# SAVING LOCAL NEWS: HOW 'VALUE' CAN INCREASE AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT

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## ABSTRACT

This study of audience members and journalists in a local news case study area illustrates a continued and widening "news gap" between the two groups. This particular local news audience searches for and finds more local news and information on targeted social media sites rather than on local news websites. At the same time, there are fewer journalists to do the work, and of ones who remain more say they use social media to find story ideas. Most of the journalists say they face more stress and pressure in their jobs than they ever did before the pandemic. A corresponding local news content analysis highlights the "churnalism" or "press release journalism" happening at an online local news outlet, perhaps illustrating that the remaining local news audience does not value or care about finding verified local news.

This study's focus group findings and content analysis raises concerns about unverified information found on social media and possibly in the press releases run by one news outlet. Overall, the findings from this local news case study area may have more broad implications for how audiences in the case study area do not seem to value verified information anymore, and how that case study finding might expanded to show what's happening to other local news outlets across the country.

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# INTRODUCTION

Longmont Times-Call newspaper editor John Vahlenkamp often sits at his kitchen table when he starts work in the morning. He posts the latest story updates to Twitter and Facebook. He checks the newspaper's main web page to make sure stories are current, especially the crime and weather stories. He sends out messages to his staff online and follows up with text messages. For the last several months, when he goes to the office, he rarely sees other people. Instead, he checks in frequently with his reporters through phone calls and texts, although he feels he's missing something by not seeing them more in person (Vahlenkamp personal interview, 2021).

Vahlenkamp has been through numerous rounds of layoffs over the years – he used to oversee a newsroom of 15 but now is down to two reporters. He posts news updates himself to both the local newspaper web page and to social media feeds. When he's not doing the work himself, Vahlenkamp is checking what his reporters have posted online to make sure there are no typos in headlines and that all online hyperlinks work. Finally, he checks all stories and other content for grammar errors and to make sure they follow Associated Press Stylebook guidelines.

Local news stories still are uploaded to a news outlet website overnight, and delivery drivers still throw printed newspapers, but online viewership dominates print subscribers, leading to the additional work by editors and reporters to market and update their content throughout the day on every online outlet they can, including social media outlets.

In its heyday, the Longmont Times-Call had a circulation of about 25,000 households, according to figures from the Colorado Press Association, a statewide industry trade association. In 2022, the Longmont Times-Call has a print circulation of just a little more than 1,200 households (personal communication, CPA, 2022). Parent company Prairie Mountain Media does not release online readership metrics for competitive reasons, according to publisher Al

Manzi (personal communication, February 2019). The steep drop in print newspaper subscriptions for the legacy newspaper in Longmont, Colorado, a community of about 100,000 about 30 miles north of Denver is just one aspect of the nature of the changes and turmoil going on in the local news industry in communities large and small across the country, however. Vahlenkamp's interview for this study illustrates more changes – a loss of newsroom culture during two years of the COVID pandemic as well as a loss of institutional knowledge as key reporters and editors get laid off, retire or move on to other things. Finally, Vahlenkamp's interview illustrates his focus on posting news to various online platforms. Based on journalist interviews, the corresponding online news outlet in this case study – the Longmont Leader – appears to have faced similar challenges related to newsroom culture and institutional knowledge. Leader staff also focus on online platforms.

These aspects of change and turmoil in the case study area are reflected at local news outlets across the country, which are being studied by academic scholars (Boczkowski et al., 2018; Mitchell et al., 2017; Napoli, 2019).

Perhaps more important to this particular case study, researchers have shown throughout the years that there is a "news gap" between what journalists feel is important to produce and what audiences want to receive (Boczkowski and Mitchelstein, 2013; Heider et al., 2005; Perreault and Stanfield, 2013). Journalists value verifying information and doing independent reporting (Christians et al., 2009; Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2014) whereas audiences seem to value being able to find news quickly, cheaply and easily as they check social media (Pew Research Center, 2021).

While local news has always held a normative value in terms of civic engagement in local communities (Christians et al., 2009); modern audiences don't seem to care much about it

(Mindich, 2004; Turkle, 2011; Shaker, 2014). As a result, while researchers have explored links between journalism's "watchdog role" over government institutions (Christians et al., 2009; Gans, 2010, p. 11; Hess and Waller, 2017), in recent years, a small but growing group of new empirical studies demonstrate a link between a lack of news in local communities and more political and business corruption (Gao, Lee & Murphy, 2019; Schulhofer-Wohl & Garrido, 2013).

This presents a local news conundrum – what do journalists who produce local news have to do to show its value to audiences? Should journalists give audiences more of what they want, which appears to be "soft news" that people find incidentally while looking on social media sites to find out what's going on (Bozkowski et al., 2018; Deuze, 2005; Mindich, 2004)? Or should local newsrooms continue to follow traditional journalism propositions, including journalism's "watchdog role" reporting on government and wrongdoing in society (Gans, 2010; Hamilton, 2011)?

Findings from this mixed-methods study are intended to offer insight into how local news outlets in the future may be able to offer more value to engage people who don't currently follow local news. The gathered data comes from a content analysis; an audience focus group study; and journalist interviews. (An initial 2020 audience focus group study was expanded in 2022 with an additional focus group meeting. Journalist interviews and findings were added following IRB approval for that aspect of the research.)

This project responds to a gap in academic and professional knowledge about how waning audience engagement is influencing local news outlets, if it is. The ideas of value presented here are largely about economic value, and how to keep local news outlets in business. But the ideas of value also have to do with what the larger questions about how local news is

valued or not valued in society, and how that might be affecting local communities around the country as well as American democracy.

Overall, this study responds to a gap in journalism studies research about what American audiences value as well as research into how the "news gap" between what audience members and journalists value continues to widen. It also intends to respond to a gap in the literature specifically about what *local* audiences value. In particular, a review of the literature indicates that journalism studies scholars have examined national news outlet journalism "value" in the United States from a normative theory perspective. Researchers do not tend to examine specific local news outlet journalism value unless they talk about "hyperlocal" journalism, which usually pertains to specific communities and neighborhoods in metro areas of the United States rather than in communities big and small across the entire country. Scholars generally have used research surveys to examine broad audience trends (Willnat et al. 2017) usually in metro areas, or other national surveys. But survey data cannot necessarily explain *why* audience members do what they do (Meijer 2016, Meijer & Kormelink, 2020). Such data also does not single out information from journalists or audiences in local communities in the United States.

In addition, scholars have used many different ways to discuss the specific idea of audience engagement (Nelson, 2018) most commonly with national news outlets or unspecified case study news outlets at different times, asking different questions, with different operationalization methods. Finally, there is some journalism studies research into news audiences in other countries, especially local news audiences in the Netherlands and Australia (Meijer, 2016; Hess & Waller, 2017). Hess and Waller (2017) in particular, make numerous links between how the studied audience members in Australia think about local journalism and about local communities and civic engagement. However, while there seems to be quite a bit of

research about how audiences interact with (mostly national) news online, there is very little research or detail about how local news audience communities in real life value journalism in the United States.

## THEORY

Most Americans have never thought about how and why journalists behave the way that they do (personal observations from unpublished audience focus group work and teaching). However, all journalists, including local journalists, believe that they are following codes of professionalism to remain free of outside influence. They believe that by following such behavior, they'll have social capital with others in society as they try to serve the public (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2014; Thomas, 2019). Media sociologist Bourdieu's field theory describes this professionalism idea as journalistic "habitus" (Bourdieu, 2005). This "habitus" has been studied as professional identity (Plaisance & Skewes, 2003); professional roles (Vos et al., 2018); and journalistic routines (Shoemaker and Reese, 1996, 2009; Tandoc, 2014); among other areas. While this will be discussed in more detail below, "habitus" generally is an idea that there are "rules of the game" that journalists play to be accepted by their colleagues and by society (Tandoc, 2014).

Journalists also follow industry norms such as professional codes of ethics (SPJ, 2021) and they set journalistic boundaries (Carlson & Lewis, 2014; Tandoc, 2014) to differentiate themselves from non-journalists. This journalistic value placed on norms and boundaries suggest that as a group, journalists answer to the public rather than to any one person or business (SPJ, 2021; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2014).

A final aspect of journalism's value is considered more of a normative theory role. Journalism serves as a "watchdog" on government and businesses (Christians et al. 2009; Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2014, Meijer, 2016) which these same scholars and others have suggested is a way to keep institutional corruption at bay. Scholars also have examined journalism's role in educating citizens – in elections or otherwise – as one that has value to society as a normative theory role (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2014; Meijer, 2020).

Because journalists and audiences operate in different environments that overlap, this study uses a slightly different theoretical framework to examine how audiences operate in connection with local media. Couldry's "media as practice" theorizing about practice theory concepts is used to examine how audiences respond to the media environment they find themselves in, as well as how that explains what they value.

Following this short theory section is a literature review that explains:

1. How journalists value journalism;
2. How audiences value journalism;
3. "News gap" or "disconnect" literature that helps explain differences in what audiences value and what journalists value, along with short discussions about traditional news values and journalism's watchdog role in society and how those two additional ideas are important to my research questions.

This ambitious treatment of the idea of "value" in all aspects of journalism leads to research questions about journalists, audiences, and a content analysis of local news outlet production that indicates more about if the journalistic and audience values are reflected in what

is produced. The three aspects of this study (qualitative research about journalists and audiences and quantitative analysis of content in local news outlets) illustrate key findings about the changing nature of the value of news and journalism in American society.

Media sociology scholars and other journalism studies scholars historically examined how journalists have tried to create a professional culture to reinforce their own "habitus" and to try to repel outside influences (Gans, 1979/2004, Tuchman 1978). Gans discusses this professional culture as one of objectivity, fairness and detachment (2004, p. xviii). Tuchman suggests journalist "participation in a common reportorial culture" (1978, p. 71) as important to understand the newsrooms she studies. At the same time, it seems like most audience members have never known or cared that journalists are trying to remain free of outside influence (Weaver et al., 2017).

Journalists used professionalization tools as ways to create internal newsroom structures that could withstand outside "pressures, censorship and self-censorship," according to Gans (1979). These historic studies about professionalization indicate the normative value of journalism's independence from outside influence.

Thinking about this brief historic background, this study uses two areas of theory – Bourdieu's field theory (2005) ideas as they pertain to journalists and Couldry's "media as practice" theorizing (2004) about audiences, to explain the "disconnect" happening in modern-day society between what journalists value and what audiences value. Scholars most commonly call this "disconnect" a "news gap" between what journalists think should be produced, based on their professional culture, and what audiences value and actually want to consume (Beaudoin & Thorson, 2002; Boczkowski and Mitchelstein, 2013; Meijer, 2016; Meijer, 2020; Perreault and Stanfield, 2015).

Bourdieu's field theory suggests that a journalistic field is an independent social universe with its own laws of functioning and power dynamics (2005). Fields have their own "doxa," which are "rules of the game" as they pertain to cultural aspects of a particular group (Benson and Neveu, 2005; Tandoc, 2014). While Bourdieu used this theorizing to discuss aspects of society, especially where some aspects of power reside in society and why, it has been particularly helpful for me to drill down deeper to use field theory to think about how and why journalism operates the way that it does. For example, the field theory idea of "habitus" seems to be one that addresses journalistic autonomy, professional culture and other related ideas. Bourdieu was a sociologist, but his later work went in the journalistic direction and was picked up by other influential related theorists in this area, including Benson and Neveu (2005) and others.

As it happens, Bourdieu (1977) also theorized about practice theory. Practice theory generally can be used to discuss social structures and an individual person's (in this case, a news audience member's) role in those structures. Before the age of the internet, practice theory generally was used to talk about media consumption, including media effects. However, as technology shifted how audiences could interact with media, researchers started to realize that they might do more theorizing to do to encompass a more broad aspect of practice theory. Bird (2003) is seen as the first researcher to take an audience research turn in this regard – perhaps presaging what would happen as internet use and people's addiction to internet practices continued to grow. She said that 'the 'audience' is everywhere and nowhere' (2003, 2-3), also perhaps explaining how audience members' limited amount of time to engage with any and all media and entertainment affects how often and how much they consume local news. For the purposes of this study, Bird serves as an important side note to Couldry's work, only because she

seems to be going in a societal direction with her theorizing rather than in an individual direction. This study intends to focus on individual audience members in a local audience setting, an area where academic literature is relatively sparse.

For this reason, Couldry's "media as practice" theorizing in 2004 and his later work to focus on audiences and digital media (2012) is more helpful than any other theorizing previously used to discuss audiences and their interactions with media, especially news. Couldry tries to encompass older work related to media effects, political economy and audiences (2004), but instead open up his theorizing to ask audiences what they themselves are doing with media. With this brief historical background in these two areas of theory (field theory and practice theory/media as practice) I now turn to each one to discuss in more detail how they pertain to this study.

## A. FIELD THEORY

When it comes to journalists, Bourdieu's field theory (2005) best explains what journalists value in their work. Field theory explains the concept of journalists trying to keep their autonomy from audiences, which is crucial to any discussion about news production. Field theory says that a journalistic field is an independent social universe with its own laws of functioning and power dynamics (Bourdieu, 2005; p. 163). Fields have their own "doxa" or systems of unspoken, unquestioned, taken-for-granted, understanding of the news game and the basic beliefs guiding journalistic practice (Bourdieu, 2005; Ornebring et al. 2018; Tandoc, 2014). Benson and Neveu (2005) argue that there's a constant tension between journalists trying to remain independent of outside influence and all of the outside forces that act upon them, which indicates the value of journalistic autonomy.

Journalists try to remain free of outside influence to retain capital with their audiences (Bourdieu, 2005). The idea of *capital* is a broad one, in that it generally means anything that can give value to its owner – either financially or otherwise. Bourdieu says journalistic capital also is an important concept because it helps explain the power, or lack of it, that journalists can hold.

Under the umbrella of "journalistic capital", Bourdieu theorizes about three types of capital that journalists wield: social capital, or the network of all possible sources and all other people that journalists interact with in society; cultural capital, or the intellectual knowledge and skills they have; and symbolic capital, or the right to be recognized as an authority on a topic. The term "capital" actually is another way to talk about value, or what is valuable. So it appears that the reason Bourdieu discusses three aspects of journalistic capital is to indicate the three areas of value that researchers can study as they pertain to how journalists believe they offer value when they do their jobs.

Certainly, symbolic capital is the most important aspect of Bourdieu's field theory as it pertains to this study. To date, scholars have discussed "symbolic capital" as it pertains to "prestige" in a field, in terms of awards and recognition. One example of "symbolic" journalistic capital comes from a local news outlet in this case study. Similar to many local news outlets around the country, this news outlet enters an annual Society of Professional Journalists contest among news outlets statewide. During the time of this study, the news outlet won three writing awards (https://www.timescall.com/2022/04/10/times-call-receives-three-awards-from-state-society-of-professional-journalists/).

The news outlet touted the awards and ran pictures of the people who wrote the award-winning stories, showing the value the journalists place on such recognition. While it is not the intent of this study to discuss symbolic capital in detail, entire research studies have been written

about such things. This example explains just one aspect of how local journalists value awards and other industry recognition as ways to generate capital with their audiences.

In another aspect of capital related to field theory, Bourdieu suggests that journalists can use credentials, expertise and networks and other forms of capital to mobilize power and resources (Bourdieu, 2005). However, he emphasizes that the power is not necessarily about monetary value (Bourdieu, 2005; Hamilton, 2011). Prestige traditionally comes in the form of recognition for investigative journalism, for example, or for doing something that helps the local community.

These forms of capital in Bourdieu's field theory seem to translate directly to how local journalism outlets were able to brand and market themselves in the past. Traditional brand and marketing examples in local communities include local news outlets hosting food and gift charity drives during holiday seasons, news outlets hosting candidate forums and voter guides during election season and news outlets writing articles about awards they receive from national groups for enterprising and investigative stories, among others (author's personal observations).

Vos et al. (2018) examine what they call "journalistic capital" that appears slightly different than Bourdieu's umbrella term. Vos et al. (2018) study various journalistic roles in society to illustrate changes in them and to discuss a decline in institutional power. Wilnatt et al. (2017) discuss social capital and the importance it has to journalists and their value in society. Other scholars, including Hess and Waller (2017); and Kovach and Rosenstiel (2014) say that all three forms of Bourdieu's non-economic capital theorizing (social, symbolic and cultural) are important in the ways that they imbue value in journalists and the journalism that they do. When journalists lose this capital with audiences, local news outlets suffer (Vos et al. 2018). This leads

to an institutional weakening of journalism's value with audiences (Vos et al. 2018; Reese, 2021).

Tandoc (2015) and Vu (2014) each suggest that in the current environment of journalist industry turmoil, the audience can directly be considered as another form of capital. Along similar lines, some scholars say that many in the American audience generally now see news outlets as having weaker social and cultural capital than social media sites do (Pickard, 2020).

Reese (2021) says that there always was outside pressure on how journalists operated. But he says a rise in populistic tendencies across the country appears now to be having more of an effect on the way that many Americans think about journalists these days. This appears to be one illustration of a change in what national audiences traditionally valued in terms of independent, autonomous journalistic reporting. Specifically, audience trust in journalism continues to dwindle (Reese, 2021). Reese talks generally about the example of the rise of populism in the United States being tied in part to politicians suggesting that journalists are "enemies of the people," which seems to illustrate another aspect of journalistic value, or lack of it, to American society. Finally, Hesmondhalgh (2006) says that a "cultural good" such as a piece of news must be valued by the people it is created for, and if it is not, it will cease to be important to society.

## B. "MEDIA AS PRACTICE" – PRACTICE THEORY

When it comes to audiences, Couldry's "media as practice" theorizing (2004, 2016) best describes what people value not only in journalism, but generally in media. Couldry references previous practice theory scholars including Bourdieu (1977 and discussed previously); Postill (2010); Swidler, (2001); Schatzki (1996); Bird (2003); and others to theorize about how a news

audience behaves in a media-saturated culture and how that might indicate what people value. Swidler (2001) discusses how (audience) media practices anchor other practices – raising the question, perhaps, in the modern day of if audiences prefer journalism media practices to other media practices, or if the news/journalism has been subsumed by all other media choices available online. This is just one aspect of theory that has been touched on by Couldry (2004, 2016) without a definitive answer.

More to the point, Couldry believes that neither journalists nor scholars can ignore the rapidly changing audience consumption practices in the current social climate (2004, p. 115). Couldry uses several elements of practice theory to offer three specific areas of "media as practice" theorizing related to:

1. Audience routines
2. Audience practices and understandings
3. Audience media rituals

(4. Couldry & Kallinikos (2017) discusses the production of value of social media systems related to web metrics, algorithms and recommender systems, but not related specifically to "media as practice" It is mentioned here because web metrics is tied to a discussion about what journalists value, below.)

Couldry's open-ended explanations about audience routines, audience practices and media rituals place his research within a more broad sociology of action and knowledge related to all media (Couldry, 2004; Postill, 2010). For the purposes of this study, this idea of practice theory can explain some aspects about how the audience attends to journalism, but not all aspects. Specifically, Couldry, Postill, Giddens (1984) and other practice theorists suggest that the news audience attends to media to give themselves a sense of ontological security.

Put another way – the audience values the security of knowing what's happening in the world around them by looking at the news. Postill highlights Giddens' ideas of time and calendar, which suggests that the predictability of time cycles contributes to people's feeling that the natural and social worlds are the way they appear to be. Postill uses this idea to talk more about familiar daily cycles or routines, which people go through in searching for news and information to control the spaces around them. Disruption leads to insecurity and disorientation, according to Postill, Turkle (2011), Reese (2021) and other scholars.

In more detail, practice theory researchers decided to go in a direction that includes more than media effects to examine all practices the audience might do in relation to media. This takes the idea of practice from not only how audiences might have more agency in terms of media production in the modern day, but in a more broad sense of how audiences act in society.

Overall , Couldry examines media-related practice by distilling it down to its particular parts "what are people (individuals, groups, institutions) doing in relation to media across a whole range of situations and contexts." (p. 37, Couldry, 2012). This media-related practice theory idea was first discussed through Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch's (1973) uses and gratifications research which focused on how individual audience members used media. The idea was to understand why audience members seek out particular types of media to satisfy specific needs. From a media effects point of view, uses and gratifications suggests "what do people do with media" and how does it affect them? In addition, uses and gratifications theory focuses on what the audience needs. Using this line of reasoning, then, and is evidenced in some focus group research in this study, an increasing number of audience members say they do not follow any local news at all, perhaps because they are saying they don't see any need for it. This seems to hearken back to uses and gratifications research, but also seems to address the idea of value –

some audience members are saying that news does not offer value to them at all because it does not satisfy any specific need that they have.

Rather than go down a more broad media effects track related to uses and gratifications in this study, however, it makes sense to be more specific related to how audiences act. Couldry's "media as practice" theorizing creates a framework of three parts to gather data from the local news audience as well as to gather information from people who might not follow any local news at all. With this in mind, Couldry's three aspects of this theory of "media as practice" can be explained in more detail as:

1. Audience routines

Couldry theorizes about audience routines (Swidler, 2001) and discourse, which he labels as a system of meanings that allows the audience to say anything at all in relation to the media/journalism it consumes or attends to. Changes in technology have driven changes in audience consumption routines, leading to new ways for academic researchers to theorize about how the audience consumes media. For example, Bruns (2007) calls one new audience consumption routine "produsage". The term "produsage" combines the words "producer" and "usage," which explains that the consumer is more involved now in media production because of technology. Specifically, Bruns says that audience members are re-form and shape the media (mostly social media, but also comments on news stories) that they interact with as they send it along to others. This appears to highlight one aspect of what the audience values in terms of content.

As a corollary, Bruns (2007) calls audience members who create their own content, "produsers" (a combination of the words "producer" and "user"). To explain this new term, Bruns says that many of the previous distinctions between producers and users of media content

have faded away online. This seems to indicate a line of reasoning toward the research threads of user-generated content and citizen journalism. Because this is not a direct area of research in this study, this literature review will not discuss user-generated content and citizen journalism in much detail. In a related measure, however, journalism scholars such as Rosen (2007) conceptualize "the people formerly known as the audience" to discuss the more participatory nature of audiences overall helped by technological changes such as the video and still cameras now found in mobile phones. This line of reasoning illustrates how the audience finds value in creating content, perhaps supplanting more traditional news content.

Finally, since Couldry talks about audience routines, it's helpful to include here more broadly how routinized practices reinforce social order (Reckwitz, 2002). Reckwitz suggests that researchers look specifically to specific bodily and mental routines and social practices as good ways to gather data about audiences (Ibid.). This idea of routines can illustrate another area of audience value.

2. Audience practices

Schatzki (1996) says that audience practices are governed by common societal understandings, rules and reference points, and that it is these commonalities that create society and the particular culture of a particular society. These understandings commonly have to do with how young people and old people are treated, how the government is in power, etc. Further, he says that researchers often can find out more about common cultural understandings (in this case, American cultural understandings) by asking research participants to describe, explain and question what they're doing. Couldry (2004) makes the distinction that this is not just *what* audiences do, an area he calls "audiencing," but a more nuanced idea about *how* audiences do what they do related to media.

One way to think about this more from this study's first research question (What do audiences value in terms of local news?) is to focus on how people engage with news outlets and how that might illustrate what they value (Belair-Gagnon et al., 2018; Ferrucci 2020; and Royal and Kiesow, 2021). Researchers have studied audience engagement in news in many ways in recent years, creating a large body of literature. For example, Belair-Gagnon et al. (2018), say that they observe audience members being invited to news outlet "listening sessions" and certain audience groups being invited to join organizational partnerships with the idea that the corresponding news organizations are trying to build trust in their products with community members. The fact that audience members were involved in the Belair-Gagnon et al. study seems to show that there still is value to them to participate in local news outlet work. The researchers found that such work also had economic value to the local news outlet.

Ferrucci (2020) suggests that audiences have more agency in influencing news coverage choices in profit-oriented news outlets. This study also indicates that audience members find value in interacting with the news coverage that they see, and that they also may be influencing more news coverage. Such audience engagement will be discussed in more detail later in this literature review.

Royal and Kiesow (2021) studies the new roles of people in the newsroom to conceptualize and put into practice new products that might have audience value. They warn against audience development people having a "pro-innovation bias," suggesting that audience members might not necessarily be "pro-innovation". But the study focuses more generally about the new audience development roles in newsrooms in terms of creating the products for news as a practice – to "align an understanding of audience needs and data analysis with organizational goals and capacities". This shows that value may be tied up in audience needs, as well as in a

better overall understanding of the potential audience when coming up with products to serve them.

3. Audience practices anchor other audience practices, creating "media rituals"

Swidler (2001) suggests that certain audience practices related to well-known people in society are the practices that help to anchor, control or organize all other audience practices. This suggests that certain notoriety in society has value to audiences. Swidler and Couldry (2004) call this idea "media ritual" (Couldry, 2004, Swidler, 2001) in which wider patterns of meaning are reinforced by journalists. This also shows the value that audiences put on well-known people/celebrities and events *being covered* by media outlets. Before the advent of social media, the celebrity realm was covered exclusively by journalists, and one of the "news values" of journalism (discussed later in this literature review) is celebrity.

This "media ritual" idea shows how American audiences continue to value celebrity and Bourdieu's theorizing about social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 2005; Couldry, 2004). Such anchoring practices "frame" wider social values across a community culture. Social and cultural capital are important markers used to show how a field operates successfully, according to Bourdieu (2005), who discusses things like credentials, expertise and networks of resources where journalists can mobilize power and resources (Repeated here for emphasis and to further the argument).

Another important aspect of the changes going on in how audiences consume media is in how much media is now competing for a person's attention on a daily basis. In response, researchers say that newsrooms have turned to web analytics to find out how their products stack up (Lee & Tandoc, 2017; Tandoc, 2014).

In this highly saturated media environment both inside and outside the newsroom, researchers also can look again to Dallas Smythe's theorizing about the "audience commodity" (Dolber, 2016; Napoli, 2011; Smythe, 1981) as a key aspect to think about what audiences might value and how that effects the economic value of a product. Smythe thinks of the audience in terms of its value to advertisers in that when audiences pay attention to something, that attention can be commoditized and sold (Smythe, 1981). This "audience commodity" in other media aspects now is valued by advertisers through subscriptions, which is an aspect of this study found in the methods section.

In addition, "audience autonomy" also is now part of the American media ritual (Napoli, 2011), meaning that audience members look for any news content anywhere online at any time, share any content without checking its veracity and also create their own content – often without comment or apparent hierarchy online other than number of other people who consume it. Napoli suggests that it is the audience that controls the news agenda through their decisions about what to follow on social media, what to share, etc. This is a significant change in the way that all news and information is valued, not just local news and information, but it appears to not directly addressed by any other research thread, other than Bruns's (2007) discussions about "produsage" and "prosumers". Audience metrics research indirectly illustrate this trend, which is seen not only in nonprofit newsrooms (Ferrucci, 2020) but in studies of how audience engagement affects newsrooms that use the web analytics platform/audience engagement company Hearken (Nelson, 2018).

## LITERATURE REVIEW - VALUE

This literature review discusses local and national journalists and what they value in terms of news production, local and national audiences and what they value in terms of news

consumption, and the "disconnect" or "news gap" between what local and national journalists value and what local and national audiences value. In most cases, the "local" aspect of this research comes from specific local case study information, which often has not been replicated throughout the years.

The literature review also examines some aspects of "solutions journalism" to try to bridge some aspects of the "news gap" before turning to a small discussion of journalistic "news values" (Galtung and Ruge, 1965) as they relate to news production and consumption. As I just said, most local news literature threads generally have related to case studies of specific news outlets in the United States. Some specific threads have been related to geographical location (Schmitz Weiss, 2015; Usher, 2019) and something that researchers have called "hyperlocal" news in the United States (Usher 2019). For the purposes of this research study, "localness" and its value to a local community are wrapped up in the case study design. These specific threads are addressed under a sub-heading (below) called "Love the local," in a nod to common local news outlet advertising and marketing campaigns. Overall, this literature review and this study respond to a relative gap in the academic literature related to local news in the United States. As a notable related concept about local news, however, is a Pew Research study in 2019 that found that 71 percent of people surveyed felt like local news outlets were doing a good job reporting news accurately and 62 percent felt like local news outlets dealt fairly with all sides. Pew surveyed 35,000 people in the local news survey (Gramlich, 2019).

For the purpose of defining the philosophical background of "value", this literature review turns to The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, which includes definitions of both intrinsic and extrinsic value. "Intrinsic value" is something that's valued, "for its own sake"

(Zimmerman and Bradley, 2019). Philosophers have suggested that things with "intrinsic value" generally are goods/ideas such as health, satisfaction, contentment, knowledge and similar ideas (Zimmerman and Bradley, 2019).

This bears more discussion as it seems that journalism's "intrinsic value" to U.S. democracy would be its normative value. The encyclopedia definition goes on to say that this is "ethics-related value" in literal, philosophical terms (Zimmerman and Bradley, 2019). In this literature review, the "ethics-related," or "intrinsic" value of journalism in American society is "in its own right". "Intrinsic" properties are ones that are good for society from an ontological perspective. In this case, one might consider journalism's "watchdog role" over government and other aspects of society as one with intrinsically valuable properties. What this means generally to journalism studies scholars is that democracy cannot survive without journalism, and journalism cannot survive without democracy (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2014; Reese, 2021).

Journalism's "extrinsic" value is related to its "intrinsic" value – that is to say, a concept such as journalism cannot have intrinsic properties without also having extrinsic properties. Such value is "of the same kind" as the intrinsic value to society (Zimmerman and Bradley, 2019).

## WHAT DO JOURNALISTS VALUE?

Media sociologists of the 1970s, including Tuchman (1978) and Gans (1979) suggested that journalists use their own news values to "construct" the news rather than take into account specifically what audiences want (repeated here for emphasis, and please see a later discussion about news values and power toward the end of the literature review). Gans, particularly, says that journalists at the time wrote for each other and did not pay much attention to what audiences

thought. This showed that the journalists valued the industry's professional culture, or "habitus" to try to stay free of outside influence as suggested by Bourdieu (2005).

In general, scholars have examined journalistic roles and norms (Perreault and Stanfield, 2019; Plaisance and Skewes, 2003; Tandoc, 2014; Vos et al. 2018, Weaver et al., 2019) as two areas where journalists try to show what they value from the ways they produce news. More specifically, although often taken for granted in journalism studies, is that journalistic roles and norms illustrate how journalists try to remain free from outside influences. To give two examples, Vos et al. (2018) discuss the professional "roles" of journalists ostensibly as a way to offer institutional value to the practice of journalism, while Weaver et al. (2019) discusses it both the professional values and roles of journalists as they pertain to news production. Perreault and Stanfield (2019), meanwhile, study more how "mobile journalists" may now have different professional roles than traditional journalists do, or that the mobile journalist roles may be changing from what was traditionally expected of journalists.

While the idea of what journalists "value" is not spelled out in the Perreault and Stanfield study literature, this examination of possible differences between mobile journalists and traditional journalists reinforces the unspoken idea that professional roles are important to remain free of outside influence. To further the normative idea about what journalists value, Weaver et al. (2019) also suggest that traditional journalists value accuracy over speed. Their research is similar to Perrault and Stanfield's (2019) in showing that only one-third of journalists feel that social media has been a positive influence, which can be interpreted to mean that two-thirds of journalists, or a majority, continue to value traditional journalistic roles and norms.

Journalistic boundaries also are important. Researchers generally have examined journalistic norms as an issue of boundaries, or specifically of journalistic autonomy practices

used to remain independent from outside influence (Carlson & Usher, 2016; Carlson, 2017; Carlson, 2015b; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2014.) In another aspect of Perreault and Stanfield's unspoken ideas about journalistic roles, traditional journalists generally value holding an adversarial role in society (Tandoc, 2014; Vos et al. 2018) where online journalists generally value how quickly they can get news to the audience (Tandoc, 2014; Weaver et al. (2019)).

In a world where technology has changed how journalism is both produced and consumed, Singer (2015) finds that journalists and the news industry now value being transparent about boundaries, an aspect added to the SPJ Code of Ethics (2021) in September 2014. Thomas (2019) finds that journalists often value the ways they are helpful to local audiences.

## "THE WALL" AND ECONOMIC VALUE

However, just as journalists have always valued autonomy and independence from outside influences, their publishers always have looked for economic value. This has been a long-running dichotomy in local newsrooms. There traditionally has been a "wall" between journalism and advertising in newsrooms, in that advertisers are not allowed to tell journalists what to do, reinforcing the importance of the value of journalistic autonomy (Coddington, 2015; Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2014). Coddington suggests that "the wall" has been eroded by native advertising, among other things. The term "native advertising" is one used by scholars and people in the industry to describe advertising that looks like editorial content. Coddington's discussion about the boundary work surrounding "the wall" between journalists and advertisers perhaps highlights just how important the value is to journalists that such a "wall" offers to try to keep them independent (Coddington, 2015).

In another economic note, Lee and Chyi (2014) point out that journalism only has economic value if consumers determine that it does. Their research reminds the reader that media content scarcity traditionally helped drive economic value. This research indicates that scarcity gave more value to journalistic content, too in that now that there's an abundance of media content, there appears to be less value in journalistic content.

Tandoc (2015) follows a similar line of reasoning, suggesting that because technology has created unlimited content, not just news content, there's huge competition for the audience's scarce attention. In this case, he says journalists should consider audiences as a form of economic capital. When it comes to emerging product roles in newsrooms, new journalists and designers have come up with some creative ways to market themselves to audiences – showing the increasing importance of audience value to journalists.

This leads to questions about if and how web metrics are valued by journalists, and if so, why.

Traditionally, if they thought about it at all, journalists thought about journalism's economic value as circulation numbers and/or subscription/subscriber numbers (Gans, 1979). In recent years, researchers have found that some journalists now have expanded their ideas about economic value to include clicks, page views and other web metrics (Nelson, 2018; Tandoc, 2015). Nelson's research shows that publishers try to incentivize the journalists in their newsrooms by talking about the simple metric of online audience growth, which they can measure easily with software programs, rather than audience engagement, which they can't measure very well.

Couldry argues, however, that most journalists would rather know *how* the audience is attending to the news vs. knowing *how many* in the audience actually attend to it or follow it

(Couldry, 2004; Nelson, 2019). Mindich (2004) also looks to the detail of how individuals follow what's in the news.

## WEB METRICS

Web metrics have become ever more important to newsroom culture (Lee & Tandoc, 2016; Tandoc, 2014) creating a tension for the journalistic community trying to remain free of outside influence. These scholars, and others, including Nelson, (2018), also have studied how web metrics were created to measure reactions of audience members and how those metrics are used in newsrooms.

This line of journalism studies research examines whether or not audiences are having more influence on journalists and what they do in their newsrooms. For example, many traditional journalists are upset by new and competing communication technologies, especially social media technologies (Gans, 2010; Usher, 2014) and decline to use them. Journalists are often encouraged to interact with audiences on social media sites, for example, according to Usher, but some journalists refuse to participate online. On the other hand, Nelson and Tandoc (2018) find that newsrooms do not rely on web analytics as much as previously thought. Other researchers throughout the past two decades have often concluded that newsrooms receive online analytic data, though, even if they don't use it (Nelson, 2021).

Another related line to web metrics/online journalism studies value research looks to whether and how journalists now look to product management of their content to be an area where they can retain traditional values but package content in a way that attracts audiences. Sonderman (2016) argues that while many in the industry and in academia may have seen such product management roles more as "tech support" to the journalists in newsrooms in the past, actual product managers in newsrooms do quite a bit more on a conceptual basis and on the

ground to get audiences more involved in news. The unspoken idea here is that journalists can value the relatively new role of the product managers in the newsroom, but there can be tension between the two groups of the more technically oriented product managers and the journalists.

Scholars such as Aaronson (2020); Cherubini (2017); Chua and Duffy (2019); Peretti (2018); Royal (2018); and Usher (2016) find that "bridge roles" in newsrooms – sometimes called product managers, but sometimes other workers who are not journalists but who have similar technology product duties - can help ease some of the tension that comes with technological changes, showing that journalists are starting to value more of the technological products they feel they need to package their stories.

Aaronson (2020) finds other new journalist roles in some newsrooms now, such as journalist-programmers who work on storytelling, for example. If journalists are open to design thinking (Cagan, 2018; Royal, 2018) to solve product problems, Aaronson believes that the result will be "the missing link to create sustainable journalism in the digital age." (Aaronson, 2020).

These scholars find that the role of the product manager in the newsroom can be a delicate dance of optimizing news content while trying to put processes in place that can help make sure that journalists remain free of outside influence. Some of these scholars spell out the idea that journalists need to retain credibility with audiences. This research appears to reinforce the value of journalists retaining their professional culture.

Overall, it seems that most journalists see value in using technology to package their content (Usher, 2014). Different journalists react in different ways to aspects of product management, however, which can be a key data point for future study.

Two other examples can explain some of the issues that arise related to web metrics and product management tools being used in some larger newsrooms in recent years. In one example,

editors asked a journalist to use an audience engagement tool on a feature story she already has reported (Ferrucci, 2020). The journalist used the tool, the story she reported remained essentially the same, but it ran five days later than it would have otherwise.

In a second example, Usher's (2014) work explores how technology often has given the audience more influence and also disrupted some journalistic routines. In one case at the New York Times, Usher found that some journalists declined to use social media tools, which, presumably, would help them market their stories. In another New York Times case, one editor updated stories online without much newsroom input (meaning, in theory, that audience metrics may play a big role in which stories get the most play online) while Page 1 print newspaper decisions are discussed by a group of editors.

These examples reinforce the idea that journalists continue to value traditional aspects of their jobs that they believe will give them social and cultural capital as they struggle to find new ways to offer value to audiences. As one final example, Hamilton's (2016) research on investigative journalism shows that journalists value reporting and writing on stories where they can play a watchdog role on government and society (discussed later in more detail). Audiences, however, do not appear to value this work (Hamilton, 2016). In addition, researchers to date have examined technological roles in larger, metro-area newsrooms around the United States rather than any local newsrooms such as the ones addressed in this case study area, mainly because of the time and money associated with working on such projects. While there are a few case studies about local news outlets, this appears to be another area where both academic research and industry knowledge or implementation is lacking.

## WHAT DO NEWS AUDIENCES VALUE?

## HISTORICAL AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT

Historically, scholars looked to Jurgen Habermas and his theorizing about the idea of the public sphere (Habermas, 1989) to think about how audiences engaged with each other (or not) to build community (Habermas, 1989; Bruns and Highfield, 2015; Fraser, 1990). This seminal scholarship about the public sphere gave an unspoken value to the idea of how audience members engage with each other in the world, and how that contributes to communities. As a side note, Fraser points out that women and other groups she calls "counterpublics" (Fraser, p. 61) were not included in the public sphere. Following this line of inquiry would take the study down a more critical theory aspect of research than this study intends to address, but please see the conclusion section for areas of future research in the case study area that might involve "counterpublics".

If scholars now examine the importance of Habermas's public sphere in recent times, such research seems to include the taken-for-granted notion that the people who make up the public sphere value the communities in which they reside. More recent research even has addressed the online public sphere, and has sometimes examined what types of communities those online public spheres reinforce. Overall, the idea of the "public sphere" in American society also serves as background to explain the importance of what news audiences value in this particular study.

On the other side of the seminal Habermas/public sphere scholarship coin is Walter Lippman's "Theory of the Publics" in which Lippman postulates that the audience doesn't have the time or inclination to expose itself to a broad range of news (Lippman, 1922). Lippman's theorizing indicates, perhaps, that audiences never valued news as much as journalists thought they did.

Couldry et al. (2010) takes this argument about the audience valuing involvement in community-building into a more detailed direction related to politics. This research looks at the way that politics at its most basic helps a community allocate goods and services. Couldry et al.'s argument also focuses on the idea that audiences find value in community involvement. In support of Couldry et al. 2010, and to take off on the idea of politics at its most basic is to think about all of the aspects of what audiences may do in relation to the media they consume, not just the "political aspect" of what audiences might do. This also shows the importance of Couldry's theorizing about "media as practice" found elsewhere in this study to be used as a backbone for this research.

In the United States, it's relevant to think about how or why some national audiences say they have a lack of interest in all (national and local) news in the last few years in that they don't think it pertains to them and because they don't agree with it (Reese 2021). For example, the Reuters Institute think tank found in a recent survey that 32 percent of audience members turned away from national news after the 2020 American presidential election and the Biden inauguration, particularly right-leaning audiences (Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2021). The unspoken idea is that if those audience members do not agree with what they find in the news, they turn away, which indicates, perhaps, a negative value of news outlets related to current national politics. On the other hand, Vos et al. (2018) suggest generally that new normative institutional structures are coalescing around key values of public service and accountability, which are aspects of journalism's "watchdog role" (to be discussed in more detail, below). This seems to indicate that at least some audiences in the United States continue to value these types of ideals.

In perhaps the only area where audience members and journalists seem to agree on what to value regarding news, Meijer (2016) finds that Dutch audiences are looking for "truth" and "trust" when they see or share news. Krebs and Lischka (2019) find that audience members in Switzerland say they want to belong to a group of like-minded news consumers. They also examine news quality and trust as areas of value for the audience.

However, scholars Fortunati and O'Sullivan (2021) suggest that user engagement online shows what audiences actually do value and finds that they value their own involvement in producing media. For example, Fortunati and O'Sullivan say audiences are now part of a digital media writing and speaking "explosion" (p. 2423) indicating that the audience values its own capability to write and speak to others, rather than valuing verified information. While Fortunati and O'Sullivan don't address whether or not this digital media is "news," they point to the audience producers who are making and sharing words, pictures and videos on social media (Ibid.), which suggests an important audience creation of media as a value theme.

Fortunati and O'Sullivan's research reinforces what Bruns (2007) originally termed "produsage," or how online audiences both produce and consume all sorts of content. The idea of "produsage" may give researchers insight into what audiences value as important for themselves and others, be it journalism or other types of content. In a similar vein, Hermida (2010) coined the term "ambient news" to think more about the "always on" nature of how people may be exposed to news these days. This "ambient" relationship with journalism may mean more in terms of overall value of journalism to audiences – that the audience wants to know what's going on nationally and so may be signed up for particularly specific information, or they may scroll through their national news feeds on their mobile phones. This aspect of how the audience values news also does not take local news and community importance or lack of it into account.

McDowell (2015) also explores this idea of audience value by examining if user-generated content engages audiences and creates loyalty to any type of specific websites, or not. This research indicates that audiences value online websites that are free of insults, swear words and libelous claims and unverified information (Ibid. and Bateman, 2013).

Mobile technology scholars such as Erdal et al. (2019) point to similar research that shows audience members have become more interested in online information where they can value/reinforce their social identities, perhaps indicating the value of behaving calmly in public rather than swearing and insulting people. Such research into apparent audience value systems also emphasizes the nature of being "always on, always on you" (Turkle, 2008, p. 121), which includes customization tools that seem to have diluted the value of verified journalism (Reese, 2021). Reese (2021) and others say that such customization tools and algorithms have led to self-reinforcing echo chambers that are not necessarily fact-based, perhaps illustrating that democratic values are not as important to audiences who search for information online as they were historically.

Along similar lines is Kaufhold (2010), who suggests that young audiences, specifically, don't seem to value news. Lee and Chyi (2014) find that it's not just young audiences who aren't paying attention to news - all audience members of all ages who they study are more likely to search for entertainment than for news.

Temmerman and Mast (2020), and Tandoc (2015) say that the active role the online audience plays in information production now is paramount, which seems to show that the audience values being involved in media production. Not only do audiences propose topics and add content themselves (Bruns, 2007; Meijer, 2020; Temmerman & Mast 2020; Turkle, 2008) but the online web metrics measure their responses, giving a quantitative snapshot that may show

better than they know themselves what they value in terms of how much time they spend on various aspects of content. This line of research generally does not address news content, showing, perhaps that there is a lower value placed on news content these days.

This line of research reinforces Tandoc's previously mentioned research about all media competition for limited audience attention spans. And in a related note, branding experts say news brands must offer exceptional value (McDowell, 2015) to capture audiences' scarce attention.

As other more civic-minded measures of audience engagement, Heider et al. (2014) find national audiences want journalists to be "a good neighbor," while both Heider et al. and Willnatt, Weaver and Wilhoit (2017) find that audiences want information quickly. This thread of research goes back to Martin, O'Keefe, and Nayman (1972) which showed that readers in a case study felt that a newspaper was biased against their opinions in a particular story about a race-related protest. At the same time, the journalists in the Martin et al. (1972) case study felt that they covered the race-related protest accurately, perhaps heralding the idea of a "news gap" between audiences and journalists. This will be addressed in more detail under the heading "news gap" (below) in this literature review.

Local and national audience engagement research in the United States in more recent years has tended to focus on how the news "finds me" (Bruns, 2016) more generally as well as on how web metrics related to how audiences engage with news online affects journalists. Scholars in other countries such as Costa Meijer (2019) examining Dutch audiences, and Hess and Waller in Australia (2017) offer helpful general details about how local audiences find value in news content in other English-speaking countries.

## "LOVE THE LOCAL"

From an academic standpoint, when it comes to journalism studies, the idea of "local" journalism seems to have gotten subsumed into the normative idea of community and the public sphere (Habermas, 1989; Mersey, 2009) and journalism's value to democracy (Christians et al. 2009; Kovach and Rosenstiel 2014; Napoli et al. 2017). But Mersey (2009) talks specifically of the value audiences place on local newspapers in their communities. And Usher (2019) and Schmitz Weiss (2015) examine geographical locations and place-based news and how they give audiences a sense of belonging. Another notable exception is Napoli et al. (2018) which examines a representative sample of content from local news outlets across the country by creating a detailed data set of content from a variety of local news outlets (print, radio and television) and operationalizes key variables related to infrastructure, output and performance at local news outlets to offer analysis about local news and local communities.

Usher says that research on local journalism has suffered because a lack of definitional clarity. But Napoli et al. (2017) and others examine both the idea of what it means to be a local news outlet as well as an online local news outlet. In other countries, much of Hess and Waller's work (2017) examines local journalism and how it strengthens communities in Australia. Meijer's (2016, 2020) work examines value in community journalism in the Netherlands. Notable U.K. work is found in the Reuters Institute for Journalism and in Jenkins and Nielsen's (2020) work.

Park (1923) represents the historical theorizing on this, arguing that newspapers and communities must go together. Usher (2019) points to journalism as the "glue" of the community, which seems similar to the public sphere (Habermas 1989) of shared discussions and shared values.

## MODERN-DAY AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT

"Audience engagement" is a buzzword term of the moment in journalism that's being used in an apparent attempt to get previous audience members who followed news to come back to it. It's a somewhat complex term that seems to have different meanings to different groups related to the journalism community. Overall, the term is related to journalism found online and to finding ways to produce more revenue (Nelson, 2018), which would illustrate its economic value. In addition, audience engagement meanings continue to shift (Ibid.). For the purpose of this research study, the fact that researchers now are trying to study "audience engagement" and newsrooms are creating jobs related to "audience engagement" seems to illustrate its strong and still-growing value of trying to connect audiences with newsrooms. All of the discussion and research into the term "audience engagement" also seems to show how valuable the audience commodity is (Dolber, 2016) to advertisers.

Researchers most commonly study online "audience engagement," since that's where the bulk of the news audience has moved. Not only do researchers use quantitative measures such as online clicks and page views, but also more qualitative measures such as interviews to find out what exactly audiences are doing in terms of attending to news, and, in this case, local news.

As one example of the contested meanings of "audience engagement," the company Hearken, which focuses on audience engagement online is unable to show that more audience engagement leads to more revenue other than through anecdotal evidence such as an increase in the number of page views (Nelson 2018). Nelson (2018) says Hearken's staff does not have a public engagement metric to show the impact of its tools and services, because no such metric has industry-wide backing (2018, p. 9). Nelson argues that the company says it has proof of engagement but does not share details. Steensen et. al (2020) suggests this is because creating an

audience engagement theory is an impossible task that includes things like human emotions and the machine-to-machine algorithms that now drive virtually every piece of content that audience members see online. (While online software algorithms are not addressed in any detail in this particular study, they offer a valuable area of future study for local news.)

In another related "audience engagement" example, Facebook - the social media product company now known as Meta - asks users if certain posts are "worth their time." The unspoken thought, here, is that audience have limited time, and so it's valuable. (This is mentioned in the discussion related to practice theory and audience attention as well (Swidler, 2001)). Elsewhere, YouTube (a video product populated by user content) has been known to ask users "how satisfied" they are with YouTube recommendations (Stray, 2021). Stray (2021), Livingstone (2018) and Couldry (2014) talk generally about how to operationalize audience satisfaction by analyzing the number of user keyboard clicks, in the case of Facebook posts and YouTube videos, but also time spent with a particular YouTube video (Stray, 2021, Couldry, 2014). This indirectly points to economic value in that products such as videos on YouTube all have advertising associated with them.

Stray (2021) and Livingston (2018) also examine the data related to the user engagement and satisfaction, including the number of "likes" users to give to posts on Facebook and the number and types of user comments (Livingstone, 2018), among other things. Facebook employees have even created a higher-level measurement of audience satisfaction, saying that user data related to "likes" and comments can be analyzed to give researchers a quantification of "community well-being" (Stray, 2021). While not spelled out in these studies, the idea of "value" appears to be related to number of users, amount of time, "likes"/positive feedback and other similar

measurements. In a related idea, Napoli (2015) shows that social media sites actually are the biggest driver of audience attention to news sites.

Traditional engagement measures for news outlets included circulation numbers, and/or page views, listeners and viewers. This particular study highlights circulation/subscriber numbers because news outlets declined to make their online page views numbers available. Various analytical tools, including Semrush, gave some page view information about the two news outlets, but the numbers were not seen as detailed enough to be considered a worthwhile addition to include in this study.

In another aspect of audience engagement, Royal (2015) calls product management "the new journalism" in that the people in these roles in news organizations often end up making editorial-related decisions to get audiences more engaged with news, including local news. Along the lines of Sonderman's previously mentioned (2016) thinking, Royal points out that the same online environment that offers metrics for any web page also has created the need for people in the newsrooms that support products to integrate data and engagement. In media organizations, then, product management person/or job description often is used to create products such as newsletters, mobile applications, podcasts and other things that maximize user experiences on new forms of technology.

Kosterich (2018) coins the term "news nerds" in her research to theorize about and discuss the particular jobs that product managers do. Kosterich finds that journalists now work in product-manager-related, technology-intensive jobs, which she finds were either separate from newsrooms in the past or non-existent (p. 52). Nationally, Kosterich estimates that about 16 percent of jobs in the newsrooms she studies are "news nerd" jobs, where journalists and other people who work as product managers create newsletters and other online product management

tools. Kosterich finds that many of the "news nerds" find jobs in places like New York, as newsrooms with money try to come up with new ways to engage audiences. However, local news outlets around the country often do not have the time or money to invest in such people or tools. From the perspective of the two local news outlets in the case study area, such tools extend only to putting out an emailed newsletter every day. This is an important area of future research.

## "DISCONNECT"/NEWS GAP BETWEEN JOURNALISTS AND AUDIENCES

Various aspects of the literature studied so far indicate that there has always been some misunderstanding and a "disconnect" between some people in the audience and journalists. Such misunderstandings have included the audience's lack of information or interest in journalistic autonomy and economic health (Pew Research Center, 2018). This is worrisome for researchers in that audiences don't seem to know or care about if the information they read is verified or not, perhaps as illustrated by this study's finding that press releases are a solid part of the content of the online-only news outlet in the case study area, and press releases are written by people whose aim is to serve their clients.

In a related note, journalism studies going back 50 years show that journalists and audiences across the country have thought differently about the value of the news for quite a long time. This literature review calls those differences a "disconnect" or "news gap" between what journalists want to produce and what audiences want to consume (Beaudoin & Thorson, 2002; Boczkowski and Mitchelstein, 2013; Meijer, 2016; Meijer, 2020; Perreault and Stanfield, 2015). Zuniga and Hinsley (2013) call the news gap a "dilemma" for journalists and news managers (p. 927). This idea that audiences value something different than what journalists value has become all the more prescient in recent years as many audiences consume news and information exclusively on social media (Pew Research Center, 2021). Because this idea is so important, I

address it next by examining various related studies that have been done throughout the years regarding journalists and audiences.

In a seminal study on this issue, Voakes (1997) found that journalists valued moral reasoning, while the audience felt like journalists would value outside influences. The value of moral reasoning appears to go back to Bourdieu's (2005) idea of "habitus," where journalistic culture tries to repel outside influences. In the case of Tsfati et al. (2006), journalists valued verification of facts and interpreting the news as most important, while the public rated neutrality and taking the public interest into account as important. The Zuniga and Hinsley (2013) study found that journalists valued their roles of covering stories that they felt should be covered, being objective and getting information to the public quickly, whereas the public just thought it was important to get information quickly. This all leads to Wilnatt et al. (2017) and other more recent studies, which have consistently found that as millions of people search for news and information every day, they grow ever more critical of what they find (Ibid.; Reuters Institute, 2021).

In recent years, scholars and news industry experts alike have grown alarmed by the rapid changes in ways that American news audiences search for and consume local news (Mitchell et al., 2017; Napoli, 2019). Some 48 percent of American adults said they got their news from social media "often" or sometimes" in a 2021 Pew Research Center survey – up from about 20 percent in 2018 (Shearer, 2018, Walker & Matsa, 2021). Another Pew survey showed that about 25 percent of all Americans got their news from traditional newspapers, radio stations or TV stations (Infield, 2020). The most comprehensive survey about news consumption was from 2018 and showed that the largest share of audience still gets its news on television (49 percent)

and on online news sites (33 percent) (Shearer, 2018). This seems to illustrate that audiences now value online news and information and social media information the most.

Perhaps just as disturbing is that the concept of economic "value" of news appears to be recognized and understood differently by the audiences who consume news and by the journalists who produce it. This leads to an additional disconnect between journalists and audiences and the current economic turmoil in the news industry. Indeed, a Pew Research Center survey in late 2018 indicated that 71 percent of people in the United States thought that their local news outlet(s) was doing well financially, even though just 14 percent paid for local news in the previous year by subscribing, donating or becoming a member of a local news outlet (Pew Research Center, 2019).

Certainly, Reese (2021), Pickard (2020), and others suggest that this contradiction – that people feel like the news just exists for free and that they don't have to pay for it – gives scholars an opportunity to think more about "value" as it relates to journalism. In addition, Pickard (2020) and some others use this contradiction to think about how to create fresh and different news models that might be able to provide more value for U.S. residents, including populations that may be disenfranchised or who may not feel like they're involved in the current system.

The "news gap" also relates to how news consumption continue to change because of continued changes in technology – specifically, new social media software and new mobile phone technology. Some of this has been captured so far, here, in the research thread discussion about user-generated content (Bruns, 2007, Dickens et al. 2015). However, user-generated content research does not address how audiences consume this content, or how they value it, other than to say that "millions" do (Reuters Institute, 2021).

Going further down the technology "news gap" thread, Bruns (2016) suggests that researchers can study the news gap online through some social media information such as Twitter APIs to see in real time how audiences do or do not want to consume what journalists find important to produce. He goes on to suggest that this information can be used to help journalists adjust how they work. Bruns details how technology has changed how people access journalism in that the audience now "pulls" the content that it's interested in, rather than receiving content "distributed" by publishers, perhaps the most basic change of the news gap. He talks about engagement as it relates to how users choose to like, share, or comment on an item without saying if they actually have read it. This is a valuable area for me to do further study, as it is too broad of an area for the audience focus group aspect of this particular study.

Bruns (2007) and Meijer & Kormelink (2020) are very similar in terms of talking about all of the ways audiences want to consume news online, which also feeds into Couldry's "media as practice" theorizing discussed in the theory section of this study.

Audiences of all ages seem to value the "shareability" of an item of news as found by Couldry et al. (2010) Boesman et al. (2020) pick up a similar thread of reasoning by discussing the "shareworthiness" of historical information as ritual communication (p. 376). This goes along with older research from Bozkowski et al. (2018) and Napoli (2015) who find that all news consumers, not just local news consumers now believe that if news is important enough, it "will find me". News consumers also believe that they should not have to pay for news (Hamilton, 2011; Ross et al., 2021) raising questions about how the local journalists who report the news can demonstrate the financial value of it so that they can get paid for their work.

As suggested by Bruns in his questioning about if audience members actually value reading news content online, Meijer (2016) also questions if researchers really understand how

audiences consume news. For example, even when people keep news diaries to show how much and what kind of news they consume, they may overestimate the time they spend with particular types of news because they want to make researchers happy (Ibid.). Eye-gaze surveys may show a headline that grabs an audience member's attention, but do not necessarily indicate how that person later uses the knowledge that he/she has consumed.

Usher's (2014) "Making News at the New York Times" examines how the audience – especially audience comments on the New York Times website - is one of the key reasons editors want to keep the news website "fresh" with rewritten stories, showing the value of immediacy for online audiences. One editor in Usher's ethnographic newsroom work (2014) says he constantly checks competitors' web sites as well as comments to look for audience trends on various topics (Usher, 2014, p. 122)

Even more recent history can be instructive as to audience habits. Some scholars now discuss how outside technological influences and a lack of government regulation (Pickard, 2020) changed audience habits related to all news, including local news, in less than two decades. This applies especially to social media influences, where audience members give their information away for free to Google, Facebook and other online search engines and social media sites in return for convenience and entertainment (Plaisance, 2014, p. 59).

Napoli (2011) and Dolber (2016) among others, also offer numerous examples of the ways that audience members create online content in the present day and add brand messages into their own communications platforms, among other things (Dolber, 2016, p. 752). Dolber suggests that this "deprofessionalizes" journalistic work, since audiences feel like they are doing more of the labor themselves that's related to journalism (Ibid.). Dolber also suggests that the audience's "attention economy" now affects news and journalism business models.

This reinforces Couldry's "media as practice" argument. It takes into account how news consumers/ "the audience" attend to news in today's "always on," 24/7, technology-dominated environment (Couldry, 2004; Postill, 2010). What all of this seems to mean is that the audience is always looking for information, but that they don't seem to value one type of information over another (Dolber, 2016).

## NEWS VALUES AND JOURNALISM'S WATCHDOG ROLE

### NEWS VALUES

Scholars traditionally studied news values to examine what was considered to be important or valued by audiences in society. While this study is not meant to go into specific news values and how they may be changing or not, it's helpful to understand what the seven historic news values are as a way to think about who has power to decide what's important in society (Galtung & Ruge, 1965). The original seven values related to newsworthiness are: 1.)impact; 2.timeliness; 3.) proximity; 4.)human interest; 5.) conflict; 6.) the bizarre; 7. celebrity (Ibid.).

Traditional newsroom culture focuses on the idea of news values driving news production (Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Gans, 2010; Tuchman, 1978) or how journalists decide what gets covered. In addition, how journalists decide what gets covered has to do with journalistic autonomy practices used to remain independent from outside influence (Carlson & Usher, 2016; Carlson, 2017; Carlson, 2015b; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2014). Journalists continue to use their power and autonomy as indirect ways of showing the value of their work to society.

But Meijer (2016) says that while journalists feel they have tacit knowledge about their audience (related to the "habitus" of journalistic culture), the audience now does not seem to find value in what the journalists do related to traditional news values. Instead, Meijer suggests

overall that audiences being able to choose and disseminate so much more information means that journalists must think about how they know what they know about audiences, perhaps so they can offer more value to audiences.

Blumler and Cushion (2014) also discuss news values in terms of how sources react to what journalism culture dictates. That is to say, Blumler and Cushion find that politicians try to tailor their messages to perceived news values and routines in newsrooms. Erdal et al. (2019) focus on the news value of "proximity" by suggesting that local news offers a value to its local audience. Hess and Waller (2017) also focus on how the news value of "proximity". They say that the locational element of news affects the audience who consumes it as well as the connections to the community. This relates directly to the power of the actual location to reinforce journalism connections and vice versa. Usher (2019) discusses similar research she has done into geographical importance, or the local "place" as it relates to news.

Harcup (2020) adds to this area of news values research by examining what he calls continuity and follow-up on particular news stories. This idea of news values in the modern day includes how much influence an audience has on a story by deciding how much to share the story on social media and how much to engage with it in other ways. This seems to bring new aspects of Bruns's (2007) "produsage," or audiences changing an repurposing news research and Hermida's (2010) "ambient news" work into play related to news values. Harcup argues that the "exclusivity" of original reporting also could be considered a news value, which seems also to reinforce Bruns's (2007); Hermida's (2010) and others' previous work in this area.

Picard (2006) says that historically journalists were able to create economic value by creating content that was deemed "newsworthy" by audiences. However, Harcup's work seems to indicate that the audience has taken over many of the aspects of distribution, making it

difficult to know if the traditional "news values" apply as strongly anymore as they did when there was one distribution mechanism.

## WATCHDOG ROLE

If journalistic news values are about power, and who holds it in society, it's important to remember that journalists in the United States are the only ones who specifically hold a "watchdog role" over government and society. Even though any citizen could hold that role, in theory, journalists are the only ones who traditionally have in any public and meaningful way. Many scholars have examined the value of journalism's "watchdog role", including Norris (2014) who says journalists question accuracy of the information they're given, question officials, and watch over officials' conduct. Other scholars also have looked to links between journalism's normative values and civic engagement of audiences, including work from Reese (2021) and Blumler and Cushion (2014). While Blumler and Cushion mean this particular work to be for journalism educators, it is instructive to think about it in terms of normative theory as other research often does not address this issue in such a clear way.

Throughout the decades, researchers seemed to take for granted that audiences would value what journalists produce in the way of news dissemination. The idea of journalism's "watchdog" role was an unspoken but important aspect of this type of research in the past. This doesn't seem to be the case anymore. For example, in recent years, scholars such as Reese (2021) and Vos et al. (2018) have examined how the normative value of the institutional role of journalism in a democratic society seems to be eroding among some audiences. Willnat et al. (2019) also suggest that journalism's watchdog role may not be valued by the public anymore. Further, Reese (2021) says that if journalists must earn the right to be heard, citing Carlson's (2017) view of journalistic authority, then Ananny (2018) also calls on the public to have the

"right to hear". Specifically, Ananny is saying that the public might not care enough about news anymore to make the watchdog role as important to society as it once was.

Reese, Christians et al. (2009); Hess and Waller (2017); and McChesney (2004); use similar lines of reasoning to say that if journalists cannot perform the investigative watchdog role required in healthy democracies, it's no use thinking about the value of any of journalism's other related functions. On a more broad scale, Siegelbaum and Thomas (2016) add to McChesney's theorizing by saying that journalistic values are those needed in a democratic society in terms of holding powerful interests to account and serving the information needs of all members of society. Journalists must be ruthless in verifying the information they find before publishing it and in creating a public sphere where all citizens are invited and involved in democracy to ensure the viability of self-governance (Ibid.).

Scholars have theorized that the loss of local news outlets will undermine journalism's "watchdog role" over local government affairs and its ability to inform the public, which may increase corruption (Christians et al., 2009; Gans, 2010; Hess and Waller, 2017). A growing number of empirical studies have demonstrated a link between a lack of news in local communities leading to more institutional corruption (Gao, Lee and Murphy, 2019; Schulhofer-Wohl and Garrido, 2013).

For example, on the political side, recent research links a lack of local news leads to negative findings and corruption in some local communities. Hayes and Lawless (2018) find that a local news outlet's demise leads to lower voter turnout. In another example, the news outlet Politico found that former president Donald Trump did better in areas without local news outlets, often because he was able to control the narrative without any fact-checking (Musgrave and

Nussbaum, 2018). While not spelled out, these examples all seem to point to the normative value of journalism in society also includes its value to keeping democracy strong.

In the business arena, Canta (2018) found that the amount of toxic emissions and overall air pollution went up in a local region when local news reporting went down. Heese et al. (2021) showed that corporate malfeasance went up at publicly traded companies in a particular region when the local newspaper left town. The corporate misconduct research found that journalism's watchdog role seems to have a powerful effect on publicly traded companies, as other variables such as underlying economic conditions, the local fraud environment and the companies' cultures also were also examined and found not to be factors of the misconduct (Ibid.).

How a lack of local news affects society is sure to be a continued area of scholarly interest and research, not only on the political and the business sides but from a news ecosystem and media sociology standpoint. This is another area of normative value, and one that merits further study.

Reese (2021) quotes a 2018 Ipsos poll that he uses to argue that journalism and its related news and knowledge is under attack in American society. In the poll, 85 percent of Americans agree that freedom of the press is essential to American democracy. However, 29 percent of the people overall say that the news media is the enemy of the American people, and of those people 48 percent are Republicans (Reese, 2021; p. 6).

As a former journalist, I generally have found the axiom, "Power corrupts; absolute power corrupts, absolutely," to be true in my work. This leads me to my sub-argument related to both scholarly and industry knowledge and power about journalism's "watchdog role" creating value in society. Journalism's "watchdog role" generally serves as a way to watch for government corruption and wrongdoing, although it applies to any outside "watch," or outside

oversight, over any area of society. While this was previously discussed as it pertains to various studies that appear to show an erosion of journalism's "watchdog role," it's repeated here because of its importance to the value of local journalism.

By connecting the idea of value to the idea of watching over power in American society and who has it, this literature review and this study take on an urgency to our modern-day democratic functions. This watchdog role is especially important in local communities, where elected officials spend millions of dollars with impunity, and often without oversight. All of this discussion about the *value* of local journalism - leads me to three specific research question areas related to journalists, audiences and journalistic content. These three research question areas are formulated to take advantage of both qualitative and quantitative study methods, which can help offer a more detailed picture of the data as a whole:

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

RQ: What does a local news content analysis show in terms of audience values, journalistic values and changes in the ways that audiences and journalists interact with each other or not?

RQ1: What content is in the local news? (How does this quantitative analysis inform or illustrate aspects of the qualitative sets of research questions?)

RQ2: What do audiences value in terms of local news?
RQ2A: Do audience members see what they value in local news content that they follow?
RQ2B: Do audience members search for particular types of local news content?

RQ3: What do local journalists perceive that audiences want and need?
RQ3A: How do local journalist perceptions about audiences influence news production?
RQ3B: Is there a disconnect between what local journalists value and what local audiences value?

## METHOD

This research focuses on a case study of the news environment of Longmont, Colorado, a well-educated population of about 100,000 on the edge of the Denver metro area, according to U.S. Census data. More than 44 percent of people in Longmont 25 years old or older have at least a bachelor's degree (while about 36 percent of people in the United States do, according to U.S. Census data); 91 percent of the people in Longmont have graduated from high school while about 22 percent of people in the United States had a high school diploma, according to 2019 U.S. Census data. In Longmont, Hispanics/Latinos make up about 25 percent of the population. The median household income in 2020 was $79,140 in Longmont, compared to a median household income of $67,521 across the United States, according to census data.

Longmont, Colorado, was chosen as a case study area because of its diversity of local news sources compared to many other cities of similar size.

The Longmont Times-Call is a daily newspaper owned by Prairie Mountain Publishing, which is owned by Digital First Media, which is a subsidiary of Alden Global Capital, a hedge fund based in New York. (Several of the focus group members in the focus group study mentioned this fact, which is why I highlight it.) It is the oldest of the three. After being founded in 1931, its offices were moved from Longmont to Boulder in 2017, where it is consolidated with the Boulder Daily Camera, another daily newspaper owned by Alden. The Lehman family owned and ran the Longmont Times-Call newspaper for more than 50 years. It is considered by members of the community to be the legacy newspaper. Ed and Ruth Lehman sold the paper to Prairie Mountain Publishing in 2011 for an undisclosed sum. Subscriptions are now around 1,200 (previously discussed, Colorado Press Association, 2021). Al Manzi, publisher of Prairie

Mountain Media, declined to give any other information about subscriptions, including daily newsletter subscriptions (Manzi, 2019).

The Canadian company Village Media is the parent company of the Longmont Leader, an online-only news outlet that grew out of the Longmont Observer (more about the Longmont Observer below). Village Media was involved in the community-run, nonprofit news site behind the scenes and took over in 2021 for an undisclosed sum (Jenkins, 2021). Subscribers receive a free newsletter. The online-only news site is free and has local community ads. Village Media CEO Jeff Elgie responded to an initial emailed research query but did not respond to follow-up requests for interviews and has not answered questions about profitability. The online-only news site previously was part of The Compass Experiment, a local news laboratory which was run by the McClatchy newspaper chain and funded through the Google Local News Initiative's Local Experiments Project (Jenkins, 2021). The Longmont Leader acquired all of the assets of the former Longmont Observer for an undisclosed sum, including email lists, donor lists, archives, the website link URL and social media accounts (McClatchy press release, 2020).

The Longmont Leader's online readership was estimated at 80,000 page views per month in 2021 by former general manager Mandy Jenkins. Its self-reported free newsletter subscriber number hovered around 13,600, based on a daily newsletter. News outlet subscription numbers are notoriously unreliable and incomplete, although they can serve as a data point to understand what's happening with news outlet subscriptions in the area in question.

The former Longmont Observer grew out of Longmont Public Media, which was and is funded by the Longmont City Council and includes the community's public access channel (Channel 8). In its first year in operation in 2018, Longmont Public Media was run mostly by volunteers on a budget of about $155,000 (City of Longmont communications; Converse, 2019).

Funding also comes in part from Comcast cable TV tax revenue (Converse, 2019) calculated as 25 percent of the francise fees the city government expected to collect from the Comcast cable company in 2020 and every year thereafter. Longmont Public Media also received the existing city public access broadcast license.

The Longmont Observer's news coverage started when volunteers started broadcasting city government meetings. Longmont Public Media ended its news coverage requirement (Converse, personal communication.)

The rapidly changing business models and structures of these news outlets illustrates, perhaps, some of the turmoil going on with local news startups across the country. Organizers originally said that the Compass Experiment would run for three years before later alluding generally to centralization needs for revenue (Jenkins, 2021) around the two-year mark with an announcement that they would turn the website over to Village Media. No financial details were made available. The Voice of Longmont Facebook page was started and run by a community member.

It seems that this case study area has particular importance in the United States because of its wide variety of news model choices (including Denver metro-area newspapers, radio stations and TV stations not mentioned here as not pertaining specifically to Longmont). And although it has both a higher average income and more educated population than the United States average, it also has a variety of income levels and a diversity of socio-economic backgrounds. For this reason, I also chose to do a mixed-methods study to better address a variety of quantitative and qualitative questions. It seems that it is difficult to capture details of what is happening in the local news arena with solely quantitative or qualitative research. The quantitative content analysis was used to illustrate what content actually is in the case study area.

The two different qualitative methods – focus groups of audience members and non-audience members and interviews of journalists –examine the concept of the "news gap" in the case study area. Audience members were interviewed in focus groups because audience members generally are seen as having a broader range of opinions about local news. In addition, previous research (Gramlich, 2019) showed that audience members were not always likely to know or understand various nuances of journalism, making focus groups a more helpful way of getting more detailed information. For instance, people may feel less embarrassed to admit they don't know something in a focus group setting if they hear that others also do not know that particular thing (Babbie, 2016). Journalists were interviewed one-on-one because journalists are more likely to have similar views because of the "habitus" (Bourdieu, 2005) of their professions.

Also, news audience members and non-news audience members can help each other think about details of how they consume news and through focus group discussion, can elaborate and build off of each other in important ways. For this study, audience members are those who follow local news in one of the community-oriented news publications. Non-news audience members are those who rely on media outlets, including Facebook, Nextdoor, Twitter and Instagram for their understanding of local news in the community.

For journalists, it makes more sense to do interviews for the reasons elaborated under the theory section – the profession is one where people have similar professional views. Additionally, from a research perspective, journalists in one local news outlet might feel competitive against another news outlet and might not be as likely to discuss things in a group as individual journalists might share individually in interviews.

In qualitative research, one generally can find more rich meaning of the social world through interviews and observation (Babbie, 2016; Miles, Huberman and Saldana, 2020) though

these methods do sacrifice generalizability. Qualitative field research is especially helpful in examining human attitudes and behaviors (Babbie, 2016). In this case, audience attitudes toward both local and national news appear to be changing so rapidly (Reese, 2021) that it makes sense to ask more open-ended questions of audience members.

This study also benefits from a quantitative content analysis of local news to better understand how local news outlets actually cover their communities, as well as similarities and differences between the legacy news outlet – the Longmont Times-Call – and a less than 5-year-old startup online news outlet – the Longmont Leader. Triangulation of data from these pieces of study are expected to offer insights into how local journalists think about news and news values, and how that might differ from the news content they produce. The data also can indicate how news might better engage non-audience members. As such, the qualitative data offered some insights into how audiences and journalists operated. The quantitative data illustrated more detail about journalistic production, which amplified some key findings of what the qualitative information showed from the journalist interviews.

IRB research approval for the qualitative focus group study came from the University of Colorado Boulder (protocol number 20-0542). IRB research approval for the qualitative journalist interviews study also came from the University of Colorado Boulder (protocol number 22-0228).

## METHOD - CONTENT ANALYSIS

RQ: What does a local news content analysis show in terms of audience values, journalistic values and changes in the ways that audiences and journalists interact with each other or not?

RQ1: What content is in the local news? (How does this content inform or illustrate aspects of the qualitative research questions?)

These research questions benefit from a quantitative content analysis of the local news outlet publications to examine if what is in the news is similar or different to what the two groups of people (audiences and journalists) talk about. Content analysis is a more unobtrusive way to analyze interactions (Babbie, 2016) than focus group interviews and direct interviews. Also, the content can be statistically analyzed to give a more rich picture to this study.

The local news content (N=426) can be examined not only to find out what the audience values and what journalists value, but also to see if content from the legacy newspaper, the Longmont Times-Call, emphasizes different values than the content of the online-only news outlet, the Longmont Leader. This study used statistical tests to yield several interesting findings, which will be discussed more in the content analysis – findings section.

When thinking about how to triangulate content analysis data with focus group data and journalist interview data, this study used content analysis findings to inform some focus group discussion about how local news audience consumption influences news production (RQ2) if it does. As it turns out, findings from the content analysis and the focus groups indirectly yielded additional findings, addressed more in the focus group findings section.

When thinking about how to triangulate data between the content analysis and journalist interviews, I used content data to help inform my one-on-one interviews with journalists. Since I argue that journalists use the "habitus" (Bourdieu (2005)) of journalistic culture and professionalism to try to remain free of outside influence (RQ3), content analysis data was used to reinforce those concepts. These findings are addressed more in the journalists – findings section. All in all, findings from the three research questions was triangulated to come up with a more detailed whole, which is found in the discussion sections for each set of research questions.

Neuendorf's (2019) discussion about content analysis serves as a framework to explain why this is the best method to address RQ and RQ1. She suggests using content analysis as a scientific, quantitative method that the researcher can use to measure types of variables. In this case, I used mostly nominal variables and compared the content from each news outlet in those variables. She goes on to say that qualitative analysis of content should be discussed more as other forms of analysis rather than as true content analysis. Researchers must pay attention to objectivity-intersubjectivity, a priori design, reliability, validity, generalizability, replicability, and hypothesis testing (p. 10), according to Neuendorf, all of which will be addressed in a later section of this paper.

Babbie (2016) considers content analysis to be a form of research that yields insights greater than the whole. This particular study would be considered cross-sectional because it is intended to measure one phenomenon at one point in time. This helps to amplify specific areas and to be the triangulation point for data collected from the other two studies.

In general, questions of reliability and validity should be considered before starting any research project. Reliability generally is the idea that any researcher can collect the same data every time they observe the same phenomenon. Researchers generally can find the same results every time they start off with the same inputs (Babbie, 2016). Validity is the idea that the researcher is in fact measuring the concept he or she intended to measure in the research design (Ibid.). Both are important to understanding the following potential problems.

In qualitative research studies, data may be hard to replicate. As an example, one focus group – dominated by one or two participants in the group - may lead a researcher in one direction, while another focus group may offer a slightly different picture. A similar problem with data quality can happen with interviewing. Larger sample sizes and doing both testing and retesting

can be helpful as ways to mitigate these problems. That is to say, the more times you're able to get similar data from coding the themes related to focus group events or from coding individual interviews, and the more events or interviews you're able to do, the more you can mitigate questions of both reliability and validity (Babbie, 2016).

In addition, qualitative research issues can be mitigated by the researcher discussing the specific measures of quality used to think about the research design (Tracy 2010). On the qualitative side, for example, in the area of both focus groups and interviews, Tracy (2010) suggests using eight key markers of quality as "best practices" that are recognized by other qualitative researchers as frameworks to think about what makes a study worthwhile. In short, the quality measures illustrate the core values for the qualitative research. The eight measures are: (a) worthy topic, (b) rich rigor, (c) sincerity, (d) credibility, (e) resonance, (f) significant contribution, (g) ethics, and (h) meaningful coherence (2010). I discuss various aspects of these measures as they relate to the findings of my study.

Quality measures are designed to offset the potential problems of reliability and validity related to qualitative research. And to highlight perhaps the most important value of "quality" on Tracy's (2010) list, researchers must always be self-reflexive in their thinking about why they choose the items that they do in terms of questions, topics and the like. Researchers are encouraged to be frank about strengths and shortcomings of research in self-reflexivity papers and researcher positionality statements, which are important to any research. These are most often discussed in terms of ethnography (Pillow, 2003), but they also seem to fit here at least briefly, given that both focus groups and interviews are so reliant on a moderator who guides the research questions and that any moderator brings his or her own background and biases to the table. Corlett and Mavin (2019) suggest that researchers should acknowledge that social reality is

constructed, and that any phenomena we study are seen through our ontological and epistemological viewpoints. Further, they say it's important to acknowledge that how we do our research affects the outcomes of that research, showing the importance of recognizing our backgrounds. In other places of this paper, I have pointed to my background and previous career as a journalist, which gives me insights some other academic researchers might not have but also makes me more reliant on Tracy's (2010) self-reflexivity standards.

I chose four criteria for my audience focus group study as suggested by Tracy (2010): the worthiness of my topic, rich rigor, sincerity and credibility. I feel this topic is worthy particularly because of its importance to democracy in the United States. I used "rich rigor" to amplify my study in terms of data and time in the field, among other things (Tracy, 2010, p. 840). My project showed rich rigor in part through the number of participants it included (Miles, Huberman & Saldana, 2020; Lindlof & Taylor, 2019). I measured "sincerity" through the transparency I used to explain my process. It's also important as a way to talk about self-reflexivity of any potential biases I have. This is crucial to mention during the current national and often local public atmosphere of distrust of news outlets and rampant conspiracy theories with no factual basis. Because I was a former journalist, I identified myself as such to my focus groups. I also gave them some other background about me and my study – that I believe journalists are following the cultural measures of "habitus" to stay independent of outside influence – and that that also was a key research area of my study.

Credibility was measured in part through member-checking (Tracy, 2010) – specifically, showing information to participants and asking them to confirm that the transcript I recorded of the interviews captured everything they wanted to say. This gave me the chance to ask participants if they had any other thoughts on the topic, which helped amplify various messages

and meanings that came out in the focus group sessions that I might not otherwise have caught as an important theme or themes. Credibility is of the utmost importance as a way to build trust with one's audience (in academia and in journalism).

Tracy (2010) suggests that a worthy topic is one that is relevant, timely, significant and interesting. Because I did participant observation at Longmont Public Media for more than a year for a separate study, and because I knew people who moved from that organization to the newly created Longmont Leader, I used my background knowledge to create this more detailed study. In addition, I worked at the Longmont Times-Call many years ago, which gave me insight into how traditional, "legacy" newsrooms operate. Having this firsthand knowledge gave me additional information to help understand some of the tensions and changes now going on in these and similar newsrooms around Colorado and across the United States to be able to think about both journalists and audiences.

The significance of focus group interviews with audience members cannot be underestimated in this time period of flux related to national elections and the worldwide pandemic (Teti et al., 2020). With this in mind, I suggested the standard to be used for the "worthy topic" criteria is interest among the focus group participants (how many people are willing to participate in focus groups), as well as future interest from academic conferences and journals.

A. Rich rigor

Tracy suggests that "rich rigor" in a study includes theoretical constructs, data and time in the field, the sample size, the context, and the data collection and analysis process (2010). Certainly, the time I already have spent with the news outlets in question shows my commitment to the time in the field. In the time of COVID-19, I believe that the number of participants I was

able to get in my focus groups, as well as the "non-news" audience members showed that it was possible to recruit audience members from a local community as long as I created a way for them to interact with each other remotely, which was through the Zoom videoconferencing sessions. I created a well-researched depth of interview data to serve as an additional standard of the worthy topic and the rigor with which I approach the study.

Generally, Teti et al. (2020) tell new researchers that collecting data in the time of COVID-19 is not about the numbers. Instead, it's about creating a thesis statement that makes sense, based on the amount of data collected, no matter how different it might be than what would be collected were researchers not all in a "stay at home" situation. With this in mind, I collected enough data from my focus group participants to be able to tell a story about why my themes make sense. (Teti et al., 2020).

B. Sincerity

Sincerity, at its core, is about transparency, according to Tracy (2010). She suggests that the conscientious researcher create an audit trail, where notes are audited to discuss how decisions were made in the study. Sincerity also is about self-reflexivity – or the subjective values, biases and inclinations that researchers bring to the table when they start a research project. The researcher should discuss the context of the study, the level of participation and immersion in the interviews and fieldnote practices, according to Tracy (2010) Lindlof and Taylor (2019) and others. Certainly, this brings up the wish to provide all notes as an appendix to a paper, to explain all decisions and to discuss all challenges of the research. In academia, and in much of life, however, research seems more valuable if it is presented in "bite-size chunks," which are easier to consume. Reams of pages of fieldnotes tacked to the end of a paper might

produce the opposite effect of irritation in reviewers, rather than the intended effect of transparency.

For this reason, it is important to carefully choose a standard that will resonate with reviewers. Reflexivity researcher memos might be one way to get at issues of sincerity, especially researcher values and biases. Allen (2007) suggests that white people often do not think of their racial identity as an issue, which can serve as a benchmark for white privilege. In the case of the people of the Longmont community, since one-fourth of the community is Latinx, according to the U.S. Census data, it's important to make sure that focus groups include at least some of that population or to explain why the focus groups might not include them. I was not able to recruit any Latinx audience members because none of them responded to my recruitment efforts, despite the broad reach that I tried to incorporate as well as the amount of time I spent with the project. As a result, I tried to seek out a community or communities of Latinx members, and found the EL PASO group of parents who work with area schools where their students attend. Please see more detail about the EL PASO group under areas of future research.

C. Credibility

Finally, Tracy (2010) calls for the credibility and plausibility of the research findings to be marked by thick description in which the researcher shows rather than tells how the findings might affect readers in ways that engage them.

Building on my "sincerity" criteria, which calls for a discussion about the Latinx population in Longmont, Tracy says that credibility also calls for "multivocality," (2010, p. 844) in which social action is analyzed from the participants' point of view (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019). Researchers should be aware of all cultural differences between themselves and participants, which can create very different meanings in the field (Tracy, 2010). In this particular study,

recruitment shows that age variability is missing. Industry data shows older people are more likely to follow traditional methods of news dissemination and recruitment, while younger people are more likely to get news and information from social media.

Researchers also should use triangulation methods to give more credibility or "weight" to data. In other words, if two or more data sources agree with each other, it helps lend credibility to the study (Tracy, 2010).

On the quantitative side, in content analysis, researchers can work to achieve validity through a similar, but completely different set of steps, according to Macnamara (2005) since, in this case, we're using a more numerical method to help us achieve validity. Content analysis researchers generally start their data analysis by carefully reading aspects the relevant content and selecting the sample to be analyzed, according to Macnamara. In terms of reliability, both Neuendorf, (2019) and Macnamara (2005) say researchers generally can find reliability from using a large enough sample of content and intercoder reliability testing. In this particular study, the content came from a constructed two-week period in the fall of 2021, which included a local election period. The constructed two-week period started on Sunday, Aug. 1, 2021, and ended Saturday, Nov. 13, 2021. While the Longmont Times-Call is a printed newspaper, its "e-edition" is an exact replica found online.

Two coders used a modified codebook template with general questions related to news content. The two coders then worked on the intercoder reliability to make sure that the codebook was clear. Intercoder reliability is used to show that this study, and the content analysis work in it, can be easily replicated. First, the two coders coded Variable 1 (Type of story byline: Longmont Times-Call, Longmont Leader, Longmont Public Media, other local news organization, other non-local news organization, other) and Variable 2 (Evidence of press release

reporting: no evidence of press release in story, some use of press release materials, reprinted press release) for a list of 20 randomly chosen stories (10 from each news outlet) from a time period before the two constructed two-week time period. Because of the level of detail in the codebook questions, the two coders then coded 20 additional stories (10 from each news outlet) for two more variables:

Variable 3 (V3): Primary topic (local government, state government, national government, schools/students, entertainment/arts, business, high school/prep sports, regional/national sports (CU, Broncos, etc.), other (please specify) and Variable 4 (V4): Percent of each local story specifically devoted to Longmont (measured by counting the number of paragraphs that mention Longmont or an institution in Longmont such as the Saint Vrain School District, count the total number of paragraphs in each story, do the math to get the percent.

For a general idea about the results, all key variables in the codebook include:

1. Byline
2. Press release reporting
3. Type of story
4. Primary topic
5. Number of sentences with quotes
6. Number of sentences
7. Number of words
8. Photos/graphics
9. Photo source
10. Story placement

11. Proportion of local reporting

For the purposes of the content analysis, additional details were added to the codebook as a result of the intercoder reliability process, including details about placement/prominence of online stories. (The codebook is found in the Appendix section, and a complete and detailed list of all intercoder reliability measures and questions, as well as links to all of the content, which was all found online, are available on request.)

Neuendorf (2019) says that only by designing and documenting the procedures of the study carefully can researchers make replication possible. Those documented procedures become the codebook for the study, and the codebook is used to measure intercoder reliability. Coders document their analysis using numbers, and various statistical coefficients are used to assess the level of agreement between their decisions while also correcting the level of agreement for expected random agreement (Neuendorf, 2019).

In addition, in content analysis, researchers can use one of several statistics, including Krippendorff's alpha (2004) to evaluate intercoder reliability. Krippendorff's alpha is a mathematical measure of the level of agreement between coders' decisions about the content analysis of the study (2004). Neuendorf (2019) and other scholars suggest Krippendorff's alpha should be at the .80 level to be considered reliable and can be considered tentative at .67.

Scholars suggest a few more ways to increase reliability and validity in content analysis studies. In addition to creating a codebook, the most important step, scholars emphasize that a good design and the best choice of methodology is the key to valid and reliable studies (Babbie, 2016; Lindlof and Taylor, 2019; Neuendorf, 2019). On both the qualitative and quantitative side,

researchers can do “pilot” tests, or preliminary testing with smaller groups of participants, of questions to inform both the rigor of studies as well as their methodologies.

In the content analysis, two coders familiarized themselves with the codebook and discussed possible areas of difference before doing coding on a set of data put together to determine intercoder reliability. To calculate the intercoder reliability, the two coders coded the set of data, which was a random subsample of content from the two news outlets. Freelon’s methods (2022) for intercoder reliability were used to calculate Krippendorff’s alpha (please see below for the output table from Freelon’s ReCal web page). For V1 (type of byline), the Krippendorff’s alpha was 100 percent. For V2 (evidence of press release reporting), the Krippendorff’s alpha was .929 percent. For V3 (type of news story), the Krippendorff’s alpha was .683 percent. For V4 (evidence of the word “Longmont”), the Krippendorff’s alpha was .947 percent. The output chart from these calculations are found in the table (below), and the intercoder reliability Excel spreadsheets are available on request.

ReCal 0.1 Alpha for 2 Coders
results for file "ICRLocalnewscontentanalysisrecal071522.csv"

| | |
|---|---|
| File size: | 392 bytes |
| N columns: | 8 |
| N variables: | 4 |
| N coders per variable: | 2 |

| | Percent Agreement | Scott's Pi | Cohen's Kappa | Krippendorff's Alpha (nominal) | N Agreements | N Disagreements | N Cases | N Decisions |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Variable 1 (cols 1 & 2) | 100% | 1 | 1 | 1 | 23 | 0 | 23 | 46 |
| Variable 2 (cols 3 & 4) | 95.7% | 0.927 | 0.927 | 0.929 | 22 | 1 | 23 | 46 |
| Variable 3 (cols 5 & 6) | 73.9% | 0.676 | 0.681 | 0.683 | 17 | 6 | 23 | 46 |
| Variable 4 (cols 7 & 8) | 95.7% | 0.946 | 0.946 | 0.947 | 22 | 1 | 23 | 46 |

Export Results to CSV (what's this?)

Select another CSV file for reliability calculation below:

Choose File no file selected Calculate Reliability

Save results history (what's this?)

**Disclaimer:** This application is provided for educational purposes only. Its author assumes no responsibility for the accuracy of the results above. You are advised to verify all reliability figures with an independent authority (e.g. a calculator) before incorporating them into any publication or presentation. If you have any questions, comments, or suggestions regarding ReCal, please send them to deen at dfreelon dot org.

## METHOD - FOCUS GROUPS

While focus groups have long been associated with market research, communication scholars Robert Merton and Paul Lazarsfeld developed the original focus group methodology in their seminal studies of communication and media in the 1940s (McCollough et al. 2017, p. 104). In the modern day, online data tools may be more prevalent, including analytics and other metrics for tracking audience behavior (see the previous discussion of Boczkowski and Mitchelstein, 2013). However, these metrics do not get to the heart of why audiences do what they do (McCollough et al. 2017). For the purposes of this study about what audiences value, it's important to ask them about their attitudes and beliefs. What do they want and why? Do they perceive that they need to follow local news to participate in a democracy, as Kovach and Rosenstiel (2014) and others suggest? McCollough et al. (2017) also ask about audience practices – their habits and routines – to understand in more detail what's going on in the local news environment. This is especially important as consumption patterns change rapidly.

In more recent times, McCollough et al. (2017) have suggested that not only can audience focus groups help researchers understand what lies behind audience behavior, the researchers also have a chance to capture the interactions between group members that are not available in one-on-one interviews or surveys. This helps introduce the idea of complexity to the research, which Meijer (2016) suggests is the best way to address previously unknown aspects of the value of journalism to audiences. Further, using not only focus groups but triangulating focus group data with other research strategies helps address the complexity of the rapid change in audience habits (2016)

For RQ2, which explores what audiences value and what they search for, this study offers findings from focus group research with local community members who say what they value about the news they follow or why they don't value local news, if they say that they don't follow it.

Focus group members were recruited through the Longmont Leader, the Longmont Times-Call, Longmont Public Media, and the Voice of Longmont Facebook page. Academic research operated differently during the COVID-19 pandemic. When it came to recruiting audiences during the pandemic, Wenzel and Crittenden (2021) suggested that scholars trying to recruit local news focus groups should be ready to use smaller numbers of group members than the optimum focus group number of six to 12 suggested by Lindlof and Taylor (2019). There was a benefit to the smaller groups, however, since smaller groups have more interaction between participants, which can help researchers better explore trust in local news and community resilience (Wenzel and Crittenden, 2021).

Because of the social distancing issues related to the COVID-19 pandemic, I held three focus group on Zoom, a videoconferencing software used by the University of Colorado Boulder (and across the United States). The first two groups were comprised of local news audience members and the third was comprised of non-audience members. I used snowball sampling (Babbie, 2016) with initial group members to try to get a representative and diverse group of people from various ages and income levels in the community. McCollough et al. (2017) suggest that local news focus groups give participants ways to talk openly about why they do or do not follow news and other sources of information available to them without judgment. Because the people are in groups, they share more detail (Ibid.) about the ways they try to get their news and information needs met.

The first two focus groups, which were with news audience members, were conducted in 2020 and the third, with non-news audience members was done in 2022. For the initial part of the study, I recruited two virtual focus groups online of 15 people total consisting of males and females ranging in age from 42 to 77. I was not able to gather more detailed socio-economic data about the first round of focus group members. In spring 2022, I recruited one more focus group of people who say they do not follow any news at all – four people ranging in age from 50 to 62.

Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2020), suggest that people's lived experiences can help researchers locate the meanings related to structures of their lives and the social world around them (p. 8), which makes focus groups the best qualitative method for this study.

In the first round of focus group research, I sent consent forms to participants in advance and offered them the option to use pseudonyms to follow IRB protocols. I offered four online Zoom video conferencing sessions at different times of day and different days of the week to generate as much response as possible. In the second part of the study in 2022, I recruited four new participants from the members of Longmont Public Media. I also sent consent forms to them and offered them the option to use pseudonyms to follow IRB protocols. I held one online Zoom video conferencing session to maintain consistency with the two initial focus groups.

In all, the 19 participants were involved in three separate Zoom sessions from which I created written transcripts. I coded the transcripts for themes, using the Glaser and Strauss (1967) constant comparison model of grounded theory. I also used triangulation methods to give "weight" to my data by indicating how many focus group participants agreed on each point. Tracy (2010) suggests that showing your work in such a way helps lend credibility to a study. After holding the focus group sessions, I followed up with each participant individually to perform a member-checking function (Tracy, 2010) about their general comments made during

the group portion of the study. This yielded additional insight and helped give me more credibility with participants (Tracy, 2010).

In addition, it's important to be self-reflexive in thinking about how my background and attitudes affected the audience focus group members and the journalists during data collection, and how what was going on with those two groups affected me. This self-reflexivity is important to highlight as I explain how I thought about the rationale for doing audience focus groups and journalist interviews. Such qualitative methods are dependent on stories and storytelling (Taylor, 2017), which fits in with my skills as a former journalist. Lindlof and Taylor indicate that scholars are "licensed to story," (2019) (both similar and different to how journalists work) which in this case might also mean that I understand more of the aspects of similarity between journalist and scholar backgrounds.

However, recruiting and interviewing focus groups who consume news and information from these particular three news outlets presented unique challenges during the current COVID-19 pandemic, which is why I decided to hold the focus groups online rather than in person. (Ravitch, 2020). Moving the research online creates additional validity and ethical issues (Ibid.), but focus group participants benefitted from group interaction, and the different perspectives and experiences of the participants as they compare information among themselves (Morgan & Hoffman, 2018). Airoldi suggests that, "social interaction is always enacted in the context of a social situation," (2018). My interview guide includes open-ended questions based on Couldry's "media as practice" theorizing (2004). Please see the APPENDIX at the end for the interview guide questions.

When it comes generally to field notes and participant observation, I used work from both Lindlof and Taylor (2019) and Miles, Huberman and Saldana (2020) to think about how to act as a "member of the scene" online. I recorded the online Zoom sessions of interviews with the participants' permission and received an automatically generated transcript of the sessions from the university. Because Zoom videoconferencing software is used by the university, the transcription service is offered for free to university researchers. I also took notes during the focus group sessions. I coded the printed interviews for key words to suggest themes in the sessions.

RQ2: What do audiences value in terms of local news?
RQ2A: Do audience members see what they value in local news content that they follow?
RQ2B: Do audience members search for particular types of local news content?

Babbie suggests that focus groups generally are used for exploratory studies, are generally six to 10 people and are seen as a convenience sample, since it's hard to get a population for them through probability sampling methods. Focus group research often is used to inform quantitative surveys as well as the depth of understanding they give to the research that's not available through a survey (Babbie, 2016; Lindlof and Taylor, 2019).

At their heart, focus groups are interviews, and, as such, they have been used in communication research for decades (Babbie, 2016; Lindlof and Taylor, 2019). Babbie suggests that they have high face validity, which might be helpful to when constructing questions related to Couldry's theorizing about "media as practice" (2004). "Media as practice" appears to ascribe

value to local news by examining three areas of audience behavior related to local news. So in this case, focus group questions center on Couldry's three topic areas of:

1. Practices – ask focus group participants about their routines related to following local news;
2. Discourse – ask focus group participants about the system of meanings they attach to media (Couldry suggests that this includes symbols and signs; this could be operationalized as how people "like" and "share" stories online);
3. Principles of ordering – ask focus group participants whether and how they talk to others about what they do with local news.

In more detail, while Lindlof and Taylor (2019) suggest that focus groups are a strong method to use for academic research, McCollough et al. (2018) say that scholars sometimes shun this approach because of its association with market research. This will be addressed in more detail in the section about data quality and the following discussion about triangulation of data.

Despite their awareness of how others might perceive the focus group method, McCollough et al. 2017 laud it as a valuable tool to study group interactions – especially among news audiences. They point to its capability to get audience participants to talk about their social practices within an interactive group setting. Morgan and Hoffman (2018) build on this by suggesting that participants in focus groups often compare information among themselves, yielding a bit more detail to researchers than computer metrics and quantitative studies can offer. In all, Babbie, 2016; Lindlof and Taylor, 2019; McCollough et al. (2017); and Morgan and Hoffman (2018) all tout the benefits of having a socially oriented research method that's able to

capture real-life data. In addition, the focus groups method offers another aspect of the "community" orientation important to this particular news organization research. When thinking about participants, it includes, neighbors, friends and even family members who can provide a more broad picture of civic thought (McCollough et al. 2018). Other researchers have used focus groups to get a sense of the participants' general news consumption, which is the undertone of this study. "Pre-questions" can be asked of focus groups to add detail and consistency to a particular session.

Focus group research data, at its heart, is coded like interviews are, so the data analysis will be addressed in more detail in the next section. Because of the current turmoil in the news industry, a focus group offers the "group effect" (Lindlof and Taylor, 2019), which can produce data and insights that would be less accessible without the interaction found in a group. In the first round of the focus group study, I saw this as group members came up with information that I hadn't asked about and offered help to each other in ways that I had not expected.

Lindlof and Taylor (2019) also suggest that group members can have "argumentative interactions" that might yield greater insight into the research. Lindlof and Taylor call it a period when group members might have "cleavages of opinion or clashing worldviews," which I think might potentially be very helpful to my research and to better understanding audience views. As such, a focus group also is a useful "social laboratory" for studying not only how the participants share their thoughts about local news, but also how they may be willing to share or not share their thoughts with others generally, which would illustrate how strongly people still feel a sense of community with others in a mid-size city in the United States during a pandemic (McCollough et al., 2018).

## METHOD - INTERVIEWS

RQ3: How do local journalists perceive what audiences want and need?

RQ3A: How do local journalist perceptions about audience influence news production?

RQ3B: Is there a disconnect between what local journalists value and what local audiences value?

Both Babbie (2016) and Lindlof and Taylor (2019) suggest that one-on-one (narrative) interviews are used to build rapport so that people feel comfortable telling their stories. The interviewer can make a guide that is non-threatening and conversational, using semi-structured questions to set the tone and context similar to that of a focus group interview.

This happens through visual cues and messages of support from the interviewer, suggesting that interviews be done in person rather than through video-conferencing software. Effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on social science research – especially qualitative research such as interviews - will be addressed at the end of this paper. In general, recruiting and interviewing focus groups and interviewees who either consume or produce local news presents unique challenges during the current COVID-19 pandemic.

Researchers can use the lived experiences of the interviewees to draw a rich picture of the topic at hand. Researchers can take field notes, record interviews and transcribe the notes before moving to the analyzing and interpretation phase. If interviewing online or in person, interviewers should ask interviewees for permission for recording.

When analyzing and interpreting both focus group data and interview data, researchers use the constant comparative method, which later became known as the grounded theory method (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) in which one looks for themes and then groups them together to look for patterns. (Lindlof and Taylor, 2019; Miles, Huberman and Saldana, 2020). If possible, it's

important to do follow-up interviews to confirm the themes, which is a "member check" that helps the researcher understand better what's happening in the participants' minds.

Interviews give individual participants the ability to say things they might not be willing to say in a group of colleagues or other community members. These respondent interviews give the researcher the capability to ask a variety of open-ended questions and to put the subject at ease. They also give the researcher the capability to make additional observations about the setting where the interview takes place, which ideally is the person's place of work or some other location with meaning to the interview subject.

For this study, I interviewed nine journalists from the two main local news outlets in Longmont – the Longmont Times-Call and the Longmont Leader. While nine people sounds like a small number to illustrate aspects of news outlets in a community with a population of about 100,000, it's actually almost all of the journalists who operate in the community every day. I interviewed an editor from each news outlet, a photographer who works for the Longmont Times-Call and the Daily Camera (there is no assigned photographer to the Times-Call, and there is no journalistic photographer per se at the Longmont Leader.) Among the local journalists, only the Times-Call editor (John Vahlenkamp) and the Prairie Mountain Media photographer Matt Jonas had worked in their jobs longer than five years, with two of the last years being during a pandemic in which many people worked remotely. This, perhaps, raises the indirect question about how much overall "habitus" (Bourdieu, 2005) or newsroom culture can exist at these local news organizations. Of note was one of the journalists Georgia Worrell at the Longmont Leader, who was an intern and then started her job during the pandemic. Please see the Appendix section at the end of this study for a full list of interviewed journalists. One journalist asked to be identified by a pseudonym, which is reflected in the list.

Journalists were asked open-ended questions (Lindlof and Taylor, 2019) about their routines and practices as those relate to their professional lives (as just one aspect of a way to operationalize Bourdieu's "rules of the game" in field theory (2005)). This yielded greater insight into how the journalists might respond or not respond to the audience routines and practices of Couldry's "media as practice" theorizing related to practice theory as well as to the assumptions that journalists make about audiences. This represents a new aspect or thread of academic research, since researchers to date seem to have examined journalistic "habitus" (Bourdieu, 2005) more generally as an issue of journalistic boundaries. Specifically, the research thread seems to be about practices journalists use to be autonomous and to remain independent from outside influence (Carlson & Usher, 2016; Carlson, 2017; Carlson, 2015b; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2014.) In a related thread, traditional newsroom culture focuses on the idea of news values driving news production (Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Gans, 2010; Tuchman, 1978) or how journalists decide what gets covered.

As discussed in the literature review, and repeated here again to explain journalist interview findings, Bourdieu's field theory (2005) helps explain why the concept of journalistic autonomy helps researchers examine all aspects of journalism. Field theory says that a journalistic field is an independent social universe with its own laws of functioning and power dynamics (Bourdieu, 2005). Fields have their own "doxa" or systems of "unspoken, unquestioned, taken-for-granted, understanding of the news game and the basic beliefs guiding journalistic practice" (Tandoc, 2014). This idea highlights the inherent tension in the discussion about journalists and audiences, helping to explain why triangulation between the three research questions yielded greater insights than individual studies of audiences and/or journalists using quantitative or qualitative methods.

Social and cultural capital are important to the successful operation of the field, including things like credentials, expertise and networks of resources where journalists can mobilize power and resources (Bourdieu 2005). While this also was discussed previously in the literature review, it's helpful for researchers to use these thoughts to operationalize key terms in interview questions. For example, journalist interviews included questions about whether and how audience analytics and comments are used in newsrooms and whether and how processes have changed. Questions also included whether and how the journalist's news outlet holds community events and whether and how processes have changed. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, follow-up questions examined how the news outlet goes about generating new subscribers and advertising. Specifically, journalists were asked if there is a "wall" between the news side of the operation and the advertising side of the operation, and if anything about the "wall" has changed over the past several years.

## RESEARCH DURING COVID

Trying to recruit and interview focus group members who consume news and information presents unique challenges during the current COVID-19 pandemic. Public figures, including university administrators, have suggested that gathering information in person increases risk, which makes a pivot to online interviews seem like a better option (Ravitch, 2020). Moving data online can create additional validity and ethical issues, which is addressed generally in my research design by adding aspects of Tracy's (2010) self-reflection processes. It's sometimes easier for the researcher to talk to focus group participants by Zoom and to interview participants by phone.

Morgan and Hoffman (2018) remind us that focus group research benefits from group interaction and the different perspectives and experiences of the participants as they compare information among themselves (repeated here to discuss COVID issues). I recruited focus group participants and separated them into three different groups of news consumers. I interviewed them in the three groups on Zoom, a video-conferencing software. As Airoldi says, amplifying Morgan and Hoffman's teachings, "social interaction is always enacted in the context of a social situation," (2018). Airoldi quotes from the historical work of the social scientist Erving Goffman (1964) about the dynamics of group interaction, which highlights just how key the discussion is among group members to the focus group research process.

After more than two years living with the pandemic, both researchers and participants seem open to the idea of Web-based focus groups, which offer an interesting and continually evolving opportunity to gather data. Online focus groups can take the shape of synchronous or asynchronous video and/or text (Morgan and Hoffman, 2018). Synchronous methods allow participants to join together at a pre-specified time for "real-time" interaction using text-based chat rooms, instant messenger protocols, and videoconferencing, especially on Zoom videoconferencing software. Text, photos and links are pasted into the "chat" function of the Zoom software to add meaning to the discussion. Participants also upload text, photos and links into the chat, which can help increase involvement among various members of the group.

## FINDINGS/DISCUSSION – CONTENT ANALYSIS

Thecontent analysis results address two of the study's research questions:

RQ: What content is in the local news? (based on the quantitative content analysis)

RQ1: What does the quantitative content analysis show in terms of audience values, journalistic values and the ways audiences and journalists interact with each other?

The findings in this study come from testing similarities and differences in content between the traditional, legacy news outlet, the Longmont Times-Call, and the 3-year-old online news outlet, the Longmont Leader. This study mainly uses the crosstabs test on the variables in the data set (N=426) to compare the Longmont Times-Call content to the Longmont Leader content. This study also uses a few T-test tests to find more detail about the byline variable, which measures whether the story was written by a staff writer or someone else. These tests can be used as a measure of what the news outlets choose to emphasize and invest their own resources in, regarding content.

First, I did intercoder reliability testing for two people coding the variables in the local news content codebook. (Please see previous discussion under "method".) Once the rest of the content was coded, I ran frequency tests for variables in the local news content codebook to get more details about various aspects of the data. The frequency tests also helped me examine the data in preparation for creating charts related to basic findings. Specifically, I ran frequency tests for the mean, median and standard deviation tests in SPSS statistical software for all of my local news content codebook variables. The codebook is available as Appendix 3 at the end of this study.

Broken out by variable, my codebook data showed:

A. In terms of frequencies for the codebook, the day of the week that had the highest number of pieces of content/stories was Saturday (M=4.32, SD=1.784). Of the total number of pieces of

content/stories, 19.7 percent of them ran on a Saturday. The next highest total number of pieces of content/stories was on Wednesday at 18.4 percent (M=4.32, SD=1.784). The next highest number of pieces of content/stories was Friday at 17.3 percent; followed by Thursday at 15.6 percent; Sunday at 11.9 percent; Tuesday at 9.5 percent; and Monday at 7.6 percent.

While this aspect of value is not covered in the literature review, it appears that this content analysis is reflecting when journalists (and advertisers) think that audiences would have time to consume news. In more specific terms, this content analysis appears to show a traditional economic value to running more content when audience members may have more time to look at it – traditionally on a weekend day of Saturday. The next highest number of pieces of content/stories in the two case study news outlets was found on a Wednesday. This also follows traditional patterns of news consumption in that grocery stores traditionally ran sales ads on Wednesday, and news outlets traditionally included additional content – most commonly a "food" section - to draw consumer attention to that advertising. Finally, the finding that the third highest day of the week for content is Friday appears to show that news content value would follow traditional work patterns where news consumers would work less during the weekend and presumably have more time to consume news content.

B. The news outlet variable showed that the Longmont Times-Call ran more overall stories in the constructed two-week time period – 292 stories in the Longmont Times-Call to 170 stories in the Longmont Leader (M=1.63, SD=.483). On a percentage basis, the Times-Call had much more overall content during the two weeks - 63.2 percent of all stories examined, while the Longmont Leader had 36.8 percent of the stories examined.

C. The byline variable showed that the largest number of bylines were for reporters who did not work for either news outlet (Mode=5, SD= 1.808). In all, 31 percent of bylines were not local bylines. On a percentage basis, the Longmont Times-Call reporters had 18.8 percent of the total bylines in the content analysis; followed by the Longmont Leader bylines at 17.1 percent; followed by "other" bylines such as press release bylines at 16 percent; and other local news organization bylines (the Daily Camera, the sister newspaper in neighboring Boulder 10 miles away, for example) at 15.2 percent and Longmont Public Media (the local public broadcasting outlet) at 1.9 percent ($p<.001$).

While more definitive follow-up research might give more detail about what this means, this finding seems to indicate that scarce resources at the two news outlets in the case study area are leading to changing reporting standards. This correlates with the journalist interviews theme of "doing less with less." Audience members did not bring up this issue in the focus group discussions. Kovach and Rosenstiel (2014) and journalism textbook authors all have pointed to the importance of journalists doing independent reporting so as to serve the public. Press releases generally are seen as pieces of content that serve a client. This will be addressed more in the discussion section.

D. The press release variable showed that 66 percent of pieces of content/stories had no evidence of press release reporting (M=2.51, with 3 being no evidence of press releases reporting; SD=.744). However, many stories in the Longmont Leader were verbatim press releases and identified as such. 14.5 percent of the pieces of content/stories were press releases. 19.3 percent of the content/stories had some evidence of a press release in the story ($p<.001$). This will be discussed further under the crosstabs section immediately following this frequencies section.

E. The most common type of story – 50.4 percent of all content/stories in the data set - was a hard news story (Mode=2, SD=1.24). The next most common type of story – 25.1 percent - was a soft news story. 9.3 percent of the content/stories were news briefs; and 8 percent were profiles. 3.7 percent were breaking news; 2.2 percent were commentary/analysis. This also will be discussed further under the crosstabs section immediately following this frequencies section.

F. The most common story topic was local government (Mode=1, SD=2.788). Local government content was 32 percent of all content in the data set. This was followed by regional/national sports content (16.2 percent); business content (12.8 percent); state government content (10.6 percent); national government content (8.9 percent); entertainment content (8.4 percent); high school/prep sports content (3.9 percent); school content (3.5 percent); and other content (2.6 percent). This also will be discussed in more detail under the crosstabs section immediately following this frequencies section.

G. The most common number of quotes per story was zero (Mode=0, SD=6.884) at 34 percent. The next most common number of quotes per story was two quotes at 8.7 percent.

H. The number of words per piece of content/story had a mean of M=558.86, SD=340.070.

I. The most common piece of content/story had no picture (31 percent). The next most common piece of content/story had a picture with no people in it (26 percent) (Mode=0, SD=1.999). The

third most common piece of content/story had a picture with more than one person in it (18.4 percent).

This data appears to show that perhaps the audience does not value pictures of people accompanying the news content. Specifically, it also appears that there's a lack of photographers to take pictures, perhaps because of financial issues at the news outlets. While a look at the data shows that the Longmont Leader appears to run a picture with every single one of its stories, this may be related more to algorithms that drive more traffic to news content that includes pictures or graphics (This information comes from the author's background as a journalist.) Most of the pictures that run in the Longmont Leader do not have people in them – they may be landscape photos or stock photos. In addition, most of those pictures do not seem to have a direct relationship to the geographical area. During the journalist interviews process, the editor at the Longmont Leader said that the news outlet does not employ a photographer. However, this data may be slightly misleading in that the Longmont Times-Call runs quite a bit of wire content from the Associated Press and other sources without many pictures. This is most commonly in the sports section of the paper. This photo content analysis finding appears to show that journalists have scarce resources and are trying to figure out the best use of those scarce resources. As such, from a "value" standpoint, when it comes to production processes, local print journalists are not valuing getting news photos as pieces of content.

J. The most common photographer byline was to have no photographer byline at 30.7 percent (Mo=0, SD=1.958). The second most common was a staff photographer byline (22.1 percent); followed by a wire service photographer byline (18 percent); and a courtesy photo from the audience (13.4 percent). $p<.001$.

K. The most common story placement for both the Longmont Leader (online) and the Longmont Times-Call was in an "inside" position (56.5 percent) (Mode=1, SD=.756). The second most common story placement was 27.1 percent. Of the total amount of coded content/stories 16.5 percent were on the front page. $p<.001$.

L. The most common amount of times the word "Longmont" was used in a story was zero (M=1.7, SD=3.418). Some 63.9 percent of the content did not have the word "Longmont" in it.

I then used the crosstabulation statistical function to compare and contrast the content found in the two news outlets.

TABLES 1, 2. Frequencies

TABLE 1: Mean and standard deviation for all local news codebook variables for the local news content analysis on the Longmont Times-Call (print and online news outlet) and the Longmont Leader (online-only news outlet).

| Variable | Mean | Standard deviation | N |
|---|---|---|---|
| Day of the week | 4.32 | 1.784 | 462 |
| Byline | 3.70 | 1.808 | 462 |
| Press release? | 2.51 | .744 | 462 |
| Story type | 2.87 | 1.240 | 462 |
| Topic | 3.93 | 2.788 | 462 |
| Number of quotes | 4.96 | 6.884 | 462 |
| Number of words | 558.86 | 340.070 | 462 |
| Type of photo | 2.31 | 1.999 | 462 |
| Type of photographer | 2.03 | 1.958 | 462 |
| Story placement | 1.6 | .756 | 462 |
| Story placement online | 1.6 | .755 | 462 |
| “Longmont” word # | 1.7 | 3.418 | 462 |
| Total paragraphs | 14.57 | 9.271 | 462 |
| Total sentences | 23.07 | 15.607 | 462 |

TABLE 2: Overall frequency of each story topic variable in a content analysis of the Longmont Times-Call (print and online news outlet) and the Longmont Leader (online-only news outlet). (N=426) (Please see the local news content codebook found as an appendix at the end of this document, for more details.)

| Story topic variable frequency | Total frequency (in both news outlets) |
|---|---|
| Local government | 32% |
| Regional/national sports | 16.2% |
| Business | 12.8% |
| State government | 10.6% |
| National government | 8.9% |
| Entertainment | 8.4% |
| Regional/prep sports | 3.9% |
| Schools | 3.5% |
| Other (any story that didn’t fit into any other category) | 2.6% |

TABLE 3. Crosstabs

| Variables | Longmont Times-Call | Longmont Leader |
|---|---|---|
| 1. Top two days of week: | | |
| Saturday | 20.9 % | 17.6 % |
| Wednesday | 19.5 % | 16.5 % |
| 2. Local byline | 53 % | 47 % |
| 3. Press release content | 1.7 % | 36.5 % |
| 4. Topic – local government | 21.6 % | 50 % |
| 5. Type of story – hard news | 62 % | 30.6 % |
| 6. Type of story – soft news | 17.5 % | 38.2 % |

In more detail, findings from the crosstab tests show that overall:

A. Days of the week

There were slight variations in the Longmont Leader and the Longmont Times-Call in how many pieces of content/stories ran on each day of the week. The Longmont Leader had a very similar percentage of stories running on four days of the week - Wednesday (16.5 percent); Thursday (17.6 percent); Friday (17.1 percent); and Saturday (17.6 percent). The Longmont Times-Call had the most pieces of content/stories run on Saturday (20.9 percent); followed by Wednesday (19.5 percent); Friday (17.5 percent); and Thursday (14.4 percent). ($p<.001$).

B. Bylines

Thinking generally about reporter bylines for pieces of content/stories, scholars commonly have talked about the presence of a reporter byline as meaning more independent

reporting/journalism. However, in this data set, many of the coded stories are from the Associated Press wire service and there generally is no byline in those pieces of content/stories. This is a more nuanced view of this variable than was originally envisioned. Of the total data set, 35.9 percent of pieces of content/stories had a byline, while 64.1 percent did not. (P<.001).

Within the two news outlets, the Longmont Leader pieces of content/stories had local bylines 47 percent of the time; the Longmont Times-Call had local bylines 53 percent of the time. This is an area that can be triangulated more with journalist interviews found elsewhere in this study to understand more about why the Longmont Times-Call has more stories reported by journalists than the Longmont Leader does. This will be examined more in the Discussion section of the study and may be an interesting area of future research. (P<.001).

C. Press releases

The Longmont Leader content was 36.5 percent press releases. Of the Longmont Leader content, 52.9 percent had no evidence of a press release. 10.6 percent had some evidence of a press release. The Longmont Times-Call content was 1.7 percent press releases. Of the Longmont Times-Call content, 74 percent had no evidence of a press release. 24.3 percent had some evidence of a press release. (P<.001).

Put another way, the Longmont Leader runs almost as many press releases verbatim (62) or partial press releases (18) as it does actual stories (89) out of the total 170 stories from the news outlet. Press releases are informational releases written by organizations outside of the newsroom. When you add together the press releases and partial press releases, there are 80 such

pieces of content/stories in the Longmont Leader. There are 89 pieces of content/stories in the Longmont Leader with no evidence of press release information in them.

D. Topic comparison between news outlets

TABLE 4. Story topic comparison between the Longmont Times-Call (print and online news outlet) and the Longmont Leader (online-only news outlet) using the Crosstabulation statistical function. (N=426)

| Variables | Longmont Times-Call | Longmont Leader |
|---|---|---|
| Local government | 21.6% | 50% |
| State government | 7.2% | 16.5% |
| National government | 12.3% | 2.9% |
| Schools | 5.1% | 4.1% |
| Entertainment | 7.9% | 9.4% |
| Business | 15.4% | 8.2% |
| High school/prep sports | 5.5% | 1.8% |
| Regional/national sports | 25.3% | 0.6% |
| Other | 1.4% | 4.7% |

Another one of the biggest differences in the pieces of content/stories found in the Longmont Leader and the Longmont Times-Call is the topic of the stories they cover. In the codebook, the topic variables were: local government, state government, national government, school, entertainment, business, high school/prep sports, regional/national sports and “other” types of stories.

The biggest takeaway in this category is that neither news outlet has much school coverage at all – the data set shows that the Longmont Leader had 4.1 percent of pieces of content/stories about schools during the time period in question; the Longmont Times-Call had 3.1 percent of its pieces of content/stories about schools. The Longmont Leader runs regional education stories from Chalkbeat, a nonprofit news organization. It appears this is another area that corresponds with journalist interview in that "doing less with less" seems to mean not assigning local journalists to cover local schools. Or it also could be that during this particular time period, reporter resources were used for other coverage and reporters later were involved more with school coverage.

The next biggest takeaway in the topic category is that the Longmont Times-Call's largest number of stories by topic are regional and national sports stories, including Denver Broncos coverage, at 25.3 percent, while the Longmont Leader has virtually no regional and national sports coverage at 0.6 percent. When thinking about all sports coverage (adding the high school/prep sports variable to the regional/national sports variable) the Longmont Times-Call has 30.8 percent of its topic coverage in the area of sports coverage. The Longmont Leader has 1.8 percent of its topic coverage area in the area of sports coverage.

Local government is the most covered topic in the Longmont Leader at 50 percent, while local government is the second-largest topic in the Longmont Times-Call at 21.6 percent. State government is the next most covered topic in the Longmont Leader at 16.5 percent. State government coverage in the Longmont Times-Call is 7.2 percent. National government coverage in the Longmont Leader is 2.9 percent and in the Times-Call is 12.3 percent.

Another interesting takeaway from this content analysis is the amount of business news coverage found in each news outlet. The Longmont Times-Call business news coverage is 15.4 percent of the total. The Longmont Leader business news coverage is 8.2 percent of the total. Entertainment rounds out the topic variable comparison. Of the total coverage, Longmont Leader entertainment coverage is 9.4 percent; the Longmont Times-Call entertainment coverage is 7.9 percent.

Based on the content analysis, it appears that each news outlet tries to distinguish itself by topic rather than using limited resources to compete with each other for any particular topic area. For example, the Longmont Times-Call focuses heavily on Broncos football coverage and other sports coverage (traditional favorites in the case study area and at cities around the country) the Longmont Leader has virtually no sports coverage. Instead, the Longmont Leader focuses on local government coverage (including the previously mentioned press releases) and local arts group coverage coded here as entertainment coverage, but including a wide variety of submitted photos from nonprofit and arts groups). Some of these results come in part from the Longmont Times-Call's reliance on wire stories, but that also is a choice of where to put limited resources – the Longmont Leader does not appear to pay for the Associated Press wire service, which was a traditional coverage tool for local newspapers to share their limited resources with other local newspapers (in non-competing coverage areas) by sending stories from their reporters out onto the wire and receiving other coverage back to put in their news outlet content.

E. Type of story comparison between news outlets

Types of stories in the Longmont Leader and the Longmont Times-Call also vary. The type of story variable in the data set includes breaking news, hard news, news brief, soft news, profile, commentary/analysis and "other". The most common type of story in the Longmont Leader is a soft news story with 38.2 percent; the most common type of story in the Longmont Times-Call is

a hard news story with 62 percent. The next most common type of story in the Longmont Leader is a hard news story at 30.6 percent; the next most common type of story in the Longmont Times-Call is a soft news story with 17. 5 percent. The third most common type of story in the Longmont Leader is a news brief with 15.3 percent. The third most common type of story in the Longmont Times-Call is a profile, with 10.6 percent. The commentary/analysis category is 2.4 percent in the Longmont Leader and 2.1 percent in the Longmont Times-Call. For simplicity's sake, because the Longmont Leader does not generally run letters to the editor or opinions, the Longmont Times-Call letters to the editor and opinion pages were not coded. This would be an interesting area of further study that would be better served by different research questions.

This finding appears to build on findings from the previous question. It appears that the Longmont Times-Call has focused its limited reporting resources on "hard news," which often means the more traditional government stories. Rather than compete in that arena, it appears that the Longmont Leader has decided not to deal with soft news/community interest stories. This seems to show that journalists value topic areas where they feel they can engage community members with the limited resource time that they have.

F. Pictures and photographers comparison and contrast between the two news outlets

The types of photos used in the two news outlets are very different, as are the photographers who take them. Five data set variables indicate different content for photos; however, it's worth nothing here that the Longmont Times-Call most often does not use a photo with its stories, while the Longmont Leader, which is an online only news outlet, typically has a provided photo or graphic with a story. This also appears to track with traditional print and online "habitus" or professional culture ideas related to news stories. This would require more evaluation of existing content, but seems to be related to most wire service stories running on their own in the

Longmont Times-Call. In the Longmont Leader, and for online news, generally, the general rule of thumb is that a piece of news content should have some photo or graphic to accompany it.

The five content catagories for photos are: 1.) if there's a local official in the photo; 2.) if there's a different local person in the photo; 3.) if there's more than one person in the photo; 4.) if there are animals in the photo; 5.) if the photo is topic-related but has no people in it.

The six categories for the type of photo – which addresses who took the photo as well as where it came from if a news outlet staff photographer didn't take it – are: 1.) staff photo; 2.) photo from another local news organization; 3.) photo from a news wire service; 4.) company-provided photo; 5.) courtesy photo from audience member; 6.) other, please specify.

When it comes to content in the photos, 61.8 percent of photos in the data set from the Longmont Leader are topic-related pictures that have no people in them. At the same time, 48.6 percent of the pieces of content/stories in the Longmont Times-Call have no photo at all. The second most common variable for photo content for both news outlets is photos from a news wire service: The Longmont Leader has 15.9 percent of photos from a news wire service; the Longmont Times-Call has 19.9 percent of photos from a wire service. This appears to be related to the fact that the Longmont Leader has no staff photographer, and the Longmont Times-Call has a photographer who splits his time between the Longmont news outlet and the Daily Camera in Boulder. This will be reviewed more in the Discussion section of this study.

When it comes to the actual types of photos in the data set, the most common type of photo in the data set for the Longmont Leader is a courtesy photo from an audience member at 36.5 percent (probably related to the idea of not having a photographer on staff). For the Longmont Times-Call, the most common type of photo is no photo at 48.3 percent, followed by the staff photographer photo at 19.5 percent.

G. Number of times the word “Longmont” appears in stories

The overwhelming number of stories in the Longmont Leader (72 out of 170 or 42.4 percent) do not have the word “Longmont” in them. There are 23 stories, or 13.5 percent, with the word “Longmont” used one time; 18, or 10.6 percent, with the word “Longmont” used two times; 14, or 8.2 percent, with the word “Longmont” used three times; and 12, or 7.1 percent with the word “Longmont” used four times.

The overwhelming number of stories in each the Longmont Times-Call (223 out of 292 or 76.4 percent) also do not have the word “Longmont” in them. There are 12, or 4.1 percent, with the word “Longmont” used six times; 10, or 3.4 percent, with the word “Longmont” used two times; and 9, or 3.1 percent, with the word “Longmont” used four times.

For the purposes of this study, I hypothesized that the idea of the word “Longmont” in the piece of content/story might indicate more local news, it appears there are many more nuanced reasons for stories in the data set to use the word “Longmont” or not use the word Longmont. Overall, as seen in the literature review, spatial geography can contribute to the idea of being “local,” as well as to the local community. However, the fact that the content is found in the local news outlet also means that virtually every single piece of content that doesn’t have a dateline outside of Longmont is from inside the community, meaning that the word “Longmont” does not have as much prominence as it would if researching random content on a different platform that is not targeted to a specific community. This will be addressed in more detail in the Discussion section of the study.

H. Number of words in each story (Crosstabs)

For the purposes of this study, I hypothesized that general financial pressures on both news outlets and fewer reporters would mean fewer words in pieces of content/stories across the data

set. As previously mentioned, it appears that each news outlet tries to use its scarce resources to best advantage. However, in the case of number of words, reporters can write more descriptive items or include more and longer quotes without necessarily spending more time on their work. This item could be operationalized in more specific terms.

For consistency's sake in reporting the number of words in the stories on each end of the data set:

The Longmont Leader's shortest story was 49 words.

The Longmont Times-Call's shortest story was 128 words.

The Longmont Leader's longest story was 2084 words.

The Longmont Times-Call's longest story was 2260 words.

Next, I ran a T-Test on the variables – number of quotes, number of sentences and number of words. Journalism studies scholars generally use such variables, especially the number of quotes variable, as creating more value for audiences, since they can indicate independent reporting. This will be examined more in the Discussion section.

TABLE 5.

T-tests for the news variables – quotes, sentences, words

| Variables | Longmont TC(M, SD) N=292 | LL (M, SD) N=170 | t value | df | sig |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Quotes | (M=6.67, SD=7.913) | (M=2.01, SD=2.763) | -7.42 | 460 | p<.001 |
| Sentences | (M=23.39, SD=13.498) | (M=22.52, SD=18.71) | -.578 | 460 | p<.001 |
| Words | (M=602.89, SD=318.200) | (M=483.24, SD=363.342) | -3.697 | 460 | p=.027 |

I hypothesized that the Longmont Times-Call, as a more traditional news outlet, would be more likely to offer more traditional news value in these three variables than the Longmont Leader did. This independent T-test bears out the hypothesis.

I. Number of quotes by news outlet

The Longmont Leader number of quotes had: M=2.01, SD=2.763

The Longmont Times-Call number of quotes had: M=6.67, SD=7.913

p-value<.001

J. Number of sentences by news outlet

The Longmont Leader number of sentences: M=22.52, SD=18.713

The Longmont Times-Call number of sentences: M=23.39, SD=13.498

p-value<.001

K. Number of words by news outlet

The Longmont Leader number of words: M=483.24, SD=363.342

The Longmont Times-Call number of words: M=602.89, SD=318.200

p-value = .027

## DISCUSSION – LOCAL NEWS CONTENT ANALYSIS

RQ1: What content is in the local news?

The content analysis helps highlight various aspects of the research questions of this study. It illustrates several key findings suggested by the literature review, although some of the findings are more nuanced than expected. The purpose of this discussion is to highlight some of those nuances as well as to draw links between the findings and the research questions. These findings add methodological contributions to research about the rapidly changing local news environment in the case study area and across the United States (Abernathy, 2020; Hare, 2021). The findings also contribute to journalism scholars' understandings of the production and consumption of local news, including the "news gap" between what journalists produce and what audiences consume (Boczkowski and Mitchelstein, 2013).

Specifically, but anecdotally, the low (1,212) Colorado Press Association, 2022) number of Longmont Times-Call subscriptions in the case study area, coupled with the higher (13,655) self-reported, 2022) number of Longmont Leader newsletter subscriptions may serve as a key background data point to understand how audiences are responding to what journalists produce. At a high point in the 2000s, Longmont Times-Call subscriptions were in the 25,000 range (Colorado Press Association).

This study also draws theoretical contributions about how real-world decisions are made about the content and production of local news in the case study area.

## FINDINGS

Key finding No. 1: Overall, it appears that the Longmont Leader does little actual reporting, and little actual hard news reporting, which could be seen as bad for local democracy, since the basic function of journalism is to hold people in power to account (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2014; Reese, 2021). As an online news outlet, even though the Longmont Leader has reporters on its masthead, it seems to serve more as a news and community information aggregator, especially of arts information from local arts nonprofit groups. In addition, the Longmont Leader runs more government press releases verbatim than the Longmont Times-Call does, or than any other similar local news outlet does, (based on literature below), while ignoring both local schools and sports coverage. (Based on the number of Longmont Leader subscriptions, and the fact that the number of subscriptions continue to grow (from 12,000 to 13,655 in the one-year data collection period) it appears that audience members may not know or care whether or not their local news is verified. This will be discussed below in more detail and in the conclusion as an opportunity for a new media literacy program in local communities such as the case study area.

Neither news outlet has half or more local stories as illustrated by the number of local bylines and the relative lack of local/community coverage found in the content analysis. However, the strategy of the Longmont Leader news outlet appears to have more local coverage from users running submitted arts information, events and photos verbatim as seen in the press release findings, below. This finding appears to support some public journalism movement research, but it's not the same, since the submitted information appears to be more oriented toward press releases rather than actual reporting. Bylines – or the person's name at the top of the story indicating that a person gets paid to work on verifying information found in the story -

are 5 percent higher in the Longmont Times-Call than in the Longmont Leader (53 percent to 47 percent local bylines).

Perhaps illustrating an audience penchant for reading soft news (Mindich, 2004) the most common type of story in the Longmont Leader is a soft news story, with 38.2 percent of the content being soft news. Perhaps illustrating its more normative, traditional role in the community, the Longmont Times-Call's most common type of story is a hard news story at 62 percent of all stories.

Key finding No. 2: There is virtually no local school content/coverage (K-12, community college or any other type of school or education coverage) and virtually no local sports coverage (high school sports, local races, etc.) in the data set.

Key finding No. 3: Press releases – which is content seen as coming from agencies and organizations whose goal is to serve clients rather than to serve the public – make up 36.5 percent of the Longmont Leader content but just 0.7 percent of Longmont Times-Call content. Key finding No. 4: News outlets generally are struggling these days to pay reporters (Abernathy, 2020; Hare, 2021). Journalism studies scholars generally have found that the presence of bylines means more verified reporting has been done, which historically has generated more trust with audiences. Bylines also are seen in the industry as one example of the journalistic independence discussed at length in the literature review, although audiences have not necessarily responded by consuming more of that kind of content (Weaver et al., 2017; others)

In all, 64.1 percent of all pieces of content/stories in the two news outlets in the study did not have a local byline. This idea appears to go to the heart of the financial crisis going on in the news industry. At the extreme end of reasoning, it raises the question as to why subscribers would find value or trust the content they read in either news outlet. On the other hand, most

stories in the Longmont Times-Call that do not have a local byline are labeled as being from a regional or national news agency, such as Associated Press, which has traditionally been shown to have value with audiences.

As previously mentioned, the Longmont Times-Call content/stories had a local byline 53 percent of the time, while the Longmont Leader content/stories had a local byline 47 percent of the time. Most of the Associated Press stories are on a topic of regional or national importance that affects the local community, such as the COVID-19 pandemic or regional or national business information. The other large amount of wire service coverage is in regional and national coverage of sports teams. But when it comes to the idea of value, these regional stories are ones presumably that local news subscribers could find in other regional news outlets, begging the question of why they would pay for the content in the local news outlet. This appears to be another interesting area of local news research covered so far only in the spatial geography and "hyperlocal" work of Schmitz Weiss and Usher. While the literature review does not extend specifically to sports, this also might be an area of niche news and identity – people who live in Colorado most commonly want to identify with their "local" (state) football team – the Denver Broncos – or with their "local" (regional) football team – the CU Buffs. This would be an interesting area of further study with focus groups to see what types of sports coverage audiences look for in the various news and information outlets where they search for news.

On the other hand, the Longmont Times-Call runs quite a bit of wire sports coverage. It's unclear why journalists there focus on this national sports coverage, since journalist interview questions did not include topic choice. This also could be an area of future research.

The Longmont Leader often runs community-provided content – most commonly arts coverage that appears to be written by members of the local art community that is not clearly

captured in this data set. However, such a low number of bylines in the Longmont Leader appears to indicate the rapidly changing nature of what local news and local information is available to subscribers. Both the Longmont Leader and Longmont Times-Call reporters write about local government officials such as the local mayor's race and about city hall. But there, the stories are similar to the press releases put out by the local government officials with virtually no quotes from members of the public or officials themselves. While this has been studied elsewhere (the presence of some press release reporting in a news story with a local byline) it appears to be a growing part of the total amount of stories/content at each news outlet.

Key finding No. 5 (related to Key finding No. 2):

Local school coverage and local sports coverage both have traditionally been seen as areas that local news outlets use to build their subscriber bases and help build local communities. Scholars need only to look to the beloved TV show "Friday Night Lights" (2006 to 2011, based on a 1990 book, Bissinger, 1990) to see the impact that a local high school sports team can have on a local town (reportedly Odessa, Texas, but a situation that plays out in local towns and cities all across the country every fall when school starts).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, people of all ages turned more to broadcast TV news (Pew Research Center) for information about the virus and about school requirements, often with powerful results that continue two years later. While more people all across the country are attending local school district's school board meetings now, there appears to be more misinformation and rancor both preceding the meetings and at the meetings. The Longmont Leader runs stories from Chalkbeat, a regional and now national nonprofit news organization. But none of the Chalkbeat stories in the data set addressed Longmont specifically, or Longmont students.

Story topic variables for this content analysis were: local government, state government, national government, school, entertainment, business, high school/prep sports, regional/national sports and "other" types of stories. The journalistic content strategy appears to be not to write about local schools, local sports and local businesses. This appears to be related to the journalistic interview idea of "doing less with less." That is to say that if editors and reporters at local news outlets do not write any stories about local schools or about local sports, either from an institutional perspective or from a student-level feature perspective, it appears that their strategy is not to cover these areas of the local community.

More discussion about press releases (Key finding No. 3)

This study's literature review discusses at length the importance of journalistic independence from outside influence. Journalists generally see their professional culture as part of their work identities, and it is mentioned in one way or another in virtually every newsroom code of ethics. This is addressed in more detail in the journalist interviews. However, in recent years, the idea has gained steam that news outlets that do not try to maintain independence in certain areas can be transparent about how reporters and editors do their jobs as a way to gain credibility and trust with audiences. For example, in digitally native nonprofit newsrooms, this is most commonly seen in codes of ethics information used to explain donor funding. (Author's own unpublished research work.)

With this transparency idea in mind, the Longmont Leader runs press releases verbatim 36.5 percent of the time in this data set. The press releases are clearly labeled as such and appear to run in full. It is difficult to tell what value these press releases would provide to audiences although more information from both the journalist interviews research and the audience focus groups research is expected to address this question. One example is a press release about

COVID statistics and best practices to keep from getting diseases, which comes from the Colorado governor's office. This presumably would be meant as a public service announcement.

Journalists traditionally generally have used the somewhat derogatory term "press release journalism" or "churnalism" to describe this type of work (Jackson et al. 2016; Moloney et al. 2013; Phillips, 2010; Spence and Simmons, 2006). Maloney et al. (2013) define "churnalism" as press releases that are published as news with little to no independent reporting or corroboration. Van Hout and van Leuven (2016) suggest that the entire news environment is changing in a way that acknowledges that while some scholars still see "churnalism as a threat to journalism's public service role, others believe that journalism is no longer defined by reporters … that the balance between journalism and public relations may be shifting (Ibid).

Meijer (2016) and some others have studied the idea of journalistic "transparency" about where news content comes from as one that helps audiences understand what kind of content they are getting. The data set coding looks to that particular aspect of press releases in that some news stories may have some evidence of a press release (Almgren, 2017). On the other hand, journalists use many different places to look for information that might be of value to audiences, and scholars have found links between news agency material and public relations (Lewis, Williams and Franklin 2008). As newsrooms have cut staff and added tasks, Almgren (2017) finds that journalists use more material from press releases and news agencies – both themes found in this local news data set for this study.

The Longmont Leader's use of verbatim press releases also seems to be related to its lack of news agency/wire service coverage, which costs money to subscribe to. The Longmont Times-Call subscribes to the Associated Press news agency/wire service and so has the opportunity to fill its remaining news hole with that work – especially the business and sports

coverage it offers. Each news outlet may argue that its offerings constitute a unique value. This offers another area of further study, as journalist interviews did address the idea of story topic.

From both a journalism and academic standpoint (Almgren, 2017) it still seems difficult to justify a press release from the governor's office that does not add any independent reporting Jackson and Moloney (2015) suggest that this type of press release use serves both journalism and audiences poorly. Further, Saridou et al. (2017) suggests that most press release journalism comes from established government sources, and that those sources shape much of the agenda that circulates on the internet.

However, Van Hout and van Leuven (2016) , suggest that press release curation can be helpful to audiences and that curation and filtration is just as important to journalism as independent reporting is in the modern day. Jackson et al. (2016) suggest that journalists are not just processing materials from outside agencies, but are trying to use their scarce resources/labor to increase their journalistic capital. Schafraad and Van Zoonen (2019) offer specific measures of sources in what previously was press release information to discuss the amount of journalistic capital a news outlet might enjoy through its limited use of press releases. These are additional aspect of value that can be examined more thoroughly in future research. In addition, more detailed information from journalist interviews research is sure to address this question.

On the audience side, studies such as Weaver et al. (2017) indicate that audiences generally don't understand or care about the nuances of the types of information they receive and whether it is information reported by journalists or information that comes from an institutional source such as a governor's office. Graefe et al. (2018) find that audiences expected news content to be better quality (and presumably better value to them) than press releases. But they do not expect human-generated news to be more "credible" (and presumably better value to

them) than that offered by an artificial intelligence news bot. And, in fact, some news agencies have experimented with offering sports scores and simple sports stories as automated content. While this is not an area that this study into local news can interrogate at the moment, it is an interesting idea that merits further study in the future.

Regardless of the research going on around how press release journalism affects the practice of journalism, there are many more public relations practitioners than journalists affecting every aspect of what audiences receive on the internet and in person (Creighton, 2017; Schneider, 2018). In Australia, scholars have calculated that are about 12 public relations people for every one journalist in the country (Creighton, 2017) not including the political advisers who work in government offices, which presumably would make the number increase. In the United States, one estimate is that there are six public relations people for every journalist (Schneider, 2018). As more local newspapers have closed in recent years, that ratio has presumably gone up.

Discussion about other key findings in this content analysis:

A. Days of the week findings.

The Longmont Times-Call's most pieces of content/stories ran on a Saturday (19.7 percent) or a Wednesday (18.4 percent) which makes sense from an industry standpoint, since traditional advertising inserts run in the physical newspaper on those days. Traditionally, a "food page"/general food feature stories would accompany the grocery store advertising inserts on Wednesday, which journalists and advertisers presumably saw as strategically adding value. The Longmont Times-Call did not have any food stories in this particular data set.

The Longmont Leader's similar percentage of stories running on four days of the week – Wednesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday may be related to historical subscriber reading habits

as well. Monday and Tuesday are traditionally seen as the days with the lowest readership, which journalists may have decided they would follow when posting content. The reason or reasons behind this will be amplified more with information from both the journalist interviews study and the audience focus groups study.

B. Story topic findings

In all, a topic comparison between the two news outlets shows that local government is the most covered topic in the Longmont Leader at 50 percent but regional and national sports is the most covered topic in the Longmont Times-Call at 25.3 percent.

While this seems like a little bit of a surprise, given the Longmont Times-Call's traditional dominance in local news, it may be related to reader surveys that show subscribers are looking for sports coverage in their news product, even if that coverage is coming from wire services or other regional news outlets. More information from journalist interviews should give more detail in this regard.

As a background to this discussion, Scott Converse, a founder of the Longmont Observer news outlet, the precursor to the Longmont Leader, emphasized in numerous interviews (personal interview, 2021) that he intended to have reporters at the new news outlet focus on Longmont as he denigrated the Times-Call for not focusing on local coverage. He said the marketing strategy was to counteract the changes going on at the Longmont Times-Call, previously a family-owned newspaper, which was bought by an outside company (Prairie Mountain Media, whose parent company is the hedge fund Alden Global Capital) and moved out of Longmont to neighboring Boulder, which is about 10 miles away.

C. Story type findings

The most common type of story in the Longmont Leader is a soft news story, with 38.2 percent of the content being soft news. The most common type of story in the Longmont Times-Call is a hard news story at 62 percent. This finding may be related to a Longmont Leader's strategy to attract more young people to its website, since numerous scholars (Mindich, 2004, and others) have shown that young people prefer more soft news and "lifestyle" stories.

In addition, it appears that the Longmont Leader runs various arts news stories about local art shows and the like from local nonprofit groups (not addressed by this local news content codebook). This appears to be an economical/free way to engage the community and get more content for its website, since there does not be any cost associated with getting the information from the local nonprofit groups and crediting it to them (both text and pictures). In addition, it appears to be a creative way to add value to the offerings on the website, since those in the arts community as well as the general public presumably would be interested in various artistic events going on in the community. The journalist interviews study is likely to give more detail about the strategies of the news outlets in this regard.

D. Photos and photographer findings

The most common type of photo in the Longmont Leader is a topic-related photo that comes from an audience member, as the news outlet does not have a photographer on staff. Many of the pictures on the Longmont Leader are stock image photos that do not have a direct relationship to the text they accompany, which can be confusing to any reader and does not appear to add value to the written content. However, it appears that computer algorithms/bots will not register any content found on the web without photos, and so this strategy might make sense from that perspective. The journalist interviews study is likely to give more detail about this strategy.

The Longmont Times-Call has a part-time photographer who also works for its sister newspaper the Daily Camera in Boulder (anecdotal journalist interview, 2020). The most common type of photo in the Times-Call is "no photo" at 48.3 percent, possibly because of the large number of Associated Press wire service articles that run without any type of photo. The next most common type of photo is a staff photographer photo with people in the picture at 19.5 percent of the photographic content in the Longmont Times Call. The perceived value here is that a photo from a staff photographer provides more interest and information to subscribers and may engage non-subscribers more often than stories without photos. Scholars have shown this to be true of news content. Again, information in the journalist interviews study is likely to shed more light on the strategy behind the photos in the Longmont Times-Call.

E. Findings for use of the word "Longmont"

This study was designed to find ways to measure the "localness" of the news available. The idea of using a keyword to denote something "local" in a story comes from the idea of geography of place suggested by Usher (2019) and Schmitz Weiss (2015). The local news content codebook also suggests that "place" in this context might be addressed by other local place names such as "St. Vrain School District," "Long's Peak" (a prominent local mountain directly west of Longmont) and other similar names. As it turns out, the word "Longmont" was not found much in the content at all – possibly because it's assumed or implied by reporters writing about the area.

The Longmont Leader has more stories with the word "Longmont" in them one time (12.5 percent) while the Longmont Times-Call has no stories with the word "Longmont" in it one time. However, the Longmont Times-Call has 4.1 percent of its stories with the word "Longmont" used six times. Overall, this appears to be related to place names used in stories that have the

word “Longmont” in them such as the Longmont Humane Society and the like. It is difficult to extrapolate as much detail from this variable as seemed to originally be the case. This perhaps makes the “byline” variable more important for purposes of understanding subscriber value. Both the journalist interviews and the audience focus groups might give more understanding about if the idea of “local” is important to people who subscribe or not.

F. Findings for the number of quotes, sentences and words by news outlet.

The idea that the number of quotes in a news story may make it more valuable to subscribers is again related to the idea of independent reporting drawing more subscriber credibility and trust. No recent research has shown this to be the case, although some recent audience studies show that verification and quotes could be related to each other in terms of value.

The Longmont Times-Call has many more quotes in its stories – it appears because of the Associated Press wire service stories of sports figures, among other reasons. The mean number of quotes for the Longmont Times-Call is 6.67; for the Longmont Leader, it is 2.01.

The number of sentences and number of words were traditionally shorter in hard news reporting than in soft news reporting (journalism textbook cite – Craft). This was so that newspapers could save money on the paper that the newspaper was printed on. However, as audiences have changed, it appears that the stories may be getting longer, at least in this particular comparison.

The Longmont Times-Call content/stories on average had more words (M=602.89) and more sentences (M=23.39) than the Longmont Leader (M=483.24 and M=22.52, respectively). In this could, one could consider that a more in-depth story might be more valuable in that it separates the print newspaper from “cheap” content on the internet. Such an in-depth story is more likely to run on a Wednesday or a Saturday as previously discussed, when a subscriber or other

audience member might have more time to read it. This idea has not yet been borne out in modern-day studies but is informed more by the journalist interviews study and the audience focus groups study.

Now that I have addressed RQ and the content that is in the local news content analysis, I plan to address RQ1 in more detail to link other value ideas together.

RQ1: What does the quantitative content analysis show in terms of audience values, journalistic values and the ways audiences and journalists interact with each other?

G. What do journalists value?

The content analysis seems to show that Longmont Leader journalists through the stories that carry their local bylines support the idea of local community by doing more feature/soft news stories about local organizations/nonprofits on days of the week when the audience traditionally is more likely to follow local news. This strategy seems to illustrate the "news gap" idea suggested by a Heider et al. (2014) survey that showed audiences would rather see news outlets as a "good neighbor" than a "watchdog".

The literature review and journalism scholars generally have talked about journalism's importance to society, if nothing else, is it "watchdog" role on government however, which is seen a bit in the findings that show the variables "hard news" (type) and "local government" (topic) are the most common forms of content. This appears to show that journalists value things like public service and accountability, which also discussed in a Vos et al. study in 2018.

In a related note, the Longmont Leader's strategy to use press releases verbatim seems to be a way to add content while supporting various government institutions. This seems at odds with traditional journalistic independence and "habitus" (Bourdieu, 2005) argument of this study. However, some of the people who now lead the online-only news outlet previously worked at

Longmont Public Media, which was and is supported in part through government funding. This seems to represent a shift in thinking between the traditional news outlet and the online only news outlet in the case study area and may be one aspect of the future of news outlets. The actual pieces of content include police reports from the Longmont Police Department and along with the previously mentioned example of a state government press release from the governor's office about COVID-19 and other statewide topics of interest to Longmont.

H. What do audiences value?

As suggested by the literature review, audiences traditionally have valued shorter stories that are more entertainment or soft-news oriented (Mindich, 2004 and Turkle, 2011). In the current disrupted media environment, they also are more likely to share information that they find on social media with others (Bruns, 2009.) Audiences prioritize getting free and fast information that reinforces their own beliefs over verified news (Reese, 2021). This indirectly indicates the "disconnect" between audiences and news outlets in that the number of people looking to traditional news sources for news continues to drop as evidenced by the drop in paid subscriptions at the Longmont Times-Call and the rise in members/subscribers at the Longmont Leader, which offers free only membership.

However, it appears that both the Longmont Times-Call and the Longmont Leader are trying to respond to audience interest in soft news by making sure that they have plenty of that type of content. To repeat one aspect of the findings – soft news is the most common type of story in the Longmont Leader (38.2 percent) and the second-most common type of story in the Longmont Times-Call (17.5 percent).

Content analysis findings also seem to show that the Longmont Times-Call and the Longmont Leader focus on the idea of shorter articles and/or news briefs as well. The third most

common type of story in the Longmont Leader is a news brief with 15.3 percent; the third most common type of story in the Longmont Times-Call is a profile (which is basically a soft news story about a specific person), with 10.6 percent. In addition, the Longmont Leader has slightly shorter stories than the Longmont Times-Call does (as previously discussed M=483.24 compared to M=602.89). Entertainment stories are the least likely topic in both news outlets – Longmont Leader entertainment coverage is 9.4 percent and Longmont Times-Call entertainment coverage is 7.9 percent.

I. What are the ways that audiences and journalists interact with each other?

The Longmont Times-Call runs more overall stories – 63.8 percent of the pieces of content/stories during the time examined, compared to the Longmont Leader's 36.8 percent of the pieces of content/stories examined. This is related in part to the large number of sports and business wire service stories in the Longmont Times-Call.

In a completely different area, and one that is not directly addressed by the local news content codebook, both news outlets have non-news strategies to draw subscribers in and try to convert more people who find their content to be subscribers. The Longmont Leader has a feature on Thursdays called "Good Morning, Longmont," which is always a scenic picture, often from a subscriber/member of the audience. The Longmont Times-Call has a reader call-in feature called the "T-C Line" (uncoded for the purposes of this content analysis, since it is call-in information from subscribers rather than stories).

The Longmont Times-Call also runs letters to the editor and opinion columns/an op-ed page, which is a traditional (non-news) area of interaction with the public. However, because the Longmont Leader does not regularly run letters to the editor or opinion columns, I did not code this topic area for the purpose of this study. In just one or two cases, the Longmont Leader has

run letters of support for local city council candidates. This is an interesting area of study and one that bears more examination.

Limitations and areas for future research

This content analysis can stand on its own in terms of adding detailed information about how local journalism appears to be changing – especially the type of content found in a local online news outlet. However, these findings can be amplified and explained in more detail with additional findings from journalist interviews and more audience focus group information.

Based on this content analysis, more future research might be helpful into how press release journalism might be a strategy of certain journalists. More research would be helpful into journalism strategies related to automated content for sports scores and sports games. Both of these areas have seen limited national research, but no apparent local news research.

In addition, Meijer talks about both journalistic transparency and the importance of researchers examining other reasons for findings rather than taking them at face value (2016). "Transparency" is related both related to press releases found in the Longmont Leader and to circulation numbers. In addition, future research could examine other aspects of circulation including how many "clicks" and "likes" a story might get online, which might give additional insight into audience behavior and interest in online news than just subscriber numbers. This future research idea is related to Bruns's work (2007) about "produsage" and how and if audiences might share more local news with each other than a particular audience focus group might indicate.

Finally, Tracy (2010) suggests eight methods for interrogating qualitative research, which was applied to both the future journalist interviews and audience focus group information. This also will be studied in more detail in the findings sections.

## FINDINGS/DISCUSSION – AUDIENCE FOCUS GROUPS

A focus group study in 2020 and 2022 into group participants recruited in a local case study area gives of snapshot of how local citizens use knowledge they receive from local sources, including local news outlets. As such, this aspect of the "Saving Local News" case study appears to be one of the first pieces of research about how a local news audience behaves in the United States, in their own words (as opposed to asking them survey questions in which they cannot explain the nuances of what they do). As the news ecosystem changes rapidly, this research also shows changes to people's ways of thinking against an international backdrop of how audiences in democratic countries have interacted with local news in the past. In particular, it captures nuances about people's expectations of what information and news should be free in the marketplace, as well as people's apparent lack of interest about if the information they consume regularly includes any verified, independent reporting.

## FINDINGS FROM FOCUS GROUP STUDIES

Most of the focus group participants who followed the news and even a couple who said they didn't follow the news ("news followers" N=15; "non-news followers" N=4) were self-described "news junkies" at one time or another who said they look for news multiple times per day in multiple places both online and offline as suggested by Couldry's (2004) "media ritual" theorizing. Several of them said they do not follow any type of "local news". A few of the focus group participants (N=4) said they did not follow any local news at all, mainly because they said they had no use for it. In fact, some of the non-news followers also suggested that they would rather get all of their information from social media and from like-minded friends, alluding to the ideas suggested by Reese (2021) related to questions of trust and credibility in all types of news, whether it is local, regional or national news. However, the "news followers" focus groups data

seems to reinforce the importance of the notion of "value" of local news to generate local audience engagement.

As a somewhat unexpected finding, several of the focus group participants complained either directly or indirectly about the ownership of the three subject news outlets and other news outlets around the region and the state, which they said were owned by corporations outside of the community. This seems to reflect some of the words and sentiments of Longmont Public Media/Longmont Observer co-founder Scott Converse (2019) was vocal online and in interviews about the Longmont Times-Call offices being moved out of town after the newspaper was sold to Prairie Mountain Publishing, and many of the focus group members echoed that complaint. They said that a newspaper must be in the community it covers to be able to do a good job.

Regardless, news outlet ownership and related subtexts were the most common theme in all of the study's focus group meetings. The ownership theme was followed in terms of the time and interest the participants spent on topics by other broad themes of 1.) "following" reporters on social media; 2.) journalistic boundaries, or "what makes a journalist a journalist"; 3.) civic engagement; and 4.) quality of sources. Each of the focus group sessions lasted on the Zoom videoconferencing software for about 30-40 minutes previewed by the list of semi-structured interview questions and followed by a written "thank you" and request for consent forms from those who did not provide them previously.

It appears that three of the themes can be discussed in terms of Couldry's (2004) "media as practice" theorizing related to audience routines, audience practices and "anchoring practices" or "media rituals". The focus group data indicates that the audience is indirectly linked to how news is produced, mainly through participants' discussions about why they believe they should not pay for the news they receive. While none of the audience focus group members said this

outright, there was a feeling of not being willing to pay for news when the media ownership structure was a corporate one. Several of the audience members in both of the "news followers" focus groups talked to each other about ways to find local news online for free. This will be addressed in more detail, below.

I can theorize, then, that this lack of news consumer/ audience interest in paying for any news product appears to be one of the main reasons that the news industry is in such economic turmoil in addition to the previously discussed "disconnect" or "news gap" between what audiences value in terms of local news and what journalists value in terms of the news content they produce.

1. Audience routines

Three focus group participants in the audience focus groups said they subscribe to local newspapers and look at them every morning. Separately, two of the participants took pains to describe how they search for news "for free" online. One woman, Sheila Conroy, said a friend still sends her news clippings "in the mail," (while others said they often share news articles with friends and family by email and on social media. One said she does not like the local newspaper ownership, "so I don't subscribe on purpose" (D2 – the person with a pseudonym). Several subscribe to online newsletters with one pointing out that she responded to the focus group invitation found in the daily newsletter she receives in her email.

All in all, after lively discussions that included comments about online news aggregation sites, the relative entertainment value of the social media site Nextdoor and admissions by several participants that they don't attend to local news anymore, one person suggested that journalism in the United States probably won't continue to exist if people don't pay for it.

> "These people all need to be paid, and in order for them to be paid, we all would have to pay for news. We would have to buy their newspapers, magazines, and online content. Unfortunately, we all think we can get things for free."

On a related audience routines note, several participants said they "follow" specific reporters on the Twitter social media site, such as Mitchell Byars, a local, countywide crime and breaking news reporter who works at the neighboring Daily Camera. When asked why they would follow the same reporters from the news on social media, they said that such reporters post news for free "regularly" on social media, which they say is more timely than waiting to find it on the newspaper website or in the newspaper.

When pressed further, these audience members said they follow specific local reporters on social media because they're the most credible journalists posting anything on social media. However, participants in the "news followers" focus groups felt like online social media sites are an increasingly untrustworthy area filled with misinformation. The subtext for this part of the discussion in each focus group, however, also was that social media information is "free" and helps the participants decide if they want to spend more time with a full article or not. Four participants said they "follow" one or more local reporters on social media, including one who said she "follows" her favorite local reporter on Facebook. This finding about "following" specific reporters also indirectly shows the importance of "free" content to the focus group participants, in that they perceive social media sites to be "free."

Many focus group participants said they felt they were justified in "following" reporters on the Twitter social media site as a way of getting "free" news because they knew that the local news outlet ownership was a corporation that was not based in the community, unlike the previous family-owned newspaper company it replaced.

> (Carol): "I've heard it (what the news outlet ownership does) called strip-mining. They really just are in it for the advertising revenues. I think that the people who work at the newspaper care about the news but there are just so few of them there anymore actually working."

This idea of "following" a reporter on social media also seems to tie in to Bruns (2016) and other researchers' work into audiences who believe that they will be kept up to date on whatever is important by scrolling through their social media "news feeds". This relates specifically to Napoli's (2015) idea that if the news is important, it will "find me". This may be an important area of future audience research as it ties in the social and mobile media aspect of modern-day society with an important news consumption pattern that has not been well-studied.

2.Audience practice

Focus group participants were like shoppers at a community bazaar as they threw out tips to each other about how to find "free" news. A participant said she had set up her personal "news feed" online to receive Associated Press headlines "for free" and offered to show other participants how to receive those headlines, too. "News feed" is a term created by Facebook social media outlet founder Mark Zuckerberg (2006). It is the "news items found on a social network," according to a patent filed Zuckerberg and colleagues. It should be noted here that social networks such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp, SnapChat and others do not produce news, so the term "news feed" seems to be a bit of a misnomer.

Participants also talked animatedly for several minutes in each session about the lack of arts and concert reviews in local news outlets, with several saying they had searched online for similar information. Some participants said they think local news outlets are not able to produce any arts coverage because of reporter layoffs.

> ("DeeDee" - the person who asked to be identified by a pseudonym): "What I really miss about what I would call the heyday of the Longmont Times-Call, is that it covered the art

> exhibits and the concerts, and there was someone who even covered classical music. There's nobody doing those things anymore."

This sense of loss among the audience about the lack of arts coverage also could be considered a discussion about the changes in civic engagement or the feeling that if there's no more "arts calendar" for people to look at to find out what's going on around town, fewer people will attend community events. From this aspect of the focus group, participants felt like the pandemic had disrupted how they were informed about local events. That is to say, many of them complained that they wanted to be informed about things going on locally and didn't seem to grasp the magnitude of all of the in-person events not going on because of the pandemic, instead blaming the lack of coverage or calendar information on local news outlets.

3.Audience anchoring practices or "media ritual"

Several participants said they subscribe to the physical newspaper because they want to know what's going on in the community. One participant said specifically that he recently had moved to town and subscribed to the local newspaper to find out what's going on.

> (Mikel): "I try to keep up with local politics, and the Times-Call is good for that. I'm also on the email list for the Longmont Leader, and I get an update every day at 2 p.m."

As a related example, three participants said they watch city council meetings on Longmont Public Media/Channel 8, one participant volunteers her time at a local news outlet (outside of the study area), and another participant is on a local senior citizen advisory board. This information seems to link the idea of "news followers" being more involved with their communities to some extent. These people wanted to be informed, and they also said they wanted to give back to the community in some way or another.

Couldry (2004) says media rituals also can be a result of framing (Entman, 1993) as to what appears in the local media versus what does not. As an example from the focus groups, one participant said he saw certain story topics being repeated over and over numerous times in the local newspaper for several months with not much "new" news to report, including an ongoing news story about the city council trying to decide whether or not to allow low-income people to park their campers overnight in Walmart parking lots in town.

> (Ransweil): "The RV ban has been in the paper now for six months, so it seems challenging to create new news with so few reporters."

In all, the focus group findings showed that even though participants say that following local news is not their first priority, they still lament the loss of community that seems to come from not having certain types of local news coverage – specifically arts coverage - as readily available as it was in the past. This was true for both the participants who said they avidly follow all local news and those who said they don't follow any local news.

The "non-news followers" focus group said they felt their communities were elsewhere, including an 80-year-old woman who said she moved to Colorado from the United Kingdom and only follows BBC news (radio and online). As previously mentioned, other "non-news followers" expressed skepticism that they could trust local media outlets and suggested they only trusted information sent to them by friends and family.

Another non-news follower said she used to advertise in local newspapers but now has decided to turn away from local news because she is so worried that there may be misinformation in it. This appears to correspond with the idea of a "news gap" in that journalists believe they're offering value (and Bourdieu's idea of social capital (2005)) by doing independent reporting, where this audience member says there is nothing that will make her trust

what she sees in the local news. This will be addressed more in the conclusion section as a need for more audience education and media literacy. It seems to fit aspects of the literature of the review that suggest audience members must engage with verified news and information in a democracy to make it function well (Reese, 2021).

On the social media front, focus group participants seemed to think social media sites such as Nextdoor give them information they need, even as several made fun of certain aspects of it. While Nextdoor was not originally an area of questioning, during the focus group discussion in one meeting about getting news "for free," one participant told others that they could receive "news" on Nextdoor, leading to a long conversation among participants about whether government press releases, advertising from Amazon and requests from neighbors actually constituted news. Participants were polite to each other and as a result, perhaps, did not come to a conclusion about the idea of what actually constitutes news. From an academic perspective, I shared with them that it's an area that Galtung and Ruge in 1965 decided could be addressed by a taxonomy of news values (timeliness, proximity, bizarreness, impact, relevance, etc.) that researchers continue to study and professors continue to teach to journalism students today.

In response, the participant who talked about Nextdoor the most said she is signed up to receive "alerts" from Nextdoor that have her looking at the social media site several times per day. A follow-up query to the group about Nextdoor found that all of the participants consume information from it, although most are not signed up for the "alerts" function. This appears to be an interesting area of potential future study related to "media as practice" (Couldry, 2004) and the audience for news and information. It also seems to beg the question about whether any of the content found on Nextdoor or other social media sites serves any news function. Certainly, it

is not verified information. Various "news follower" participants suggested that it was helpful information, but that they look more to Nextdoor for entertainment and a feeling of community connection. "Non-news followers" said they shun Nextdoor in favor of their own messaging apps.

## DISCUSSION FROM FOCUS GROUP STUDIES

Based on the previously mentioned recent Pew Research Center demographic that shows more people follow or attend to social media than actual news outlets to search for news (Shearer, 2018) this study's local news participants were an unusual bunch. That is, virtually all of the participants said they search for news among several media products and consume a wide variety of media products that they attend to every day, either through subscription or otherwise. Most of these focus group participants said they do not follow traditional social media sites such as Facebook and Instagram, but three said they look to Twitter for news. It's worth noting here that information on social media sites is not verified by any independent third party, although several social media sites, including Facebook and Twitter have stepped up policing in recent months of incorrect information, which is now "flagged" more often.)

It was somewhat unexpected that all of the "news follower" participants follow numerous news outlets, mostly online, but that they also follow the Nextdoor social media site. This may be related to my study recruitment methods at three local news outlets rather than in the general population. The focus on looking for "free news" also was unexpected, since participants agree that news outlets cannot produce news if they don't receive funding. In one of the "news follower" focus groups, I asked a question about the idea voters being able to decide to fund a

"library district" in Longmont. This led to a brief discussion about the idea of a community "tax on news" coming from a future community library district. Just one participant had heard about the idea of a library district, and none seemed to know what I was talking about when I tried to explain more about it.

Also, it seems that none of the audience members valued or even thought about whether a news organization had the prestige of winning awards for reporting – the idea of "symbolic capital" espoused by Bourdieu (2005). Based on the focus group discussions, it is unclear if the audience members in focus groups would have thought more about this idea if it was presented to them as something to discuss. News followers seemed to take for granted that finding news information was valuable by its nature (perhaps the intrinsic value mentioned in the literature review) while some non-news followers specifically highlighted that they could receive all of the information they needed from friends and neighbors. This suggests that the non-news followers do not expect or want news outlets to have institutional power in society.

Finally, participant complaints about the loss of local civic engagement also were unexpected. Two got into an exchange about how they used to enjoy looking at event calendars in the local news outlet information online (perhaps indicating that they followed local news more than they realized) but that it's not available anymore, not only because of the pandemic, but because the local news outlets have a decreased level of staffing. Another person said that everything is on hold because of the pandemic and suggested that some areas such as local events and corresponding calendar items might bounce back after the pandemic is over.

## CONCLUSION FROM FOCUS GROUP STUDIES

Scholars and those in the journalism industry alike continue to search for ways to combat the financial turmoil facing local news outlets that is causing them to go out of business across the

country at an alarming rate - a new Medill study shows that two local newspapers are going out of business per week around the country, perhaps indicating the larger stresses on local news not only in the case study area, but around the country (Karter, 2022). About 70 million people, or about one-fifth of the United States population, live in an area with no local new outlet or one that's at risk (Karter, 2022).

Much of the academic research in recent years has focused on new business models for journalism, especially new nonprofit business models. How the audience responds to those business models also is a key piece of the puzzle. For that reason, this study focused on the local news audience to help understand audience thinking and behavior, and hopefully yield insights into the news industry's economic turmoil.

In this particular study, focus group participants had lively discussions about paying for news, "following" reporters on social media sites, civic engagement and other themes that illustrate ways that news consumption is changing in the United States.

None of the participants expects to pay for news, which is, perhaps the overarching theme found from this focus group study. This broad idea seems to illustrate that news consumers and non-news consumers alike do not find enough value in news content that they want to subscribe or otherwise pay for it. This particular finding has not been explored much in academic research, perhaps because it seems too obvious. As a related example to show how surprising this finding is in a capitalist society, however, no American consumer would expect to go to a grocery store and not pay for a gallon of milk or a carton of eggs; no American consumer would go to the gas station and not expect to pay to fill up the gas tank.

This is an interesting area for future research. Also, based on the findings of this study, future news consumer/ "the audience" research might focus on "a day in the life" of selected

audience members through ethnographic observation or content analysis of diaries, or both. Researchers also should recruit people who formerly followed local news to find out why they don't anymore, as well as recruit people who never have followed local news. Couldry's "media as practice" theorizing helps create a broad framework that can encompass these groups as well.

## FINDINGS/DISCUSSION – JOURNALIST INTERVIEWS

Ancient Chinese symbols have been translated to mean that crisis yields the opportunity for change. For the last several years, journalists have lived this "crisis" as one of working more and more hours with fewer and fewer people as economic uncertainty clouds the future for local news. News outlets – especially local news outlets - have gone out of business at an astonishing rate in recent years.

Poynter.org puts the number of layoffs and closures at local and national news outlets at an estimated rate of 100 news outlets per year in the last two years (Hare, 2022). The more recent Medill study (Karter 2022) indicates the pace that local news outlets are going out of business continues to accelerate and is now at a rate of two per week. In Colorado, local print and TV news outlets mostly along the Front Range announced scores of additional furloughs and layoffs that most attributed to huge drops in advertising brought on by small business struggles related to the COVID-19 pandemic (Hare, 2022). Overall, from 2000 to 2018, newspaper employment across the country fell by more than 60 percent, or about 1,000 jobs per month, according to the Boston Globe (2018).

All of the changes journalists face in the local news industry landscape seem to flow in one way or another from this loss of workers and revenue. Local journalists who remain in their jobs are called on to do more work with far fewer resources (Abernathy, 2020). During the pandemic, those local journalists battled additional challenges, from public meetings held on

Zoom (and often not accessible to the public) to a loss of in-person communication with each other.

This qualitative study of journalist interviews uses an inductive approach – or allowing data to determine the themes – because of the continued rapidly changing nature of what remains of local journalism. While my field theory framework (Bourdieu, 2005) gave me some ideas about what to expect from the journalists, the drop in the number of journalists as well as the unprecedented change in conditions related to the global COVID-19 pandemic, made me decide to use the inductive approach.

For this reason, I decided to use thematic analysis coding to examine the nine interviews I was able to conduct in the case study area. This small number of interviews in this aspect of the study is directly related to the small number of local journalists who work in the case study area. I interviewed editors and reporters from the Longmont Times-Call and the Longmont Leader about aspects of Longmont local news. My questions are attached in the appendix of this study.

I also used a latent approach regarding the data, which means I tried to examine the subtext underlying what the journalists said in some cases. Because I have a background as a journalist, some latent approach themes presented themselves generally throughout the interviews, although they did not have a stronger representation than the thematic analysis themes.

Tracy (2010) suggests that the researchers try to be aware of their intrinsic biases regarding their research. This is why I mention this area of latent analysis related to my previous professional work as it pertains to my qualitative research.

Some of the local journalist statements made in these interviews led to areas of further exploration and more study on this topic. Based on the literature, information from nonprofit

newsletters (such as Nieman Lab, Poynter and others) as well as my nine interviews, it appears that these local journalists in the case study area in Colorado are facing many of the same issues that other local journalists across the country are facing. (This is seen both in academic research, but more commonly in industry and foundation nonprofit work on journalists. This gathered information all seems to reflect the continued broad financial and social/sociological stresses buffeting the journalism industry.

I familiarized myself with the data and then coded it for themes (Babbie, 2016; Miles, Huberman and Saldana, 2020) I reviewed those themes, based on the literature review, and looked for areas of similarity and difference between themes in the literature and new themes that I was able to identify.

Thematic analysis coding of these particular local journalist interviews led to three key themes for journalists in this local case study area:

1. Local newsroom cultures struggled with "doing less with less".
2. Some local journalist social media interactions and other interactions with the public changed.
3. Some journalists avoid web metrics and other online data while others embrace it.

The three overarching themes: 1.) Communication/"doing less with less"; 2.) Social media interactions with the public; and 3.) Web metrics, address RQ3: What do local journalists perceive that audiences want and need?

After discussing various aspects and key pieces of interviews that answer this first question, I will move to a discussion about how the findings answer question RQ3A: How do local

journalist perceptions about audiences influence news production?; and RQ3B: Is there a disconnect between what local journalists value and what local audiences value?

To help make the findings easier to read, I gave each journalist name a number and put the list of names and numbers in an appendix at the end of this section.

RQ3: What do local journalists perceive that audiences want and need?

1. Communication/"doing less with less"

While the interviewed journalists had worked for news outlets for different amounts of time (from one year to 30 years), all of them perceived that their news outlets have a far diminished capability to cover stories in the local case study city. Four of them specifically gave examples of how they used to go on assignments where both reporters and photographers would be on scene. All four of them lamented about how now their newsrooms have few photographers, and how they are expected to take their own pictures and short video clips in some cases. This qualitative finding is reinforced by the quantitative date in the content analysis area of this study, where nearly all of the photos for the online-only news outlet were provided by sources and public relations agencies during the time period of the study.

In a related measure, a photographer (4) at the legacy news outlet complained about the workload at his news outlet and the fact that he had more assignments and less time during the study time period then he did when he started his career. Two reporters and an editor expressed thoughts about now having to take pictures themselves and the additional amount of time it takes to do a good job with photojournalism (5)(7)(9).

Some of the journalists who have worked longer in the profession pointed out that when reporters are stretched thin, they have less time to check in with local officials as regularly as

they used to in the past (8). Most local government officials have been working from home during the pandemic. In a related example, many public meetings were held online for months during the pandemic, where neither reporters nor the public were able to ask questions or interact with elected officials because of the software the local officials used. During the journalist interviews, many expressed a vague feeling of unease about government corruption that could be happening even though there were no specific examples, other than the public meetings not being interactive online. Some of the reporters and editors said they wouldn't necessarily know where to look or have time to work on investigating tips from their sources without giving any specific example.

> "There are stories we can't cover and wish we could. We used to be able to. Local governments are getting away with stuff that they weren't getting away with before." (8)

Along a similar line of thought, two reporters interviewed for this study (5)(7) said that some government sources and members of the public complained that reporters did not cover public meetings the way that they once did.

One reporter said as an example that while she always would try to reach police and fire officials to get information for her stories, she often was forced to quote source information found on social media sites like Twitter because of her tight deadlines. (This idea is dealt with in more detail in the author's own paper on journalistic authority, "Law enforcement "journalism" in the modern age: How does social media erode journalistic authority?") The reporter felt like she could not do her job well because sources would not reply to her individually, even though she always tried to meet with them in person. This addresses the research question indirectly by the reporter indicating that she feels like audiences should get verified information from local

news outlets, not just press statements from local officials. The pandemic made it harder to even reach local officials, this reporter said.

Another aspect of "doing less with less" during the pandemic was how all reporters and editors interviewed for this study said they interacted with each other more often through the Zoom video conferencing software and texting than they did previously (as did millions of other American workers and others around the globe). Before the pandemic, reporters were expected to work in the newsroom and to talk to editors to find out if there were questions about their reporting. During the pandemic, newsroom culture – or how newsrooms operate based on Bourdieu's theory of "habitus" (2005) – was not prevalent at all in the case study area because of social distancing and people working from home.

Two local news reporters (2)(9) specifically brought up this idea, one of them who was an intern and then started working for the online news outlet in the case study area during the pandemic. While she gets tips from her editor and communicates with the editor frequently by text, the reporter says she has never worked in a newsroom and feels awkward about interacting with the editor in person. The other reporter (2) has several more years of experience. She says she can work from home but that she prefers to go to her newsroom so that she can see her editor face to face to make sure she is meeting the requirements of her job.

All in all, each of the interviewed journalists mentioned the feeling of a loss of communication and said they thought it would get better when everyone came back to the office. But several also said that their sources also seemed to want to take advantage of the social distancing measures and remote meeting measures brought on by the pandemic by being less available and responding to phone messages with emails rather than with return phone calls. While a phone call may not be the ideal way to interview a source, it is better than an email in

that it can give journalists the opportunity to hear their sources' voice inflections and ask follow-up questions. (Yopp and McAdams, 2013.)

This thematic area shows the value that journalists place on being independent and verifying information from sources in their work rather than having to rely on press statements and not being allowed to ask questions. However, it also seems to show how little agency journalists have to change how their sources operate and/or find new sources because of the lack of time they have in their jobs.

2. Local journalists' changing social media interactions and other interactions with the public

Local journalists are not immune to the high level of personal stress they face both online and in person. While most of them talk generally about trying to remain independent of outside influence, several also mentioned how they scour social media for trends and interesting tidbits of information as well as to find out what is going on around the region. Three of the journalists say they look for "likes and shares" on social media (1)(7)(9).

"If a story doesn't get shares, I worry about if it's relevant." (9)

In more detail, the three journalists say that they look on social media sites such as Facebook to search for story ideas, which shows the value that some journalists now feel they get from social media. However, the three journalists also say they feel like interactions with the public online feel more stressful, and there can be many negative posts aimed at the news, even if those posts and the particular tone of the comments is not aimed at them personally. At least one journalist said she had gotten away from following social media for work because of the negativity from audience members. Audience members seem to be generally hostile toward

journalists, with the least offensive comments on social media sites about news stories usually being about how journalists "control the narrative," she said (1).

> "For my mental health, it's nice not to have to monitor the Facebook comments. I can look up the comments on the Facebook page, and I don't do it very often anymore." (1)

In particular, this journalist said that school district coverage has been challenging in the local case study area. School district officials post their own information on social media sites, she said. They also try to influence journalists to only write stories that "reflect their (school district officials') values." (1) It's difficult to tell from these journalist interviews whether this local public official's refusal to talk to one reporter is any different than local public officials have ever been. However, it illustrates, perhaps, the increased stresses placed on journalists in the modern day.

The idea that journalists face increased psychological stress related to audience interactions carries over into real life for at least one reporter (2). She said she has had more concerns about her personal safety in recent months and that people have been more negative toward the idea of her being a reporter when she approaches them in person to interview them. In one case, she said that for the first time in her career, she felt uncomfortable at a recent protest on Main Street in Longmont because people carried weapons to express their support for the Second Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. While no one threatened her directly, the reporter said it was "scary" to see a person carrying an assault weapon at the protest, given the continued litany of mass shootings in the United States in recent years.

> "Sometimes it's scary talking to the conservative side, because at one point they were trying to how their support for guns, and had weapons strapped to their chests, and they could have weapons in public. Personally, I try to get both sides, even if it's challenging, though." (2)

3. Web metrics

In addition to specific interactions with the public, the journalists interviewed talk about how web metrics drive their news content. The Longmont Times-Call now uses an online content management system called Social Flow for example, which shows editors and reporters which stories and topics are trending (getting the most interest from audience members) and which stories and photos are getting the most interaction on the website (8). The Longmont Leader posts its number of "likes/shares" at the bottom of each story and also posts its number of members/subscribers at the end of each daily newsletter (6).

Reporters (2)(5)(9) constantly look to Facebook and other online platforms for story ideas (this is addressed in more detail in the discussion ssection). Tips also come to them from social media messages directly to them or to editors.

## DISCUSSION

RQ3: What do local journalists perceive that audiences want?

All of the interviewed local journalists in the case study area appear to embrace the idea that audience engagement will help them with economic revenue. However, many suggest that they push back against specific audience requests for content (the previously mentioned meeting coverage, for example). Certainly, the reporters talking about their informal routines and placing importance on scouring social media sites for trends and tips indicates that there's much more audience influence into what goes into their daily newsgathering than there was before the advent of social media sites.

In addition, using online software engagement tools such as Social Flow (8) or Hearken (mentioned in the literature review) seems to indicate at least one of the key underlying changes

that happens without much comment now in local newsrooms. Even if there is no specific "audience engagement" number or push associated with a particular story or topic, the reporters all are generally aware of which stories receive the most audience engagement, mainly from looking at "likes" and "shares" on social media pages.

When it comes to the question of what local journalists perceive that audiences want, the answer is, it seems to depend on the journalist. Some journalists in the case study area seem to feel like they should not interact with audience members at all on social media (as previously mentioned by a journalist saying she did not look at Facebook comments anymore), while others report getting gratification from seeing the number of "likes" or "shares" from audience members when stories are posted on social media. This finding appears to indicate perhaps a culture that's changing from what the literature shows in terms of Bourdieu's idea of "habitus" and journalistic culture. This may be especially true in an online-only culture, and may be related to less newsroom interaction between reporters and editors, which would reinforce traditional newsroom culture about remaining free of outside influence.

For example, as previously suggested, some reporters in this study are more likely to interact with people on social media and ask them for tips (7)(9). Other reporters (1) and the two interviewed editors (6)(8) are more likely to look at their email inboxes to find tips. This is an area of study that bears more research as it's difficult to tell from this limited pool of local reporters and editors if these differences in routines are related to things like age, length of time in their jobs or some other aspect of journalism or lack of journalistic culture in the local journalism case study area. Because all of the journalists interviewed for this study are relatively young, other than the editors, it's difficult to tell if this is related to age or time in career or not. Overall, the idea of news routines being a key part of journalistic culture is a heavily researched

area of journalism in academia. This study could be expanded in the future to examine this idea of changes in news routines in more detail. Journalists overall generally have indicated that they do not want to be influenced by audience members. But the changing economic landscape appears to have changed the journalistic ideas to support audience engagement tools now.

> "I think our reporters follow routines who fit who they are. It is a mark of a good reporter to live by their ethics." (6)

RQ3A: How do local journalist perceptions about audiences influence news production?

This question seems to be answered indirectly by journalists talking about their frustrations of not being able to spend time on the stories they think they need to (lack of meeting coverage or a lack of photojournalism at the online-only news outlet). That is to say, the Longmont Times-Call journalists continue to produce the stories they think are important based on their newsroom culture, and the Longmont Leader journalists produce more soft news stories, and the audience seems to want more entertainment, creating the "news gap" between Longmont Times-Call journalists and audience members that's mentioned in the literature. This seems to be related to the drop in the number of subscribers/audience members consuming news from local news outlets.

In addition, when there are fewer journalists trying to cover a local community, the remaining journalists try to pick and choose stories they think will be valuable to the community, although the audience focus groups indicate more that audiences are frustrated that they don't see the detailed coverage that they want on a variety of topics.

Finally, since at least two journalists gave examples about how they feel uncomfortable about potentially being targeted by audience members – this also appears to show how some

members of the audience are negatively affecting what journalists produce. This is an area addressed generally by Bourdieu's field theory (2005) that journalists try to remain free of outside influence. But the greater stresses against journalists in the environments in which they operate locally and nationally are ones that can have an effect on what they produce (Giddens, 1984). For example, the journalist interviews in this study showed that some journalists try not to look at social media because they don't want to see the negative and hateful comments from social media users. Other journalists said they feel worried for their safety after the constant drumbeat of mass shootings around the country and them seeing people carrying weapons at a public demonstration. This is another societal example (Giddens, 1984) of a negative impact of society on local journalists that cannot be overstated. For example, if journalists feel more threatened when they do in-person reporting, they may stay inside more often and not produce as much in-person news coverage. This idea of local journalists feeling threatened just for doing their jobs – not just feeling uncomfortable, but being verbally threatened online or potentially at public protests appears to be an escalation in society (Giddens, 1984) against journalists and another new area of study of local journalists across the country that bears more examination. The fact that there are fewer local journalists working now and more audience members apparently threatening them, either directly or indirectly, is bound to affect news production in unexpected ways.

In addition, the idea of having fewer journalists struggling to do more work generally might be one explanation for the high number of press releases found in the online news outlet content analysis. This topic area will be discussed more in the conclusion of this study, but bears further future study as well.

RQ3B: Is there a disconnect between what local journalists value and what local audiences value?

As one of the biggest findings from the focus groups, audiences want to find local news online for free and don't seem to differentiate between news that has been verified through reporting and press releases that are put out by public relations practitioners working for government agencies or private companies (or both).

Journalists interviewed for this particular aspect of the study say that audience members complain the most about when they have to pay for local news (7)(8). The audience focus group members seem to have similar feelings, sharing information with each other about how to look at local news without paying for it. This direct economic value seems to be the biggest disconnect between what journalists value and what local audiences value.

> "People criticize us for not making news free, and if articles are open and not paywalled, that's a tricky thing. (Paywalls) deter readership or clicks, and then we cut the number of days that we print." (7)

Audiences are so disinterested in paying for local news, whether they value it or not, that some of the interviewed journalists worry that it's too late to convince them to pay for it in the future. Journalists still want to inform their communities, but they have no new financing to pay for their work. Journalists continue to do reporting in the community and to cover that they think is important, but it appears that some members of the public's desire for that work seems to have gone away based on the difficulty in getting a focus group together of non-local news subscribers. Some local news consumers still want to make their opinions heard through letters to the editor, but national political polarization also has filtered down to the local level, and some of the information has no factual basis, according to one editor.

"Our goals, our aspirations for what we want our jobs to be haven't changed, the desire to inform our communities, accurately and fairly hasn't changed. I don't know anyone who works for me who isn't willing to bust their butts. But everything else has changed." (8)

Based on the audience focus groups, it appears that many audience members don't understand the difference between news and propaganda/press releases. Some audience members said they like to receive the Longmont Leader newsletters and noted that the newsletters were free (there is advertising on the Longmont Leader website: www.longmontleader.com). The content analysis shows that more bylines, indicating more verified local reporting, are in the Longmont Times-Call. This shows that the journalists at the legacy news outlet still seem to value the idea reporting on news stories. In addition, those stories have more quotes in them, showing the value to journalists at the legacy news outlet of finding outside sources to talk to. Finally, as illustrated in the content analysis, the Longmont Times-Call has longer stories (more words) indicating the journalistic value, perhaps, of more detailed and in-depth coverage. None of the audience members in the audience focus groups remarked on any of the bylined stories or the quotes in those stories, which may indicate that they do not value those aspects of the news they receive. It may be that audiences don't understand the significance of a local byline or quote from multiple sources as indicators of quality or journalistic integrity related to Bourdieu's field theory (2005). However, it may be inferred that since more people have signed up to receive the free Longmont Leader newsletters than who subscribe to the Longmont Times-Call now that they don't value the independent reporting or number of quotes or length of the stories. None of the audience members in the focus groups said anything about whether they were reading press releases, another difference between the legacy news outlet – the Longmont Times-Call and the online Longmont Leader.

All of these areas of difference between what journalists value and what audiences value appears to illustrate the "news gap" between journalists and audiences. The journalists at the Longmont Times-Call continue to produce news that they believe to be valuable because of its outside sources and independent reporting. Because none of the audience focus group members brought up these particular aspects of news, it appears that at least these particular audience members do not know the difference between verified reporting and press releases. This all may also be related to the questions that were asked. However, many audience members were sophisticated about the financial needs of the news industry, so it seems surprising that some would not also mention the verification needs of the news industry.

This appears to be just one aspect of the "news gap" between journalists and audiences. Another aspect is the audience members' relative lack of discussion about payment for news and why it's important to help pay for independent reporting.

Based on the literature review, but also on some aspects of the journalist interviews study and the audience focus groups study, the "news gap" between journalists and audiences appears to be widening. This seems to be another valuable area of future research.

## Conclusion

Overall, these journalist interviews showed that local news journalists generally try to follow a journalistic "culture" based on their professionalism and the norms they follow to try to remain free of outside influence (as discussed generally by Bourdieu's field theory (2005)). However, the COVID-19 pandemic has left all of them working remotely, which has both editors and reporters complaining about lack of communication at various times. In fact, the COVID-19 pandemic has changed work situations across the United States in a broader sense, which seems to be beyond the scope of this specific study on local news. Across the board in all industries,

more worker routines are now remote, with people working at home, and more coworker interaction is now done online as suggested by the increase in work tools such as Slack and other work accountability tools (Kelley, 2022).

In a separate measure, it seems that the local journalists are more willing to carefully consider aspects of audience engagement that they might not have been in the past – especially related to new content management strategies. It's an interesting finding that the local journalists at the Longmont Times-Call use the social media management tool Social Flow, which can help quantify audience attention in terms of likes, comments and shares as well as prioritize content that is getting the most audience member likes, comments and shares, according to the company website.

## CONCLUSION

Journalism studies scholars face both exciting and challenging opportunities when thinking about how to do research into local news outlets in turmoil during the global COVID-19 pandemic. Participant recruitment also can be challenging in terms of finding representative samples of participants. In fact, all research during a pandemic appears to yield information about a journalism industry in a crisis that only continues to get worse in terms of news outlets going out of business.

In this study, I have tried to use media sociology theorizing as well as more broad discussion of practice theory in society. Specifically, I used Bourdieu's field theory (2005) to explain how journalists try to remain free of outside influence. I also used Couldry's "media as practice" theorizing (2004) related to practice theory (Bourdieu, 1977, and others) to examine audiences and how they react to local news in an environment where they have virtually limitless information. Both quantitative and qualitative methods – quantitative content analysis and

qualitative journalist interviews and audience focus group interviews – help illustrate various aspects of why the concept of "value" might help increase audience engagement with local news. This area has been studied nationally from various angles, and locally in a few other countries, but does not appear to have been studied locally in the United States. In any mixed methods study, triangulation of data can be used to show a whole perhaps greater than a sum of its parts, which is another important aspect of this conversation.

## LOCAL NEWS IS THREATENED

Triangulating the data from the three aspects of this study and discussing it in relationship to the traditional economic metric of value – subscribers/subscriptions – appears to show that local news is threatened – especially at the legacy news outlet, the Longmont Times-Call.

The content analysis shows that journalistic values at the Longmont Times-Call are related to independent, verified reporting as suggested by a slightly larger number of bylined stories found in the content analysis, and the measure of more quotes in those stories. The Longmont Times-Call stories that have quotes have an average of 8 quotes, while the Longmont Leader stories that have quotes have an average of 2 quotes.

The audience focus groups study shows that audience members value free news. This appears to be confirmed by the number of subscribers being above 14,000 for the online-only Longmont Leader and the number of subscribers being about 1,200 at the subscription-based Longmont Times-Call. This aspect of value might be expanded in discussing Couldry's "media as practice." In the modern-day, it appears that audience routines are now online, so the news and information they're looking for also is online.

Some audience focus group members also said that they value reporting from individual journalists by "following" those journalists on social media sites – most commonly on Twitter. This is an important area of research that merits further study. It appears to be related not only to "media as practice," but also, perhaps to Bruns' (2007) idea of "produsage," where audience members can share online information with each other freely and easily.

In a related measure about what news content is "free" and what news content is shared and who shares it, journalists at the Longmont Times-Call are expected to promote their own work on social media (8). The editor used to watch over all content that went out on social media but now seems to not have time. This could indicate a change in news values, or it could be another illustration of how journalists must "do less with less" because there are so few of them doing the work. As a requirement of newsroom culture, edtiors used to approve all social media posts. Now, editors allow reporters to make social media posts, which are essentially marketing and promotion for their news stories (8). This is another anecdote (reported in only one interview because only two editors are working in the case study area) but an important one in that it raises implications for changes to the aspect local journalistic habitus in the case study area. Bourdieu (2005) theorizes that "habitus" belongs to a group or class, but this particular interview indicates that it now may belong to individual reporters in some cases.

This study started with the historic nature of journalistic autonomy. The literature review included some aspects that can help scholars understand why audiences seem to value local news and perhaps local knowledge less with every passing year. I come to this research as a former journalist with practical knowledge and industry audience surveys that showed it was important to incorporate local news more into both mobile platforms and social media platforms. This study's literature review also indicates that technology plays a role in how people consume news

as well as what they're looking for – and that they expect their local news outlets to be good neighbors rather than watchdogs on local government (restated here for the sake of the summary) (Poindexter et al., 2006; Weaver et al., 2017). In addition, and also repeated here for emphasis because of its importance in recent years – no matter how good journalists are at doing their jobs, if local newspapers cannot fulfill their watchdog role on democratic institutions anymore, democracy will be greatly weakened, along with the role of the press in that democracy (Gans, 2010; Hamilton, 2011; Reese, 2021).

While this is a complex issue related to the rapid rise in technology in society and to national politics, Reese (2021) suggests that former audience engagement in newspapers, be it national newspapers or local newspapers, has gone away and is not coming back, presenting a scary alternative to democracy – a rise in populism. However, despite the former American president and other elected officials talking for more than four years about "fake news" and journalists as "enemies of the people," a lack of audience engagement in news and civil society is not a new concept. Local journalists have long struggled against local governments closing public meetings and keeping public records secret. What that means in today's terms is that holding powerful people – including local elected officials - to account is always valuable in a democracy, and that democracy cannot survive without journalism (Christians et al, 2009; Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2014; Hess and Waller, 2017).

Outside pressures have never been greater on journalists – especially financial pressures. This represents an opportunity for those interested in reviving local journalism. Because our political system has been tilted more toward the political economy of deregulation (Pickard (2018) government officials have not been forced to emphasize the value of local journalism as much as they could in recent years. This is a mistake that must be brought back into balance to

help strengthen not only journalism, but American democracy. Scholars have often criticized journalists in the past, but there is no reason that in the future, both scholars and government could not support news as a "public good" (to be discussed more detail under "areas of future research" (Pickard, 2020; Bourdieu, 2005a). This is a conversation that must happen now, in academia and across all sectors of society.

Not only is it important to understand what journalists and audiences do separately from each other (as conceptualized by my former career as a journalist and the pilot study of audience focus groups) it's also crucial to understand how and what local audiences actually consume, as social media becomes ever more prevalent in American consumers' lives. Scholars traditionally looked at normative theories of why news engagement is important to a healthy democracy (Christians et al. 2009; Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2014), but the idea of "local" journalism often has been relegated to understanding of what "hyperlocal" (Schmitz Weiss, 2015; Usher, 2019) might mean to an online world as traditional news outlets go away.

Product thinking, and more specifically, design thinking, may be one aspect of a solution to journalism's malaise. Royal (2018) and Aaronson (2020) suggest that bridge roles in newsrooms may serve to kickstart new ideas. Certainly, one of those ideas has been to offer local news on mobile phones (Colorado Media Project, 2020; coloradomediaproject.com). However, local journalist interviews related to "doing less with less" may explain why technology innovation has happened more often in national newsrooms than in local ones to date. However, academic research into both product thinking and audience engagement (Nelson, 2018 and others) show that this may be an area of hope for the news industry.

## 2. AUDIENCE EDUCATION

When it comes to audience research related to the "news gap," found in this study, there's certainly room to discuss media literacy related both to findings of this study and in general. In the past, scholars who research the "value" of journalism generally have suggested that if journalists are able to increase the quality of journalism through independent reporting, being transparent about sources and the like, more audience members will become subscribers. In addition, audience engagement often is discussed in terms of online metrics, which scholars also have used to find that audiences search for soft news (Mindich, 2004) and entertainment (Plaisance, 2014; Turkle, 2011). (Boczkowski and Mitchelstein, 2015 are a notable exception, finding that audiences are looking for hard news.) The content analysis portion of this study shows some similar findings in terms of the Longmont Leader focusing on soft news stories, among other areas.

However, audience focus group data from this study showed that audiences generally were not aware that journalists are trying to follow all of these measures of "value". From this aspect, more audience education seems to be key to increasing trust of independent journalism in the future.

## HOW THIS ALL FITS TOGETHER, AND WHAT IT MEANS

This study responds not only to a gap in the literature about how waning audience engagement influences local news, it also illustrates some of the measures journalists can take to make sure their content is of value to the audience.

First, based on the content analysis of two local news outlets in my case study area, it appears that journalists spend their scarce resources on more and longer storytelling, which

studies have shown that the audience wants (Turkle, 2011; Weaver et al. 2017). Gone for the most part are the long, explanatory stories about governmental issues, to be replaced by feel-good features, many of which come from ideas and trends first posted on social media. In fact, while there is local government reporting in both news outlets about city council meetings, the content analysis data set showed no particular controversy or watchdog reporting about anything in the local government, which seems to indicate the threat that faces local journalism in the case study area.

In the content analysis, it appears that reporters and editors at the two news outlets in the case study through their choices of "soft news" show that they care about the community by reporting on interesting people and groups (Poindexter et al. 2006). The content analysis data set does not appear to show any solutions as suggested by the Solutions Journalism movement, however (Ellis et al. 2021). And when it comes to journalism's "watchdog role" over democratic institutions (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2014), nothing in the content analysis indicates that reporters are able to play any particular watchdog role on government in the two-week data set time frame in question. On the other hand, it could be that because there are two news outlets in this case study area that behind the scenes, government officials are operating in a more democratic manner, since they know that their actions are watched at city council meetings and the like.

This research project also responds to the rapid changes going on in the journalism industry. Repeated here again for emphasis – more than 600 local news outlets went out of business across the United State in 2020-2021, and in 2022, the number grew to two local news outlets per week (Hare, 2021, Karter 2022). Even if every single future journalism study focused on aspects of this stunning change, I would argue that journalism studies researchers won't be

able to keep up with aspects of all of the changes to journalism and society. In the study's content analysis, one can use findings to discuss trends in coverage. However, it's difficult to know how, exactly, those trends are affecting audiences without doing more longitudinal work. Certainly, every local community in the United States has at least a few commonalities. But because the individuals in each community all have different ways of thinking, it may be years before researchers can truly grasp the magnitude of the loss.

It's easy to be optimistic about the changes going on in the industry, what with nonprofits and foundations getting involved in funding issues. But this very limited study of a content analysis and an audience focus group pilot study seems to indicate a weakening in community engagement already. In addition, audience focus group members who are willing to discuss the issues seem to be mourning the loss of community. This may be related just as strongly to people being more isolated during the COVID-19 pandemic as it is to less local news coverage. However, we don't know what the people who are not willing to come to a focus group might be thinking about local news, or if they're thinking it's important or relevant to their daily lives at all.

Some researchers in other countries (Hess and Waller, 2017; Meijer, 2019) have tried to examine community fragmentation in their own countries. However, American hegemony and the differing media sociologies of each country make it difficult to extrapolate more than even the most broad brush strokes about how these changes might affect society. Certainly, if Habermas' public sphere (1989) is now online rather than in the real world, as some media watchers have postulated, that's another aspect of changes in real life related to community engagement and news outlets. The corresponding shift in audience news consumption habits from local news to national news also does not bode well for community. (Abernathy, 2020,

Hess and Waller, 2017) In addition, consumer buying habits going online/to Amazon also has grown rapidly during the pandemic. This also seems to mean there is no going back in terms of the traditional advertising business model (Hamilton 2011).

In this study, I have discussed theories that can help scholars understand what is happening in the local news industry, especially what is happening to the audience for that industry. I also have tried to unpack why both qualitative and quantitative methods – focus groups, interviews and content analysis – are the best methods to answer my research questions about what audiences value and what journalists value, as a way to figure out more details to solve the current crisis of local news outlets going out of business. In any mixed methods study, triangulation of data can be used to show a whole perhaps greater than a sum of its parts, which is another important aspect of this conversation.

## LIMITATIONS AND AREAS OF FUTURE RESEARCH

Certainly, doing research during COVID-19 presented unique challenges, not only from a recruitment perspective, but also in doing both focus group interviews and journalist interviews in terms of where to hold the interviews that would be safe or offer a low chance of infection for both the participants and the researcher. In addition, recruitment in the case study area yielded many interested audience participants in an older age range, but only one participant in her teens. Follow-ups were difficult because of COVID – most participants preferred to follow up online as well, and that often can yield less rich information (Tracy, 2010). In addition, it appeared that all of the audience focus group members were white.

In the future, this existing study can be expanded to examine how to incorporate diversity and equity in audiences into saving local news. Census bureau statistics show that the case study

area of Longmont, Colorado has a 25 percent Latino population. There appears to be no existing research (academic research or industry research) into the news consumption of this particular population. This study can be expanded by working with the ELPASO community group in Longmont to find out more about members' news needs. This group of Latino parents has come together with help from the local nonprofit Community Foundation of Boulder County.

Members of the ELPASO group and others in the community can be recruited specifically through a Spanish-language journalist who works for one of the news outlets in question as well as through specific Latinx chambers of commerce and other civic groups – including school groups in the surrounding area. The Community Foundation of Boulder County, a nonprofit, grant-making organization that has created this specific ELPASO K-12 schools advocacy group, which is expected to yield a new set of audience participants who did not respond to previous recruitment tools.

On another front, the limited number of journalists in the case study area also may be seen as a limitation. Future research on local journalists may yield additional insights, especially ones in areas outside of a metro area, as well as ones in lower income areas.

Finally, the case study area includes the two print news outlets, but it also includes the local public TV station (Longmont Public Media, Channel 8) as well as several metro-area TV stations, radio stations and community social media pages, among other media that serves the local community. It would be helpful to broaden both the recruiting through other media channels as well as to examine more journalists, audiences and content in a broader area surrounding the case study area to understand in more detail some of the findings of this study.

In the future, it also would be valuable to examine more economic matters related to local news outlets. A local news business model taxonomy would show the positive aspects of local

news outlets and perhaps offer instructions for methods that could be used more broadly. Gans (2010) has suggested that more than one measure is needed to create successful business models for the future. Underpinning this study, perhaps, is the unspoken idea that future funding models could focus on news as a public good (Pickard, 2018) (see below) to create more value for both news producers and news consumers. This idea is gaining traction in Colorado and throughout some states in the United States, including New Jersey, where $2 million from the government sale of the public broadcast channel spectrum was used to strengthen local news outlets; along with California and Massachusetts (Karr, 2022). This is an idea that is addressed indirectly through this study's focus group findings – that existing audiences don't believe they should have to pay for news. In the literature, this area of research also is seen in business model research of Hamilton (2011, 2016). Various newspapers, foundations and think tanks working around the country are focused on new business models, including the work to make the Salt Lake Tribune newspaper a nonprofit entity (Gustus, 2021); work to incorporate more public broadcast funding into news outlets of all kinds (Karr, 2022); and discussions about how government funding might affect news outlets of the future (Converse, 2021).

Gans (2010) suggests that successful news outlets use several different funding models rather than relying on just one. In addition, finding business model aspects that work and help increase revenue, whether indirectly or directly, is bound to help journalists create more value for audiences that encourage more audience members to re-engage with local news and their communities. I plan to create a taxonomy of local news business models in this rapidly changing financial environment, which will help focus academics and investors on trends and on what's working.

Another important area of future research is related to media literacy programs, which may help educate the public about details of both journalism and propaganda. This appears to be a way to counteract the "news gap" found in this study and could also help inform more journalism research. One such media literacy program is the "hands-on" individual class offered online by the Poynter Institute (Poynter.org) in St. Petersburg, Florida. The Center for Public Deliberation in Fort Collins, Colorado, also has worked on disseminating audience materials related to media literacy and education. I propose that more work be done in this area as it relates to universities creating ties with local communities to increase local news consumption. This can happen through listening sessions with local communities either in the case study area or beyond, as well as expanded focus groups.

In perhaps a related measure, researchers have started to examine the "Solutions Journalism" movement as that can help to build trust and engagement with audiences. Solutions journalism is generally defined as journalism outlets focusing on reporting about social problems with an eye toward offering ways to help solve those problems.

As seen in the audience focus group study, most people who are news subscribers have never heard the term "Solutions Journalism" or know what it means or how it might provide value to them or get them more engaged in local news. This area of focus (media literacy and Solutions Journalism) would require additional educational work in the case study area and around the country as a positive aspect of what might be able to engage audiences rather than the negative findings of the current participants from this study, which indicate less engagement with verified local news.

## NEWS AS A PUBLIC GOOD

Finally, I suggest that if audiences don't value local news enough anymore to pay for it, as suggested by the findings in this study, policymakers should find ways to keep it healthy.

This area of news "value" is one that assumes journalism's importance to a healthy democracy (restated here). Pickard (2018); McChesney (2004); and others – mainly journalism foundation thought leaders - suggest that the way forward and to add value to the current hollowed-out news organization system (Abernathy 2018) is to think of news as a "public good" that can benefit from and receive more direct government subsidies. Public goods are things like parks, libraries and clean air. They're generally considered to be "non-rivalrous" in that everyone can use the same product without detracting from each other and "non-excludable" in that it's difficult to prevent people from not paying (Bourdieu, 2005a).

Public goods generally offer tremendous value to society (Pickard, 2018), although people are often unwilling to pay directly for them. Reese's media sociology perspective (2021) on public goods is to mention them in the context of research from Pickard and McChesney. He goes on to say, however, that he generally is optimistic about the ways that journalists and news organizations are protected by the U.S. constitution and their capability for continuing to survive as an institution, despite the current economic turmoil. Further, he says that journalistic institutions are complex social structures … with interlocking networks of norms and roles … that can sustain .. coherence, endurance and value." (p. 57)

This research and theorizing about news as a "public good" is similar to Bourdieu's theorizing that governments should subsidize "public goods" such as education, libraries and other things in society that help equalize opportunities for citizens and reduce inequalities (Bourdieu, 2005a). If journalism were to become a "public good" paid for by the government,

however, journalists would face a credibility issue and would have to figure out ways to illustrate their "habitus" or independence from outside influence (Benson and Neveu, 2005). Blumler suggests that journalists can follow the "doxa" of their traditional routines, norms and structures of newsroom production as a starting point to remain independent of outside/government influence (Blumler, 2005, Bourdieu, 2005).

Further, Bourdieu says that consumers might feel like they already have freedom of choice in terms of news content in the United States, since there's so much of it, but in fact, their choices are heavily constrained by the previously discussed lack of government regulation (Pickard, 2018). That lack of government regulation has led to consolidation into the "Big 5" news corporations owning 90 percent of the media, which means little variety (and I would argue, little value). This was mentioned in the literature review but brought up again here for argument's sake.

U.S. regulation used to be more in favor of the news organizations, illustrating the historic value of journalism to democracy. Politicians supported newspapers more than 200 years ago by creating preferential postal rates for news distribution in the Postal Act of 1792 (Ramey, 2007). The government also regulated broadcast media more strictly in the past – with the Blue Book of 1946 requiring radio stations to abide by a number of public service requirements (Pickard, 2015) and the Fairness Doctrine of 1949 requiring broadcasters to present controversial issues of public importance in a manner that was honest, equitable and balanced (Ibid).

Current thought leaders at several journalism foundations (Holliday, 2021; Karr, 2022, etc.) also have led the call for a shift in our thinking in American society – that journalism can be a "public good" that's financed through tax dollars. This normative theory idea generally feeds

into the idea of Habermas's public sphere – that all people are involved with discussing the issues of the day to create a greater community than just the government.

At least one Colorado official, Rep. Lisa Cutter, is taking the lead in the state legislature to get a tax credit bill passed that focuses on the idea of journalism as a "public good". Nationally, Sen. Amy Klobuchar in Minnesota has reintroduced the Journalism Competition and Preservation Act.

The Colorado bill calls for government tax credits to small businesses who advertise in local news outlets and to taxpayers who subscribe or donate to local news outlets (Hutchins, March 22, 2022; Roberts, 2022, March 11). A market study in Colorado shows that 81 percent of adults read some sort of print or online news (Ibid.). Cutter says her new legislation can "help local media, and in the process, help our communities grow stronger" (Roberts, March 11, 2022).

In Minnesota and nationally, Sen. Amy Klobuchar is calling for legislators to pass laws to get social media company founders and others to pay more to the news industry. Earlier this year, she reintroduced the Journalism Competition and Preservation Act, which is designed to do that.

These new and untried government funding ideas to focus on "news as a public good" bring this study full circle, as I originally started doing research on Longmont Public Media because of its public TV/Channel 8 funding background. Longmont Public Media was spun off into the Longmont Observer news outlet, which was sold to the Longmont Leader (one of the two news outlets this study focuses on). At the time, the Longmont Public Media model was to become a "library district" in which voters would approve a taxing district to raise money for public institutions such as a public library, which would in turn create an independent board to oversee a new news outlet or an existing public access TV news outlet. Longmont Public Media

may still go in this direction, and the Boulder Public Library – just outside of the case study area – also has explored getting voters to approve a library district.

Finally, in the last few years, several social media companies also have put grant-making programs in place to help local news outlets survive. The Google search engine company has created the Google Local News Initiative, which offers grant funding to local news outlets across the country, including the former Longmont Observer. Executives at the social media platform Twitter also have said they want to help keep local news healthy (Fisher, 2021).

Overall, the "news as a public good" research area calls for a working group to come together to think about key findings from this mixed-methods study related to the content analysis findings, the audience focus group information and the journalist interviews. These future funding ideas and research must yield solutions for the journalism industry, as no less than our U.S. democracy may be at stake.

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# XI. APPENDICES

## APPENDIX 1

Semi-structured interview questions used in focus group research (approved by CU IRB protocol 20-0542):

1. Do you search for local news? If so, where do you find it, and what do you use it for?
2. Where specifically do you look for news on a typical day?
3. What makes you decide to look for local news or national news when you are interested in reading news? (Example: A friend sends you a news story about something happening in Boulder and you want to find out more details.)
4. How often would you say that you like to share local news and information with other people, and how do you share it? (Examples: How often do you mention something verbally to another person, how often do you forward information by email, how often do you "like" something on social media sites, etc.)
5. How does looking at news and information help you operate in the local world, if at all? (Examples: You look at the weather forecast and put on a coat when the temperature drops. You hear on the radio about a traffic accident on your route to work and decide to go another way. You hear about a new fire district tax on the November ballot and make sure you're registered to vote.)
6. Where do you most commonly look for news and information that helps you operate in the world?

## APPENDIX 2

Interview questions used in journalist interview research (approved by CU IRB protocol 22-028)
Study title: Saving local news: How 'value' can increase audience engagement

Any or all questions on this list may be asked of any journalist participant who works at the Longmont Leader or the Longmont Times-Call, or who has worked at either news outlet in the past.

1. What does/did a typical day look like for you in terms of the news production routines you follow?
2. What factor or factors do you think have the biggest influence on your work?
3. Do you think that audience members are aware of the things that journalists are doing to try to remain free of outside influence?
4. If you think audience members are not aware of what journalists do to try to remain free of outside influence, could you talk in more detail about that?
5. If you think audience members are aware of what journalists do to try to remain free of outside influence, do you think their awareness is changing in any way?
6. Are there any aspects of your daily schedule that you think you use to help you remain free of outside influence?
7. Could you give examples in either case?
8. Overall, what's the biggest change in how you feel that audiences perceive the value of what you do since you started your career?
9. Overall, what's the biggest aspect that has stayed the same about how audiences perceive the value of what you do since you started your career?

10. Do you have any other related thoughts?

APPENDIX 3 – List of journalists interviewed for this part of the study
Interviewed journalists in alphabetical order (IRB consent forms available on request) – numbers correspond to numbers in text:

(1) Amy Golden (Longmont Leader)
(2) Kelsey Hammon (Longmont Times-Call)
(3) Mandy Jenkins (former general manager of the Compass Experiment/Longmont Leader)
(4) Matt Jonas (Longmont Times-Call/Prairie Mountain Publishing)
(5) Katie Langford (Longmont Leader)
(6) Sam Mayfield (Longmont news outlet) a pseudonym
(7) Annie Mehl (Longmont Times-Call)
(8) John Vahlenkamp (Longmont Times-Call)
(9) Georgia Worrell (Longmont Leader)

APPENDIX 4
Local news content codebook

"Saving local news: How focusing on 'value' can increase audience engagement"
Beth Potter
Version 4: Oct. 15, 2021

News outlet name

This variable indicates the local news outlet in which the news item appears.

1. 0001 to 1999 (Longmont Times-Call)
2. 2000 to 2999 (Longmont Leader)
3. 3000 to 3999 (Any other news outlet)

Date (include all four of the year)

The year, month and date on which the news item appeared. The required format is—first the year (four digits), then the month (two digits), then the date (two digits) with no punctuation between them.

Year/Month/Day—so May 12, 2011 becomes 20110512; January 8, 1984 becomes 19840108

Weekday

Please record the weekday on which the news item appeared.

1. Monday
2. Tuesday
3. Wednesday
4. Thursday
5. Friday
6. Saturday
7. Sunday

(E)V1: Byline

Record whether the story is written by a staff member or whether it comes from a wire service or other source, especially a non-journalism source such as a government agency (for example – a press release from a government agency – please see more detail under press release reporting, below).

1. Longmont Times-Call
2. Longmont Leader
3. Longmont Public Media
4. Other local news organization (Boulder Daily Camera, La Voz, etc.)
5. Other non-local news organization (Other news organizations from around Colorado such as the Associated Press, Chalkbeat, Rocky Mountain PBS, Denver Post, Coloradoan, etc.)
6. Other (please specify): _____
9. Unable to determine

(F)V2: Press release reporting

A press release generally is an informational statement that may or may not outline facts in a journalistic style. Its main difference from a news story is that the person who writes it is generally loyal to a client, whereas a journalist's loyalty is to citizens (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2014). Journalists who use press releases in reporting often will cite the press release as the source of information in a news story (See No. 2, below).

3. No evidence of press release in story
2. Some use of press release materials (quotes, data directly from a company. For example, the story says, "so-and-so said in a press release" or otherwise mentions that information came from a press release.)
1. Reprinted press release

(G)V3: Type of story

The type of news the item represents. Please determine the nature of the news item using one of the following five categories:

1. Breaking News
   Breaking news items are urgent occurrences that must reported right away and become obsolete very quickly. These items are truly “new”. Any article that includes new details or updates about the story.

2. Hard News
   Hard news items are well-reported stories that investigate the details of the shooting that have recently been discovered, and therefore likely have a timeliness element. Unlike breaking news items, these items are longer and do not detail real-time events. But these articles do cover important details of events.

3. News Brief
   A news brief is a very short (typically under 100 words) item that contains an announcement.

4. Soft News
   Soft news items—as opposed to hard news items—are usually not expected to be “timely.” The reporter or media organization is under no particular pressure to publish the news at a certain date or time. Feature stories and investigative stories typically can be prepared under the reporter’s control in advance of the eventual dissemination. While there may be some competitive pressure to print these stories, they are not so closely tied to a specific issue that they have to appear in the same or the next news cycle.

5. Profile
   A news feature about individuals rather than macro-issues or larger picture.

6. Commentary/Analysis
   News items that express an opinion held by the newspaper i2n general or a certain staff member. These news items are usually clearly labeled “editorial” or “opinion.” However, if an article is not labeled, it still may be commentary or analysis. If an unlabeled article seems to have as its primary purpose the goal of expressing the author’s opinion or reaching an evaluative conclusion, it is commentary/analysis. If opinion appears only in quoted material or in an isolated phrase or sentence, it is not considered to be an article involving commentary and/or analysis.

7. Other
   Stories that do not fall into one of the categories above should be coded as “other.” But this category is to be avoided unless no other category is a truly good fit.

(H)V4: Primary Topic

Choose the dominant local topic, which should be the most discussed topic. If the topics seem evenly split in terms of the amount of coverage, then the topic that is mentioned first in the story would be the dominant topic.

1. Local government
2. State government
3. National government
4. School(s)/students
5. Entertainment/arts
6. Business
7. High school/prep sports
8. Regional/national sports (CU, Denver, etc.)
9. Other (please specify): _____

(I)V5: Number of sentences with quotes in them.

(I)V6: Total number of item sentences

Item sentences refers to the total number of sentences in a news article. Record the number in the appropriate blank on the code sheet.

(J)V7: Total number of item words

Item words refers to the total number of words in the news article. This number is sometimes found in the database summary of the article. If this information is not readily available, skip this item.

(K)V8: Photos, graphics

If a local story appears with a photo or a graphic, record what the general subject is of the photo or graphic:

1. A local official
2. A different person
3. More than one person in the picture
4. Animals in the picture
5. Topic-related photo – no people in the picture

(L) V9: Photo source

1. Staff photo
2. Photo from another local news organization
3. Wire service photos
4. Company provided photo
5. Courtesy photo from audience member/stock photos
6. Other, please specify: _____
9. Unable to determine

(M) V10: Story placement-print (if it can be determined)

Please indicate the newspaper news item's placement within the newspaper. If the story is online, the top three stories should be considered the front page, the next three stories would be considered the section front, and anything after that should be considered "any other position".

(please note that the category numbers (3,2,1) are in reverse order):

(3) Front page—the news item starts on the first page of the newspaper (generally indicated as page 1 or A1 on an e-edition of the newspaper.)
(2) Section front—the news item starts on the first page of any section but the first (generally indicated as B1, C1, D1, etc. on an e-edition of the newspaper.)
(1) Any other position
(9) The position of the story cannot be determined (please avoid using this category if at all possible)

(N) V11: Story placement-online

3. Main page
2. Main page of a subsection (reached by clicking on a tab at the top or at the side of the main publication website)pubic
1. Any other position (have to scroll or click links to find it)

Proportion of each story focused on Longmont

(V12) 1. Count the number of paragraphs that mention Longmont or a Longmont government body (including Saint Vrain Valley School District) or otherwise clearly reference Longmont.
(V13) 2. Count the total paragraphs in each story.