page. And he said he just – I don't know whether I would have done that, but it cut down on drunk driving. The people were angry about that and when we came here, one of the police officers... I went out to a wreck and a doctor said, "That old son of a bitch. He doesn't have any consideration for himself." He got drunk and smashed up his car and he thought we should run a picture of him. But you think about the guy's mom and his family and friends and... A lot of time, those things could have just happened to any of us and not... Some awful good people get – have been in that situation and just... We didn't run a picture of it. But you can... We did... We have had a lot of accidents around here, and in those days, it just seemed like an epidemic – what would you say – well, just... I don't know what word you'd call it, but there... It was more like a disease. It was really bad.

Researcher: So in that case, you chose not to run a photo.

Kessinger: Yeah. We didn't run a photo.

Researcher: OK. And what factors figured into that decision?

Kessinger: Oh, respect for the person, even though he was dead. He mostly had led a good life. And just... Under the right circumstances, it could be anybody.

- Researcher: OK. How do social ties to the community on your part affect decisions about coverage or treatment of coverage?
- Kessinger: Well, we don't let our friends influence us. We listen to people; we listen to everybody. But we've never – to my knowledge – taken something out of the paper that was... Somebody... Right after we got here – we hadn't been here two, couple months. Well, the president of the (organization) came in and offered me tickets to the (organization) dinner, which we go to. "Oh," he said, "may I talk to you privately?" And I said, "Sure." So we came in here and he said, "My son got a ticket the other day for speeding. I wonder if you could keep it out of the paper?" I said, "No, we can't do that." We just – to be fair – we've just never done it and..." So he left and...
- Researcher: In general, how do community journalists handle social pressures like that, do you think?
- Kessinger: Oh, in community... I think they understand these things. We have people come in. People go out and tell people they can come in here and told us this and that and sometimes they're right and sometimes they're not. But we always listen. That's always important.
- Researcher: OK. Do people in this community prefer positive community boosterism over more hard-line, watchdog-type reporting or the opposite?
- Kessinger: Oh, you always have a mixed bag on that. I mean, we've been critical of this administration editorially and have just got some really hot letters on that. One of them from a Lutheran pastor here ended with "God bless America. The guy's commander in chief and we ought to be doing what he's telling us we ought to do." And I don't subscribe to that. I mean, most people don't, but a lot of people have voted one way or the other all these years and they're not about to change and they just look with alarm at people that are in favor of cutting and running or whatever else. I just... That guy's the... That's the worse administration I've seen in my life – far and away. And we're registered Republicans, but we just find ourselves voting for more and more Democrats, and that's the beauty of a two-party system.
- Researcher: OK. How did you become aware of what the standards of this community are?
- Kessinger: Oh, just by living here. We lived near – lived in Overland 14 years before this, and that was an excellent community; I love western Kansas. It's just... People... Well, they're like the small communities you came from. They're fair and honest and look – usually try to do the

right thing. Every now and then you get somebody who causes problems, but it's rare.

Researcher: To what extent would you say news coverage and content and treatment of news in the newspaper are influenced by the standards of this community?

Kessinger: Oh, I think we all try to do the best we can. That's all you can do. And if you make a mistake, we correct it. And I think people recognize that. There's some people that you're never going to please, but that's true of anything.

Researcher: OK. How important is it for news coverage and treatment of news in the paper to conform to the standards of the community, or adhere to them, or be in line with them?

Kessinger: Oh, I think there are things that pull on you – they tug on you and... Advertisers sometimes try to influence you and we've lost a lot of advertising because of saying no. We just won't treat people any differently because they're big advertisers and that's always the way they get even with us is, "Well, we're canceling our advertising." They never tell me; they'll tell somebody else and you'll get somebody from the ad staff in their place and bawl them out. And it isn't that person's fault, but you get... You got to have thick skin to be in this business. Did that answer it?

Researcher: Yeah. Yeah.

Kessinger: Don't hesitate to say, "Rephrase it" if I...

Researcher: OK. I'm just trying to get a feel for how peoples' expectations may play into some of these decisions.

Kessinger: Yeah, I... We're blessed with just tremendous readers here that come down and get the paper – stand in line to get the paper, and if we're late, why they're angry, and... We always hear, "Well, you said this and you said that in this story or that," and you may not even know what they're talking about because you haven't read through the paper, and if you have, you may have missed it. And again, it's just really important to listen.

Researcher: OK. Give me an example of an instance where a decision you made about coverage or treatment of coverage was knowingly shaped by the interests of the community or what you thought the – how you thought the community would react to the news item. And you might have done that with the example of not choosing to run that wreck photo.

Kessinger: Yeah. Yeah. That was one I... I don't know, there's probably been several of them, but you always think the readers want you to do your best and that's what we expect, is our best. Well, Sharon or Sally probably would be better at thinking of things like that. So you might defer that to Sharon when she gets here.

Researcher: And what about an example of when something that was written or placed in the newspaper didn't hit the mark and you maybe heard about it?

Kessinger: Hmm. Oh, we have people complain about us not getting out to cover something and we got a lot of things. Our predecessors – the guys – were a lot better than Sharon and I at socializing. They really did. They... One of the.... They said one of the advantages they had that we didn't have was that they had newspaper competition. They had a twice-a-week paper that was in what's now the arts center, and they... (Name) always said that – (name) was the editor of the other paper – he said if there was a dog fight in town, he'd know about it in five minutes. He was just a guy who was plugged into everything He was a great guy and ended up being a postmaster here and... Well, that was true. Competition keeps you on your toes. We have the radio as advertising. They're right on top of things and do a good job here.

Researcher: OK. But nothing that comes to mind where something that was in the paper that the community didn't respond to well?

Kessinger: Hmm. I suppose... Well, the things stemming from (mayoral candidate)'s adventures would be the most recent thing that I can think about. And again, you might run those by Sharon and see what she thinks.

Researcher: All right. I just have a couple more questions scribbled down here.

Kessinger: OK.

Researcher: How are journalism ethics balanced with community standards? Or how do you draw the line between journalistic ethics and the demands of the audience?

Kessinger: Well, the ethics are always there and unchanged, but the others can change. And the advertisers that we've lost is a good example. And you end up over the long haul getting most of them... (Mayoral candidate's business), of course, is not running anything and one of our guys went over a couple days after the election and wanted to buy some light bulbs and (mayoral candidate)'s daughter, who is married – she and the owner... She and the guy that run the place are owners now and...

That's not exactly straight, but, anyway, they both own the paper – or own the business. Anyway, this guy came over and they did not... Not only did they not want to advertise with us, they didn't want us doing any business with them, so... But... I felt sorry for his family – I really did. You just... There's no way to get into things like that and have everybody feel great about it. It's just not going to happen.

Researcher: OK.

Kessinger: And again, you might run those by Sharon and see what her reaction is on that, 'cause she and Sally are out there on the desk and working.

Researcher: OK. Tell you what, that's all the questions I had scribbled down. Is there anything that you think would help me with what I'm trying to get to that I didn't think to ask?

Kessinger: No. I'm not sure I've done a very good job of...

Researcher: No, I think it's helped.

Kessinger: Well, I hope so.

Joe Harder
Publisher/Editor
The Onaga Herald
Onaga, KS

Researcher: All right. So, the first set of questions I have are in regard to the factors that you consider when you're faced with a decision of news coverage – whether to cover something, how to cover something, and how to treat it on the pages of the newspaper. So, I guess first of all, what are some of those factors that you consider when you're faced with a decision like that?

Harder: Well, of course, the first thing you have to think about is what are the consequences of my decision. Are the consequences of what's in the paper going to hurt a person? If it's a youngster, how will a negative news story help that youngster become a better citizen? I go by example. We had a young man – he's a showoff. He was carrying a knife at school – at a school function. He was jumping; his knife fell out of his boot. Nobody had to know it was there – he wasn't showing it off; he didn't pull it on anybody. It fell out of his boot. Well, that's a news story in (larger city) or (larger city) – this 15-, 16-year-old boy has a knife at school. In Onaga, Kansas, it's not. I felt the superintendent made a bad decision by 100 percent following the board guidelines. He expelled him for 186 days. Since he was expelled, as a member of this school district, it cost the school district over \$100,000, 'cause they then had to bus this special ed kid to Topeka to school every day. To me, that was a news story in itself. I felt like I should have done something after the fact. But the superintendent did his job as per board direction. And the board could have said, "No, this is not what we had in mind." So I chose not to do anything with it, 'cause I felt it was wrong on their part. I didn't want to encourage him to show off any more. I was hoping that just that incident alone would take care of itself and just let it go. Everybody in town knew about it anyway. What good did it do to blow it up bigger than it really was? There are times when... We didn't used to deal with DUIs here in town. It just wasn't done. If someone was booked on a DUI, it had to come from the county, 'cause we didn't have a local police department, and we didn't run that in the paper. DUI when I was a kid didn't exist. I mean, you got stopped with an open container or you were drunk, the cop let one of your more sober friends drive you home. Now days, it's not acceptable. And I can go with that. So, I've been running... The local police department has been sending me news releases when he arrests people for DUI. He wants people to know he's arresting people for DUIs. So I run them. It makes them mad, but, hey – they're adults. Consequences. If I'm an employer, I can find out if they've got a DUI. It's public record. Once they've been charged, it's public record. So I

don't have a problem with that. A juvenile? I would probably not run it. I may run "A juvenile was arrested for DUI," but I would not name the juvenile.

Researcher: Because of what it might do to...

Harder: Reputation. Unless the juvenile already had a reputation. Once the reputation is there... It's really easy to ruin your reputation; it's really tough to regain it, especially in a small town. We've got example after example of kids... There was a kid that was a freshman when I was a senior. He and a buddy of his – everybody in town know they used marijuana. They got that reputation. To this day, people still think the same way about this kid. And he's a good worker, he's a dad, he's a good guy. He grew up. That's just a prime example of how, in a small town, if you want to leave your reputation... You have to leave your reputation in a small town and go somewhere else. And if I can spare a reputation, I will. By the same token, I will try to help someone's reputation. If they screw up when they're kids and they do good later, I'll be the first one to run a story about what they're doing or tell people about what they're doing. And I suppose that comes from my background. My dad gave me the reputation speech when I was 9, 10, 11, 12 years old – somewhere in there. And my daughters all got the reputation speech. And they're all well-thought-of, so... That doesn't mean we don't have our other idiosyncrasies.

Researcher: Great. Any other factors that figure into that? I think I have if it would – the consequences of if it would hurt other people.

Harder: Right.

Researcher: And if there's an instructional value. You kind of said everybody knew about it anyway, what good what it do.

Harder: Right.

Researcher: So anything else that figures in?

Harder: It's probably wrong, but will it hurt my business? Obviously, in a small town, you have to think about that. Especially on the editorials. It's kind of like being on the school board. In a small town, you run a business, it's best if you're not on the school board or on the City Council. That's the way it works. It depends on how... A lot of it depends on – I hate to, shouldn't say it – but depends on when it happens, too. If it happens on a Tuesday, when I'm pressed, I'm more likely to overlook it, 'cause Tuesday is my crunch day. I'm more likely to overlook it. And then by Thursday or Friday when I have time to

look into it, I've cooled off about it. And sometimes that's best. I don't know if it's right or wrong, but it seems to work out the best. If I feel there's an editorial need, I'll go ahead and write the editorial. I'll sleep on it a night and re-read it and re-do it and I e-mail it to my three daughters and get their thoughts on it. I never write an editorial on Monday or Tuesday. I always... If I'm going to editorialize on any subject, I do it, at the very latest, on Sunday. It gives me a chance to rethink, reevaluate what I said, and make sure I'm saying what I intended to say. And like I say, and financially makes a big difference. Of course, in a small town, you have to be careful, but not so careful that it appears you're crooked.

Researcher: As we go through I'm going to ask for a few more examples. You've given some good ones already, but if when you're going through them, if another factor figures in that you remember, just toss it out and I'll jot it down then. Now, when you're considering these factors – when you're making a decision like this – are they considered systematically or in a certain order or not?

Harder: You're going to have to explain that just a little bit better.

Researcher: Like the Factor 1, if this would hurt somebody. The Factor 2, if this is an instructional value. And the Factor 3, if this will affect me. Are these in an order or...

Harder: No.

Researcher: OK.

Harder: They're how I perceive the whole picture, basically. Does the public need to know this? I mean, is it essential that this be out, also. I look at it as the whole picture. Is it newsworthy? Well, I have things in the newspaper that really aren't. We got old lady so and so went to visit somebody else. Well, that's what old people like in the newspaper, so we try to do that. Do they need to know? Sometimes. I consider – even going to cover a wreck story – I consider is it going to hurt the family...

Researcher: Like a car wreck, you're talking about?

Harder: Yeah. A car wreck. We had a guy just recently was hit by a train. It killed him. It didn't injure him severely; it killed him. Well, I didn't sensationalize it nothing. I just reported what the Highway Patrol and the county gave me. I didn't go down and take pictures of the train the body laying there. I just reported the story as the facts were presented to me. It served absolutely no purpose to go down and take a picture of

a train and the area where he was killed and it certainly wouldn't have helped the family at all of the guy that was hit. So, no. I considered that. That's... That all goes in to how I make my decisions on what to put in the paper.

Researcher: OK. The next set of questions I have are in regard to the standards of the members of this community with regard to what they expect to see in the newspaper and what they maybe expect not to see in the newspaper. So, first of all, to get into that, what is a newspaper's role in a small community?

Harder: Well, obviously, it's to disseminate information. Not only through the news pages, but in the advertising. If there are fund-raisers going on for different organizations and things like that going on... Basically, there... If you want local news items, you have to go to the local newspaper to get them. The radio station here is not going to cover it. Blue Valley's Internet site has free classified advertising, but they don't put a... They have a local news channel that can be broadcast on, but other than that, it's the local newspaper. And it's pretty much that way in most of the small towns. What people expect, I'm not sure. If... I try to keep the sports – the grade school and the high school sports – I try to keep that in the paper each week when there's something going on. Obviously, I don't – I'm not going to take time to write it all myself. I've got people at the schools that are willing to write those stories – the coaches, at the grade-school level, write those stories for me. It's not exactly how I would do it, but I'm not doing it, so... And I'm not paying them, so it's great. Anything I can get somebody else to write is an hour less time I have to spend in here. I've got a guy that works for me two days a week and anything that's handwritten in the news file he comes in, he sets that, and he edits it – he takes care of that. And actual stories that get written, I write. I buy a news service from the (nearby newspaper) – you've visited with (name), I'm sure. I subscribe to his news service – he covers the county for me. (Name) has a journalism degree and is a so-much-better writer on meetings and – basically everything. He is a good writer. And I look to him for proper reporting skills and I think he does a good job. He doesn't editorialize in his news stories. He just tells it the way it happened, and that's all. Sometimes it seems a little slanted, 'cause he's buddies with one of the commissioners, but that's OK. Probably, if anything, I'm too careful. I would rather err on the side of not putting something in than jump on a story that could be detrimental, and then down the line, find out there really wasn't a lot to it.

Researcher: Detrimental to?

Harder: Well, the reputation of the city, to the reputation of the... I'll give you an example. There was a scandal here in town that the city clerk's office – I'm not going to say it was the city clerk or... One of the employees was stealing money out of what they called a "petty cash" fund. The KBI came up. Have you ever tried to get information out of one of those law enforcement agencies? Good luck. Well, they did a full investigation of the situation and the last time I talked to them they told me that they were not at liberty to discuss what they found, that all information that they found had been turned over – would be turned over when the investigation was completed – would be turned over the county attorney. I did nothing when the story broke: "Full investigation of city clerk's office." Well, I never did get to talk to the investigator. I got to talk to his secretary four or five times. The city cop would not go on record as saying this, this. He said, "Now, I can talk to you off the record, here." Well, everything he told me was off the record, because he didn't want to impede the investigation, so... He said, "You're going to have to talk to KBI." Well, the KBI is not going to be giving any information – whether or not they found anything or nothing. They would... They did tell me that they were in the middle of an investigation. That's all. Well, what's the point? The rumor was that \$13,000 was missing – at least \$13,000 was missing. Well, that was rumor. And I believe it was probably true. Who stole it? I... I don't know. That gal that is the office manager, I've known her all my life, and she's maybe guilty. I wouldn't think so, but maybe. The clerk is relatively new, doesn't like anybody, wants a full-time job. I don't know. So, what'd I do? I did nothing and I still haven't. Because since the county attorney has never filed a charge against anybody – I've tried to call the county attorney and never returned calls, so I just dropped it. Would it have accomplished anything more? 'Cause it was all over town. And the poor office manager was being blamed for it, whether she had done it or not. I wanted... What I wanted to do was – is – just find out once and for all that nothing was ever found. Well, they wouldn't tell me nothing was found. Well, I didn't feel like I could ever editorialize on it. I think the way it – the whole way it was handled was wrong. If they're going to stir up stuff, they need to smooth it over when they're done. And so, consequently, I think that the city manager, or the office manager, I think she got dumped on, whether or not... Even if she's guilty, she got dumped on, 'cause nothing was ever filed. So that's how I handled that. So I think, probably, I should have done something about that, but I don't know what. What's right? That's things I used to ask my dad about. But I just can't ask him anymore.

Researcher: Well that actually flows pretty well into the next question, too. Do you think – and if so, how – people in this community was tough or controversial news covered? Covered and treated, I suppose.

Harder:

Controversial news – I think they’d just as soon have exact information, not slanted one way or the other. Just the facts and let them decide what’s right and what’s wrong. I find in many of the larger newspapers, I can find a slant one way or the other. In many of the news articles that are controversial – and I bring up the... Was it the county or city police officers, when – on a racial slur? There was a black lady made comments and the police officers retaliated by sending a letter to the editor and they lost their jobs because of it. The (metropolitan newspaper) sensationalized that and slanted it that it was racial. And it wasn’t – she made it racial. So, if they had reported that this was done, the story was here, this is exactly what she said, here are the two, make up your mind... But it was slanted that the police officers did wrong by defending their own positions. And that’s what I don’t want to do – is slant it. We’ve got a streetscape project supposedly coming up here next summer. It’s going to end up costing close to a million dollars. I haven’t published anything because nothing is set in stone, other than the city has agreed to put up \$285,000. The plan is not set in stone – how it’s – what it’s going to look like. This is the architect’s drawing right here. You may have noticed the orange stripes – that’s what that’s all about. Those are the bump-outs. And I was a proponent of these bump-outs, thinking, “That’s not that big a deal, because they don’t go out any farther than what a 6-foot box truck, extended cab is.” They just don’t. But I’ve got a full-size four-wheel drive pickup. I pulled up right next to this orange line. Let’s see, which way’s north? It doesn’t matter. I assume this way is north. OK. Right here. When I turned this corner with my full-size, four-wheel-drive pickup, I either ran over this corner or the front of my pickup was in this other lane. Or real close to it. If a semi truck had been coming down this street, we would have hit. The way it is right now, I can cut that corner off, still miss this first vehicle, and there’s plenty of room. And I’m part of the committee – anybody along these two streets has been invited to participate in the planning committee of this and I’m... I’ve decided I don’t think we can take the bump-outs. And the... I plan to run a black and white version of this and put in that in an F-150, four-wheel-drive pickup, extended cab, whenever I turned corners, I either cut the bump-up – bump-out off, or extended into the other lane. And I’m as careful a driver as anybody. What I suggested was we run something like this and we set concrete blocks out there on a Sunday. We set concrete blocks or cones in the center of the street – actually measure it – set cones there and set cones on the corners and just see how easy it is, making sure you’re not over the center line here, to make a wider swing, that everything is going to work well. Just see how much room is there.

Researcher: So the fact that you haven't had anything in the paper on this yet is because of – because it's not – there's not enough facts or 'cause it might be controversial?

Harder: Oh, it's going to be controversial. It is. It is already. The reason I haven't is because the plan was so unset that what do you – what are we talking about? Are we talking about loss of parking places? Are we talking about bump-outs? Are we talking about trees? At one time, there were trees in this project. Well, so far, we've eliminated this crosswalk because the two stores that absolutely have to have semi traffic up to their front doors are right here and right here. The bank's drive-through... See where the handicapped parking sign is there just on the other side of that car? It's just over the top of your pickup – to the right of that car. Anyway, the only parking place with these bump-outs – the only parking place – would be where that red van is. Now, we've created handicapped-accessible parking, but we're eliminating half the parking. So have we really accomplished what we're after here? Are we really enticing people to move here? And that's all questions we're asking at these meetings. So that's why I haven't done anything, because the plan wasn't – isn't – set enough for people... People are already upset about the plan to start with because of the bump-outs, the trees, everything: "We don't need it. It's a waste of money." Well, if I say in the newspaper that it's not a waste of money, well, that's just direct argument: "If it's a waste of money, what do you want?" That's what I would rather say – "What do you want?" But the answer is standard: "Well, I don't know," or "Nothing; I like it the way it is." Well, we've got a 200-and – well, 600-and-some-dollar grant to make our sidewalks prettier, to make everything ADA-accessible. And the state's going to pay for – what – 75 percent of it, 80 percent of it. The state and federal government. And we're still not going to have streets. See, the city doesn't actually own this street. It's a county road. So, unless the county's willing to fork out some dollars to rebuild the road, it's still going to be a crappy road. The water went in in 1911 – or, yeah, 1911. That's when the water tower was built, so I assume that's when the water lines went in, and they're still there. There's still lead coming into this building. They're recalling toys because they have lead paint in them, and yet I'm drinking water that comes through a lead – an actual lead pipe. It's good. I test it every year. It's not showing any lead – so many parts per million or whatever it is. But those kind of things need to be taken care of. The sewer lines were replaced – the main sewer lines were replaced and they dug down and attached each one of these buildings on to it, but they're still the original services from the building to the middle of the street. It's still the original cast iron or a clay tile sewer line. So that in itself would be reason enough to tear up the sidewalk – to replace them. I mean, if you're going to replace the water lines, why not replace the sewer

services? I'm not sure whose responsibility the sewer service is from the main to the building in the downtown area. But, as far as reporting, I think before we – there's a... The streetscape report actually has come out – what the plan is, or was. The revised plans, the actual one's that going to happen, things like that, are not set enough yet to be certain. I just got this yesterday, so probably this next week or the following week, we'll do a story on it: "This is what is being planned. The committee has actually voted or general consensus to take this crosswalk out." This crosswalk has never... They decided a long time ago that there was not going to be a crosswalk there. But they're going to take this crosswalk and turn it at an angle, make it 48 inches wide, have a handicapped parking beside the crosswalk. Have you been to (city)? OK. That's what (city) did. In the middle of their blocks, they made slanted crosswalks between parking and they're actual crosswalks. And where these streets are planned to be concrete, they shouldn't pick up the black, so they're actually going to be marked "Crosswalks" with brick – bricks on the sides, concrete on the middle, to mark the crosswalks. So there's starting to be more of a workable plan each time we meet, and I think as the plan becomes – makes more sense to more people, it will be more – better received. The original plan was just... Every... Ninety percent of the community just thought it was idiotic, because it was complete with trees and there's an awful lot of communities that cut their trees down because of the birds. And then (city) puts trees in theirs. I love it.

Researcher: Now, was any decision not to have something in the paper early on because the majority of the community were not happy with the plan?

Harder: Because the plan wasn't set in stone, so to speak – really, it was conceptual drawings. It's basically what everybody thought was set in stone, and there was a small story that... I did write a small story that it wasn't set in stone. And I talked with a lot of people who showed dissatisfaction with the story that I did have, of the streetscape plan. If they verbalized to me, I would go ahead and tell them that, "No, this plan is not set in stone; it's just conceptual. I'll be glad to show you the picture of what it could look like if everything works out the way the architect drew it to start with. Everything we take out, we will save money to add to somewhere else." So, sometimes we seed it just to let people know it's coming down the pike, but there wasn't enough information on out and out what it was going to be for sure, and that's why I haven't done anything lately. This streetscape has been going – has been in the works for a year, because... The way the state funds things, they're always at least two years out. See, we're still a year out from the beginning of the project. The first thing you have to do is you have to get a certain amount of funding from the city to hire the architect firm to get the plan and submit it to the state before they'll

even... So you have to convince the city fathers to turn loose a... I don't know what it costs – \$10,000 – to hire the architecture firm just to draw the plans to state specs.

Researcher: All right.

Harder: And the funny part of it is, the guy that was complaining the most to me about this whole deal was so pissed off about them tearing up the sidewalks, making it harder – he's in Redbud now, which is an assisted-living center. And I tried to convince him that someday, he would have trouble walking that 4-inch step. And he told me I was full of shit. And that was two years ago – a year and a half ago. He now lives in Redbud, because he can't walk. I hate to say I told you so, but... That side – the bank sidewalk – was built up and brought up to meet their... At one time, this whole street on the west side was an 18-inch step up to get into all the west side. Well, then in '57, or '58 – somewhere in there – the state came in, they tore up the street, and they built the street up to more match the buildings. Well, they didn't build up high enough, because there wasn't such thing as an ADA then. Well, see, I've got this 4-inch step. The pharmacy's got an 8- or 9-inch step. The next building's got a 6-inch step. So what the plan is to build the street up just a little bit and then each building, the cement will rise and fall at a light enough grade that it will fix the step problems.

Researcher: How do social ties to the community affect decisions about coverage or treatment of coverage?

Harder: Unfortunately, too much. Unfortunately. Social status I don't think has as much to do with what I put in the paper, except a lot of times, things are... With the more wealthy people, they don't do them here. Sometimes, frankly, nobody knows about them. Status with me makes no difference. If the doctor screws up, gets a DUI, his name's going in the paper, too. We don't have major crimes in a small town. Probably, if David screwed up and murdered somebody, I'd probably put that in the paper whether he worked here or not. I don't anticipate that to happen, but...

Researcher: In general, then, how do community journalists handle social pressures?

Harder: Did you ever saw one that didn't drink?

Researcher: I don't think so.

Harder: You have now.

Researcher: Really?

Harder: I quit 14 years ago because it gave me headaches. I mean, this place does, too. But it made my headaches much worse. I think that... I think printers drank. But that's how they relieved their tension from the... I don't know if that's right or wrong, but... It... We're... We seem to be getting more and more non-working class here and I don't hold very high regard for non-working class. When they get in trouble with the law, I figure they deserve everything they get. If they don't contribute to society, why should I worry about them? And I'm... Maybe that makes me think of myself as a judge, but that's my job. I need to judge in my newspaper what goes in and what doesn't and that's... I don't know that that's right, but that's what makes it mine. Now, it is for sale. It's gong to be high, but...

Researcher: Do people in this community prefer positive, promotional community boosterism over hard-line, watchdog-type reporting, or the opposite?

Harder: It's always been my impression that they would rather see something promoted than the investigative reporting tougher stuff, and maybe that's because it takes more energy to investigate stuff and dig out the dirties. And I suppose in the larger cities, there's more dirties. But airing dirty laundry in public is not necessarily the right way to go. The... My readers... The readership really has not changed that much over the years. As people get older, they subscribe to the paper. Younger people don't read newspapers. And you could talk to... And I... Am I'm the first one that says that? OK. I didn't think so. Younger people don't read the news on the Internet. People think they do, but they don't. They may have it on the radio and just catch it in bits and pieces, but younger people just don't seem to care – and I'm talking 25 and down. They're not interested. As they get older, get families, it becomes more important to them. The bulk of my subscriptions are grandparents and parents. They want to see their kid's picture in the newspaper, which is a positive thing. We try to keep it positive. And there are usually some negatives in there, too, but to me, a positive newspaper is so much better than a totally negative newspaper. And I figure there's enough negativity out there, that if we can bring some positive notes each week on good things happening to good people, then we've done our job – even if we have to stay 'til midnight on Tuesday night to do it. And some weeks, there's not enough advertising and we do stay 'til midnight to fill the newspaper pages, or we get lazy and we throw a shut-up-and-color page and go home. In a town of – I think it's down to 700s now, I think – sometimes it's a little tough to figure out even what you're going to have for pictures. I could run sports pictures every week, but I really don't want to. Sometimes that's all there is.

- Researcher: OK. How did you become aware of what the standards of the members of this community are?
- Harder: I don't know that I am. I know what my dad's standards were and my mom's standards. I knew what they expected of me and that I should not – I was brought up to believe that I should not expect anything less from anybody else. Growing up in the early '60s, that's the way I was brought up. I open a door for a lady, even if I don't know her. Even at Wal-Mart, when the door opens by itself, I don't walk in front of a girl. And when I see people that do, I just can't believe they do that. Because I got knocked on my butt if I thought about doing it when I was a kid. When two girls are walking down the sidewalk, I step off the sidewalk and let them pass. And I'll walk down the street and see guys walk down a street and make the girls walk around them. That just irritates the hell out of me. I want to reach out and just slap the crap out of them That's standards. That's how I was brought up. My grandma would whip my ass now if she was still alive if she ever saw me make someone walk off the sidewalk for them – female or somebody older. That's the way it worked. I'm weird. And standards are just... I have a high regard for people. Even the people that don't work – I don't try... I won't belittle them.
- Researcher: OK. To what extent would you say decisions of news coverage and content and treatment are influenced by what the community thinks or what the standards of the community are?
- Harder: Well, it certainly plays a role. But there again, if I keep it positive, then it's not a problem.
- Researcher: So, it plays a role?
- Harder: Absolutely. It has to. What the owners of the bank at (city), who are my wife's boss... I have to think about what do they think of my newspaper because they are doing business with me. It plays a role. What everybody thinks plays a role. It... If it's an accurate story, it can be negative. If it's guess work, it's not right, and I won't do that. I'd rather not run a story than guess.
- Researcher: OK. This is kind of related to this question, but how important is it for news coverage and treatment of news in the paper to conform to the standards of the community?
- Harder: I think if it doesn't conform to the standards of the community, you're not going to be in business very long. An example: In 1983, my dad had sold this newspaper. In 1985, he took it back. They were putting in very little Onaga news. It was mostly whatever they got from

senators... And they also owned the (nearby newspaper), so I don't even consider that even being out of the family, because we ended up having to go to court to take it back. People were not happy about it. About lost one of our best advertisers. They changed the total look of it. People didn't like the look of it – they had it for 18 months and they still didn't like the look of it. They didn't care that people didn't like it. They reported stories differently, but basically the same. The advertisers didn't stop advertising with them because the people didn't like the paper. They didn't stop because they felt that it was vital for Onaga to have their newspaper. I think the people were very dissatisfied with the way they were producing their newspaper. They were – weren't in here. It was in (city). They had an office gal in here and they didn't do anything of it in here. Nothing was basically in Onaga. They had a managing editor who was around town occasionally, but played golf on Monday. And they put the paper out on Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, or not at all. So people were not happy. So when they missed the second Thursday in the same year, my dad, my brother, and I went to the attorney, got a court injunction, took the paper back. 'Cause after they missed that second one, there was no way in hell we were going to let them miss that third one, 'cause Kansas statute says that you miss three newspaper – you can miss two, but you miss the third one, you lose your legal standing for five years. You have to reestablish for five years. Well, in a small town, you can't lose your legal standing. So, we ended up taking it back. But as far as the... I kind of got off track. I think it has to influence the way you run a newspaper – what the public, how the public perceives you. Ask them.

Researcher: OK. A few more questions, I'll get out of your hair.

Harder: OK.

Researcher: Thank you. Give me an example of an instance when coverage or treatment of your coverage was knowingly shaped by the interests of the community or your perception of how the community would react to the news.

Harder: Well, I'm not sure that I understand... The way I felt about it, how it affected? Is that basically what you're talking about?

Researcher: Yeah. And you... Maybe you already kind of gave me some examples, too, when we talked about the picture of the train that you chose not to take. Really, why was that picture not... Why did you choose not to take that picture?

Harder:

I didn't think that it would... I felt it would be a bigger detriment. I want to give you an example of when my being for something without actually coming out and saying it. It's slanting stories to – in a positive sense... The... Onaga just built a \$200,000 playground. Have you seen it? And the City of Onaga didn't build it. Volunteers built it in five days. We raised \$140,000. The rest of it was grant money. They're still working on it; they're still raising money to put in bathrooms and shelter houses and... A high school senior just did a project and got a \$2,600 grant from the PRIDE program to complete grass – too add – plant grass. Literally thousands of dollars have not even been... They... People don't even understand how many dollars the (family name) have put in just in dirt work. And this kid got the \$2,600 from the Kansas PRIDE program and did landscaping – not just him, but other people helped him. People in the community had to help him for him to get this grant. He wrote the application, got the grant, got the money, put in 90 bags of mulch, gravel, seeded it, got all these people together, and put water over there... It just... The whole community had to go work together to do – to put this playground in. It's a pretty phenomenal playground. It really is. It's neat. You really ought to go see it before you leave town. I ran – of course, I had a gal writing a lot of it for me, because she was the big pusher of this playground. She was the chamber of commerce or main street person for (city) when they built a playground down there, so she knew how... She's a pushier old gal. She's a pain in the ass. But if she gets you convinced, you're willing to go that extra mile for her and she's the one working on this. And that's why I'm kind of staying away from it, 'cause I caught a lot of shit on this playground. The playground is something I felt we needed – a safe playground. There were – I forget how many people – there were over a thousand people that worked on that playground. K-State students came up from Manhattan and worked on the playground. The volunteers came up during the build and put in anywhere from two hours to four days. Some of the K-State students came back a second day after they said they could work a couple hours. They stayed the rest of that day and came back the next day and brought buddies. It was cool. It really was cool. Walk up there and you have no idea who you were working with and just get to talking: "Well, I'm from South Carolina." "Why are you here?" "Because I had the opportunity to come and help with a project I've never been involved with." I mean, it was really cool. Well, that was... The whole thing was just fantastic, the way people came together to build something. And when you see it, it's really neat. There's not a sharp edge anywhere on it; everything's beveled. And I wrote some of the stories. She wrote most of them; I rewrote them. It was slanted toward helping. It was slanted toward raising funds: "We need this." It was basically – it was factual, but it was also... If I had chosen not to run these stories, it would have hurt her efforts, so she knew she had to get me on her side. And she did. I

think it was a little overboard, but everything costs too much, and it's a really nice playground. I'm glad we did it. And let's face it – I didn't have to do all the work; she worked her fanny off. She's – I'm going to guess close to 70. Maybe not quite that old. Maybe – I'm betting she's... I bet she's more than 60 – 65. She's older than I am, I know. That's where I feel that the influence of the newspaper can help the community come together. And, let's face it – we're all a little bit greedy, so while she was raising funds for her –\$140,000 she raised while she was raising funds – she was advertising, too and paying bills out of those funds. I didn't charge her full rate, but I made money on it. So, is it selfish? Maybe. But, on the other hand, isn't that what we're all doing? It just kind of goes around. If I make a good living in here, each organization gets more of a donation every time they come walking in the door. And believe me, they do. Every time there's a church auction or a church something going on, they walk in the door and want something. And I've got no problem – I give back to the community. So, if I can make some money at it and then, in turn, turn around and help them, I... Probably what I made in advertising I gave back to them. I don't know. I'd have to go and look, see how much (unintelligible) bill actually came out to be. As a total bill, I'd guess it was between 500 and \$1,000, and I'm guessing that's about what... Well, I know I gave them a half-page ad at least once. And if she ran an ad twice, I gave it to her once, she ran it and paid for it once, I mean, that's half-price advertising. Does that answer your question?

Researcher: Yeah. Yeah.

Harder: Kind of?

Researcher: Yeah. Well, and then, on the flip side of that, maybe, how about an example of when something you wrote or placed in the paper didn't hit the mark, as far as the community standards are concerned and you maybe heard about it?

Harder: Oh, I think the last time that happened was when I wrote in our headline that our city taxes were going to go up 185 percent. Well, you could... There's several ways to look at city taxes. If they go up, they have to go more up, more than 100 percent. Because if you take anything times less than one, it's less than the original amount. If it goes up 75 percent, does that mean it goes down? How can something go up 75 percent? It can't, logically. So I said it went up 185 percent, meaning it damn-near doubled. Well, the same... The (nearby newspaper) took my same article – my article – and changed the headline and everybody was OK with that. It went up 85 percent. Well, no. Technically, that's wrong. Multiply it out. And my math teacher from high school said, "Harder, you screwed up that headline." I says,

“You think I did? Do it mathematically that way.” And he said, “Well, mathematically and the way people think about it is two different things.” I says, “Well, now, you’re the math teacher.” And he was the one that put me in the dummy class, so, OK... But that’s about the last time... I really screwed up that time. They made fun of me forever, but... So I explained it the next week – how I arrived at the 185 percent – and everybody pretty much seemed to accept that, but negatively impacted? Yeah, they thought I was pretty damn stupid.

Researcher: One more question and I’ll get out of your hair. How do you balance journalistic ethics with community standards? Or how do you draw the line between journalism ethics and the demands of the audience?

Harder: It’s not hard. It’s really easy. Journalism ethics is the standards that my dad brought me up to. I’m not obligated to report a story just because it’s there. I’m obligated to be a good citizen first. I don’t have to rake everybody through the mud. And I’m not saying that everyone in town is, but... Certainly I’ve not come into problems with journalistic ethics as far as scandals and things like that, so... I’m afraid I’m not going to help you much on that one, because I just... I have to do what I feel is right. And where I don’t have a degree in journalism – my degree’s in electricity, from a vo-tech – I’ve had to rely on the way I was raised and how I was taught to treat people. I’m not even sure what journalistic ethics are. I mean, if I had to give the definition, I’m not sure I could do it. To me, ethics are a set of principles and values and the way you live. And it... The way you work and the way you live is the same thing. So, journalist... I... Journalistic ethics? It’s ethics – what’s right and what’s wrong. I would much rather help somebody than hurt them. And if I can help them, I will. I’ll not write a story out of spite. I have – but I didn’t print it. I write it, but I don’t print it. That’s... Those are... That’s why I do them... They’re more editorializing. I’ve written some doozies that I said way too much and there was name-calling and the whole bit. And I edit that name-calling out and I go back and I read it again and I edit a little bit more out and then by the time I’ve edited it down to where I think I’m not going to see it anymore, I’ve decided, “You know, it was really good to get that off my chest.” It doesn’t have to be public. It’s taken care of. And then I’ll go talk to them or just let it go. Maybe it really wasn’t that important. I don’t write a lot of editorials. But what I do, I’m really, really serious about the subject. The last one I wrote was about Rule X coaches in Onaga. We’ve gone through – our basketball coaches have 1.2 years for four basketball coaches. And it’s not always because... Well, I just think the board policy sucks and I’ve been told it’s a cache of rules and all that, but nobody’s showed me or proven to me that it’s a cache of rules. I think it’s just easier if a teacher wants a job, you give him the job, than say “No; we’ve got a Rule X coach, and as long as

he's doing a good job, with no parental complaints, he stays." Well, what they did, they bumped the money up, so then a teacher wanted it. And the Rule X coach was out, when he was willing to do it for peanuts. And I just was really – felt really, really strongly about it's time we quit crapping on the Rule X coaches, because eventually, in a small community, you run out of Rule X coaches and if the teachers decide they don't want to do it, then where are you going to be? So I wrote an editorial. And I rewrote it seven times before I decided that I could run it. And when I ran it, I pissed one coach off and he was... And I wrote in the very beginning that this was not about the coach that got the job. This was about the school board's actions giving him the job. And I had board members compliment me on it and said it was well-written and it got the point. But they didn't do anything about it – they still haven't. They may the next time... It's a negotiated agreement. But I had teachers come up to me and told me they agreed with it and that if it was changed on their contract, that they would sign the contract to support the Rule X coaches. So we'll see. Negotiations are not open to the public, so I won't know. I can find out after the negotiations are closed, whether or not it passed or was even brought up, but to ask anybody, they can't tell me. They're secret negotiations. Now, to me, that's not right – where it's a public entity dealing with our money. But they're closed.

Joann Kahnt
Publisher/Editor
The Prairie Post
White City, KS

Researcher: OK. All right. Please, the example.

Kahnt: A few years ago, we had this situation where a local city employee did something illegal, as far as... And I don't want this... You're not going to write articles about this in your local paper?

Researcher: No. This is academic research.

Kahnt: OK. What happened was the State of Kansas requires testing of the water samples for different places in the town to make sure that the water's all OK. Well, come to find out this guy's just been taking this all out of one tap and sending it in and... This was like the icing on the cake that finally got – was something that they really had to do something about. Well, they fired him. I mean, he... And I know he told them that they couldn't fire him, and they said, "Well, sorry. You're fired." OK. Well, I put it on the front page. That's front-page news. This guy had done something wrong and got caught. And if our City Council hadn't done something about it, the state would have come in and done something not only to him, but to the City Council for allowing it. OK. I put it on the front page. Well, it was a local guy. Lost a lot of subscriptions over it because, "Well, how could you do that do him? I mean, he's lived here all his life, la, la, la." Well, he broke the law. I think it was better that I put in that the City Council fired him than wait 'til the state come out and made a big to do about him doing something illegal. 'Cause I didn't put anything in there about what he did, just that the City Council had fired him So there's an example of what happens when you do tell the truth sometimes and the consequences you pay. And in a small-town newspaper, you need every subscription you can get. So, that was when I had to pay for being honest.

Researcher: Well, thank you for that example. And I'll ask for a few more of those as we go along. We'll start out with a basic question. Well, the first set of questions will be in regard to the factors you consider when you're faced with a decision like that – of whether to cover something, how to cover something, and how to treat something in the newspaper. So, first of all, what are those factors that you consider when faced with an ethical decision like that?

Kahnt: Well, I think the first thing is that you've got to be honest with your readers. They're expecting you – and the two hardest things that you

cover in our area are school board and city. Now basically, we have three small towns that we cover – Dwight, Alta Vista, and White City. White City is our home base. White City has our – by far – our biggest subscription base. So I cover this. The other two towns just give us their minutes from their meetings, ‘cause they’re much more smaller. All of their students are in the (city) school district and they have a newspaper, so we don’t worry about putting their school board news in there. (City) covers that. But I cover White City. So, you’ve got to be honest with your people. You’ve got to keep them informed about what’s happening, but you don’t want to overstep that and cause people to speculate about well, what’s really going on, or something like that. So you’ve got to be as honest as possible without overstepping that boundary of sensationalism, I guess. And that’s sometimes hard. And... I don’t know. I guess I’m a very loyal person and... I don’t want to just be about bad news. Our world is so full of bad news. I mean, you turn on the 5 o’clock news, the 6 o’clock news, the first thing you hear is somebody was murdered or somebody... You read the big papers – the (city) paper, the (city) paper – which are the only two big papers, basically, we have in Kansas... Most of that is bad news. I mean... And I know that’s what they’re about, but in a small town, when you go out once a week, I think ours is about good news. And I think that we’re bombarded with bad news often enough and there are a lot of things that go on that are good news. We try to, I guess, concentrate on the good news. And we’ve had other instances of making a judgment. A few years ago, we had some brothers around here who were supposedly having a hunting lodge and taking people on hunting – ‘cause this is a real big hunting and fishing area. Well, they got caught poaching and stuff like that and I guess guaranteeing people that they would go home with birds and stuff. And so, doing it a little on the illegal side. Well, then I was faced with the dilemma... Their parents were older people, and it had been in... Well, it made the national – or I mean, the state news. Then I was faced with the issue of, “What do I do?” ‘Cause the mother and father were in a rest home. I finally talked to one of the sister-in-laws of not one that was involved. And I said, “I’ve got to put something in the paper.” I said, “I’m not putting it on the front page, ‘cause everybody knows it by now.” But I said, “I think I will conveniently lose that issue that goes to them in the rest home.” I mean, I have enough compassion for people that I didn’t... It wasn’t going to do any good to hurt this older couple and they were in a rest home away from here where they probably didn’t know about it. So we just... It conveniently went in the trash can and the rest of the papers went out. And that... Maybe that was the wrong decision. I don’t know. But I couldn’t see people that were in their 80s having to deal with something that... And at that point, the man was suffering with some Alzheimer’s. There’s just no sense in being mean. And yeah, I had to put it in – something in, because then I would have gotten accused of

“Well, what’d they do, buy you off?” So, that’s how I handled that. I don’t know if that’s right or wrong, but that’s how I handled it.

Researcher: OK. So what I’m getting here is some of those factors that you consider are honesty and compassion for others – you’re thinking of others.

Kahnt: Yeah.

Researcher: OK. Anything else?

Kahnt: Oh, golly. No. I just... I kind of want to be known as somebody who had a positive attitude and tried to find... I guess this comes from my mother. My mother taught me from day one there’s good in all of us. You just have to find it sometimes, and sometimes it’s just a little bit more difficult to find than others. And it’s especially that way, I think – I feel – with teenagers. Teenagers are one of my favorite groups of people and everybody thinks that’s really weird, because I like teenagers. I just have this thing that if I can put good things in about the teenagers, then maybe they will feel better about themselves and not get into as much trouble. And I... The police report comes out in the county paper and unless it’s like a drug bust or a huge issue, I just don’t pay any attention to it, because we have such an overwhelming majority of our kids are good and I’d rather put their picture in the paper and their information in the paper. I’d rather put in about the guy who catches the pass for the touchdown or the girl who makes the winning free-throw or one of the kids that their art project was selected to go onto New York, which we had this year. I’m just about trying to get kids to look at the positive side of themselves and... I mean, I’ve had teachers tell me on Thursday morning it’s just a mad dash to the library to see what you’ve got in there. Whose picture got in there, or... What’s in the paper this week? I don’t know. I’m a little different than... But you have to take into consideration I am not a journalist. I have zero journalism. I have no college degree. I had a fantastic English teacher when I was in high school and I have a background in writing. My mother and my grandmother both were not really writers, but they were both good at writing letters and writing poetry and writing... Both of them kept journals. So, I think that probably is an inherited thing that I like to write and then by having (name) as an English teacher. She really pushed us to write. In senior English, that’s about all we did. So, I don’t have that journalism degree and I don’t have those classes that tell you what you do and this is what you don’t do. I grew up actually right next door. My parents had an insurance agency, and this was the newspaper office. So I grew up coming over here and watching (name) do linotype up here in the corner on that great, big huge machine that had lead all over the floor and probably

inhaled all that lead. But... I just have a different view of what I think I should put in the newspaper. I'm not an ambulance chaser. There... It's kind of funny, 'cause there is a newspaper around... The guy doesn't own it any more, but every week there was an accident of some kind – a picture of an accident. I mean, it was a joke. It was just... If there was an accident within 50 miles, he was there taking pictures. I think I have a little bit more to do with my time. And that's another thing that's really difficult, is when there's an accident or a – something happens and a death. That's a difficult decision Do you put the picture of the car that's mangled? I've only had that happen twice and I did put it in, but I didn't put it on the front page.

Researcher: Both times?

Kahnt: Uh-huh. One time it was someone who got killed. The other time, it was very serious, and...

Researcher: What was the rationale behind not putting it on the front?

Kahnt: Of not putting it on the front page?

Researcher: Uh-huh.

Kahnt: Well, on the death, I guess part of it is because those people know what that car looked like and everybody around here had driven by it. There wasn't any sense in those people having to open up their front – open up their paper and it's the first thing they saw. They know their kid had died in a car wreck. As far as the other one, I guess I just didn't consider it to be maybe as newsworthy as some of the other stuff. It was a bad accident... I don't know.

Researcher: As we go through some more of these questions, I'm going to ask for a few more examples and if any more factors that figure into your decision-making process come up, just throw them out and I'll get them then, so... So, in the decision-making process, are these factors that you take into consideration considered in a certain order – systematically? Or how does that process work?

Kahnt: Not really, 'cause every instance is different. Like with the example with the people who got in trouble for the hunting thing. That was just a concern I had for the – and compassion – for the people that were going to be hurt the most, was going to be these parents, so that was my decision making there, whereas the accident – well, basically, kind of the same thing. I didn't... I'm just not a person that wants to hurt anybody else's feelings if I can keep from it. Now, if somebody does

something wrong, I'm not worried about their feelings. It's the people that it affects that are not really directly involved with it.

Researcher: This question is kind of like the last one, but walk me through, if you can, your decision-making process.

Kahnt: Oh boy. Well, I guess I just take every instance separately and try to think through what good is this going to do. Do the people really need to know this? Is it something so important that it's important enough that if somebody's feelings get hurt over it, it's more important to put the article in than the person's feelings? Or is it something that I can put the article in, but not make it – sensationalize it, so that it doesn't hurt people's feelings as much, but it's still the truth and it's in there and its covered? I guess that... Is that what you mean?

Researcher: Yep. That is... That's wonderful. My next set of questions will be in regard to the perceived standards of the members of the community with regard to what they expect to see in their newspaper or expect not to see in their newspaper. So, first of all, to get into that, what is a newspaper's role in a small community?

Kahnt: I think the biggest part is keeping them informed. Entertainment. It's like a connection. People move away and they continue to take the paper just so they continue to be connected somehow and know that John Doe died or the Smiths had their new baby or... I... It was explained to me one time when I went to one of the KPA meetings that small-town newspapers are what you call "refrigerator journalism." It's anything Grandpa and Grandma can cut out and stick on their refrigerator. And that's pretty much it. It isn't about anything national or state. I mean, we do put in news releases from the state or – I don't know that I've ever put a national one in – that have direct consequences in our community, like, oh, if the USDA is – has a program out that's going to benefit the community, I'll put that in. Or if our senators or representatives send us a news release about – well, some of this stuff I don't put in, 'cause all it is is just, "Look at me." But if it's something that pertains to – like veterans. If there's new legislation that definitely deals with veterans or farmers or something or people that are really in our community, then I'm going to put that in. But if the senator meets with the head of the CIA or whatever, I'm not going to put that in, 'cause that's just, "Look at me. I've..." And that's not just who I am and who I'm about. And I don't think that anybody around here wants to read national news. If they want that, they can turn on the 6 o'clock news. They don't really want state news, because by the time it comes out on Thursday and it happened on Monday, they've already known about it and it's old news. So, that

pretty much... Small towns are... Our journalism is just totally different than the big towns that are dailies.

Researcher: All right. What do you think people in this community expect from their newspaper?

Kahnt: Well, they expect reports. They want to know what went on at City Council. They want to know what went on at the school board meeting. They want to know what's going on in the schools. They want to know what... We even have people that write that like "John Doe went to Sam Smith's for supper." And people like to read that. We lost one lady – she was in her 90s. Well, she's not dead. She moved from the community and I think people are really going to miss (name's) articles, even though it was more a journal: "I got up, I went to (city) to renew my license tag, I had lunch with so and so, we played checkers last night." But that's one of the first things that they turn to. So I think that what they expect is just local news. What's going on... The school's a big part of it, 'cause it is definitely a connection. It keeps people informed of what the school's doing and not just – and I'm a sports addict, so sports are my big thing – but not just sports, but the academic side of it and... Our principal writes an article every other week for us and... Our second graders... Our second-grade teacher has been doing this for years and it's just hilarious. They write articles. Well, it's amazing to me to read the first articles they write compared to the last articles of the year, 'cause their thought process and their ability to express themselves has grown so much in a year. That is just absolutely hilarious and... They'll write things that like the first... One of the first things they write is talking about their family. Well, not very long ago, their first articles were in and the little girl wrote, "I love my mom, my mom is pretty, all this. My dad is weird." (Name) said, "I have been called 'weird' so many times now, it's not funny." He said, "I don't go anywhere but what somebody says, 'Oh, so you're weird.'" And then we had a few years ago, it was just... I mean, this little kid wrote this wonderful little article about what they did for Thanksgiving, telling about their Thanksgiving meal and how they all celebrated by having a glass of wine and explained the meal and everything. And after it was in, I talked to the mother, who happens to be a teacher. And she says, "We have never had wine with our meals, ever. I don't know where (name) came up with this." And then a few months later, he wrote in there about his dad having a hundred-dollar bill in his billfold. (Name) said, "(Name)'s never had more than a 20, ever. And I don't know where..." And in these kids' imaginations are just... And then they'll write about their siblings or something and "My brother..." And they're just darling and people just look forward to that, because it's pure entertainment and these little kids... But, the whole thing is write at the first of the year, and by the end of the year, their writing has

improved and everything about what they say and how they can form paragraphs. At the very first of the year it's just sporadic. It might be, "My mom is pretty. We went to the ballgame Sunday. My brother hit me." All kind of things like that. Where at the end of the year, it'll all be, "My mother's pretty. I really love here. She does this for me, she does that..." And then go onto to what we did for the weekend, maybe, and then go onto something else. And so you can see the progress the kids have made, and I hope other people see it as much as I do, because those kids mature so much in their writing and they write usually once a month, and... I appreciate that. Because I think... Well, for one thing, it's just entertaining and cute, but the kids, they love it. And usually one time during the year, we take up the newspapers and take them like juice or something like they can have their coffee with their newspaper, well, it's juice with their newspaper as a reward for them, but... That's one of the fun things.

Researcher: OK. Do you think – and if so, how do you think – people in this community want tough or controversial news stories covered? So, do you think – and if so, how?

Kahnt: Do they want controversial?

Researcher: Uh-huh.

Kahnt: Sometimes, yeah. And sometimes, that's good, because it makes people think about opinions and how they really feel about something. Now, if it was full of controversy, no. Then it wouldn't be it. But we have controversial issues that come up and if we do, there's usually a passel of letters to the editor about it and that'll get people kind of heated up and going, but on a regular, basis, no, I don't think they'd want controversial issues. We have enough of that.

Researcher: OK. And those cases where maybe they would want something like that, how do you think they'd like to see that covered by you?

Kahnt: Oh. Well, the instance I can think of is a few years ago, we had a bond issue come up. Well, I think they expect me to be honest about it, but I think that they're all right with me forming – expressing my opinion, too. Because I did. There's certain things that I have written editorials about that are controversial and have gotten peoples' response to them, but that's not all bad, so... I think they expect me to be honest, but they also know that I definitely have opinions on things and sometimes I write that.

Researcher: OK. How do social ties to the community affect decisions of coverage and treatment of news?

- Kahnt: That's hard. My husband's on the City Council and I know sometimes people think that maybe I'm biased. I'm really not. I write a lot of stuff in there that's just the truth; it's just what happened at the meeting. I don't have a lot of relatives here. I mean, even though I grew up here, I really don't have very many relatives here. So that doesn't have to come into play. And I've really not ever had too many issues that I've had to deal with that.
- Researcher: How about as far as your involvement in the community, maybe – membership in clubs and organizations?
- Kahnt: Well, we don't have a lot of clubs and organizations. We just started a new promotional group and I guess if they want to say that I'm biased and have overly covered that, I probably have, but... It's hard because I do belong to one of the churches here and I'm active in it and I guess that I see that ours – that people... I encourage them to give me anything that has to do with the church, but I also encourage the others and we write to each one of the ministers and say, "If you have anything, please get it to us." I don't know whether seeing me in church reminds them to do it. So, I guess, there's an area where I could maybe be seen as "Well the Methodist church gets all the publicity." But I try not to, but... And I don't belong to clubs and organizations 'cause we just don't have them anymore. When I was younger and was raising my kids, we had a lot of organizations and I belonged to them – extension unit and to a federated club – but they don't exist anymore, so...
- Researcher: All right. In general, how do community journalists handle social pressures?
- Kahnt: I don't know. I think it's one of the more difficult decisions that you'd maybe have to make. If your neighbor's kid gets into trouble or there's a drug bust at one of your friend's kid's homes or maybe it's another businessperson or some of their family, that makes it difficult. And I can see why making those decisions is not easy; it's not fun to decide if, "Do I put the play-by-play description of a drug bust at somebody's..." I've done it. Luckily it was easier, because the people were known to be problems and not anybody that anybody looked up to by any means, so... It probably wasn't even a shock to anybody when they saw it, but... I remember we had a... Somebody had built a homemade bomb and the sheriff's department found out about it and, of course, confiscated it. Well, the bomb squad or something from somewhere else – 'cause we certainly don't have one in Morris County – came and had to detonate the whole thing. But it was a guy that had been in so much trouble, it wasn't even funny, so nobody even thought anything about it. It was – yeah, it was scary, 'cause it could have been really disastrous – but it made people angry that he would do that and

at the time he had a lady – a gal living with him that had a child. But he’s an idiot. He’s a druggie. He’s known to do stupid things. But it would be very difficult if I ever had to make that decision.

Researcher: Do people in this community prefer positive community boosterism over more hard-line, watchdog-type news reporting?

Kahnt: I mean, they expect you to report the truth and luckily, there hasn’t been a lot of controversy in our school or in our city. ‘Cause right now, our city is kind of growing, which is unusual for a small town. But, because of Fort Riley, we’ve got new housing on both ends of town. And so, yeah, they expect me to have pictures of them building the new houses and we had – this promotional thing – we had a meeting in July. And the gal that owns the (store name) over here and I kind of got our heads together and said, “These people moving to town, they don’t know what’s here.” So we had this meeting thinking that we’d have 10 or 15 people. We had 50-some people show up at this meeting. A lot of businesses, a lot of – the few organizations we have – had representatives there and just some concerned people. So we did a... We had come up with this idea of doing an old-fashioned Saturday night, ‘cause when we grew up, Saturday night was the night everybody went to town. And we did that in August. We were overwhelmed. We had probably maybe 4 or 500 hundred people and every business stayed open ‘til 9. We gave away city bucks – they could sign up for that. We have two museums down here and they were both open. One of the – well, the dance team at school had games for kids in the park and our music teacher did a jam session down in front of the senior center. And then people who don’t have a storefront business set up in the community building, so they knew that somebody was an Avon dealer or somebody was a – here we have a guy who does signs and stuff like that. So that’s... I think that’s what our people want is the promotional thing and... The school had a display and there was just a... And there was stuff up and down all over main street. We’re getting ready to move our library over to the old (unintelligible) hall and so they had it all open to show people what they were going to do with that. I think that’s more what around here they want. They expect you to tell the truth and they want the minutes, or the reports of the meetings and what’s going on and they want to know if there’s controversy, but they also want to know what’s going on, what’s – what we’re doing to promote our town, that type of thing, so...

Researcher: How did you become aware of what the standards of this community are?

Kahnt: I grew up here. I mean, I was born and raised here. The only years I was away from here is when my husband was in the Air Force. And it’s

changed some, because when I grew up, I could literally name everybody that lived in town. Now, with our military, I can't do that anymore. I mean, I know that they're military, but people come and go a little more. So that part of it's changed, but I don't think the core of our community has changed that much. So I guess just growing up here.

Researcher: To what extent would you say news coverage and content and treatment are influenced by the standards of the people of the community?

Kahnt: Well, I think every community... Probably every newspaper gets their standards from their community. I mean, if you've got a community where – oh, golly – where you have organizations that are big and do a lot, then that's going to be the core of your – a lot of your decision making and stuff as far as what... I would say the core of our community is our school, so that's going to be the basis of where we are, but... I don't know. I really don't know.

Researcher: All right. And we'll get a little more into it, too. How important is it, then, for news coverage and treatment of news in a community newspaper to conform to these community standards?

Kahnt: Well, I think you can conform, but you don't have to... You can still have your own identity. You can still have your way of doing what you do. I don't know how to say it. You conform because you've got to, because you've got... If you want subscriptions, which is important, you have to give the people what they want, but you don't have to lose your own identity to do that. You can report what needs to be reported in your own way of reporting it. You know what I'm saying?

Researcher: Uh-huh.

Kahnt: If you're a person who likes the edge – likes to be on the edge of everything, you can report with that edge in there. If you're a person who doesn't like controversy at all, you can just report the facts and not have to worry about ebbing too controversial. If you're a person that feels real – has real strong feelings about certain things, you can integrate into your articles in a sense that you're not going to lose who you are, but you're still going to report what they think is important. I think what it is, you can conform, but you don't have to lose your identity in doing that. And everybody has their own way of writing. And I don't know that any one way... I mean, if you're going to college, they're going to tell you one way is the right way, but I think when you get out in the world, you figure out that there's not one right way. You have to do what the community that you live in wants, plus

you have to be your own personality, because that's part of a newspaper. It brings out the personality of the people that are running it or writing for it. I don't know if that's what you mean, but...

Researcher: OK. Give me an instance of when coverage or treatment of news was knowingly shaped by the interests of the community or your perception of how the community would react to that news item.

Kahnt: Hmm. Gosh, I can't even think now. A... Tell me that again.

Researcher: An example of an instance of when coverage or treatment of news in the paper was knowingly shaped by the interests of the community or your perception of how the community would react to it.

Kahnt: Probably our bond issue was one of them. People in our community – a majority, a big majority – knew that we needed to do some renovation, do some addition and stuff. And so my articles were probably a little bit slanted toward that and our bond issue passed overwhelmingly. I mean, it... The guy that – they hire somebody to come in and help you do that – said it was the biggest percentage of any he'd ever done. And in retrospect, I do think that that how we perceived it and how we put it out to the community probably was influential. Newspapers can slant stuff. And I don't know, but like a neighboring town has tried – oh – at least five or six times in the last five years to pass a bond issue and they can't pass it. But their newspaper hasn't been for it and hasn't helped them in that sense. So I guess that one of the things that knowing how the people felt maybe probably slanted the way I covered it. I don't know if that's right or wrong, but...

Researcher: Well, why did you do it?

Kahnt: 'Cause I felt strongly about it, too. And it was before we knew that we were going to – that Fort Riley was going to grow, but... We just knew that the school needed to have some things done to it and the only way we were going to do it was pass a bond issue, and, gosh, now we're so glad we did because of Fort Riley. But I guess because I felt real strong about it, too, it was fairly easy to do that. But I know that part of my motivation was the fact that the majority of people wanted this bond issue to pass.

Researcher: Give me an example, then, of when something that you wrote or placed in the newspaper with community standards in mind did not hit the mark.

Kahnt: Oh. I wrote an article once about being a stay-at-home mom that got some of the mothers that are outside-of-the-home-working mothers

kind of upset, but that was OK. But that was one of the more controversial things I ever wrote.

Researcher: Was this an article or a column or a...

Kahnt: A column.

Researcher: OK.

Kahnt: Yeah. I've written a lot of... And then... I don't think that I've had too many times that... That's about the only instance, and I've written some controversial things. Our oldest son died of AIDS and I've written about it several different times. I wrote about his death, I wrote about the four years that he fought this disease and our family did and people around here were amazingly receptive and supportive. And a lot of times when you think of small-town Kansas, you think of pretty redneck and pretty conservative, but in the four years, we had one instance, and... Now, when he was... He died in July of '95, and I bought this in September of '95, so what I wrote was after he died, mostly. But I've written several articles and I don't try to slant the facts, but I've never really had anybody get upset with it, which kind of surprised me because of this being more of a conservative... Of course, the majority of Kansas is Republican, conservative – not me, but... We were amazed. We were truly amazed. Our son came home and for the first few years, we didn't tell anybody what was wrong. He just came home and lived and worked and stuff. Well, then he got pretty sick, so we had to tell people. And we were all scared of what was going to happen. Our youngest son was in high school. We were scared to death what controversy he'd have to go through. So... I know that for a lot of people it probably was like a little shocking at first that I would even write about it, but I think that after that, maybe it was educational. Maybe that was one of the purposes of it. So, I've really not had too many bad experiences, luckily. Knock on that wood.

Researcher: All right. Two more questions and I'll get out of your hair.

Kahnt: Oh, that's fine.

Researcher: How do you balance journalistic ethics with community standards?

Kahnt: Like I told you, I'm not a journalist and I've never had journalism training, so nobody's ever really told me what I'm supposed to do and what I'm supposed to do. The community has been much more of a tool for that. I... Like I said, I just don't have any... I guess my training came from high school English class and not from the professional journalism angle, so my decision making is more about what I perceive

our community wanting and how I feel about our community and things that I look at as being important more so than the standards for journalism. I guess when you don't know them, you don't know.

Researcher: One more question. How and where does a community journalist draw the line between journalism ethics and demands of the audience?

Kahnt: Well, it's just a decision-making process that you have to do yourself. I mean, you're the one that's going to suffer the consequences. If I put something in the paper that people don't like, they can't blame anyone else. I can't blame the printer. I can't blame anybody else. The buck stops here, so that's what you have to make your decision on – how you... How much do I care about what other people say? And that's what it boils down to. And how important do I think this issue is? Is it important enough for me to offend people? Is it important enough that I might lose friendship over it? And my answer is probably going to be no. I – luckily – haven't had too many of those experiences, so... But you also have to look at it from a financial end of it. The post office just has started gouging us, and so finances is a big thing now – bigger than it ever was before, 'cause our expenses skyrocketed 27 percent when the post office just had this increase a few weeks ago. So, you have to look at that and think... And it shouldn't be part of it, but it has to be. You have to keep those subscriptions. You have to keep your advertisers happy. You have to look at all angles. But bottom line is the buck stops here. I know in the big newspapers, the buck basically stops with the editor-in-chief, but – let's face it – he don't see half of what is actually put in the paper. He has this person and this person that's in charge of this department and this department. Well, there's two of us here, so... And I own the newspaper; I'm the editor, so it's all on my shoulders. It's like everybody makes mistakes in life; we put them on the front page in black and white. Not often, but we've been known to do that. Just like a couple weeks ago, some new people bought the bar. Well, we always put an article about if somebody new buys a business. So I go over on Monday and do this whole interview with them, take a picture, come back, write it all up, put the picture in. Wednesday, I go print the paper, get back – they're putting new locks on the front door of the bar. "What is going on at the bar?" Well, we hear 40 stories about whether or not they quit or whether they were – whether the other owners took it back over, what... I don't know what happened, but by the time the newspaper came out that afternoon, those people no longer owned the bar. Now, talk about feeling stupid. Nothing we could do about it, but it's just one of those things that happen. And then you hear people say, "Well, I don't think they own the bar anymore." "No, they don't. But they did when I did the article." So, well, we have things like that. And then we have funny things. We'll screw up a name or a headline or something like that, and then we get grief about it. It's

people usually joking, but a few times they weren't. And anymore, with everybody thinking they've got to give their children unique names that are spelled... And you have to look at them for about five minutes before you can actually figure out what that kid's name is and then you're expected to know all the different ways to spell... Caitlyn is a big one. And all the different ways to spell all the different names and heaven forbid you get one wrong. That's one of the hardest things anymore. You used to... A name was spelled one way. Ashley – A-S-H-L-E-Y. But anymore, it can be numerous ways.

Researcher: Well, tell you what, that's all the questions I had scribbled down on my little sheet. Is there anything that you think might help me in what I'm trying to get that I didn't ask about?

Kahnt: I understand, I think, what you're trying to get at – trying to know small-town newspapers and how they make decisions and I would say you've pretty much pinpointed it, because it is community. It is knowing the sense of the community. I don't know how with a small-town newspaper – and anymore, a lot of it happens – how some total outsider can come in and have a successful small-town newspaper, because they don't know the community. And now we have so many that are being bought up by conglomerates that I'm afraid that they're going to lose that individual identity. And that bothers me. And, quite frankly, in about five years, I'm going to want to sell this place. And I just hope that there's somebody from the area that wants to buy it. I worked here for two and a half years just typing for them. And then the gal that I worked for – she had only owned it for three years – she had three little ones and then found out that she was going to have twins and they were all going to be under the age of 5. And, at the time, she was just going to have me manage it. And, like I said, that was when our son died, and then our youngest son was going off to college. So it was like, I went from... And, actually, our middle son had lived at home that year before, 'cause he was finishing his college. So I went from having three sons at home to having no sons at home. And, so when the opportunity arose and she says, "Joann, I can't even do any of it." She says, "I can't even do it with having three little ones, and I'm going to have two babies," so offered me a very good deal to buy it. And, like I said, at the time, I needed something to really dig myself into. So that perfect opportunity – I was very, very fortunate that that happened. But, I'm hoping that there'll be somebody else needing that opportunity in about five years when I get old enough to retire that will want to take it over and keep it have it's own personality. Originally, it was just the White City paper and we printed the Alta Vista paper. Well, then, before I bought it – a lot of the same thing was going into both newspapers and it was just a hassle to do two. So that was when they merged it and made it into one. And then we kind of added

Dwight, because it's between the two towns. And I know that it bothered Alta Vista when they had to give up their – basically part of their identity.

Donna Sullivan
Publisher/Editor
Riley Countian
Riley, KS

Researcher: The first set of questions will be in regard to the factors that you consider when you're faced with an ethical decision of news coverage, or whether to cover, how to write it, how to present it in the newspaper, and how that decision-making process takes place. So, first of all – this is kind of a broad, general question – what factors do you consider when faced with an ethical decision like that? What goes through your mind when you're deciding an issue of whether to cover, how to cover, how to write, and how to place something in the newspaper?

Sullivan: I consider... For one thing... Because of the nature of the paper – it's kind of considered... We're called... Our slogan is "Your weekly good news paper," so there's not a lot of hard news that finds its way in the paper. Now, like when something's going on with the city, I'll cover that. Like for instance, right after I bought the paper, there was this housing development that they wanted to put in – caused this humungous uproar in the city and there were special meetings and things like that. And I feel like it's very important with stuff like that that the information gets out, but I think it's also very important that I'm completely unbiased. And I have a little bit of an advantage because I don't actually live in the city, and so I'm a little bit less likely to form a hard and fast opinion.

Researcher: But you live nearby?

Sullivan: Yeah, I live about 7 miles out of town

Researcher: OK.

Sullivan: And like another thing that we had somebody drop in our drop box, the son of some people here in town is in federal prison for attempted murder. And they wrote on there, "I think this is newsworthy." Well, I didn't consider it for even a second, because I feel like it's not like this kid is going to break out of prison and come terrorize Riley. And I felt like these people have the right to only have... They have to face the people in this town every day, and if they want people to know about it, they can tell them. I'm not going to. And so was that the right decision? I don't know. If I was a bigger newspaper and hard news was more my focus, then I probably should have covered it. But I just didn't feel like it really fit with who we are and what we do and that kind of thing. Did that answer your question?

Researcher: Now you said – the last thing you said was “fit with who we are and what we do.” Is that in reference to the newspaper or the community?

Sullivan: The newspaper.

Researcher: OK.

Sullivan: I kind of see my mission as documenting the things that go on in these towns – and it’s not just Riley. It’s Leonardville and Randolph and Olsburg and those towns. I want to... The things I want people... I want to foster a sense of pride, and yeah, here we are, these tiny, little towns out in the middle of Kansas. But some amazing things actually come out of these towns. We send kids out to do... They go on to do wonderful things and I think a lot of that comes from the nurturing and the things like that that happen here, and so I just want to document what goes on. I want to preserve a little bit of that history and things like that. So, I guess part of my decision-making process is will it serve the greater good or will it actually have more of a negative effect than a positive?”

Researcher: And that’s in reference to the community: “Will it have a greater good or will it be negative?”

Sullivan: Right.

Researcher: OK.

Sullivan: For instance, had I run this story about this kid being in jail, was the community going to be well served by that, or was one family just going to be further humiliated and hurt and embarrassed by having that kind of story in the paper.

Researcher: When you’re taking these factors into consideration, is it kind of a systematic process or are certain things considered in your mind in order, or is it just kind of a general overview-type of process?

Sullivan: Probably a little bit of both and just some gut feeling thrown in for good measure. I mean, I don’t have a list of criteria that I sit there and say, “OK. Does it meet this, this, this, or this?” I don’t go through that process, but mentally it’s kind of like I kind of go through a little checklist sort of mentally.

Researcher: And on that checklist, of course, is what you said about “Will it serve the greater good or will be negative?” Any other things that you can identify right now that are maybe on that mental checklist?

- Sullivan: Does it reflect the flavor of our community? Does it preserve part of its history? Does it get information out there? Like when it was that housing development, there was information that needed to be out there because there were so many rumors flying around, and I'm a very, very firm believer that it's always important to get the correct information out, instead of letting... Because that is one thing about a small town is you can have something that is very, very minor that before you know it, it's a huge, huge thing because by the time it goes around a few different circles, it's completely wrong. So, I do feel like it's important that the paper present correct and accurate information to the public.
- Researcher: As we go along here and we delve a little deeper into this, if there are any other of these factors that pop into to your mind, let me know. The next set of questions are going to be in regard to the perceived standards of the members of the community with regard to what they expect from the newspaper or what they expect to see or not see in the newspaper. So, first of all, what is – in your opinion – the newspaper's role in a small community?
- Sullivan: Basically, like I said, to document its history, to foster a sense of community pride, to get important information out to people. I feel like if there is not about 75 things in that paper that anybody else from anyplace else would pick up and say, "So what?", then I haven't done my job. I want the first things... When somebody grows the biggest radish ever, I want – within the first five minutes – I want it to pop in their heads: "We need to call the paper." And that's happened a couple times – where nobody else is going to care, but these people care. And so that's kind of what I'm going after.
- Researcher: And then the flip side of that, what do think people in this community expect from their newspaper?
- Sullivan: Hmm. That's a good question. I don't really know. I think they expect to be entertained. I think they expect to be kept in the loop, as far as just – we have an entire page that is nothing but who went to visit who and things like that that they want to see that in there. And that's fine with me. If that's what they want, then... But, on the other hand, I have to continue to realize that that particular group of people are aging and there's a whole set underneath them that could care less, and so it's very, very important that there's things that – whether it's the high school sports, anything going on at the school, just anything going on with our kids – I think that's really important to be in there because that's going to keep your young families interested.
- Researcher: Do you think, and if so, how – how do you think – people in this community want tough or controversial news stories covered?

- Sullivan: I think they want them handled fairly. And that's a goal of mine. Last week I had to write a story that we had a huge fuss because the city bought a fire truck that... The county people said they didn't think they needed a fire truck with a ladder, but they were able to get one that didn't cost them that much more. There was a group of people in town that – I'd been getting letters to the editor weekly for a while against this fire truck and stuff like that. So, I had to write this story. And when I was done I just handed it to June and I said, "Read this; if I didn't handle it fairly, then tell me." Because my high school journalism teacher was a real stickler about editorializing. You'd rather be called a liar – dirty, rotten, filthy cheat – than have her tell you you were editorializing, and so that's really – and I think modern media has lost that. And so I do strive to really try to present a really balanced story about things.
- Researcher: So balanced and fairness?
- Sullivan: And accuracy, I think... I hear so many people that will... Like a lady was just in here to pick up copies of the paper that had her son's engagement or wedding picture in it and she goes, "Before I went on vacation I forgot to even drop it off to the (town's name) 'Mistake.'" And they'll call the (town's name) newspaper the (town's name) "Disappointment" and it's the (newspaper name), and so I think that they expect accuracy. Do I achieve it a hundred percent of the time? No. I try. But it happens. Mistakes happen. But I don't ever want a reputation of, "Well, you better double check that before you sent it or else they'll screw it up every time." I don't want that. So I think they expect accuracy.
- Researcher: How do social ties – and this is on your part – social ties to the community affect your decisions about coverage or treatment of news?
- Sullivan: Hmm. I've never really thought about that before. Again, because there's not a lot of hard news things that come in, it very rarely ever comes into play. There are things that give me heartburn. Like how would I handle this if it happened, and it hasn't yet. Well, I – this might not answer the social thing quite as well, but on the standards you were asking about – within the first few months of when I was here, there was a kid that had managed to make it into the world series of – what is that kind of poker? Texas hold 'em. He made it into the Texas hold 'em thing in Vegas. And so to me, that's – whether you believe in gambling or not – that's just a pretty neat story. He's right of high school; he's studied this. He didn't just haphazardly get into it; he actually studied how to do it right and things like that. And so I did a story on that. And I heard a few comments on that they didn't think that gambling should be promoted or whatever and it's like... And the thing about it is – and

I'll say this up front – I am a conservative Christian, and so there are things that I'm sure at some point I'm going have to deal with and it's going to be, "How the heck do I do this?" Because how do you handle it fairly without compromising your own deeply held beliefs?

Researcher: In general, how do community journalists handle social pressures – do you think?

Sullivan: What do you mean by social pressures?

Researcher: You were talking about you identify with a certain church and you're involved in that church. How would those kinds of ties – whether it's church or clubs, organizations, that kind of thing – in the community generally affect journalists?

Sullivan: Well, again... I mean, I think in my position the more out and about in the community I can be, and things like that... Now, I don't belong to... For one thing, I'd rather poke myself in the eye with a sharp stick than attend a meeting. I hate meetings. But, like I belong to the Riley PRIDE, and so I go there once a month and tell them to just hide all sharp objects – I'm here, but it's under protest. But, so, I don't belong to a lot of organizations, but if they've got something going on like a pancake feed or something, I try to support that and stuff. Is that what you mean? Sort of?

Researcher: Yeah. And breaking away from you personally, just as a journalist, how do you think, in your view, how do those social ties that other journalists may have affect how they...

Sullivan: Well, because you're human, I think it would almost be impossible to not let your own personal convictions or beliefs or whatever influence what you cover or what kind of a slant you might put on it or whatever. But I think if you're covering news, for the integrity of the entire field, you need to lay aside all personal convictions and just say, "This is the facts; this is what happened," and things like that – if it's a news story. Like I said, I think as a whole, the media has – we've all kind of dropped the ball there, but...

Researcher: Back to this community now. Do people in this community prefer positive community boosterism, or community pride, over hard-line, watch-dog-type news coverage?

Sullivan: I think so, because they can get that – they can get the (nearby daily newspaper name), they can go online, they can that kind of stuff anyplace, but they're not going to get their own local, what's-going-on-in-the-neighborhood kind of thing anyplace else. So, I do think they

prefer... I mean there's always going to be a few people out there who are like, "Well, you don't ever cover any real news anyway; why should I read the paper?" and it's like, "Well, whatever; don't read it. It's not going to affect me that much one way or the other." The very first week – it might even have been the first week or two that I had the paper – there was a couple arrested up at Randolph for child endangerment and I did include that. That's probably been the closest thing to something like that that I've done, and that serial rapist in Riley, I think – or in Manhattan – I think that's an important thing and we included a story about that and stuff like that 'cause it could affect these people, so... I've got a daughter going to K-State and living in Manhattan, so – and I know there are just tons of people like that, so they need to be aware.

- Researcher: And, you said you've been in this position for a couple years and you've worked for this newspaper for many years. How did you become familiar with or aware of the standards of this community?
- Sullivan: I think just living here for so long. And then, I mean, at a certain point, you have to do what you feel is right no matter what – I mean, even if you feel like maybe not everybody's going to agree with it or whatever, you have to do – or you believe is the best – and that's all any of us can do in life is the best we know how to do at the moment. You can always go back and second-guess yourself, and other people can second-guess you, but until they're in that position making those decisions, then they don't really have any right to second-guess you.
- Researcher: We're getting a little nitpicky here, but to what extent – how much – would you say news coverage, content, and treatment of news is influenced by the notion of the standards of the community?
- Sullivan: Oh, probably quite a bit. Kind of vague, I'm sorry.
- Researcher: How important is it for news coverage and treatment of news in a community newspaper to adhere to these standards?
- Sullivan: That's pretty important, because if you don't know your community well enough to have a feel for what they would take as acceptable and wouldn't take as acceptable, then you've got a problem much deeper than that. You better know the town that you're putting a paper out for and representing.
- Researcher: Why?
- Sullivan: Because if they don't feel like you know who they are, then they're not going to have any sense of loyalty to you or anything. I mean, they're

just going to be kind of like, “Well, . . . And that’s why I think you see a lot of problems with like a paper that somebody’ll come in from out of town and just decide they’re going to put a paper together and whatever and if they don’t establish themselves in the community and if they don’t really know these people, then they’re never going to be to that point where they call you and say, “Hey, you want to do this?” or “Did you know this?” or whatever. They have to feel like you know who they are and you know about these towns and stuff.

Researcher: Give me an example – and you’ve given me a few already, but if there’s another one that comes to mind – an example of an instance when a news judgment decision on your part was knowingly shaped by what you knew about the standards of the people of this community.

Sullivan: Probably the housing development thing was probably one of the biggest. I can’t really think . . . Before I owned the paper, there was a – we had a football player die up on the football field. And I was real – the lady that was the editor at the time just said, “Do you want to do this?” Well, see, I was sitting there at the game. I had a son on that football team. And so it was just so gut-wrenchingly emotional . . . So I was so torn between when all that – because the (nearby daily newspaper name) was doing extensive coverage on it, other area papers were – but as you read all the stories or like when they were on the news and stuff, because they’d be on TV and stuff, everybody was heard from except his mother. And so then I’m sitting here thinking, “If I call her, am I going to look just like a news shark trying to get a different angle on somebody?” And I just called her and I said, “I do not mean to intrude on your grief, but is there anything that you would like to say?” And then she just said “Oh, yes,” and she just poured forth all this stuff. And up till that point, nobody had asked her. And so I think that was shaped not so much by what I know from the community as what I knew as a mother. That she knew . . . I knew she probably had things she wanted to say, and so . . .

Researcher: Give me an example, then, of when something that you decided to cover or something that you wrote or placed somewhere in the newspaper didn’t conform to the standards of the community.

Sullivan: Well, probably that gambling thing. You know, that was probably . . . But it’s funny, because it never even occurred to me when I wrote the story, because I just thought it was so interesting. It never even occurred to me that anybody would have a problem with it, and then, then they did.

Researcher: So in that instance, the standards of the community were a part of it, but maybe weren't gauged as they actually came in? Does that make any sense?

Sullivan: Sorry, I didn't follow you.

Researcher: Well, that was... Well, never mind. I get what you're saying.

Sullivan: Now, if some young lady was to all the sudden become a porn star or something, I'm not going to cover that. I mean, I would know – OK – that people are not going to think much of this.

Researcher: With the gambling story, in hindsight, would you have handled it differently?

Sullivan: No. I'd still done it. It was an accomplishment for him. The kid that did it was a conservative Christian kid from a conservative Christian family. And so his parents actually had to deal with some angst about it, like, "We're sending our son to Vegas to go gamble." And so they struggled with it. And so what I did when I wrote it was I played down the actual gambling aspect of it, as much as you possibly can in a gambling tournament, but that wasn't the focus so much – the tournament was, but we just didn't really talk a lot about the actual gambling aspect of it.

Researcher: And so the reason for doing that was what?

Sullivan: The reason for playing down the gambling?

Researcher: Yeah.

Sullivan: Just because I didn't think that that was the neatest part of the story. He had a chance – he possibly could have won some big money. He didn't. But it was more the fact that he actually studied the mathematics of it and things like that and that he had managed to go as far as he had.

Researcher: A couple more questions, and then I'll get out of your hair. How do you, as the decision maker at this paper, balance what you know about journalism ethics with this community's standards?

Sullivan: There's just not that big of a disparity between them. I think that, in general, that the standards that the people hold journalists to are miles apart from the standards journalists hold themselves to. And so I figure, if I adhere to their standards – of balance and accuracy and things like that – if I will adhere to that standard, I'm going to be way far ahead than if I... I sound like I'm being pretty hard on journalists, but it

frustrates me, and so, 'cause I feel like the role of media is to inform, not to influence, and that has been completely lost. And the sad thing is we, the people, let it by not bothering to look into anything any further, just believing the sound bites as they come across the TV and stuff like that. We let it; we did it to ourselves. We let them; we did not hold them accountable enough. And so...

Researcher: How and where – again, I'm asking to take yourself, or not focus on what you do – but how and where do other community journalists draw the line between – and you already answered this sort of – draw the line between journalism ethics and the demands of the audience?

Sullivan: Now we're talking community journalists still?

Researcher: Uh-huh.

Sullivan: Well that's really kind of hard for me to answer, because – as odd as this may sound – I don't really meet up with a lot of other journalists 'cause I'm just so busy that I don't spend a lot of time at KPA conventions, and I would probably be better at what I do if I did. But it's kind of like I'm too busy cutting wood to sharpen my ax, sometimes. Now, I can tell you like the lady that is our news director at the radio station, she is just real cognizant of wanting to know what's going on in all these little communities around here, and being a part of the community, and I think she would... I would expect her to adhere to some pretty high standards – some pretty strict standards.

Researcher: Standards of?

Sullivan: Just fairness and accuracy and representing the values of the community and things.

Researcher: OK. Tell you what, Donna, that is my list of questions. Is there anything that sprung to mind as we were going through them that I didn't ask that you think would be valuable to what I'm trying to look into?

Sullivan: No, I don't think so. I can't think of anything off the top of my head. But if you think of anything else that you'd like to ask me, you're welcome to call me anytime.

Researcher: And any other – as we were working through some of these examples – any other factors that were part of that mental checklist that you had that sprung to mind?

Sullivan: I'm... I hate controversy. By nature, I'm a people-pleaser. And as soon as controversy enters in, you know that there's going to be some people that are going to hate you and disagree with what you said and stuff, so... I'm in hot water right now because of this fire truck story. There's people who are back to writing letters to the editor and a lady comes in yesterday to get a copy of the two-weeks-ago paper 'cause somebody else had written a letter to the editor and it's just a ongoing thing, but... I don't know. I don't like controversy, and so as often as possible, I would probably stick away, or stay away, from controversy as much as I could while, at the same time, keeping the people of the town informed of what was going on, like with the housing development. It would have been much easier to not get into that fracas, but it needed to be done. People needed to know what was happening, so...

(ADDED VIA FOLLOW-UP WRITTEN COMMUNICATION):

Researcher: Walk me through your ethical decision-making process.

Sullivan: Is it true? Can I verify it? Is it relevant to the communities I serve? Will it serve the greater good? Is it in line with the values on which I've based my business and life? Can I present it in an unbiased way?

Steve Tetlow
Publisher/Editor
The St. Marys Star
St Marys, KS

Researcher: A fire?

Tetlow: Yeah, like I said, Justin, I don't know what you're wanting to discover this morning, but as I was saying, I graduated from (university) in 1983, or '82, rather. I bought my first small-town newspaper in '83 – my hometown, which made it more challenging, 'cause there was a lot of expectations, and...

Researcher: What town was that?

Tetlow: (City), Kansas. North. Extreme northeast part of the state, as the (metropolitan newspaper) calls it. I think (city) is the extreme northeast part of the state. But (name)'s house was burning down – we called him "Skunky." And I had a photo opportunity to take a picture of (name) underneath a tree just weeping wildly at the loss of his house and the loss of his pet, his dog. His dog had perished in the fire. And so... It was kind of a scrambled affair and my sister happened to be and so she was taking some pictures, I was taking some pictures, and when everything had all settled down, we were developing – hand tray developing – our film and got it all back and had the proofs hanging on the line, we had some fantastic photos of "Skunky" just in utter mess. When we were working at the (university newspaper), we published pictures like that all day long and I'm sure they did at the (university newspaper) over at (city), even more so. And, I'm thinking, "Well, I live here. I'm from here, and I'm going to run this of Mr. (name)?" And I didn't. I didn't. I mean, I'm sure the photos are long gone, the negatives have crumbled. But we opted to run a fireman all leaned over on a clothesline or a fence or something and he was out of breath and taking oxygen and that was the op of the day and we put Mr. (name)'s pictures in a box and retired them. And that was my stance on hometown community journalism from the onset and it hasn't wavered in 20-some years. I've been in the business that long and I've never run a sensational photo. And maybe I'm wrong and maybe I'm not, but there's so... There's readers to look for, there's family, and if you get into the business, and you're trying to feed your family, there's advertising, and that... You'll never hear much from doctors at the universities talk about it, 'cause they don't know about it. They haven't lived it; they haven't done it. They don't know about the advertising that keeps us staying afloat. I mean, we've got an arson case right here in St. Marys now that's on – it's been ongoing since the day I bought the paper. I bought the paper two years ago and the day before I took over, our newspaper – or, I mean, our grocery store was up in flames,

burned to the ground to an arsonist. Case unsolved. And so I run updates as much as I can. I try to get in the owners' face as much as I can. They don't talk to me anymore. The attorney, all he does is offer me news releases, which is just canned information that really doesn't lead anywhere. And that's part of running a newspaper in a small town. You know, there's a big story setting there – it's huge. You go to the restaurants, you go to the bars – people, if they talk to you, it's off the record and it's speculation on their behalf and they really don't know. They think they know. It's nothing to publish, so... That's in a little different vein, 'cause that's something I really would like to expose and be able to publish ahead of the (metropolitan newspaper), because that's... These guys are going to beat you on everything and you just... Basically, you're going to rewrite it and go the source and say, "Is this true?" They may or may not expound upon it and that's your story. And that's milk toast and that's run-of-the-mill stuff, but... I've never... When I sold my – one of my weekly newspapers, I was amazed that a photojournalist from the (metropolitan newspaper) came over and he was basically writing the story and taking the photos, which isn't terribly uncommon, but by the time his story was published, what I had done and what I was pursuing to do – the guy really didn't care at all. He skewed it and he basically had a picture of me down in the archives looking at the oldest newspaper published in the state of Kansas, and... He made it sound like I was crapping on the community and leaving to go and do something else. And that wasn't a big metro market; that was (city), a town of 75,000. But it was an arrogant person, which a lot of photojournalists are, and they're in your face and I'm not. And I'm not... I'm a little bit lazy, too. I like to get the truth, but if people aren't opening up, hey, we'll run some fluff in here and go on, because this is us, right here. Typically, this is all the small-town papers are and... I'm meeting advertisers and trying to tread that delicate balance of supplying the readers with good, solid stories, but still have advertising in to keep the paper going. It's a matter of economics – there's not a lot left at the end of the day. You work pretty hard. And we do have a void right now in our staff and it's the city beat. It's important. We have issues going on with our armory; it's empty. The National Guard pulled out, which they have all over the United States and Kansas, and it's left us with this nice, historical building and now the city fathers are trying to intelligently decide what to do with the building and there's a group of – a splinter group – of the chamber of commerce that are trying to look out for the interest of it and this has been going on now for a year and nobody's getting real aggressive with it, but we're not really getting any farther about what we're going to do with the armory. But it's something that needs to be addressed, and so, every other week, people convene down at City Hall and they banter back and forth about what we need to do with the armory. Well, frankly... I'm the editor; I'm the publisher. Theoretically, I should be the reporter. But I know

what's not going to happen on Tuesday nights, and I pick it back up on Wednesday and I get the synopsis and run it. But, by appearances, city fathers and the chamber of commerce think, "Well, there needs to be a figure-head here covering this event." Well, that's... I guess that's important, so... On other weeklies a little bit larger than ours, they would have staff that would typically do that and cover the sports on Friday night and I've been in a very fortunate position the last two years, where I have had parents write pretty sound stories of Friday-night football and – because you're not going to scoop the (metropolitan newspaper) on that, if it's a contest on (highway), and it's really big on Saturday's paper, man, you're not going to be able to touch that, 'cause it's in the big daily circulated to however many people. But then we get our story in the next Wednesday and it's good and it's not terribly biased. I mean, it's easy if you're a proud (mascot) father to write a one-sided story. But that's... I'm – again, I'm not sure what you're seeking here this morning – but if you're running... You just have to use common sense. Here's an instance, and this is true. It happened down in southwest Kansas, in (city), Kansas. There was an advertiser who wanted to place his advertisement in the local weekly newspaper. It's the typical 100-and-some-year-only-newspaper-in-the-county-seat thing and this is how this story goes: He went to the publisher, which is also the advertising director, which is also the editor, and asked, "I would like to place these ads." She – the publisher – felt it not important and was brushing this fellow off to the side. Well, this guy does have an ego. And this is how the story goes, and I know that it happened, but I'm not sure exactly if it happened the way he described it, but it did happen that when the publisher went away for vacation – which sounds suspicious, because we don't; you don't go on vacation when you're publisher of a weekly – but when she went away, this advertiser went in and took two of her employees and went around the corner and started his own weekly newspaper with absolutely no experience, but he did have some money and he did have two experienced women that he was smart enough to get and started his own weekly newspaper. And one year and some odd weeks later, they're still running side by side – two weekly newspapers in that town. And not only are they still in existence, that upstart publication has been named co-official newspaper of the city of (city), Kansas. So you want to know how it goes and how decisions are made – if you're the editor and the publisher and the ad director and a guy's walking in wanting to spend some advertising dollars with you and he's credible and he's putting real money down, you better be careful of how you treat him. That's how decisions are made. It's not a passion; it's common sense. Unless you carry so much money with you as a publisher, you don't care – and that happens; I've seen clusters of weeklies, family owned, where they do throw their weight around and they do get in your face and that's a style and it works for them.

Nobody's burnt their house down, nobody's absconded with their kids, but they're not the most highly respected folks in town. They don't walk into all the cafes with a lot of ease. Oh, yeah; they'll still walk in the cafes. Nobody's buying them a cup of coffee. Nobody's buying them any beers after the game on Friday night at the local pub or whatever. So, that's a style. It... I started with relatively nothing and I still have relative nothing, but it's something that I enjoy. It's been my only thing.

Researcher: All right. I kind of have a little list of questions I might toss out there.

Tetlow: Sure.

Researcher: And maybe in light of that example that you gave about the guy's house on fire and the photos that you had had available to run. And when you were talking about that, you sort of listed some factors that figured into that decision. One was what your readers would think. The other one was concern for the family – for him – and also advertising. Are there other factors that figure into decisions of whether to cover something, how to cover something, and how to treat something in the newspaper?

Tetlow: I think to do that, you have to have a true sense of belonging to your community because if you are plugged into the community and you exercise common sense, issues that are important will really come to light and you will recognize them. I've always felt that. If... I'm kind of disjointed with the town right now, because I'm actually on assignment half the week out in (city), Kansas. But when I get back in town – and I don't have kids in school that are telling me things – and I think that's important, and I'll get back to that; I'll try to stay focused on what you just asked – you have to belong to the community. And if you don't have kids in school, it's even more so challenging to have a connection. How do you do that? You befriend yourself with the powers that be. If there's a handful of teachers and you are associating with them, they'll tell you about the issues that might be below the radar that are maybe worth taking a look at. If there's something like a mill levy, that's going to be obvious. I mean, you're probably going to read about that in the (metropolitan newspaper). Or if... But how will that allow you to decide? Basically, it falls in your lap. I mean, it's not going to be some exposé thing. It'll come to you if you are actually genuinely concerned with your community and people know that. You will encounter, however, a lot of noise, a lot of extraneous stuff that you will have to filter, but if you start hearing the same thing over and over from different sources that are known to be reliable, it's something that'll become to a point where you can't ignore it. You just got to get on and do it. That's all... No matter what town I've ever been in, if I

haven't been the guy that's been the go-to person, there's always been somebody on staff that is. I worked on a twice-weekly newspaper in (city). Well, I wasn't from (city), but there was some residual staff members that were very much part of it. Well, so, I go, "(Name), what's going on today?" And she said, "Well, you won't believe this." And then I'll go to that source and say, "Is that what's going on today?" And they, "Yeah, you're right." And that's how you know. It's not yourself. There's got to be one person that's the go-to person that's always in the loop, always in every loop. And in a small town, it's not that hard. And this town is not like (city). This town is very divided and you cannot know this, Justin, and I did not know it when I got here. There is a traditional Catholic group that are from the academy and then there's the rest of us. And the town looks like it's 3,000; in actuality, it's two communities of 1,500. And that's called a schism. And I'm not a brilliant man, but I don't – I don't know – I don't just out of the gate try to take one side or the other. I try to balance both sides, 'cause there are both sides. And if you play it right, you can get along with both sides. You have to be someone like Henry Kissinger. He was wonderful at that. You have to be a big bull-shitter. You just have to listen, more than anything. I mean, I find myself comfortably where both of these elements exist. I should be... I could go to the grain elevator or I could go to the sale barn and those are the folks that have lived in town for hundreds and hundreds of years. Or I could go down the basement of the smoky pub and hear what the other side is doing. Some people are – hold their cards a little closer to their vest, but if you keep coming around, keep coming around, don't always ask a lot of questions, that's when you hear the most. And bring somebody with you, 'cause they're going to hear something different.

Researcher: OK. So, you've outlined a number of factors that figure into this decision-making process. Are they considered systematically or in a certain order, or...

Tetlow: Not at all.

Researcher: OK.

Tetlow: I've really valued my experience at college and the education that I received. And (university) was not known for being a journalism school, and I had a... It didn't matter. There was some very well-educated folks there and I don't know how much time you have this morning, but... He wasn't my adviser, but he was there at the time and still as an adviser. His name was Bill Brown and he was the editor of the Garden City paper when Truman Capote was in town writing "In Cold Blood." Well, I never knew that until I read the book many years later. Well, that was the type of quality folks I was surrounded by at the

time that taught very structured journalism and very structured decision-making process in the classroom. But you take a guy like him back out in his domain, he's exercising those principles, but he's exercising his common sense. You can't go by that classroom. You can take that teachings, but there's going to be a point when you deviate from it where it will... If you are truly what you're in the profession to do, as a journalist, it will occur to you the proper path to take. But the instruction... I think when you're 18 and 19 and 20 years old, you have to be presented with some rigidity to give you as a guideline, but... And there's nothing like time that can give you wisdom. I mean, I was blessed with the education; I was also blessed with the fact that I was able to take the helm of a small weekly right out of college. Nobody gets that experience. But when I made those decisions early on, my mother and the former publisher were also still in town, and while it seemed like a hindrance, they were also helpful. Because I did have their years' wisdom. My mom had worked at the newspaper one week less than the former publisher did. He got into town. He was from (city), also. He got back in town, I should say, eased into it, and hired my mom a week later, and so they'd worked that thing. And so I had the proper education, but I had their practical application. Oh, I pissed them off from time to time, 'cause I deviated from it, 'cause that's not what I was taught. But something told me not to run (name)'s picture. Not them – my gut did. I mean, it would have played well on the (university newspaper), but there's 39,000 or whatever, 29,000 students there that are subscribing to a more liberal philosophy than a hometown journalist. You already know how I feel about that, so go on.

Researcher: All right. Walk me through your ethical decision-making process, maybe using that fire as an example, as a reference.

Tetlow: Yeah, I had an instructor, and I wish I could think of his name, at (university). He says, "We're here today in ethics class. And if I have to teach you ethics, you might as well leave now." I mean, how do you teach ethics? Gosh dang. If when you're 20 years old and you don't have them, you... I don't think I can walk you through that process. I mean, just tell the truth. And I wish I could. There's just a God-awful truth here to be told this morning, and if I had it and I could substantiate it and I could put it in my lockable file and they throw me in jail and I've got it on fact that it's the truth – I'm claustrophobic, but I'd go to jail. I mean, that's it. You don't... An ethical decision. Where do you draw that line? I think that's what you're here today, to get this answered. I'm a little soft on it. It hasn't cost me much yet, but last fall some kids were screwing around in the parking lot at the high school, and big guy – he's about 250 pounds, and 6-foot-4 football player – and his big dad was 6-foot-4 and he would have pounded my ass into the asphalt if I'd something too weird with it, but... A skinny kid kind of

goosed the pickup truck and threw him out and he cracked his head on the parking lot and he was foaming at the mouth and stuff. Again, 20 years after my first opportunity, I had a chance to get in somebody's face and run a picture of kid's head cracked open as the life-flight helicopter came down and the fire chief trying to get me out of the way. I just thought, "Well, I'll write a story about that and take a picture of the helicopter leaving." That worked out pretty good. The big guy, he healed up all right and his big-guy dad didn't come and hunt me down or anything. And the mom – she's a little thing, no bigger than a squirrel – she could have probably yielded more wraths on me than anything through her network of friends, so that's... You just got to call it sometimes as it is. That's really, I guess, that's really not getting down at the grit of what you're trying to answer...

Researcher: Well, why, really, did you decide not to run that picture and instead go with the helicopter photo?

Tetlow: That's a good question. If you were here, Justin, if you were here and you decided to do it, it probably would have played and they would have been a little chapped with you. What would you have gained? I'm not sure what you would have gained, but what would you have lost? I don't think you would have lost anything. You're a lot younger than I am and I think that you are pursuing something, ideally, that I'm not saying that I abandoned, but I don't... I use the word "soft," and I am. You... In retrospect, you could have probably done it. You could have probably done it – that's not good English, but that's the way that goes. And that was dumb luck, because I happened to be headed out of town and I... You always carry your camera and there was this stuff going on and it shouldn't have been, so that was an easy deal. But, on the other hand, I've got to know the fire chief really well. And is he giving me any inside stuff? No. He's still going to... We go back a long, long way now. He's probably not going to give me something that's going to crack the case open, so you have to decide, I think, if – from the onset, and it's true with anything – if you're going to go down an avenue – this sounds trite, but – you darn well better stay the course, 'cause that is fair. If you're going to run cracked heads once, you better be prepared to run cracked heads your whole career. You can't pick and choose at that point, because then that will come back and it will bite you. Because I chose not to run cracked heads – a guy fell off scaffolding right around the corner just last month. He cracked his head open; he was foaming. I was out of town. Renee says, "Do I go shoot a picture of cracked, foaming heads?" I said, "No. We didn't do it last month. If we're going to do it now, we're going to start... We're going to catch hell this time, but we're going to run it this way from all the way out." And that's how – that, Justin – is how you decide. If you're going to decide to do it that way... If you're out of school and you're

going to run (name), that's what you're going to be known for, and that's the truth – and it was the truth – then that's how you do it, 'cause it's your conviction. It's your call. That's the wonderful thing about whatever amendment it is. If you can shoot something, you can shoot it. And if you can say it, you can say it. It's that freedom of speech. But be fair with it. That's – I mean, that's the process. It's really not a process. It's really a journey at that point, when you've decided.

Researcher: OK. The next set of questions I'm going to ask are going to be in regard to the perceived standards of the members of this community – what I call “community standards.” And the best definition I've been able to come with for this concept is, “Every community has a sense of what's acceptable and what's over the line.” And that's kind of what I'm trying to get at with these questions here. So, what the members of the community expect from the newspaper or what they expect not to see in the newspaper, that kind of thing. So, to get into this, what is a newspaper's role in a small community?

Tetlow: It's to record and publish the events that transpire in this community and, in this case, surrounding, immediate, surrounding area. That's the expectation. I mean, that's 101, I would say. There's people, though, that form factions that become schisms that attempt to steer how their groups should have it reported. You have to train... You have to know what you're doing and then it's a process. Then you have to train your readers – this is what you should be expecting, because the editor – the competent editor – has had this training. She or he knows what to do and if you're to be fair, you go in, be fair, and you take some wrath – some verbal beatings – but you know what you're doing. You know if there's a pervert in town that's been convicted on molestation charges, but his best friend's your best friend and you have to tell your best friend, “I'm hanging your brother out this week because he's done bad things to kids.” That's... You have to do that. Not only is that ethically correct, it's morally correct and, on a mechanical level, it's what a newspaper of any size is for. Everybody knows the guy's a pervert and they've got their own take on it, but this is what the court docket is reflected that he has done. Of course, you can't speculate on it, but when he's tried and these are the charges leveled against him and he's wearing that orange suit out and he's shackled, it might be an in-your-face opportunity. That's an easy one, 'cause he's not going to swing back, but his brother might. I think I deviated from your question, but...

Researcher: So, recorder of history, really?

Researcher: All right.

Tetlow: Yeah. And it's not really for – I guess it is for history. But yeah, to accurately reflect the essence of what truly transpired at that moment in time. And I'm a great one for philosophizing this, but you don't see me practicing it every day. I mean, it doesn't happen every day. You should never forget where you came from. I guess I allow my journalistic downfalls as an excuse because I'm a businessman. It is business and it does go back to the fact – if you have mouths to feed, then you have to think about that, too.

Researcher: OK. What do you think this community expects from its newspaper?

Tetlow: OK. I'm glad you asked that again. I don't think I answered it the first time. People are individuals, and they want their stuff published – they want their stuff. Photos of big fish – they want that. The quarterback's father wants his son's name in the paper more than anybody's. That's what they expect. As an editor, what you should expect in return is the punter's father wanting to kick your butt for not running however many punts that he had versus however many punts he had. That's something you should know. They also should expect some feel-good stuff. Say if that fish were caught in Alaska and there was a thousand words on that, then they should expect to get that in the form of a feature. Everybody feels good about that. They should expect to get some club news that little ladies submit. They should get e-mailed photos of the luncheon that nobody wants to go to that little old ladies took a low-res picture of that you've Photoshopped the best you can. They expect to get the truth without sensation. I cannot describe to you this morning how the split in this community is – and it's so rare – of the traditional Catholics and the people at the sale barns, the people that have been here for hundreds of years. The (metropolitan newspaper), and I don't have these articles... Our features writer that lives in Maple Hill, they have a group of those splinters of Catholics down there, just a swelling, huge congregation. Well, Catholic families by and large are by and large – they're large, so huge, great, fantastic communities of all these little kids. You wonder why some of them don't die. Well, one of them did die last month. He drowned in the river. And the (metropolitan newspaper), they had a slow news week. It was on the front page every week – every day. Of fathers – the Reverend Father so and so and at Mass and the fathers – the dads, I mean – on this slot right here, full color. And about how (name)'s not found, about this, about that. And so the *Star* – one article – said that “(name) had drowned and he's not found. There will be a requiem Mass on Saturday morning at 10 a.m.” And that's all we did. I got more thanks from that than anything that I've practically ever done as a newspaper person because that was it. Now if they should ever find young (name)'s body, I will record the

fact that that's what happened. I think that's what the community expects. And that was from them. We... This little town has us and them and I try to be we. I had no idea – I thought I was just doing the right thing – but I had no idea it would be recognized, because the parents from that community called and said, “We normally don't do this, but thank you.” ‘Cause there was no photos. There was no priest in robes and their dad. It was just... And that was harsh enough – those brief words. So much less was so much more on that occasion, that this boy and his buddies and a couple of his brothers and that dad, the sandbar broke away and everybody was going everywhere and the dad grabs all of these brothers, but it's like – it's like a mother and her cubs. I mean, how much can you grab? One got away. You don't have to say a lot about that. As a journalist, you don't have to put it in full color. If you've any imagination at all, and you can put down in some brief words, “They were on a sandbar. It broke away. Dad was grabbing.” That's what... I don't know if that's what the community expects, but that's what they got and it was a whole powerful image right there. It wasn't a bloody train wreck. And it was the editor trying to be sensitive of the family and the extended family beyond that. You have immediate family, but it... The community can be your family. You're going to screw up. You're going to screw up, but that's what a... You don't ever intentionally do it. But a heart-felt retraction can beat any libel suit hands down. This lady that had it before me, she had hundreds of thousands of dollars in libel insurance. Well, what's that? Why? They're going to sue you anyway. Well, why are they going to sue you? “Hey man, I am sorry. What I said last week was wrong.” If people know you at all, they know that that's just not a false veil. They're going to say, “God, Tetlow – he screwed up and he said he's sorry. You know he meant it.” That's... I've been here two years and I feel pretty comfortable. If you really want to foster the relationships and promote community goodwill through the vehicle of this one weekly newspaper, people catch on to you. If they want to tell you something, they'll say, “Hey, I got something mighty important I think you ought to know.” It takes longer some places than others, but if you really have a genuine care, it'll show.

Researcher: All right. Do you think – and if so, how – people in this community want tough or controversial news covered?

Tetlow: They don't want it. They just don't want it. I've tried for a year and a half to get the, like, the DUIs and the – all the published stuff. Well, I get what I can. Some of that stuff, I'm sure it's public record – and I haven't brushed up on my open meetings law are – but there's another venue for the trash – and that's through the gossip circles and what not, and that works pretty well. But I don't think that people want the hard-line, in-your-face stuff. But there... Like this arson thing going on, it's

just gnawing on everybody right now, because we're out a grocery store two years and everybody in town is like 60 years and older and people just don't have the luxury of flying off to (city) and (city) and (city) to get their groceries, and... Is that a hard-line, in-your-face thing? No, that's a necessity of life, is having a small-town grocery store. And I talk to the owners every week, I talk to the attorneys every week, and I'm not getting any answers. And now I'm getting frustrated and that's when I want to take a little harder approach to it, but the harder it gets, the more information... The harder I want to do it, the more scarce – the scarcer information gets, so... Sometimes things pop when you least expect it, when you've been gently prying, even to the point where people don't even know you've been gently prying. I... There's this young man who worked here – I wish he still did – he's called, like, "Mr. St. Marys," because he's all over town. He knows everything. And he'll come in and I'll ask him two questions and then he'll leave, one week, and he'll come back, and I'll ask him two more questions, and then finally the fourth week, I'll have run this article and I'll have like 18 quotes from him and he'll go, "What did you do?" And I'll say, "Well, it's just my job, (name)." And then he'll come back and he goes, "Oh, I get it. You were interviewing me." Yeah, (name), that's... It didn't... It's like a nurse who can draw blood painlessly. I got stuff out of him and I – he didn't even know. I drew blood and he didn't even know it. And that's not... I don't know if it's a knack or not, but the fact of the matter was I was really interested in what he was saying. By the end of three weeks, I had enough stuff, I could publish. And I wasn't being deceitful because it was an open dialog of stuff that it was truly recordable and... But it was kind of like one of those knee-slapper things: "Oh yeah, I said all that." And then it turned into that story, so that's... And I'll get another graph – five graphs – from him down the road, 'cause he's plugged in. He's connected. And I haven't (unintelligible) any rapport from him. I can always go to (name). I can go to him in a coffee shop at noon or I can go the pub – the smoky pub – in the basement at night. It's the same (name). 'Cause we have this ongoing thing and it just takes a few in a small town like that. You cross the fire chief once and he may not – you may not get something again, but...

Researcher: You touched on this a little bit already, but I'm going to ask it again.

Tetlow: Sure.

Researcher: How do social ties to the community affect decisions about coverage and treatment of news?

Tetlow: Wow. Social ties... Social ties are double-edged swords. The ying of it is with these social ties, you extend your network. You're just throwing

a very broad net out, so it's going to avail to you the opportunity to leave no stone unturned. Then, the yang of that is "Oh my God. What do I do with that?" I just... The bank president just told me off the record that one of the tellers is embezzling some money and he told me that on the golf course: "If you breathe a word of that, 'cause it's true, but it will put a bad spin on the way our bank looks, I'll never advertise with you again and I'll never invite you to the clubhouse again." And so, social ties can be good, but be forewarned that you're going to be supplied with information that maybe you should do something with and you may opt not to. Now, I say I'm plugged in in this town, but I think I might be kidding myself to a degree, 'cause, see, I don't have any kids that ever went through this school system and my social exposure has just become of late. In other words, it does – it takes 18 months to two years to develop that and I think that if once you develop these social ties, you're going to have to decide if you want to... You're going to burn... I think you would systematically... If you used your social ties as an instrument to obtain publishable information, ultimately, you will end up burning bridges. You will use that bank president one time and you will have thrilled that other bank president, but he will have seen what you would do with that to the other bank president, you will never foster anything deeper with him. So not only have you sullied that one side, you probably already stopped yourself from developing that other side. OK? Social ties. Now, if you are so thick-skinned that you're willing to do that and you feel comfortable walking into the restaurant and the bar and eating by yourself and getting bad-mouthed to the high – to the hilt when you leave – and you can live with that, you can live with yourself, and you can live by yourself, and you don't care what people think about your wife, and you don't care what people think about your kids, and if that's the way you want to do 'er, then that's the way it is, because I can cite you a newspaper that does that. Nobody cares for the guy. He runs a pretty good newspaper, but if you ever – if he has any social ties, it's all family now and they are all, "Oh, this is my asshole brother. He runs the newspaper." Everybody knows that. I mean, it can. I think what you're trying to lead up to is, can it bury a story? Yeah. It has; it will. It always will. I mean, particularly, say, if drugs and alcohol are involved and there's kids that have – like bank presidents or – yeah, bank presidents' kids that have gotten in trouble with the law and you're having lunch or... "Man, Steve. God, ol' Junior screwed up really bad this weekend. He not only... He banged... He wrecked the bank car and got somebody knocked up and was drunk at the same time. You're not going to write about that, are you?" "Gee, Ed, I don't know. That's pretty interesting. How did he do all that at the same time?" He goes, "Well, this is what happened, but you can't publish it." "Oh, I don't know. Yeah, I think – you know what – I'm going to publish it one time and then I'm not going to get any advertising any more and you're

going to be pissed at me for the rest of your life. And I'm going to run Junior's name and I'm going to run his girlfriend's name 'cause she was the head cheerleader and what do you do when you look like that and try to cheerlead?" Well, what happened? "Well, this is what happened, people. You really have a right to know, but I'm... I can tell you, but I can't print it." You have to decide – I guess – decide for yourself. 'Cause these are not renewable, replenishable resources. 'Cause once you burn them, that's it. A town of 3,000, you go through them and that's about it. You've got to choose wisely, prudently. And if it's fair, it's fair, but you may have to live with the consequence. If you decide that that's right and your relationship or your friendship or your social ties are strong enough to sustain and withstand it after the fact, then it probably wasn't that genuine to begin with. If it... Like... If you cultivate that social ties and you've already – and if you've had a proven record that this man is fair – then that banker, that doctor, that affluent, influential person should know, based on your reputation, that you're fair, and if your sons or daughters or yourself or your wife or somebody screws up, then chances are that – and you've had a fair record – that the truth is going to hurt 'cause it's probably going to come out. I think I said this and stated it earlier, just... You have to be consistent. If you're going to start running broken heads, then you have to – and if that's fair... I'm not saying it was unfair – that it would be unfair to run broken heads – it would... I went soft and I went easy. I elected to do that. Now would (name) do that? Well, he's older than I am; he's probably getting soft, too. And in his situation – he's just all screwed up over there, because he can't make any money because something so insidious called the (nearby newspaper) moved in and stole all his advertising, which is all the money, and it's a rag from a journalistic standpoint. He knows it and it hurts him, but he has ethical standards. He's never been married, so he's never had kids. He's never had a wife to bash and he's never had kids to bash and so he's pretty socially hooked in there. He's never run a real controversial exposé on something gone bad in (city) because he enjoys a very cushy lifestyle being a bachelor over there in the social arena. And, to my knowledge, since I've known the man, he's never run a truth that was just really wicked. 'Cause I think he chose right out of (university) that, "This is not the way I'm going to run it." It's served him pretty well, but it... In the meantime, just as he was getting his start at the (nearby newspaper), which was truly a real newspaper, a man with money – and I'm talking with how this money gets in, interferes with journalism – a man with money said, "Well, this is B.S. This man runs an outstanding newspaper and he's making \$20,000 a year. I'm going to bring a shopper in. I'm going to steal all his advertising. I'm going to go down the road, because I'm going to saturate all of (county name). And I'm going to steal all the *Star's* advertising and I'm going to send it out to (nearby city) and steal all their advertising and I'm going to send it out

to (nearby city) and steal all their advertising and I'm going to send this thing down to (nearby city) and steal all their advertising. And suddenly, five weekly newspapers with editors with good intent have had their advertising swept under, away from them because of this shopper that has nothing to do with journalism. The shopper runs crap for integrity as far as news content and suddenly these five hard-working editors don't have their ad base and they – it has nothing to do with the social connections. It's a matter of revenue. And they're beat all to hell and they go, "What's the use of serving our readership when I'm trying as hard as anybody and I'm not being rewarded?" So that's a little gray area you might want to consider getting into the program. But as far as the social deal, if you've illustrated, historically, that you've been fair and you've been ethical and something a little weird comes up and those people you've been palling around with, they should know that you're going to – "Hey, Junior's name is going to be in the paper, 'cause he did something God-awful. Maybe, as a parent, this might illustrate to you how you could be a better one so Junior twice-over won't have the same problem. This is not a lecture here, but this is the sad reality. Your kid got a DUI; maybe it was to save his little brother from being crack-head of the year. And I'm not trying to lecture you here, Fred, but this is..." That's my take on that. Or you could be like Bobby Goldsberg – be "I am a rock; I am an island" and if that doesn't matter to you, then you could just be this thick-skinned guy that just bounces around that nobody cares for anyway. But just being fair; being consistent.

Researcher: All right. How did you become aware of what the standards of this community are?

Tetlow: I wrote an editorial. That's how I became aware of the standards of this community. I said people with TVs in their bedroom have less sex than people without TVs in their bedroom. Well, that was funnier than hell, but the them – the other side – they couldn't believe that. That was the most obscene thing they ever read in their life. Well, a month later, I ran a picture of the homecoming queen and man, she had nice – gown on. And so I got dinged again. Beautiful girl. So that set the standard. And it pissed me off because I did two things: I wrote a tasteful editorial and I ran a picture of a good-looking girl and her homecoming queen and the king. And I thought "What have I... What am I doing here?" That's when I discovered... What was the question?

Researcher: How you became aware of the standards?

Tetlow: And it's not like I threw up my hands. Because the guy I'm working with out in western Kansas, he writes these... He puts these jokes in the paper every week about... "There was a semi-truck full of Mexican

eggs and they hatched and they were stealing motorcycles and, oh well, that's how the Mexicans do it." And then this woman had a breast implant called the iBoob. And because women are always complaining about men staring at their breasts, and so now, they'll have something to look at and listen to. Well how does he get by with that? He's got 13 newspapers and I follow up on his newspapers – nobody cares. By golly, they want those (school district mascot) that play five – or four football games, now – and they scored 70 points or 60 points in each game and nobody scored a touchdown off of them. Well, (name) knows exactly where... He knew when – what was expected of him on the editorial line – big football thing. But... And we can run – we can demean women and their breasts and get away with it. We can't do it here. I became aware of that through an editorial. Do I adhere to it? Because I think it's right to be able to tell a quasi-tasteful, funny joke? Will I do it again? I probably will, because it wasn't offensive, and most the farmers and the ranchers and their wives and the other Catholics in town that have large families – well, they got a big old hoot out of it. They thought it was funny. That was half the town. And then the other half that literally you have to wear long dresses, you can't show any part of your flesh – they... But do... Does that segment advertise so great that I'm going to lose ad revenue because I tell bedroom jokes? No; probably not. Now, if one of them hooked up with me for an \$8,000-a-year advertising contract and says, "Man, you've got to cut these jokes." Eight-thousand bucks. Hmmm. I probably would, just 'cause I want the \$8,000. Is that right? I don't know. I've been in business 23 years; I still don't know the answer to that one. It's not that I'm greedy, but I just... That's when I found out.

Researcher: To what extent would you say news coverage and content and treatment in your newspaper are influenced by community standards?

Tetlow: Really not much, because the publishable things are pretty self-evident because we take what we can get. And, for the most part, it's run-of-the-mill stuff. It's the staples. It's the meat and potatoes. I mean... Before school starts, we're grappling for anything we can get our hands on. And because my feature writer was out in the hospital, 'cause he had triple bypass surgery, so I didn't have the fluff to fill in, I wanted to get my hands on anything. So there wasn't anything influencing what went in the paper. I was getting my hands on anything. We had an ongoing case of an instance that should be vehicular manslaughter, which should probably end up with some kind of a diversion, and I've been hitting on that thing for over a year just absolutely trying to overstate that situation to the point where maybe it may border on maybe not fair. But it's not not fair, because it is fair, because a woman drifted over the center line and she was proven drunk and killed this 66-year-old man and maimed his wife. He's dead. She's permanently and

physically scarred, and this woman still walks free. Well, what influences me is the fact that not only did those lives been affected, but virtually the whole community has been affected, 'cause they've been engaged in some way with these people and their lives were changed and ruined and lost in a split second and through a night of indiscretion. So does that get me fired up? The article wouldn't reflect it. I have to be fair. Does it get me fired up to get on the Internet and go turn every officer that was ever involved with it and call him and interview him? Look at the (metropolitan newspaper) and see what they found? Yeah, that's what influences me – people that are under the influence or something. Or people in this town that have been so arrogant that they've opted not to pay their income taxes while everybody else is paying their income taxes – why are you walking around free and being arrogant? That gets me a little fired up, but you wouldn't know it. The readers wouldn't know it. But that influences me. Readers ought to know why this man is being arrogant and who just stole hundreds of thousands of dollars from the United States government by not paying his taxes. It gets a little edge going, but it comes out in the paper as "(Name) has been sentenced to five years in federal prison for evading taxes." (Name) walks in my office: "Well, what are you doing?" I say, "What are you doing? Not doing time, like you ought to be." He says, "Well, that's not right." I say, "Well, tell me what's right, (name)?" "Bring it back." "Well, these gals researched it for me. All I did was write it. Had my notes. They're in back. Want to see them? It's there." That was easy. Being fair. It's fair. It didn't take a lot of years of training at the old U to understand that. But do I want to write bedroom jokes? Sometimes it's just more tired than other... Does that influence me? Well, I mean, writing an editorial versus reporting – the editor gets to do that, but, certainly, he understand the distinction. Do we cross the line? We try not to. Sometimes I get a little lazy and I know there's a story and I think, "What the hell; I'll just run it into the editorial 'cause I can't get everything sewn up this week." That works pretty good, too. I wouldn't advocate that. I'd never teach it, because the young man or young woman trying to learn this trade should not know that vehicle exists. Sometimes it gets really late in the day, you've got 90 percent of it, you can slide through that. You can substantiate things to the degree that it works in an editorial and it doesn't fly as a hard-news story. And I think that's a tad bit artful. I'm not trying to pat myself on the back, but I have gotten comments. OK, so what's influencing me today to report the news? Well, OK, the hardware store and the lumberyard's going up real fast and the grocery store's going up real slow. OK, I have this contrast of day and night and there is an inkling, because I've been around town, of "Gosh, dang it. Somebody should be able to put up 50,000 square feet of building and somebody can't put up 10,000 square feet of building." So what's influencing me today? I don't know why the grocery store can't get done, but I do know why the lumber

yard can get done. So, to illustrate my point, I will go out – and this is fair, this is ethical, and I think this is what the people want to know, if they can't know the total truth – that the lumber yard is going to open ahead of schedule. Sorry, folks. The grocery store is not going to open at all. OK, that tells me 90 percent of everything and that's 90 percent of what I can tell you and 10 percent innuendo and that's your package for this week. That's the news. And because it's grinding on me a little bit, I'll take what I read in the paper – well, I wrote it, but that's OK, because that's nonbiased – and put a little different spin on it in the editorial and say, "Hey, you know what? I didn't really tell you why the grocery store's not opening. I don't know why either. The owners aren't talking to me anymore and the attorney said that I'm throwing out half-truths, so here's my half-truth for the week." Put a little sense of humor with it, liven it up, lighten it up, and there, you've done it. That's small-town journalism – getting... Not feeding the people what they want to hear, but getting an understanding that what they're getting out there is kind of what's going on. That influences me. I'm not about regurgitation, but sometimes people like just to chew the fat. If you just throw it back out there again and disengage yourself from the coffee-shop talk, they're going to go over it like a Monday-morning quarterback. And what have you done? Well, they're still reading your paper. They still know that you're interested in the paper and if something really big is going on, you never know... If you have a proven track record, they go, "I think there's going to be something serious going down tonight. You might want to be nearby." And if you're nearby, and your reaction time is an hour quicker than it might have been otherwise, then somebody's paid you a very good compliment and you've instilled a pretty good relationship, I would say. Nothing really influences me to the point where you should see it in an article. And sure, that editorial forum, that's wide open. I mean, my influences are reflected in an editorial, as it should be. I think that's something that I was lucky when I got here was that the former owner – well – she didn't care so much about hard news and she wouldn't offer her opinion on anything. It was the last thing she ever did. Well, I'm struggling a bit with the hard news 'cause I don't get as much as I like, but I don't have a problem offering my opinion and that shows the community that you do care and they can walk up to you and say, "Gosh darn. I disagreed with that all the way, but I sure liked to read it." So those things are influential.

Researcher: OK. How important is it for news coverage and treatment of news in the community newspaper to adhere or conform to the standards of the members of the community?

Tetlow: OK. I think that's a reiteration of the previous question. I... Let's consider where we are. We are in the Midwest and I'm a Midwesterner,

so what's my thinking? I'm... My thought process is generally congruent with the community's. We are blessed, however, in this community in any given moment to be surrounded by folks of many origins, which can be refreshing and it can be a drag. Frankly, there's a lot of people from the coast here. They've migrated for the scene, which is the academy, and they're very educated people, which means you don't fool them. They have their own thoughts, they have their own opinions, and they generally aren't swayed. You – knowing that there's that brand of folks out there – you throw it out there anyway. They're going to decide for themselves how they perceive it because you know you're not influenced – what you are giving the reader – what they're reading is everything you got: "That's the truth as I've been told; that's the truth as I know it. And if you're so darn skeptical from Jersey, I can't reiterate this any more. Sorry you're paranoid. This is what I know. No one's influencing me; this is what I know. This is the truth." And, so, we have a lot of Midwesterners and we have a lot of others, so you really can't second-guess your readers, you just... It... Man, you're writing it like it was some kind of a report for your professor to read. I mean, this is what it is.

Researcher: All right. Couple more questions and I'll get out of your hair. Give me an example of an instance when coverage or treatment of coverage was knowingly shaped by the interests of the community or your perception of how the community would react to that news item.

Tetlow: How we shaped it – how the newspaper shaped it?

Researcher: Well, yeah. When your decisions were influenced by how you thought the community would react to it.

Tetlow: Oh. I've probably already given you a couple of those.

Researcher: Like the photos of the cracked heads or the burning house?

Tetlow: Yeah. I probably did something I would do the same way again, but not feel like I did the total readership justice, because here's the flip side of being silly: If I... As a responsible journalist and responsible photojournalist – I might have gone up to that teenager and said, "I know you can't hear me now, but I'm going to take your picture and I'm going to run your bubbling head on the front page next week and I'm going to tell your dad if he smacks me down, I'm going to have to live with that, but it's for your own good, OK?" And so I'm... That influenced me, because I opted not – I clearly opted not, Justin, I didn't. If I were to uphold the Hippocritical oath, the doctrine of journalist, I would – I'd publish that and say, "Kids, don't do this. Don't stand up in the back of a pickup truck and expect your friend to ease out of the

parking lot. He's probably going to goose it. You're going to end up on life flight. Here's what's not to do." That's the instance. If I were really living it true, I probably should have run that picture. But I saw the kid writhing around. I saw the mom – she was hurting a little bit. The big old bear of a dad, he probably kind of like, "God, is my kid going to walk again? Am I going to have him for harvest?" That's... I can't answer... You're not going to walk away with a real straight line from me today, other than the fact that I was just trying to be fair.

Researcher: All right. You sort of touched on these other two. I'll just throw them out there and see if there's any more thoughts you had.

Tetlow: OK.

Researcher: How do you balance journalistic ethics with community standards and how do you draw the line between journalism ethics and demands of the audience? Like I said, we sort of hit on that. If there's any more thoughts you had on those areas, I'd be interested in hearing them.

Tetlow: Yeah. OK. What happened in Katrina when that owner of the old folks' home – it was an older couple themselves that owned the nursing home – they took a couple people with them and kind of left the rest of them to die. Did they? I don't know. Those people might have really done all they could, but the national media made it look like they grabbed a couple able bodies and then – oh – could you imagine the death? Of lying there and just drown in a cesspool of whatever. But, that... To apply that here, you damn well better have the truth of what happened. Say the funeral home director was chucking bodies in the garage because he ran out of room at the crematorium or something and the (metropolitan newspaper) ran it, but it wasn't all the way done yet and you knew it wasn't, but from a factual standpoint, yeah, he did. He really did have a bunch of corpses in his garage. And you went up to the funeral home director and you say, "Gosh darn, Frank. I know you better than that. I know you just wouldn't store your garage full of dead bodies, but the (metropolitan newspaper) said you were doing it. Why?" And he goes, "Well, I couldn't afford to pay my gas bill. But as soon as I got the furnace cranked back up, I swear I was going to torch them all." And I'd say, "Well, that was a bad deal." If I really thought he was going to go back and get it all taken care of before it raised a real stink, if you will, I'd probably almost pass on it, 'cause I really... If I knew that he was really on the path to getting it right and it shed poor light on him in the interim, I'd probably pass on it, 'cause it's not the whole truth. But circumstantially, it's like saying, "Justin, I hear you beat your wife. I hear you just beat her all to hell." And you say, "Well, that is just not true. You don't even know my wife." And then you read the *Star*, like, "Wow..." – your last name is?

Researcher: Lessman.

Tetlow: Yeah, Lessman. “Justin Lessman denies beating his wife.” Well, that’s what you did, but is that ethical? I mean, is it true? No, it’s – yeah, it’s true he doesn’t or, no, it’s true he denies that. That’s my answer to that. I mean, if you see a real truth and it’s something that looks like it’s unjust, I don’t think it’s fair to sensationalize it because you’ve proven it to that point. Yeah, to this point...

Ervan Stuewe
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Researcher: So the first set of questions are in regard to the factors that you consider when you're faced with an ethical news decision of those things we already covered – whether to cover, how to cover something, and how to treat it on the pages of your newspaper. So, off the top of your head, what are some of the factors that you consider when you're faced with a decision like that?

Stuewe: Well, there's never two situations that are the same and I probably handle them a lot differently now than I did 17, 18 years ago. I think that I probably avoided a lot of things when I first started just because I knew that maybe it was unpopular. But as far as covering issues, I don't think we avoid anything anymore. I think we cover them all. We probably treat them a little differently than a big newspaper would because everybody knows everybody. You've got to... I'll give you an example. I had a situation – when you called me earlier, or e-mailed me, it popped in my mind right away. About a year ago, I was at a City Council meeting across the street and a... A routine meeting normally doesn't amount to too much. About that time a mother comes in and said, "I want to talk to the council," and they said, "Fine, go ahead." And she said, "My son was doing community service for the City of Alma this afternoon," for some traffic violation or whatever, and he was in front of the fire hall and one of the city employees came by – a hot, hot day – and one of the city employees came by and approached him and told him he wasn't doing what he was supposed to be doing and they got into a shouting match and the city employee grabbed him in the groin and threw him up against a car and starting hitting him. And I'm thinking, "Why isn't our mayor saying, 'Whoa. We need to go into executive session here.'" They're talking about a non-elected personnel and I'm setting there. And the city employee happens to be my next-door neighbor, his wife babysat for our kids, we're all good friends, and I'm thinking, "OK. What do I do here?" So, anyway, I wrote the story just like it was told in the meeting and I didn't get into the detail as far as what was involved with the grabbing and the groin and things like that. I just said he grabbed a hold of him and pushed him against a car and... Of course, then I... As soon as the paper came out that week, I imagined that my neighbors wouldn't look at me or wouldn't wave or anything like that. And I think they were reasonable enough that they know that he screwed up and he knew it and there really hasn't been any issues with it. I guess I imagined there would be and I want ahead and dealt with it and it wasn't a big problem. It was a lot of embarrassment for him and for some other people. And I guess it

was one situation that really drove it home for me that I'm not the person that made the mistake. I'm not the person who screwed up and the people should be scrutinizing. All I'm doing is telling what went on at the meeting and I think that maybe since then, I've take a little better look at that and that's made that a little easier. I go to four different city council meetings and – (city names) – and I always see council members and mayors say things under their breath that are stupid. And I have a good relationship with all those communities and I know that there is nothing going to be served by making those dumb comments public and I just overlook it. If it's something that really pertains to an issue, then I go ahead and report it. I guess that, in time, you learn to use good judgment about what you can and can't use. I think you can still report what's going on without embarrassing somebody, unless they... I mean, some people you can tell want to be embarrassed, and if they do, then fine. So be it. But I – like I said before – I'll hear them say something under their breath and you'll know they don't mean for the general public to hear it. And I may have gotten clear away from your question there.

Researcher: No, no. That helps. It's difficult at times to identify the factors that you go through in your mind until you get into some examples, so... That's good. So what I'm getting from you is that if it serves a public value, if it serves a public instructional value, is one factor.

Stuewe: Right. Sure.

Researcher: OK. Any others that pop to mind?

Stuewe: Oh, God. If I gave it a lot of thought, I could think of a lot of different situations, but not right now, I guess.

Researcher: OK. Well, as we go through and ask for a few more examples, if something comes up as something that registers as one of those factors, throw it out and I'll scribble it down. OK. So walk me through – and you kind of did this in example already – walk me though your decision-making process when something arises that's a question of whether to cover it or how to cover it or how to treat it.

Stuewe: Well, I went to... Tuesday night, I went to two city council meetings. I went to Alma from 6 to 7:15 and then I went to Paxico from 7:30 'til almost 10 o'clock. And out of those four hours of meetings, there were probably maybe an hour of worthwhile stuff. And I just go ahead and I take notes on everything and I get back to here and I go through my eight or 10 pages of notes form each meeting and then I kind of put it in order of number 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 – whatever is important. Usually, when I get to anywheres from 3 to 6, they're probably really not issues that

are all that important. They're things that are going to come out in the minutes. All of them send their minutes to our paper and we publish them all in their legal. We're their legal paper. If they decide to spend \$48 on that new printer, then I don't feel like that's an issue. The other night at Paxico, there were two things that came to the top, and here in Alma, there were two things that came to the top that I just felt like they were the most important issues, and so that's what I decided to cover. At the meeting in Paxico, there was a little exchange over... Oh there were a few barbs thrown and some of the little dumb things that came out, I didn't really write, but then there were a couple things where the one guy said, "I really don't agree with that," and I felt like it had some substance to it, it was important, so I went ahead and reported that. In fact, I do a lot... I quote people a lot from those meetings. There's really not, in most cases, a whole lot of earth-shattering things that go on in these little towns. As an example... Well, now, the other night at Paxico they decided that they were going to hire a guy that's going to go to work and start enforcing these... He's going to be the ordinance enforcement person and try to keep the parked cars of the peoples' yards in front of their houses and in back of their house, and in Paxico that's a big issue. It's newsworthy, I guess, and it's worthwhile. And sometimes I'll write about an issue in one town like that and I get people in the next town saying, "How come we can't do that?" And I get an awful lot of that, where the four towns – we're all in the same school district here – and they get to comparing what each town is doing and I hear a lot of that. Well, in fact, there'll be people come to the next City Council meeting and say, "They're doing this; why can't we do this?" Like I said before, no meeting – two meetings – are the same. You just kind of got to sit there and listen to it all and see what little bit comes to the top.

Researcher: All right. The next set of questions I have are in regard to the perceived standards of members of the community with regard to what they expect to see in the newspaper or what they expect not to see in their newspaper. And so, first of all, to get into this, what is the newspaper's role in a small community?

Stuewe: Well, I think it's pretty important that people know what their city governments and their county government and their school districts are up to. That's one thing that Sarah and I... Between the two of us, we cover six cities, the county, and two school districts and – which is pretty much the bulk of the government in the whole county. And I think that you need to let people know what's going on with them without giving your perspective of them. Sometimes that's a little difficult. I know I've had a person or two tell me that they think I editorialize a little bit in my articles. I used to. I think I've gotten away from that, but... But I think it is important that you let people know

what's going on with those governments. I think that one of the big things that I told the folks at the other end of the county when I bought the paper down there was that I was going to work hard to unify our county. We've got seven communities and I felt like it was kind of an economic development-type issue. We've kind of always had a little competition between some of the communities and I told them that I felt like maybe if we would all work together, that I could maybe bring a little continuity between all the towns, and I've tried real hard to do that. One of the ways I have done that is promoting news businesses. When there's ever any kind of a new business in the area, we do some kind of a special plug for them. If nothing else, we cover the ribbon-cutting ceremonies and things like that. It's tough in a little county like we are for these small businesses to make it, so I think it's important to promote them when we can. And I do a lot of promotion that does not result in advertising, but that's just part of it.

Researcher: All right. What do you think people in this community expect from their newspaper?

Stuewe: Well, I think that they expect reliable information. I think they expect the truth. I... I'm a real stickler on facts. I mean, I probably wear some people out – city clerks and things like that. I go to these meetings and I get my view of what went on and a lot of times, I'll go back and say, "Now, is this the way I heard it?" and "Is that what you intended to say? Is that the way it was?" So I try real hard to make sure that the facts are right, that the information we put out is correct, and I think that people have gotten to the point where they expect that. I mean, it's very seldom do we ever have to make a retraction or correction. It just doesn't happen very much, and I can probably count on one hand in recent memories where someone's called me up and said, "That wasn't right. That wasn't correct." In fact, I just recently went to a City Council meeting where one of the councilmembers reported on how much assistance the county was going to get from the Department of Commerce on a project, and I reported in the paper what that councilmember said. And I had a – this lady that lives in our area who works for the Department of Commerce – and she called me up and said, "That's not correct; you're going to have retract that," and I said, "No, that's what your councilmember said. I'm not going to retract it." I said, "If they want to correct it next meeting, then we'll say that," but I said, "I'm not going to make a retraction for something that was said." Well, she didn't quite understand that. But anyway, then, when I went back to that council meeting, this councilmember started jumping on me about what I had said that she said and, bless her heart, the clerk says, "But that's what you said." And, so... I mean, I... We work real hard at that and I think that's important. I think that you owe that to your people, and... I mean, it can create a whale of a stir when you get

something that's totally of the wall and it can hurt people, it can hurt organizations, and don't care for that. So I think people expect that. I think people expect reliable information, I think they expect the truth, and I think that they expect to have their groups and organizations represented. We print a lot of stuff that groups and organizations bring in here and give us for meetings and reports on things like that that we don't get paid for. And I don't expect to, but I think that that's part of helping your community out – just by promoting those groups and organizations or churches, schools, whatever.

Researcher: Do you think – and if so, how do you think – people in this community want tough or controversial news stories covered?

Stuewe: I think they do. I think they want them covered. I think that most people understand that in a small community, it's probably difficult to drag some people through unnecessarily. Getting back to the City Council meeting that I went to, I report what happened, but I didn't get into some of the gory details that came out, but I didn't think I had to. But I think that people expect you to handle issues important to them. It's interesting to me that once in a while I'll have somebody that'll jump me about why wasn't this or that in there, but usually that's because at some point in time a member of their family got in a lot of trouble and they got something in the paper somewhere, whether it be here or (city) or (city) or whatever and I usually find out that they didn't like the person that got a ticket or whatever. I mean, it... People delight in seeing other people have problems if they've been there before themselves. I don't really run into that a lot, 'cause – like I said – we... I think that most people here know that we're going to cover the issue. We may not get into the gory details of it, but I think that most people maybe understand that and don't have an issue with it. If they do, they don't say anything 'cause I just don't hear much about it. I mean, they know we're not going to dodge it. I was... To give an example. I feel that way and I always will, but... You pick up the (metropolitan city) paper and it might have somebody that was killed in a fiery auto crash and they have a picture of it on the front page and... And we have some accidental deaths out here – not a lot of them, but... We always put it in print. We talk about what has happened, but I don't put pictures or anything like that. I just don't feel like it's necessary. I saw something here two weeks ago that I thought was pretty tacky, but... This little boy – or he was 9-year-old or 12-year-old, or whatever he was – boy from (city) that fell in the river and drowned and the (metropolitan city) paper covered that quite a bit and that was fine. But when they finally had their funeral service, I mean, they had the picture of the mother and the father and the two children. I think that was... It was a Catholic Church and they were kneeling in the front of the church and it looked like this camera guy practically crawled up in the

pulpit and took a picture of them. I don't know. I just felt like that was kind of tacky and I feel like people need to have a little dignity, and...

Researcher: OK. I want to get a little more into that, like you gave the example of not including some of the gory details and you said that wasn't necessary. What is the driving decision-making process behind you making that decision? Why do you come to that decision?

Stuewe: Well, I think that when you're a small community, everybody knows each other and everybody's either family or friends or whatever and if you've got a lady that – here a while back – got caught under a farm implement. She was drug to death and... I mean, just... I mean, it just tore her apart. I... Everybody was aware of what happened, and... But we put in the paper that she was drug under a farm implement and died of multiple injuries. I don't feel like that family has to relive that over and over and over, and I guess that for me... I try to put myself in that position, and maybe I'm not being a good journalist because of that, but I don't feel like it's really necessary to hurt those people again by... I mean, it's bad enough that it happened, that you can put in the paper what did happen, but I don't know that they need the details. I mean, it's kind of like... I know a lot of guys in this community that are volunteers for EMTs and fire departments and that's one of the first things that they're told is that you don't share what goes on on those calls. And, I don't know. I just don't think people need to relive all that.

Researcher: How do you think social ties to the community affect decisions about coverage and treatment of news?

Stuewe: Say that again.

Researcher: How do you think social ties – social ties that you may have – affect decisions of coverage and treatment of news.

Stuewe: OK. Well, I think they make a difference. I try to overlook them all, just like the situation I told you about – the next-door neighbor that got in a fight. I just told what happened, but I... It makes it tough. I don't think there's any question about that. But I think that that's the kind of thing you just kind of have to overlook. Fortunately, we really don't have a lot of those issues that come up, but I know it does once in a while, and I guess having a person work for me that writes can help relieve a little of that, too, because now and then when there's a subject that's kind of sensitive at times, I'll just say, "Sarah, you take care of that one." And vice versa. There's been a couple things – with her husband being a minister in this other community – there's been a couple things that maybe socially could have been an issue for them,

and so she just kind of referred it off to me and... I mean, I think people are smart enough to know that you can't avoid an issue all together and so it's going to end up in the paper, but yet maybe your good friend or your cousin isn't the one that covered the story. Maybe somebody else did and that makes it a little easier. So I think that having two of us here, I haven't felt that a lot. Because it does have... I mean, it can have a big effect on you socially and it's... There's nights every now and then that I'll lay in bed and toss and turn on that one and think, "Boy. How am I going to handle that?"

Researcher: In general, how do community journalists handle social pressures?

Stuewe: I really don't know how anybody else does – don't have any idea. I'm not... This may sound strange, but I don't visit with many other small-town newspaper people. I just don't. I don't know very many of them personally and... So I don't really know how they handle them. I'm sure it's a challenge for all of them.

Researcher: Do people in this community prefer promotional community boosterism-type stories over the hard-line, watchdog-type news coverage, or the opposite?

Stuewe: I think probably the promotional-type things. One of the things that we try to promote a lot are the school kids of all ages all the way from kindergarten though high school – well, through college, for that matter. And I think that people appreciate that and I think that they enjoy that, especially when it involves their own kid. And it's a lot easier to report on those items and there are a lot of them, too. I mean, we just don't have that many hard-core, watchdog-type issues that come up. I think that there's a certain number of people that delight in other people's agony and their problems and I think that, for the most part, the majority of the people are more apt to enjoy seeing the upbeat, the positive. I don't know if that's true, but that's my opinion. I like to think that anyway.

Researcher: How did you become aware of what the standards of this community are or what people want or expect?

Stuewe: I think just by experience. I think when I first started I could kind of tell when – from the people's reaction – if I wasn't really covering enough, and I could also tell... Well, I don't know that I ever had an experience where I was going too far on something – I don't think. But I think that I started to figure out what people expected from me and probably started covering things a little better maybe, a little more, a little more information than what I had been at first. There's always been a few
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people that have been willing to share constructive criticism, and I've appreciated that.

Researcher: Now, is this in the form of just folks coming in or letters to the editor or how's...

Stuewe: Almost, it's just... I mean, I've lived here all my life. Just seeing people socially and comments that I get from them and things like that, whether it be at a school function or a church function or a party or whatever, people... You can kind of get a feeling for what the tone is – what they expect from you, I guess. I don't think I've ever been... I can't remember ever being chastised in a letter to the editor.

Researcher: To what extent would you say those decisions of news judgment are influenced by community standards?

Stuewe: Oh, I don't think to a large extent, or else I don't perceive it as being that way any more. Maybe it did in the earlier years, but I don't seem to think so any more.

Researcher: What was the reason for the change?

Stuewe: I think everybody kind of figured out where we were all coming from – me, as far as figuring out what people expected and they figured out what they could expect from me, I guess. I don't know if that makes sense or not, but I think that that was part of it.

Researcher: OK.

Stuewe: And I think that everybody knows that I'm going to do the best job I can and that they'll be able to rely on what we report and I... As far as how far I go with some of these things, I guess I just kind of... Don't expect me to get too far out of line with some of the reporting and we all kind of have an understanding anymore.

Researcher: How important is it, then, for what you decide to cover and how you decide to cover it in a community newspaper to meet these standards? I don't want to say conform, but meet what the people expect.

Stuewe: I think it's real important. You can gauge your stuff pretty easily from week to week on how many people don't renew their subscription or what your... Counter sales are probably how I can judge that as much as anything, because I sell papers in one, two, three, four, five, six – six different communities – counter sales – and I can gauge pretty easily by whether we're doing a good job or whether we're missing out on something or whatever. I mean, I can just tell by that – whether papers

are selling, and I think that's as good of way of gauging if you're doing a good job as anything. And you can kind of judge from that if you need to maybe pick it up a notch or something. And I get real depressed when my wife gives me the labels for the next week and there's three or four people who didn't renew. Now, of course, most of the time, she'll point out to me that these people do this every year. After 17 years, you figure that out. They do it every year and then about a month later, then they finally renew again, and... In fact, she's got this system – I was telling you how she set her system up – she has this system where one of these names on our labels have little asterisks behind them, and... We always give people a month when their renewal comes up. We give them four weeks and then we send them a postcard, and then if they don't renew, then we take them off. Well, these people that she's got the asterisk by, if they don't pay the week it's due, she pulls them off. 'Cause she says, "They do it that way every year anyway. They're not going to pay, so we're not going to give them any free weeks." But anyway, I get depressed when I see two or three of them that get pulled off and – 'til I see who some of them are and that always helps, because I know they'll be back.

Researcher: OK. Give me an example of an instance when coverage or treatment of coverage was knowingly shaped by the interests of the community or your perception of how the community would react to that news item.

Stuewe: Well, I could probably go back to the one that I gave you earlier about the City Council meeting. I knew that if I... I mean, there was people from both sides of that issue that were angry – the mother of the son that got beat up and the family and friends of the city worker – and I knew that if I walked out of that City Council meeting and said, "I don't want to touch this," I was going to hear plenty from the other side, so I just... I knew that there were two forces involved there and I was going to have to do the right thing and report it just like it happened and so that's what I did. And there's been several situations through the years where I think the fact that there are two sides to everything, it probably keeps you honest. I mean, it'd be pretty easy to maybe soften up a little bit or just to walk away from an issue, but when you know that there's other people that are involved with that, you know that you can't do that. In this case, with reporting on that particular individual... We had a lot of issues with this young man. He had beaten up his parents and been involved in a lot of different things and his mother did not like me at all because of the fact that they had bankruptcies and we put court news in and that was in there. And anyway, she didn't care for me at all. And it's been real interesting, because after I reported about her son got attacked and everything else, she's been a good friend of mine. She called me up and told me how much she appreciated it and just turned it all around. And that's an

interesting thing, too. We put court news in, and I just had an attorney call me about three weeks ago that had a client that he... These sexual laws that they have now are... I don't know about it. They came home – and this kid was 17 and his girlfriend was 14 – and they came home and her parents caught him making out with her and touching her inappropriately. Well, they filed charges against him. I mean, the... My gosh, the way the charges read, it was almost as bad as a rape charge. I mean, I think they've gotten a little carried away with some of these things. Although if it were my daughter, maybe I wouldn't. But anyway... So this kid was going to be charged with this inappropriate sexual whatever with an underage kid. Well, it was his girlfriend and this attorney said, "Everybody's going to know when they read this about him who the girlfriend is and she's in high school and could you not put that in the paper?" And I said, "You know better than to even ask me that." If it's a court filing, it's a court filing. I told him, I said, "It's just three weeks ago, we had a guy that actually did rape a girl – a young guy, but – and I said, "We put his name in there." I said, "How do you suppose his folks felt about that?" I said, "I can't not put in what – pick and choose with what I'm going to do with court charges." So we put it in and nobody said anything, but that's a challenge sometimes, too. The bankruptcies, the foreclosures, the – some of the dumb things kids do, the... And then I had to put in there a few years ago that my nephew got on the school bus and took a crap in the aisle – him and some other kids. I mean, that's the way it goes. Another one of those deals – I didn't do it, so why should I feel guilty?

Researcher: And then kind of the reverse of that question. Give me an example of when something you wrote or placed with community standards in mind maybe didn't hit the mark.

Stuewe: Well, I don't know. I can't really think of anything there, Justin. But I'm sure that if I had enough time and gave it enough thought, I might be able to think of something. Right off the top of my head, I really can't, though.

Researcher: How – two more questions and I'll get out of your hair – how do you balance journalistic ethics with community standards?

Stuewe: Well, I guess it kind of gets back to what I told you earlier about being factual and telling the truth. I think as long as you tell the truth and you do the best job you can, and you treat everybody equally, as far as ethics are concerned, then I don't think you need to really be too concerned about the other things. I think they'll all kind of fall into place. If you treat everybody the same way, you can't have somebody come back and say, "You did this for them" or "You didn't do that for them," and so I think that's real important. I mean, that's kind of like I

said about this attorney asking that the other day. I said, “We have to treat everybody equally,” and I just feel like that’s important, whether it be good news or bad news. You don’t have a grocery store open up in one town and make a big deal about it and then have a grocery store open in the next town and act like you’re not even going to cover it. You’ve got to report all the good news and the bad news equally, I think.

Researcher: One final question. How and where does a community journalist draw the line between journalism ethics and demands of the audience?

Stuewe: Well, I don’t think you waver on it. I think that if you’re ethical, you just treat – like I said before – you treat people equally and fairly and if people don’t care for that – you’re normally not going to have over a small percentage – but if they don’t care for it, then that’s just too bad. I mean, I’m not going to put my integrity in question by looking away from something or by handling something unfairly. And I think that’s important. I think that you might have people at some point in time that may not agree with you or may not like that, but I think that in the long run, overall – when it’s all said and done – I think people appreciate you for that. I remember having a... We had a kid that – oh, it was after 9/11. It was after the Columbine that we had a kid that went into the restroom up there at the high school and wrote on the wall that he was pissed and all and all this crap. I mean, we had KBI and everybody out here within – like that, and... Dumb kid. I mean, a dumb thing to do. And they could tell by his handwriting who it was. I mean, they knew right off. I mean, it was... His handwriting was so distinctive, I guess, and... So they arrested him and I reported on the incident. I’ve always worked closely with our sheriff’s department. They probably... They have a standard, too. I mean, it’s like, “We’re going to give you this or we’re not going to give you,” and they... Anyway, he gave me the information and I reported just exactly what he told me. And the kid was 18 and we listed his name and his grandmother just ripped my ass over it, just terrible. So it was probably... Well, it wasn’t long after that hit, they suspended him from school and, of course, then we had to pay for tutoring at home so he – he couldn’t miss out on school. And everything kind of blew over, and it was about six months later his grandmother came to me and apologized and said, “I understand you had a job to do and it was my fault that I got upset with you and you did what you needed to do.” So I... That’s why I say I think if you treat people fairly and equally, even though they may be irritated at you for the moment, they’re going to understand later on. Oh, another little incident. I had a guy that was – this has been quite a number of years ago – that was writing some stories for me. And we had a beer party out here in the country and a couple guys got in a fight and this kid bit another kid’s ear off. I mean bit it clear off. And he wrote the story just

like it was. I mean, he didn't embellish it or anything. He just said that they got in a fight and so and so bit this kid's ear off, and... I mean, the people just thought it was a hoot, except this kid's grandmother. And she was buying subscriptions for like four of her grandkids and she came in and she was just livid 'cause we put that in the paper, and she canceled the subscriptions for all of grandchildren. I'm sorry, that's fine. Do what you got to do, but it's not like it didn't happen. And it was a year or so later that she turned into my best friend again. She got over it, but... I think that people understand that people screw up and if it ends up in the newspaper, you may not like it very well, but you can't act like it didn't happen. And time heals those wounds, I guess, and they suddenly realize it wasn't the guy that wrote the newspaper article that made the mistake, like I told you at the beginning.

Mark Portell
Publisher/Editor
Wamego Times
Wamego, KS

- Researcher: The first set of questions will be in regard to the factors you consider when you're faced with an ethical decision of news coverage or treatment and how that decision-making process takes place.
- Portell: OK.
- Researcher: So, first of all, what factors do you consider when you're faced with a decision of whether to cover something, how to cover something, and how to treat something on the pages of your newspaper?
- Portell: Well, I guess you always base it on the importance to your readership. That's got to be the number-one factor. If it's an event that a lot of people care about or will care about as a result of reading it, I would certainly give it more importance than something that wasn't – that people didn't care about.
- Researcher: So it's really the number-one factor that you...
- Portell: I would say that it is.
- Researcher: OK. Anything else?
- Portell: No, can't think of anything else.
- Researcher: All right.
- Portell: You always have to go back and consider what your readership is interested in.
- Researcher: OK. As we go through, I'm going to ask for a few examples of stuff that you've done in the past and if any other factors come to mind, just toss them out then. Walk me through – well, since that's the factor we identified, there's really no decision-making process per se, then. It's just kind of focused on that one issue?
- Portell: Yeah.
- Researcher: OK. The next set of questions, then – and it eases real well into these – are in regard to the perceived standards of the members of this community. And when I say “community standards,” I mean every community has a sense of what's acceptable and what's over the line,

and that's kind of what I mean by "community standards," so, with regard to what they expect from their newspapers or what they expect to see or not to see in the *Wamego Times*. So, first of all, what is a newspaper's role in a small community?

Portell: Well, I think, number one, it's the ongoing recorder of the community's history. A hundred years from now, people are going to look back and say, "Golly, wonder what they were doing in Wamego a hundred years ago?" So, on a weekly basis, we're actually putting down the history of Wamego, in addition to being – providing the news.

Researcher: What do you think people in this community – in Wamego – expect from our newspaper, their newspaper?

Portell: Well, I think they expect me to cover the news as best I can – all the news and, of course, the sport. The high school sports are important in a small town. They expect me to be accurate and objective and when they pick up the paper and read something, I think they've come to anticipate that that's the way it really happened. I hope that's what they think, anyway.

Researcher: Do you think – and if so, how – people in this community want the tough or controversial news covered?

Portell: How do they want it covered?

Researcher: Do they, and if so, how?

Portell: I think they do. I don't think they want something that's controversial suppressed by any means. If they don't read it in the newspaper, they're certainly talking about it in the coffee shop, so I think the newspaper's role in that situation is to put the facts out there as objectively and accurately as possible and then the coffee shop rumors hopefully will subside. But, yeah, I don't think the small-town newspaper should shy away from controversial issues. They should embrace them and tell both sides of the story.

Researcher: OK. How do social ties affect how – affect decisions about coverage and treatment in a community newspaper?

Portell: You mean, if I'm – say – friends with someone who's a decision maker or a policy maker?

Researcher: Sure. Or maybe your affiliations with different clubs or organizations in town.

- Portell: Well, it shouldn't affect them at all. I'm not going to say that it doesn't or never has. In the small town, unless the newspaper editor is a recluse, he's going to know some of the people that, at one time or another, he's going to be writing about. For example, I have a good fishing buddy of mine is the chairman of the Pottawatomie County Commission. So I go up there every Monday and cover the county commission meeting, but I think he understands and I understand that once we're in that meeting, we're not fishing buddies. I'm a reporter covering the county commission meeting and I'm going to do it as best I can. And so far, we've never had a problem.
- Researcher: Now, taking yourself out of this position and kind of looking at the overall landscape of community journalism, how do you think social pressures, or social ties of community affect other community journalists?" How do community journalists, in general, handle these social pressures?
- Portell: That's a hard question. I don't... There's a nearby small newspaper here in the county that I know his policy is basically to never print anything that might embarrass a family member in town. And that's pretty tough to do. That eliminates a lot of news. But I don't think most of them are like that. I think most community journalists will report the news as it happens without regard to social ties to someone else. The ones I've been involved with...
- Researcher: Do people in this community prefer promotional coverage or boosterism over hard-line, watchdog-type reporting?
- Portell: Oh, on issues of city government or school or county government, they prefer straight, hard-line, objective reporting. For example, our community has gone through a couple bond issues in the last five or 10 years through the school district – \$12, \$13 million bond issues, which is quite a chunk of money. And I don't think it's the role of the newspaper on its news pages to promote that sort of thing. The role of the newspaper is to say, "Here's how much money, here's what it's going to build, and here's why the school officials say it's needed." I think that's what the people expect and I think that's – that ought to be the role of the small-town journalist. If you want to promote passage of a bond issue or the failure of a bond issue, the place to do it is on the opinion page, the editorial page.
- Researcher: Now, that was in reference to city government – school, county government. How about on non-governmental issues – community festivals?

- Portell: I don't see anything wrong with a little bit of glitz and promotion in that regard. It certainly doesn't harm anything. I don't think you're trying to influence people. We have quite a number of festivals over here. Our Fourth of July festival brings 10, 12,000 people to town and it's... We've got one of the best parades and one of the best fireworks displays in the state of Kansas and it takes a little bit of boosterism and... But I don't see anything wrong with that. If you say in there that "This is one of the best firework displays in Kansas," That's not boosterism, it's a fact. We've had people come in from California, New York, and they say "That's the best fireworks display I've seen ever, and I've seen them out in the harbor in New York and every place."
- Researcher: How did you become aware of what the standards of this community are?
- Portell: I don't know if I became aware of the community standards. I know what my standards are as a journalist, and I've been here for a little over 27 years and you pretty much need to decide up front once you start what your standards are going to be – what you're going to cover and what you're not going to cover. And once you go down that path, you need to stick to it. For example, we run the district court criminal dispositions and traffic violations every week. And we make no exceptions. I mean, if you're convicted, your name is in the paper. And we've had instances – not too many – where people have come in and they'll say, for example, somebody got a DUI and they don't want to see their name in the paper. Well, should have thought about that before you... So we won't make exceptions for that.
- Researcher: Maybe if I reword that question slightly. How did you become aware of what people in this community want to see in the newspaper – the things that they are interested in?
- Portell: Well, shortly after I came here, I ran a kind of a cutesy editorial making fun of Republicans and Democrats alike, and an old retired Republican came charging through the door and he says, "If you want to get along in this town, you better not bash Republicans." I said, "Well, hey, I bashed Democrats, too." He says, "That doesn't make any difference." And he slammed the door and walked out the back. I thought, "Boy." And I'd been here for about two weeks, and I thought, "I'm going to have a tough time in this town." But, I don't know how you become aware of what they want you to cover. I certainly think they want you to cover all the governmental entities for certain and they seem to be interested in... If there's a two-car accident out at the intersection of 24 and 99, I'm going to get calls saying, "Who was in the accident? Was anyone hurt?" They expect to see things like that. And that's just the

nature of a small town. They want to know what their neighbor is doing.

Researcher: To what extent would you say news coverage and content and treatment are influenced by the perceived standards of the members of your community or the standards of your audience?

Portell: I don't think at all. I don't believe I've ever... The news that I cover, the events that I cover, or the way that I cover them, I don't believe have ever been influenced by people in the community.

Researcher: So then, you sort of answered my next question. How important is it for news coverage and treatment of news in a community newspaper to conform or take into consideration the standards of the community? And like I said, I think you answered that one already.

Portell: Well, I don't... Let's say this – if the community – members of the community think that you shouldn't – let's say – you shouldn't report on a suicide... I mean, is that where you're coming from, an instance like that?

Researcher: Sure.

Portell: Would I not report on it? I don't think so. I think I would. And I have. A suicide can be a pretty touchy thing at times. I recall once when I worked back in (city), a gentleman – pretty prominent community members – committed suicide. And there were rumors all over town about how he did it. There was even talk down at the coffee shop that he tied the shotgun to a tree and he tied a string onto the trigger and pulled it. Well, it didn't happen that way at all. And my boss back there justified running the story because of that. You know, let's not get into the gory detail. Let's just say he committed suicide and used a .22 caliber pistol and that's the end of that and we won't talk about it any more. Once that was in the paper, the rumors of the shotgun in the tree went away, so... There are some things you don't like to report on, but, by golly, if you're going to be in the newspaper business, that's part of the game.

Researcher: You used the example of a suicide. What about like a photo of a car accident or something like that?

Portell: I use... I will take pictures of a car accident. I won't take photographs of a person who's laying there injured on the ground.

Researcher: And what's the reasoning behind that?

- Portell: That's a good question. Well, I guess it serves no purpose – to see a mangled and bloody body laying there on the ground. And most times, police officers and sheriff's deputies in this county won't let you close to an accident until the injured are in the ambulance. Now, I... I suppose if it served a purpose to show someone there bleeding on the ground, it would be different. But I don't see what that purpose is.
- Researcher: Give me an example of an instance when coverage or treatment of news in your newspaper did not hit the mark in the eyes of your readers.
- Portell: As far as accuracy or...
- Researcher: No, as far as conforming, or as far as they were concerned when we were talking about acceptable vs. over-the-line kind of thing.
- Portell: Oh. OK. Well, let's see. There was an instance a couple of years ago when our – I can't remember the circumstances... Anyway, he was the minister of the Methodist Church and he was charged with a crime and it... I can't remember what it was. It was... Whether it was molesting a child or whatever. And we ran this story and there were a certain number of Methodists who didn't think we should have. I didn't hear from any Catholics or Lutherans, but some Methodists were upset. But it was a true story and he was charged and convicted and the Methodists kicked him out, so... And I'm sure they would have liked to kept that right among their little congregation up there. Nobody likes a scandal like that, but everybody in town knew it, whether it was in the newspaper or not, so you might as well put it out there accurately.
- Researcher: All right. How do you balance journalistic ethics with desires of your readership or what your readers want or expect from the paper?
- Portell: I don't know. I'm not sure what they expect except for what I'm providing. I don't know. We try to do a light feature every week to balance the hard news. I think people don't want to read just about city commissions and county commissions and school boards. That gets a little boring. So we try to do something a little lighter on a regular basis.
- Researcher: OK. And then, again, one of these broader-outlook questions, not necessarily on you, but on community journalists in general. How and where do you see community journalists drawing the line between journalism ethics and demands of their audiences?
- Portell: How do I see community journalists in general drawing the line? Well, I don't know. I would hope most of them would stick to their own

standards of what is and isn't news. The best definition of news that I've ever heard is "something that people are talking about or something that people will talk about as the result of reading it in the newspaper." I don't think, in general, community journalists can ignore the news just because the folks in town don't want to see it in black and white. If they are, I don't think they should. I don't think that's their mission.

Researcher: So that – ignoring the news kind of touches on the decision of whether to cover. What about, in your opinion, shaping or altering how the news is written or how it is presented on the page of the newspaper?

Portell: Should I alter it, or...

Researcher: Yeah. You or others.

Portell: Well, I... If it's a hard-news story, I think you need to stick to the facts and be as objective as possible. As far as its placement in the newspaper, if I think the majority of readers are going to give – place more interest in this story than another story, that influences my decision on how it's placed in the paper.

Researcher: All right. Mark, that's my list of questions. Is there anything that I didn't think of to ask that you'd think may be helpful to me and what I'm researching?

Portell: You know, I was trying to think of a couple ethical situations that I've come across in my not-so-illustrious career. We had a time back... There's kind of a relationship between... A lot of times in a small-town newspaper, the guy who's writing the story might also be the guy out – say – selling the advertising. So what do you do with a big advertiser who's spending 2 or \$300 a week with you and doesn't want you to cover a story? And we had an instance of that back in (city) when I was back there. And our boss... There were three of us who worked on the newspaper that pretty much covered the news and the sports and he just kind of sat back and let us do it. I mean, he kept an eye on it, but... And the president of the bank in town – the bank ran a full-page ad every week – the best advertiser in the newspaper. Well, one of us saw a story in the (metropolitan newspaper) where the bank president's son, who was a native of that community and had graduated from the high school and most people knew, was charged with embezzlement at a bank in (city). So we decided we've got a – we just can't ignore it. So we ran a little piece – didn't blow it up – just a little piece down in a corner inside and we didn't run it by the boss before that. And the next day, the bank president came in and was in his office for about an hour

yelling and screaming and he pulled the full-page ad for at least a year – didn't do any advertising and we figured the boss was going to come out and fire all of us, but he never said a thing about it. He never said a word. So he lost a ton of money over that little old story. Now, should we have run that story? I don't know. I think we probably should have. I think we made the right decision.

Researcher: What were the factors that came into consideration during that decision – that particular decision?

Portell: Well, the fact that he's a hometown kid, and Mom and Dad and brothers still lived there, and the fact that we're not the only people that read the (metropolitan newspaper). People in that community are going to find out about it. And if it's not in the paper, the first question they're going to ask is, "Why not? Are you protecting the bank president?" Luckily, I've never run in to that situation here. I did have an instance once where we had some... The son – a couple of sons of two businessmen here in town got in trouble, and... I think we were getting ready for our tulip festival, and we put up big tents down there every year, and they're pretty good-sized tents and cost a lot of money. Well, those kids went out at night, got knives, and cut all the ropes and cut the tents down and it just about ruined the festival, 'cause they were – it was going to start the next day. And we had a little story in the paper and the father – of the business – came in and said, "That's just what my son needed, was to see his name in the newspaper." So that worked out all right.

Researcher: OK. All right.

Portell: Anything else?

Researcher: No. That's all I got.

Portell: Well, I hope I've been helpful.

Dan Thalmann
Publisher/Editor
Washington County News
Washington, KS

Researcher: The first set of questions are going to be in regard to those factors that we talked about – those factors you consider when faced with an ethical decision of news coverage or treatment and how that process takes place. So, first of all, what factors do you consider when you're faced with an ethical decision of whether to cover, how to cover, and how to treat news in your newspaper?

Thalmann: I consider covering everything. What I do when I... Basically, when something comes up that I think might have some potential controversial aspects to it, I basically try to step outside myself and say, "What would a real newspaper do?" What would the (metropolitan city) paper do? What would the (metropolitan newspaper) do? What would some of those – what I would say are a real paper – do? And – which gets me into the mindset that as uncomfortable as some of these things might be, I have a job to record history whether it is good or bad, 'cause I know there are... I've been told by many newspaper – smaller newspaper – people that put out the weekly society sheet that they just want to put out the good news. And while that would sure be a lot more comfortable at times, I just do not... I consider it our job to cover everything. Because as a history major, when I was doing research on different topics, I valued those newspapers that would cover everything, and so I knew – like I said, as uncomfortable as it is, it's my job to cover everything. And sometimes it's because maybe I need to make sure there's an awareness out there. If there's a pedophile out there, as uncomfortable as that is to stick on the front page, especially if it's someone everyone knows, I make sure and go ahead and do it. And, unfortunately, a recent one was Pastor (name) sex exploitation – sexual exploitation case, and this happened to be my former pastor and my parents' current pastor. And boy, was that sure awkward when that came across the district court filing. I'd actually heard about it right before that because of my parents, but I felt, boy, this is awkward, but I gotta do it, and so I've done it. Those sorts of things are the hardest to do – anything sexual in nature. And frankly, what I've found is that in those sorts of uncomfortable stories, I protect myself by being consistent. I cover it. I do the facts. People know I'm going to cover it, so they don't – at this point, they're not even trying to tell me not to anymore. And it's worked out real well. And it sells extra papers – that's not why I do it, but I notice that people, even if they complain – and I do get complaints: "Oh, you shouldn't cover that stuff; that's terrible" – I know that behind the scenes, they read every single word of that story twice before they decide to complain that they don't want

to see that. And I have – there’s people who might quit their subscription. I also – and I’ve heard this in the newspaper business before – that those are also the certain – the people who will go and buy it off the rack instead of subscribing. So I don’t – I’m not going to lose anything off of that. So frankly, I just... If a real newspaper would do it, then I feel I have to, even though I’m a rural weekly with a very... I know every single – not every single person – but I’m going to run into these people that I cover. The big city daily doesn’t have to account for their actions in the newspaper. I wrote an editorial this week on – basically taking a negative spin on the county commission’s plans that they want to develop our airport further. And I’m... Very rarely am I against some sort of development, but this one I decided to, and I’ve had two people already today come in and say, “I’m glad you wrote that; I agree with you.” But I know Monday I’m going to run into those commissioners and they aren’t going to be too happy with me and neither is the economic development director, who is really behind this whole thing. And so, that’s the hardest part, is having to run into those people the week after and, usually, when those uncomfortable situations work themselves out, we’re friends again. Sometimes – I still have one holdout down south in a community who just – he won’t advertise, he won’t do this and that – because of a... He was put in a bad light in a story. And I’m like, “You know, if this was videotaped and put on cable TV, local station, whatcha’ gonna do?” All we did is record what happened, and they might not have thought that it was as bad as it was, but it was. So, that’s where I think we – even though I say I have to be a real paper like (metropolitan city) – they don’t have to get in front of the people like I do the next day. But, it’s still my job. (Name) – I don’t know if you’ve heard of him, but he was at the (nearby newspaper) – and he said that any – something like any newspaper reporter who has a lot of friends isn’t a good newspaper reporter. And I agree with that. I mean, it’s... And I feel really bad, because I really want to be friends with everyone. It’s just my nature. But there’s times where I’m definitely not going to be, and that hurts my feelings, but I also know it’s for a greater purpose. I really believe in the philosophy of what a newspaper does and that’s, I think, what kind of guides me. And I get really upset with newspapers who don’t take that as their responsibility. And some of them I consider really good newspapers. And then there’s certain of those uncomfortable stories that they decide not to follow, and it really irks me, because I feel if everyone – every newspaper would hold that sort of standard, it’d make it easier for all of us. But, unfortunately, we’re – some of them, even my smaller neighbors, choose not to, and then I’m the bad guy because sometimes I cover them. But, then again, some people are happy I covered it. So, it’s always different, but I try to stay consistent.

- Researcher: So, when we're talking about those factors, then, the one that I'm getting from what you just said was being an accurate and complete first draft of history. Is that pretty much the guiding factor, or are there others that figure in?
- Thalmann: And I want to be... If there's a story out there that would have some uncomfortable or controversy or whatever, I want people to look to me for the accurate description of it. I want to be their first option. I'm offended if a neighboring paper has a story before I do about something in my county. And it's going to happen; I can't catch everything first. But I do get offended every time it does happen, and it doesn't happen very often. But...
- Researcher: And as we go along here, I'm going to ask for a few more examples of some stories that you've covered. If there are any more factors that come to mind that figure into that process, just let me know. So walk me through – and you've kind of outlined one or two factors that figure into it – walk me through your actual ethical decision-making process.
- Thalmann: I don't know that there's a decision-making process when I just consider it to be my job. I mean, I... Ethical, I guess... I've got to be accurate, and I... On the first sexual-related story I had to do, I went through every single word of a story so many times, 'cause it was a really hard one. This time – the second time it came around – it was easy, 'cause I basically used it as a template, and... But that first time, I spent I don't know how many hours on... (Name) trial. And I actually brought it to a Kansas Press Association leadership workshop, and... Let's see. I think the first one was... Yeah, this one here. It's not a long story, but – and then this was a follow-up – but this story here and this story, they took me hours to write, because I wanted to make sure I wasn't judging him, I was putting out the exact facts. So my process was take the information, write it in layman's terms, cause legal speak is always confusing, but don't add any opinion to it, don't add any extraneous information to it, but make it readable and... Everything that was part of this... The trial story was even harder because then they talked about every little detail, which is pornographic in nature at times, and so I'm not going to print pornography. But I also want people to know this is extremely serious stuff. And so I think it's just going through it with a fine-toothed comb. And I also call – I should say – I called (name) with the (organization), and bounced a lot of this off of him. I called... I have this very small group of people that I really trust to give me the straight dirt on what I need to do bar nothing, without considering anything uncomfortable, anything like that, tell me what I should do with this. And so (name) is one of them, and then (name) at (university), he's a retired journalism professor – I've gotten to know him – and I call him once in a while, too, to say "What should

I be doing with this and how should I approach it?" So I definitely bounce it off people on some of these. Some of them that are controversial but not life-threatening or whatever to me, I don't, but if there's something that really is – I'm really concerned about it – I'll bounce it off them and they're extremely helpful. And for me, without having that journalism degree, I need that, because I figure probably the journalism students learn how to deal with these things. I don't know how, and I still to this day – even though I'm almost eight years into it – I say, "Oh, I don't know what I'm doing." I do my best, so...

Researcher: I'd like to dig little bit deeper into something that you said about this case. You said that some of this discussion in the courtroom was borderline pornographic. What was the decision-making process that led to the decision not to put some of that stuff in?

Thalman: Well, I put quite a bit in, but I tried to instead of describing every act that took place at each of the – let's say – eight locations, I put that certain... Oh what did I do? I didn't gloss it over, but I reworded it to not list any genitalia, not do certain things that I just thought weren't necessary. I must not have put the actual story in. But I did point out that these things – certain – sodomy at a pond west of (place) and at this and this and this. I still kind of listed it, but I paraphrased in a way that still had the facts in there, but I didn't get explicit. And I think that doing it that way was the right way. I've read versions both ways in bigger newspapers and that sort of thing, and I guess I just had to use personal judgment at that point – what I felt comfortable with, putting out the accurate story, but without trying to get any shock value out of that. I know that more papers are sold, I know that this is a big headline, but I try to... It's sometimes really hard, because it's a juicy headline. And you get real... We talk all the time – and especially when I'm talking to the sheriff's department and stuff, who can talk about this sort of thing without even blinking an eye, because they're so used to it – I talk about the fact that, boy, I'm just – this stuff just doesn't bother me anymore talking about. It's horrible, just absolutely terrible, but now it's part of business. And so now I've become – what do they say when kids do so much violence on Playstation that shooting someone in real life isn't that big of a deal? Desensitized. I've become desensitized. And that kind of helps me, I think, just really kind of say, "What really, holistically, needs to be done here?" The odd thing with this is there was a little pressure to not print certain updates and certain things and the county attorney who prosecuted this case happened to be my step-sister. So there was some joking back and forth during family meals and stuff and gatherings that "Well, you're not going to do that, are you?" and I'm like "Yes I am." And she knew I was going to do my job. And, again, that consistency has helped me – that they know, even if they ask me not to, they know they're basically joking when they ask

me because I'm going to do it whether they like it or not. I have a great relationship with the sheriff's department and the county attorney, but I don't always agree with them. But I think there's a certain amount of respect that we're both going to do our jobs whether they like it or not, or I like it or not. And I know they're going to try to cover stuff up, and that's part of business. I'm not a great investigative reporter, but I've got to do what I... Try at least.

Researcher: Thank you. Now the next set of questions is in regard to the perceived standards of the members of this community with regard to what they expect from the newspaper and what they expect to see or not see in the newspaper. So, first of all, what is a newspaper's role in a small community?

Thalman: Boy, there was a great quote once that I have never been able to capture again, but it's something about we're both a mirror – this is some standard newspaper thing, I'm sure – it's a mirror to the community, but also a – maybe a magnifying glass, where we also look deeply into it and try to bring that out. I mean, there's several roles, and – but I think my... What I look for every week is I want to reflect the culture of what is going on in rural America at this time, locally. And I'm constantly saying we have to be local, local, local. And I've said that many, many times to many, many people, because if I try to start covering state stuff that has either no local end to it, I'm wasting my time, because I'm not going to do as good a job as the big city dailies. But if there is a state story that has a local impact, I can do that. But mostly I focus on what's going on here and now. And so that's good for history; that's good for just something to read, for leisure. I realize I'm... Sometimes I'm just entertainment. And then half the time I can work my butt off on a front page and, sure enough, they'll walk in the door, buy the paper, go out, first thing they'll do is turn the page to the district court news – boy that pisses me off. I said, "Do you know how hard I worked on that front page, and all you care about is who got arrested?" God! But that's the nature of the beat and I understand it, so, it's OK. I'm sure they'll read the front page eventually.

Researcher: So, I have entertainment, history, and reflect the culture of what's going on in rural America on a local basis?

Thalman: Yeah. But that history, I mean, historic record. 'Cause the county clerk, the city clerk, the school board clerk... I'm under the understanding – because the county clerk said it once – that they're basically taught in county clerk's class or board clerk's class to be vague. Because, she said, if you get too specific, there could be a potential legal problem eventually for some reason. But we actually are pretty blessed, our city is a – she's formerly worked at the newspaper – she does a great job

with minutes, which I have on my screen right now – almost too much. County clerk I didn't think did enough until I saw some of the county clerks from neighboring counties and I thought, "My God, we're blessed." And, so... And it all varies, so... But... And some of them literally just do what it takes to get a sentence in there that they talked about, but they won't say anything else. So when someone a hundred years from now – and I've told them this – I said, "A hundred years from now, someone's going to ask about why this happened in the county at this time, or in the city or school," and I said, "They're going to look at your minutes and they're going to say, 'Well, that doesn't tell us anything.'" And they'll have to look to the newspaper to find out what happened during the school consolidation process that was very ugly at times, or the (city) City Council's really nasty meetings with walk-outs and all that stuff. Those minutes aren't going to tell them anything. And so we become a very true and what would then be considered official reflection – even though we're not official by any means, we become that. So, that demands that we become accurate. But then you asked about standards. We've pushed those, and... It's strange, because in Washington, I pretty rarely... If I do something of this nature, or if I write a... I wrote a column on my vasectomy I had, which at the time... At first, I was like, "I'm not going to tell a single soul, not even anyone but my wife," and then the next week, I wrote about it in a column, which I guess has just now become my nature. But in town, I think people are used to that, because I think over history, this paper has had some pretty good publishers and editors and they've tried to stick to that standard, and so I never really get Washington people complaining to me about content. I'll get calls, though, from like Linn area or Barnes area or something, people complaining that I – why would I write about that; that's terrible. And, I've also had a... And that's just newspaper, but I also was inspired by Carol to do a parade float in the Linn-Palmer, or in the Linn parade. And so I thought I had this really – actually, my wife came up with it – she's pregnant with our fifth kid and she's really big, and... Anyways, so I did "*Washington County News*: We deliver it all." And we did a spin on "deliver." And I thought, "Boy, isn't this clever?" So she's on the bed and I'm the doctor, and once in a while, I'd pull out a bundle of newspapers and I said, "This is my bundle of joy." Like bundle of newspapers, bundle of joy. Boy, I thought that was clever, and anyone 35 and under thought it was just the best float they've ever seen. And kind of the 40 and over thought it was pushing the limits way too far. And we took some flack for that, and we retired it immediately after that; I didn't bring it back to the county fair parade or anything like that.

Researcher: Now, what city was that parade in?

Thalmann: That was in Linn.

Researcher: OK.

Thalmann: I thought, “Boy, that was clever,” ‘cause we made it into like a hospital room and we had the little bassinet there. I don’t know. ‘Cause I always joke about the fact that we’re having all these kids and all this sort of thing, so... Anyways, that’s when I found out I can go too far.

Researcher: OK. So the standards, then – when we’re talking in terms of community standards – differ from this home-base community and other communities?

Thalmann: I’d say so, because I commented after that several times that I probably could have pulled that off in Hanover, ‘cause they like to push the limits over there, but I said, “I guess Linn-Palmer area is not ready for that.”

Researcher: Interesting. And we’ll get back more into that. The next question that I have is – we talked about what a newspaper’s role in a small community is. What do you think people in this community expect from your newspaper?

Thalmann: It’s hard to say. It’s... This is the county seat, so this is a hodgepodge of cultural history. There’s not one unifying... I mean, the thing about Washington County is Hanover is pretty much all German – in town, Catholic, out of town, Lutheran. Linn-Palmer, all German Lutheran. Go northwest, it’s another kind of hodgepodge, but they’re really small, off the main corridors, so they have a different perspective on the overall economy. And then Greenleaf and Barnes, I mean, there’s... So, it’s just so different. So, in town here, we kind of have a little bit of everything. So we have a very conservative situation in some parts, but we also have a very liberal area, too. I mean, this county’s – what – number four on the most Republican counties in Kansas, and I’m a very conservative person, too, but I see varied – a lot of versions of that in politics and that sort of thing and Washington just has the full range, and... Gosh, I don’t know. I don’t know if I could even give a proper judgment of Washington standards, because they’re so different. I mean, there’s... As far as standards go, I’ll say social standards, and... Like there’s a couple church communities here in town that are so conservative, yet this is also the town with probably the least church-going population in the county. Overall, though, I think that they do expect me... Like I said, we have a good history here of publishers and editors who have done their job, and so, therefore, I think they expect that from me constantly. If I don’t, they’ll probably start voicing it. They do expect me to hit every little thing that goes on, and, which is

fine, and I tell them sometimes I just can't. But I think they expect me to keep the standard high and cover everything, keep a proper focus on the community. They don't necessarily want to hear all the time what's going on outside of Washington; they do have that county-seat mentality that "Everything's that's really happening is happening here, and who cares about the rest of the county?" And they... You know, frankly, for advertising, they pay my bills – Washington does, so... But I don't reflect... They're probably subsidizing news in the rest of the county, and I'm OK with that. I mean, I just... That's just how it's going to be, so...

Researcher: OK. You talked a little bit about, or you were pinpointing like down to even the ethnicity – German – and religion – Catholic, Protestant – that kind of thing. How did you become aware of what those differing demographics and, accordingly, standards were?

Thalmann: Probably partly my interest in history and then a lot of just paying attention. I think to be a good newspaper person, you have to be extremely aware and observant, and I probably would have done that even if I weren't in the newspaper. I just... It's my hobby. I like to just pay attention. And we are a declining-population area because there aren't the economic... There are not the jobs around here. A lot of kids who graduate from high school would love to live here, but there are just no jobs for them who go to college to want to come back for that professional job. If you're blue collar, you could find some manufacturing and that sort of stuff. So, what happens is our current cultural breakdown is probably still extremely connected to what started this county. And that's why you can so easily stereotype what a Linn-Palmer person will do, because they're pretty much going to be a German, Lutheran, conservative farmer. You can pretty much pinpoint Hanover, because they're going to be German, Catholic... Both... Germans like to drink, too. Doing a beer garden in Linn and Hanover, they'd be pissed if you didn't have one at the festival. But then when they try to get a beer garden here in town for their festival – a whole, controversy. Oh my gosh. "I'm not going to do business with you if you support that beer garden." And so it's... But it... And I say that's probably how it's been for the last hundred years, and so that's why I say all the new – the MTV generation go somewhere else to live; very few of us come back and so we are still very close to our roots and so that's where I think that comes from.

Researcher: Do you think – and if so, how do you think – and you've already sort of answered this, but if any other thoughts come up... Do you think – and if so, how – people in this community want tough or controversial news stories covered?

Thalmann: Do they want them? I think they want them, but they might not tell you they want them. And they may want them, and they might even tell you they didn't want them even though they wanted them. I think they do. I think they're used to it enough that they're fine with it. We have – and it doesn't happen very often – we have a guy who just disappeared during county fair, so it was the end of July, beginning of August – a missing person story, and there's wanted posters – we still have one out on the counter – and just literally disappeared, never any evidence yet to what happened. They think he fell into the creek, 'cause it was right after some flooding, but they have no idea. And anyways, when... So (TV channels) came in; we got some state coverage, and I kind of joked with them. I said, "You know, if we based our life here at the newspaper with breaking news like a lot of the big papers do, I would run out real quick." And, so, therefore, I am a... While I think they expect to get some of those stories – that sort of hard news – they also realize that I'm not going to have it every week. We used to be a paper that would have the county commission – and that's kind of the hard news, what's happening with our local government – on the front page every single week. I don't think we've ever had anyone sit through the meetings – we can't afford the staff, but... And I'd love to, but we just can't... But we do have the minutes and we expound on some things if they're – that we consider important enough. It used to be on the front page every week. I don't think it's that newsworthy every week, so I don't put it on the front page. Happened to this week because of the airport project, but... So, that might be our kind of breaking news. I think they want it covered every week, but I don't consider it breaking enough to be front page. So we are very feature-heavy, like any rural weekly, human interest... We'll never run out of stories. I'm so far behind, it's frustrating, but I live with it now and it's OK. It doesn't bother me like it used to, but I will never catch up. The first year I was here, I didn't think I could... I could hardly think of anything to write about, and now it's just like, "I'll never run out," so...

Researcher: How do social ties to the community affect decisions about coverage or treatment of news?

Thalmann: Well, I haven't... I think it allows me to find out more what's going on. I've been members of several clubs, I've been on boards, I try to be real involved with the chamber and that sort of thing. I've gotten to the point where I used to be on the... Before I was editor, I was on the public school board for Linn-Hanover-Barnes, and once I became editor, I thought, "There's potential for conflict there," and so I got off after two years and they were OK with that. I don't think there would have been anything that came up that would have been major controversial with me being on it like a conflict of interest, but there's times, I mean, the a... There's a... I'm on a swimming pool committee

for town right now and they're talking about potentially doing a tax – sales tax – to fund it and this sort of thing. Well, our surveys came back and they're upset that I'm on it, mostly because I live 6 miles south of town in the country and they thought that was – I shouldn't be doing something for Washington because I don't live here. Well, I own a building here; I pay taxes, too. I employ people here. But anyways, that's just how they felt. But, when I'm looking at... Because of that survey, I'm thinking I need to do a story on the survey results, because some of them were upset. And I said, "But I'm on the committee; this is uncomfortable all the sudden." Because can I really properly, unbiased, do a story on that? So I assigned it to one of my reporters to do in a couple of weeks, 'cause we just got the surveys back, but... So there's times where my involvement helps me find stories that I wouldn't have if I weren't involved. It also, though, sometimes hinders the process. And so I try to step lightly, but it's really hard for me not to be involved – it's just kind of how I am. And being in the newspaper business, I think it definitely gets you plugged into what the community is talking about and that's a lot of content in that, so I do my best to consider what's good and right. Maybe I make the right decision; maybe I don't, but so far, I can live with myself, so...

Researcher: All right. In general, then, and taking yourself out of this perspective where you are, but in general, how do you think community journalists – small-town journalists – handle social pressures?

Thalman: I think some fail miserably and some can't hack it. I had a reporter who – it was actually this guy who doesn't advertise with us any more – she covered the school board meeting; she wrote the story. I wrote an editorial on it and we got bashed big time by him and the school board and the superintendent. I mean, just mercilessly yelling. And it got me down for a good week. I mean it's... You don't want people hating your guts. But I got over it; this reporter didn't. And most of us say that... And she was a great feature writer and stuff, but the hard news thing, she just couldn't do it and I think it ruined her and she's working at (grocery store) now, but ... That wasn't that long ago that she finally quit, but... So some people just cannot handle it. And it is hard. It... I'm finally getting that thicker skin – they talk about reporter needing that thick skin and I think I'm getting closer. It still hurts my feelings, but anytime I want to think I'm doing an excellent job and everyone loves me... I framed my nastiest letter to the editor I've ever had who was singed by a whole group of people and they went off on me personally and that's what was really bad was they went off on me – writing about my kids and all that sort of stuff. It was just really nasty, but anyways... So I think a lot of people would quit writing this sort of thing and there's some papers that just refuse to do any controversial. And there's some that do an excellent job and probably better than me,

but overall, community journalists and that decision-making process, I think you can pretty much tell by picking up a weekly paper and looking at their editorial page. If they have an editorial in there most weeks, if they're comfortable putting certain negative things on the front page, probably, overall, they're doing the best they can do to do it right. And they probably know what's right. Some people think that a newspaper should be a propaganda machine, a promotional weekly newsletter for the community. And while that's great and I promote the hell out of certain things that are going on, I see that that is not our only job and it's... I don't... I couldn't tell you what the percentage is... I'm on the KPA board of directors and I talk to the director, or the – Doug, our executive director quite often. I say, "You know, not all newspapers are doing their job right now and it's hurting all of us." We all hold these certain high standards – and maybe my standards aren't correct, but I'm trying. I think I have my thumb on what's correct. If more of them would do that, we'd all be better off, but some of them just choose not to, and it's usually the ones that have been doing it for 50 years and are either just giving up or they never did it in the first place. The newspapers from a hundred years ago were a lot more ready to go jump on their neighbor and say, "You stink, and you're terrible," and – or "That editor over there in the neighboring city, he does this and this and this," and they'd just rip each other constantly, and it was great, and then they'd get together for lunch on Friday, but... And I love those papers. And I've picked on (nearby newspaper) a few times, but... I don't know. It's... I don't know. I hope more would. I'm just not sure, though, that everyone's doing their job. It is something that disappoints me. 'Cause we trade a lot of papers in this business. You get all those exchange papers, and some I just really admire and some I just wish would fold, because I think they're doing nobody any justice, so...

Researcher: That actually flows very well into my next question – when we were talking about promotion and that kind of stuff. Do people in this community prefer positive community promotion/boosterism over hard-line, watchdog-type news coverage or the opposite?

Thalman: I think they do. I think... I mean, that's what a lot of comes in my door anyways is people wanting this sort of story, that sort of story done, rather than people coming in my door saying, "Hey, did you hear so and so's doing this? You should check that out." I very rarely get... There is a group of conspiracy theorists out there who think I'm networked and aligned with city government and the sheriff's department and all that stuff, and I constantly say I get along with everyone. I said, "But, if there's something that needs to be said, I'm going to say it." And I think they know that, but they're not doing as many nasty, underhanded things as you think they are. I mean,

everyone thinks... This is a very “black helicopter” society up here. This whole conservative, anti-tax, pro-private-property sort of thing lives heftily up here. I mean, there’s a big chunk of those sorts of people who are just paranoid, and I think they know that, but they’re fine with that, and so... I get some of those things sometimes of me: “You need to check out this,” or “You need to check out that.” When... One of the common ones that finally hasn’t happened for a while is that “The Kansas Park and Wildlife Department is still releasing cougars in the northern part of our county.” “No, they’re not. I mean, how many times can I tell you that this is a false rumor?” But it circulates itself and for some reason people don’t read the newspaper thoroughly enough and then they come in with it again. I’m saying, “You’re full of crap. Give me a picture.” One guy, oh he has movie – movie footage from when he was deer hunting. Let me see that movie; I’d love to and I’ll write a big old story about it and that will be statewide news. Never saw that movie, so there’s... I think they prefer the promotional stuff, but there is a solid core group of people who just want me to find crap every week to write about. And I just don’t think there is enough out there to justify their theories, so... And... But that’s probably also a place where... I’m not a big county budget writer. Some people live and die by what the county is increasing in their budget or cutting out of their budget, and that is a very important job of a newspaper, but I stink at it, and I admit that fully. I should do a lot more stuff on the county or what the school is spending their money on or who’s trying to raise taxes. And I try to document what’s being done, but I’m terrible at breaking down statistical figures and stuff. I’m a word person, not a number person. And if I have to say I have a big negative about my style it’s that I’m not very good at that, so... But I don’t think there’s as much out there as they think there is. It’s the coffee shop crowd that just loves to find something to talk about and complain about and theorize about. I’ve said half my job could be done just sitting down there – I’d get all the news before I could print it, and the other half is correcting everything that they have wrong, so...

Researcher: All right. To what extent would you say those three things we talked about – news coverage, content, and treatment of news in the paper – are influenced by community standards?

Thalman: Frankly, I don’t... I don’t know. I try, personally – I don’t know if this is right or wrong, but when I consider what I do or how I treat it, I always try to go back to what I think is the Journalism 101 way of doing things. I try to just – like I said before – I try to take myself out of my own feelings and all that – aspirations, anything like that – I try to take myself out of that and do what I think is the right newspaper way to do it. And so in that respect, I’m not sure as far as what I choose to write about and that sort of thing is changed very much at all by what

the community thinks. Now, when I see on a per-story basis, and if I'm doing a promo story or something like that and I know this particular topic is really important to the community, hell, I'll go after it big time. So, I guess what I pick and choose every week, probably not taken very much at all, but how I do it or certain aspects of it... I don't know. That's an extremely confusing answer. And I don't really think about it as I do it sometimes. I don't know. I do a lot of personal judgments. I try not to let advertisers judge what I'm doing and I know that sometimes I'm going to risk them pulling advertising or getting upset with me, but I try not to let that affect me. I really just try to act like I'm a robot in a lot of my judgments and I'm just going to do what's right. But as far as certain stories that come in – if people bring in a story idea or something – we'll do it. We'll do it accurately, rather than maybe if they have some inaccuracies. But we try to please everyone in that respect. But I try really hard not to do any of my judgments on money. And that's tough, 'cause I know there's times that this might be really painful, but I really – except for that one advertiser – I really haven't hit that very often. And we've pissed off plenty of people either by screwing stuff up or whatever, but usually just going and talking to them works out. And I can probably get this – I know I can get this guy back if I go and talk to him, but I think he's trying to intimidate me, so I'm on principle not going and talking to him, which upsets my ad sales people, 'cause they can't sell an ad him now and that's their commission, but they know that it – we're in this little game now, so...

Researcher: How important is it for news coverage and treatment of news in a community newspaper to conform to community standards?

Thalman: Well, since I don't know that I'm even conforming... I don't know. I don't think it is. I think if you do your job and have a nice mix of everything that's going on, I think you're going to sell subscriptions to those who want to read a newspaper and I think you're going to have advertising. So I'm just not sold on conformity. I mean, to me, conformity is basically the community telling me what my job's going to be without me deciding. And I think... I guess you have to be somewhat arrogant in this business to think that I know what the community wants. And it's probably not right, but I think I do. I mean, I really pay a lot of attention to what papers do everywhere. I mean, I read through – I don't read a lot – but I really pay attention to content and what are other papers are doing and I try to just assimilate all of that into what I think is a good product. And I win awards on it in the KPA contest, so I know that other newspapers think I must be doing something right. I... I'm also a very competitive person, and since I don't have high school basketball anymore, I – KPA awards is all I got. And so... I did figure out last year, we were at the number... In the points for the KPA award in my category, which is the mid-sized

weeklies, we were number five in the state and we were number one for a rural weekly, 'cause number one through four were all suburban (metropolitan city) area. So I was extremely proud of that. That means we're doing something right. And I don't write for the contest, but I do – when a story comes on that I think might do good in the contest – maybe I'll put a little extra effort into it. But, anyways, I think... And I get a ton of compliments from neighboring communities who really have no interest in what's going on in Washington, but know that we have a generally interesting story package every week... And I get those comments, so I keep thinking, "I must be on the right track if I'm getting those comments." And so I just stick with whatever philosophy is guiding me and go with my best judgment.

- Researcher: I wonder if I was to take one word out of that last question – how important is it for news coverage and treatment of news in a community newspaper to “conform” to community standards – to “be mindful of” or “consider” community standards, would that change the answer?
- Thalman: Well, I guess it would be important in the fact that if every single week, people were complaining there was nothing to read, or “You should have been at this event, and you weren't,” or “You were here, but you got it all wrong,” as compared to the generally good reaction, I guess that'd be very important, then. I mean, I guess my judgment's made on how is the reaction, and it's either very good or pretty much silent and usually silent is good, because people are a lot quicker to jump on the negative than the positive. And so, if I do get positive, that means I must have really struck it good, because... Like these... I very rarely get two positives on an editorial so quickly, so I must have really struck it right with this one. But anyways... So I guess, in that case, very important, 'cause all I do is respond to what I feel is going on and that sort of thing. I'd almost have to look at the negative. If I'd be getting constant negative, would I still try to stick to what I think is the right way to do it? No. 'Cause I figure people are generally smart – generally – and they just do not complain and a lot of them are just really happy. A lot more when I took over, because it was new and they just were... Almost every day, people would be just loving me. I mean, it was the honeymoon. It was so fun. It was so great. People just loved it. And same with the (nearby newspaper). I mean, I just bought that in May, so I've only had it four months, and with that one, my God, it was like every subscription that came in, people were just kissing butt and we gained a hundred subscriptions within six weeks and it was crazy. And they still to this day are just absolutely thrilled with it. And... But I'm using the same formula there that I do here and I had it here when I first started taking over as the editor, but now it's been four or five years, so it's not new anymore; they just expect it. And that's why I said it was

the honeymoon period, because I know even with the (nearby newspaper), it's going to end. They're going to start being pissed about this or that and they're not going to write those cute little notes in their renewals. So, I would respond, though, if people were constantly complaining about our commission coverage or this or that. I'd try to find out what I could do to please them and still be accurate. So I probably took your answer wrong in the first place – conformity. I just... I don't want to bow to pressure, monetarily, so I won't conform to advertising pressure or I'm-going-to-cancel-my-subscription pressure, but genuine, constructive criticism, absolutely. I'll jump right on that, 'cause I do not claim to be perfect. I try really hard and I put ton of hours into this – way too much. And it's bad. I mean, my priorities are all messed up at home and all that sort of stuff. We have... My wife is great, my kids are wonderful, but I work way too much, and I keep working on that. It's something I'm trying to improve, so...

Researcher: OK. Give me an example – and you've waded through a few already – of an instance when coverage or treatment of coverage was affected by this consideration of community standards, and your perception of how the community would react to this piece.

Thalman: Well I... Another one that comes up that I didn't write the story, but I worked very closely with the reporter who wrote them is – oh, maybe three months ago now, this May, maybe April, May – we did a series of stories on a lot of local government conflict that was going on in Mahaska, which is a little town with 102 people in the northwest corner of the county. Their city government, they had some new people come in and one was the new mayor who was just absolutely pounding his ideas through the council whether they liked it or not, and a lot of them didn't. They were wanting to throw him out of office. There was a lot of conflict on a big new apartment development there. They have kind of a power struggle in town, 'cause they have the biggest private employer in the county up in this little town. It has probably 90 employees there in a town of 102, so most of them drive in. Anyway, so there was this almost three sides fighting each other constantly, and we covered it and we quoted people who were just bashing. And it was extremely interesting. Again, my competitive thing, I can't wait to enter that one in the governmental coverage category, 'cause it's going to win. Anyways, every week I had that on the front page, and I was shocked that we received maybe one negative comment about covering up there. Mostly, people were just so pleased that we were paying attention to them because they're such a small town, but also that we were covering such a ripe little piece of history going on, even though it was extremely – extreme turmoil for them, 'cause they were living it day to day. I don't know. It was kind of a... It was interesting, 'cause I

don't think anyone else would have covered this sort of thing like we did, but it really, I think, reflected the situation, probably helped them work through some of these situations as... Since we were quoting what they were saying, and it really worked out well as far as getting the whole story done. And they finally did work things out. Lately, it might have erupted again, but that's the story Tom's working on for a couple weeks from now. But that was a time where it was interesting times. I don't even know what the question was. Community pressure?

- Researcher: Instance of coverage was knowingly shaped by standards of the community.
- Thalman: OK. Yeah. We didn't know what their standards were, so I guess I don't know if it helped us shape anything or not.
- Researcher: Well, maybe, how about this then? Give me an example of when something you wrote or placed in the paper did not hit the mark, did not conform, did not reflect these community standards and what were some of the comments and that kind of thing?
- Thalman: Give me an example. What's something, theoretically, that could have happened?
- Researcher: How about a car accident and you decided to run a picture of the victim who...
- Thalman: So I had some extreme reaction as a result of something I put in the paper? Gosh. Well, not covering the Relay for Life three years ago got me this letter. And it actually... There was two letters that came as a result, but this was the nastier of the two. Then I got letters kind of defending me – maybe one letter – defending me because of that letter, but that was probably the very worst situation where I just didn't cover something, because the rumor was out there I didn't cover it because – gosh, I don't even remember why. Anyways, it just didn't work out. I'm not... My father died of cancer when I was 15 years old. I personally think – and this is on the record, I don't care, but I wouldn't print it my paper – I personally... I should write an editorial on this, but this is one thing I'm not, 'cause it would piss people off. The American Cancer Society, they raised \$36,000 in this year's Relay for Life, and I bet 80 percent of that probably goes to secretaries and other people sitting at the American Cancer Society office. When my dad went through a five years of struggle with cancer, hospice was a huge help, the local doctors, the local churches, that sort of thing, were extreme helpers. The American Cancer Society? Never heard of them. And so, for me, to send all the money that way really pissed me off. And maybe, in the back of my mind, every year this Relay for Life comes

up, I want to say “Screw them. I’m not going to cover it, because it’s a big waste and people are...” But we usually do. Well, this year I didn’t. And I probably made comments around the office that might have gotten reconstrued into something else to one of my interns who happened to go and talk to her mom who was involved who happened to... And somehow that got out, I think – my attitude with the American Cancer Society. And so that really... And so they said it was my against that thing that caused us not to go cover it on purpose, and so we got all these nasty letters. Well, that wasn’t why I didn’t go. It was because I get sick of covering stuff every single damn weekend. So I didn’t go. And that one really reacted badly, and to this day, I probably still kiss their ass because I don’t want a letter like that again. I don’t go overboard. I don’t know. I gave them a hundred bucks this year – it just killed me to do that, but I did.

Researcher: So, in hindsight – what I’m getting from you is – in hindsight, you...

Thalmann: I should have taken a few frickin’ pictures, and then I wouldn’t have had to dealt with this. But otherwise, I’ve... Oh, we’ve had car accidents. I’ve... I didn’t put pictures in of one that was really bloody, but I covered it. I’ve done these sex cases, and I haven’t had... I’ve had some negative reaction of people who just don’t believe he could do that. But as far as... I just haven’t had any memorable things where something I actually covered crashed back down on me. I haven’t been doing it long enough, though. I’m sure it will happen. I’m bound to make a stupid decision.

Researcher: Two more questions and I’ll get out of your hair. How do you balance journalistic ethics with community standards?

Thalmann: It’s a tough one because I do want – personally – I do want to be liked. And so, when these really uncomfortable... There’s probably some stories that I should do on occasion that... I don’t know. Washington, as the county seat, thinks they’re the main attraction here in the county, while some other towns like Mahasaka folks tell me all the time they come here once a year to pay their taxes and renew their paper and that’s all they care about Washington for. So, there should probably be some stories that I do that would really reflect that, but I don’t, because I just – I know that Washington folks just wouldn’t care for me writing about them that way. And it’s not like it’s a story that has to be done. So there’s probably stories on occasion that just aren’t done because they’re not those required stories and they would also be uncomfortable. So there’s two reasons for me not to do them. ‘Cause I... One time I wrote a column – it’s when I lived in Linn and just started working here not too much, too long – and North-Central was – the school was the one of the 10 smallest in the county; they’re now

consolidated with Washington. At the time, there was some talk that they should consolidate with Washington. I made the comment in my column that instead of them consolidating with Washington, I said all of the – ‘cause they always said that’s the best for students – well, I said if we really wanted to do what was really the best for all the students in the county, let’s close down Washington and split all the students up among all the smaller schools around. And the North-Central folks just thought that was the best column I ever wrote in my entire life, and Washington people were pissed off. And so I really haven’t written anything more like that again, because there’s some things that are probably better left unsaid, ‘cause part of them are just smart-ass thoughts and... I don’t know. I... I don’t know. I’m sure there are stories that I could be doing, but because the local standards are very pro-themselves, I find other stories to do instead.

Researcher: One more.

Thalmann: OK.

Researcher: How and where does a community journalist draw the line between journalism ethics and demands of the audience?

Thalmann: I should have taken that journalism ethics class. Drawing the line. I really... Most of the time, I say there is no line. I say it’s our job to... Again, I think you almost have to be arrogant and say it’s our job to document everything – no matter if people want it documented or not, it’s our job. However, the line I throw in there is to stay ethical you have to make sure something is relevant rather than you’re only doing it for the shock value. And that’s why I say like for crime, I will do sex cases, murder, those sorts of big things, but if there’s a domestic or something, I’m not going to talk about – I just don’t see the reason behind documenting a big old divorce fight or some civil matter or something like that. So I have a line somewhere in there. I think there’s no line, but you’ve got to make sure it’s a relevant story. I constantly get pissed off at CNN or Fox News for talking about Britney Spears or something like that. I say, “Who cares?” I mean, really, who the hell cares? A hundred years – I say that sometimes – I say, “A hundred years from now, will this matter?” And the flavor of the moment, while it’s good for the shock value at the moment, a hundred years from now, it’s totally insignificant. And so, sometimes then I can say, “Why bother?” It’s just someone’s blowing it up. And that’s where I think... And they – hell, they talk about that oftentimes – CNN and stuff – ethical standards. And I think they mess them up all the time. And so my line is basically just on that relevance, I guess. And fact. You have to be factual to protect yourself. I pay a big libel insurance bill every year and I think it’s totally ridiculous to pay it, but I guess you kind of

have to. But if you're factual, I say, no one can touch me. And I do get very arrogant at times. When this missing person thing came, it was kind of funny. Again, I get along real well with the sheriff's department. But when they were down there, the diver was in the dam area where they thought he possibly fell in, and so he was doing his thing, the fire department crew was down there helping, the family was down there, and the sheriff's department was down there. And someone told... And it was Tuesday; I was busy as hell. I told Cynthia, our intern, I said, "Go on down and just take a picture so I can put it with the story that I was doing" – working on anyways. And she said, "OK." So she went down there and she comes back and said, "The fire department guy said I'm not allowed here, that's not appropriate, and I shouldn't be taking pictures," that she shouldn't. And so he sent her away. And they had set up little blockade – those little can't-pass-this on the road, because they didn't want a bunch of gawkers coming through. But she come back and told me that and I was livid. I said, "They cannot tell us we cannot go there. At least I don't think they can." So I called up (Name) and I said, "Can they do this?" Actually, no, he wasn't there. I ended up calling the lady from the (nearby newspaper), another person I respect. I said, "Can they do this?" I said, "I think I can go down there." I said, "I'm on public property, blah, blah, blah." I go off. "Yeah, I think she can." OK. So I puffed up a little bit and I marched down there with my damn camera, and (name), the undersheriff comes up and says, "Uh, we're not wanting media here today," kind of joking – I could tell in her voice she was joking. I said, "That's what I hear." And I say, "But I'm taking pictures; I don't care what you say." The fire department guy who – and I knew who it was, but – he looked back and he kind of had a mean look on his face, but he never came and talked to me, and I took a couple pictures and a – of... Well, the one thing that I wanted was the sheriff's department car in front of the dam because that was a good representational shot. The diver wasn't there. I wasn't going to take a picture of the mom crying or anything, or the wife crying, but anyways... So that's where I said there is no line. If I'm in my legal bounds and I pretty – I know pretty well what my rights are, my Bill-of-Rights rights, I pretty much know what they are and so I know where I can go and so... And it was relevant and all that stuff and so there is no line for me. And I'll definitely push that if someone's trying to make a line for me. And that's... It gets fun to puff up once in a while and try to be arrogant, so... I don't know.

Researcher: OK. Tell you what, that's all the questions I have. Was there anything as we were going along that came to mind that you think may be useful for what I'm trying to get at that I didn't ask?

Thalmann: Yeah. Well, just... I think the ethics thing is a... In the industry, isn't it a relatively new concept – journalism ethics? I mean, they talk – at least we talk about it a lot more. I read about it more now than I figure they did 20 years ago.

Researcher: Yeah. I think a lot of it has... Well, a lot more debate about it has started since the '50s when they came out with this idea of social responsibility of the media.

Thalmann: I think it's interesting... I know like even in pictures, they're talking about – I just read about it in something – about you can't even take out something distracting in a picture by Photoshop. Like *National Geographic* has to be exactly what was seen through the lens. Which sometimes I think, "Well, I lightened the highlights and I darkened this – am I messing it up? Would National Geographic frown on me?" I mean, there's so many angles on the ethics thing and you try to imagine what the folks who have been in this industry for 50 years – if they even consider that. I know there's some good ol' boy newspaper publishers out there that probably could care less about ethics, but they probably do it right, just because they were trained properly. To be in business that long, they almost have to be. I think it's an interesting thing, and so often, it's just a judgment call. And I don't always make the right call, but I haven't had any major memorable mistakes, I guess. I know it's coming. I know I'll mess up sometime. I assume I'll be sued sometime. But I know the last guy to sue the last publisher, he was just a nut-job anyway, so it never made it anywhere, but I guess that's why you have libel insurance – to protect yourself from nut jobs. I don't know. I wish people would push it more. That's... And that probably has no relevance for your paper, but if I have a soapbox in the newspaper industry, I need all our rural weeklies and small-town weeklies to step it up a bit and get that opinion page going a little bit better. 'Cause it's so important to get that community conversation going. I think it's an extremely important role of the newspaper that a ton of newspapers are not using. And hell, most of the time, it doesn't have to be the publisher that's putting those opinions in there. If they have some good columnists, I mean, the conversation can be spurred on by them, but... So sometimes... I guess I'm at the stage in my life in this industry where I think there's a lot of publishers without balls out there that need to get some guts and do their job. Too bad (name)'s gone, 'cause he was so very obnoxious at KPA meetings and that sort of thing, 'cause he'd always be going off on something. But he talked about a "fire in the belly" – that a good reporter has to have a fire in the belly to really go out... And he would... And he was so proud of the hole in his window in the front of his office that a guy shot in there and then he lost it because another guy used a shotgun and shattered the entire window. I said, "Oh my God. I would love to have a bullet hole

in the window.” But then again, my back is to this one and they could probably plug me right in the head, so maybe not. But if I would, I’d probably cut it out and frame it, so... So I just framed this instead. That’s my bullet hole.

John Roche
Publisher/Editor
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Researcher: So the first set of questions I have is going to be in regard to the factors you consider when you're faced with an ethical decision of news coverage or treatment and how that decision-making process takes place.

Roche: OK.

Researcher: So, first of all, what factors do you consider when you're faced with an ethical decision of whether to cover something, how to cover and write something, and how to present that to the public in your newspaper?

Roche: I think the first one that I have to apply to it is whether or not it's an issue that is going to affect a large part of the community. If it's a minor... If it's going to affect a minor number, I'm less likely to cover it with any depth or heaviness than I am otherwise. And this is probably not an editorially correct way of doing it, but I also look at the amount of damage that it's going to do in a community and then spend a heck of a lot of time trying to figure how I can work around the... I don't know how to put it. Put the facts out without adding personal commentary to it. It... There's a difference between putting out the facts of what's going on and turning something into a news story and that's... I've seen a lot of times where they've taken stuff that is – can be damaging – and put the facts out and allow people to deal with it and work with it or you add all the commentary around the sides of it and it gets personal. And that's – 90 percent of the time that's uncalled for.

Researcher: OK. So, what I got was whether or not it was going to affect a large number of people and also the amount of damage it could do to the people of the community.

Roche: Yeah.

Researcher: OK. Anything else?

Roche: I think those are the two major... Everything else that you come up with is going to be a variation or a fracture off of those two.

Researcher: OK. All right. As we go through, I'm going to ask for a few examples of some stories that you've done in the past that might tie into some of this, and if something else comes up that you think is kind of figures into this process, just let me know and I'll scribble it down.

- Roche: All right.
- Researcher: So, when you're actually going through this process, are these factors considered in a certain order, systematically, or just...
- Roche: No. It's... Years ago, they used to refer to it as "mental gymnastics." Each thought leads to another thought leads to another thought, and as you dig through it, OK, what about this and what about that? And what about... I mean, it's... I don't have in my notebook one, two, three, four...
- Researcher: All right. And so, walk me through – and you kind of did already – walk me through your ethical decision-making process.
- Roche: OK. I'm trying to come up with a usable example to run through so you can actually... All right. You've got... Hypothetically, you've got a... Suddenly, papers show up that indicate there's been funds steadily disappearing from the city. All right? That's the news part of it. Now, this is what's happening. Funds are disappearing from the city. Then it starts getting as to – all right – how do I deal with this without making this an accusatory article? How do I deal with this and find out what the facts are and, because people in small towns are – that's their neighbor that you're talking about. It's their mom or their dad or their cousin that you're talking about. Where in a big city, it's some abstract person obscurely on the other side of the state that they really couldn't care less about one way or the other. So... Now I have to actually think about what I do by actually doing it. I... The majority of the time, I don't think there's... At this point, since I've come in, there have not been any that I've had to not pull. If you say this is what's going on and you assess... I said if this is something that's – it doesn't affect anybody, it's one thing. But if funds that are – like that one I just chose – funds are disappearing from the city, that's something people in the city need to know. Now, the hard part comes in keeping it from being a personal issue in terms of keeping it – turning into editorial And I ended up writing it and then going back through and seeing what the verbiage is and figure out – OK, they need to know this is what's going on, they need to know this is where it's – where the trail says it went. And, I mean, that, ultimately, that's the whole process, is just... I mean, you just keep rolling back over that whole thing again, keep looking for other people that have got a better view of the angles, and it's too late – you got to put it in the paper, so you do it. But... I think most of the controversial issues I've been involved in have been misinterpretations of the people reading it more than anything else, so...
- Researcher: OK. The next set of questions will be in regard to the perceived standards of the members of this community with regard to what they

expect to see from their newspaper and what they expect to not see in the newspaper. So, first of all, to get in – to ease into that – what is a newspaper’s role in a small community?

Roche: In a nutshell, to tell them what’s going on with the city government, as well as to tell them what’s going on with Joe and Betty down the street and the friends that she had show up for dinner last week from Tucson. The... Let them know about anything that’s new in the community. Hope that people are telling you what’s new in the community. I mean, it’s basically, it’s the non-grapevine information route and, it’s... That’s essentially what I see it as, and I’m finding more and more that fewer and fewer people are interested in a statewide view or a national view than they are in their little neck of the woods. In fact, right now I’m in the midst of a... I’ve been going through and having a reader survey, and the vast majority of the ones that I’m hearing from as those papers are coming back is, “You know, we really couldn’t care less what’s going on in (metropolitan city). We couldn’t care less. We’ll watch the news if we want to know that. We want to know what’s going on here.”

Researcher: OK. What do you think people in this community expect from their newspaper?

Roche: Always one notch higher than the paper they’ve got. They expect to be able to read it and get details on something they heard about the week before and be able to fill in the gaps and be able to find out if what they were told was factual or whether it was too much coffee too late at night. To find out what’s going on in that business down the street that doesn’t have a sign up yet that they see people going in and out of and they’re too afraid to walk in and find out. They... Even as the number of small-town papers is dying off, and it is steadily declining – now, even more since the postal rate jumped – but they still expect it to be the information route for the community.

Researcher: OK. Do you think – and if so, how – do people in this community want tough or controversial news stories covered?

Roche: I think every community wants controversial news stories covered for the same reason that we watch the races – not to see who wins, but to see who crashed on the way. And that’s... I don’t know. I... That’s where I have to decide whether or not it’s something that I’m going to cover. And – like I said – I’ve come into this community at a pretty good point. Controversy is pretty nominal in the area right now, so I haven’t had to mess with it. When I wrote in (city), now there was always something that was – but then you’re in a community again when it’s – you’re separated. But, yeah, I think they want controversial.

Researcher: And how? How do they want it covered?

Roche: I don't know that I can put a global answer on that. It's what I've been finding out with the surveys is that there is no global answer. I mean, half the people want one thing; half the people want the other. And no matter what answer you give, you're going to lose. But, ultimately, they want to know what the details and the facts are. We're back again to the whole job of reporting, is the fact that you can say a, b, c, d, e, f, and this is what it cost. I'm not a big editorial writer, and I'm not likely to be. Because of the very fact that you step out of the fact and into editorializing – adding opinion, feeling. And I'm... They don't need my opinion. But, yeah, I think a lot of them do want controversy, because it makes them feel like maybe they're a little bit better than they thought they were.

Researcher: You mentioned something about deciding – at that point you decide if it's something you're going to cover. What plays in to that kind of decision?

Roche: Boy, let me think that one through on how I actually decide that. Well, about the only one that I can actually pull up at this point was one that actually took place before I took the newspaper over, but the ramifications were fully realized after. And, by that time, everybody knew what the details were. Again, we're in a small town and everybody knows what's going on in a small town. They like to see it in black and white, but I chose, at that point, what was going on with the... Again, there were funds missing, there was a bunch of stuff going on. Well, they already knew the basics of it and the facts of it. Because it would cause more damage than what the information was worth, I just let it ride. I didn't do it. I'm sure on some level I was wrong in that decision, but it's the one I made. It... I really felt on the one hand that the amount of damage it would cause was far above the value of the information that they would gain.

Researcher: When you say damage – sorry to keep prying...

Roche: That's all right.

Researcher: Damage to?

Roche: Damage to the people that were on the City Commission. Damage to the family of the woman that was behind all the stuff that was going on, and – she's got family here and she is part of the community and a lot of small-town communities don't have the ability to forget stuff and

just... The amount of news value from it would have been far less than the amount of damage it would have caused.

Researcher: OK. How do social ties to the community on your part affect decisions about coverage and treatment of news in the newspaper?

Roche: I've kept myself pretty separate, socially, here. The first article that I wrote when I moved up here was about the school board bond issue that was going on and, for this area, it was a sizable bond issue. And I quoted – well, I paraphrased – the school board superintendent at the end of one of the articles and got a moderately scathing letter sent to me to it telling me that I needed to correct that 'cause it wasn't what he said. And it was. When I go to meetings, I tape every meeting, because I second-guess myself every time. And it was what he said. And one of the things that he put in the letter was that he was looking forward to building a relationship and working with me. And that's not – no, that's not what the newspaper is supposed to do – it's not supposed to work with you. It's supposed to report what's going on. And the tighter you are, the less likely you are to be... Social ties make things messy. They have no choice, but. Because there are things that are going to come up that you have to put in that are going to damage friendships. Even as it stands with no more controversy than I write, I mean, I get glares from people in this silly little town. You don't have to put "silly little town" in there. It's just... It just boggles my mind. It's like... I wrote for two years for the (newspaper), which is supposed to be the bad dog on the street, and never got a nasty letter, never got a nasty phone call and I get one a week up here at least. So, it is bizarre. It's just bizarre. But, yeah, social ties complicate things and, I mean, they have to. There's no choice for it.

Researcher: All right. In general, how do community journalists handle social pressures?

Roche: I don't know how others handle it. I honestly don't have a clue. I've never... God, I wouldn't have a... I honestly wouldn't. This whole ball game is new to me. So your answers aren't going to give you a whole lot of depth.

Researcher: Do people in this community prefer positive community boosterism...

Roche: Yes.

Researcher: ... over hard-line, watchdog-type reporting?

Roche: Yes. Yes. Which is a bizarre contrast when you consider they still like their controversy. But, yeah, they much prefer to hear the upside of

things and that's what I prefer to write. And that's what I told them when I moved up here is that's what I was looking at putting out was a paper that would be much more enjoyable to read. I'm not looking for a Pulitzer, so...

Researcher: How did you become aware of what the standards of what the people of this community are?

Roche: Repetitively being told. Phone calls – anonymous, left on the answering machine. Letters. E-mails. Comments in passing – standing in line at a checkout. That pretty well covers the whole spectrum.

Researcher: All right. To what extent would you say news coverage and content and treatment of news in the newspaper are influenced by the standards of the people who read it?

Roche: I would have to say fairly heavily. I mean – good grief – ultimately, it comes down to the fact that if you ignore your subscribers, you won't have subscribers. And in small-town papers, that's tough already. I think that's where you basically got to tailor your newspaper to the community and know what they're looking for. Well, that's pretty much what the (newspaper) did in (city). It doesn't cover controversy unless it's shoved into it. It stays as far away as it can. The... Get into the larger cities, and it's not an issue, but... And that's... You've got to kind of put in what they want to hear.

Researcher: All right. And piggy-backing off that, how important is it – you addressed this already – how important is it for coverage and treatment of news to conform to these community standards?

Roche: Pretty important. Pretty important. If you've got a TV station that is not... Well, all right. Let's put it on a business level. If you're not addressing your market people, your market people are going to find somebody else to address them. And it's... News is news, but it's still a business and it still feeds a family, still got to cover the bills, and the ramifications with 600 subscribers is far greater than with 5,000.

Researcher: Give me an example of an instance where coverage or treatment of news in your newspaper was knowingly shaped by the interests of the community or your perception of how the community would respond to what was in the paper.

Roche: Let me work on that one for a minute.

Researcher: OK.

- Roche: It would have to be more in human interest than it would in anything else, because when I do like the City Commission and things like that, I mean, it's, "These are the facts; you can brew them the way you want to brew them." I mean... But, now the rest of it, it comes down to the fact that I am looking for things that people in the community are interested in knowing about and it shapes – really quickly shapes – what I'm going to write when it comes to human interest, when it comes to business news in the area. But the rest of it, I mean... City stuff that's going on, county stuff that's going on, I'm not going to spin that. This is what happened, this is what they said, if you don't believe me the city minutes are right there to be read. And I'm finding out they actually want to publish those stupid things. That just drives me nuts. OK, but... When it... Far less effect on the issue on topics like the city operations and stuff like that than there is on my choice of whether I'm going to cover the kid who just came home from Iraq and how or whether I'm going to cover a new business that's opening. I end up covering family reunions. I mean, come on. I don't even go to my own; why would I cover some...
- Researcher: Now, on the other side of that coin, how about an example of when something you decided to cover or wrote or took a picture of or placed in the community newspaper with community standards in mind that maybe didn't hit the mark?
- Roche: I could grab any one these papers and find... I had a lot of dud articles over the year. I mean, jeez. I don't even know where to grab one of those... I honestly wouldn't know – wouldn't be able to grab one of the top of my head to go with. One of the things I've gradually learned is forget it. Once it's black and white, it's done. Otherwise, you beat yourself to death.
- Researcher: How do you balance journalistic ethics with community standards?
- Roche: I think that the level of ethics that – and I... Not having gone through journalism and never having set down and read anything on what they consider journalistic ethics, I have to go by the ethical code that I live with in every situation in my life. And that comes down to the fact that I have to deal with the facts of the issue – try to avoid the emotion of the issue, 'cause emotion lies. I have to evaluate whether or not it was something that occurred out of intentional act. If it's something that is a fly-by, fluke incident and people are blowing it up to be more than it ever was or ever could have been... And that's... I mean, that's... I wrestle with that far more than I do anything else. I write... Ninety percent of the stuff I end up writing, I end up staying up at night worrying if I treated them right or if I was wrong in it – if I was slanted or biased. And I... I don't now how you define "journalism," but I

think that's the different between writing and journalism. In ancient times, the early reporter were actually on the battlefield, and their job was to go back and get an unbiased view of what was occurring on the battlefield – of the battle lines. And if they added their flavor to it, somebody died on the frontline, because it wasn't accurate: "This is what is occurring at this moment. This is what happened before that. This is what it appears is going to be going on because of these two events." And there's a... I think there's a difference between the reporting and journalism, and I've never considered myself a journalist. I write, but I report. Not to step on any journalists' toes or anything.

Researcher: How and where does a community journalist – community reporter – draw the line between journalism ethics and demands of the audience?

Roche: When people start getting hurt. When people start getting... Even if it's perceived slander. I mean, that's... And, when there's something that's really going on that people are turning a blind eye to, 'cause the standards that they've got says that everybody should be smiling. I mean... Ultimately, when it comes down to reporting reporting, you've got to report. And we're back again to not trying to add my own flavor to it. And everybody's got a flavor. I mean, everybody's got an opinion, and trying to keep it out's tough.

Researcher: OK. Tell you what, that's all the questions I scribbled down on my little list. Is there anything that came to mind that you think would help me to get at what I'm trying to get at that I didn't ask about?

Roche: I don't how much it will weigh in to your ability to – 'cause eventually, you're going to put this down as statistics, but finding out the background of the person that is doing – that you're doing, getting the information from, because that's going to flavor everything about what they write.

Researcher: So you're saying that's a part of it, or shouldn't be a part of it?

Roche: Should be.

Researcher: Should be.

Roche: Should be. My background heavily flavors how I view things and how I try to approach things and whether they're set and my view of journalistic ethics is soft, hard, and whether I reap the gray or if I look at the black and that's it. And, that's... I mean, whether you go over and talk to the guy over at (city) and whether you go... And he's got a few years worth of time behind the paper, so he's undoubtedly stuck his toe in too many doors, but... Ultimately, his background is where he

came from and where his view of what he's doing came from. I don't know if that'll make any difference or just cloud your issue, but...

Researcher: All right.