

## Examples of good community journalism

There are times newspapers are interested in putting on an "event" as part of a community journalism effort. Here are a few examples of community journalism projects that have relevance for southwest Missouri:

- The North Hills, Pa. *News Record* assigns reporters a "reader advisory group" which meets with the reporter to provide feedback. This keeps the newspaper's focus on the community's real issues.
- The *Tryon (N.C.) Daily Bulletin*, held a town forum titled "Role of the Newspaper in Our Community: Spectator, Reporter, or Cheerleader?" The forum was co-sponsored by the Chamber of Commerce and the local community college.
- One small newspaper in New England profiled non-profit community organizations that needed community involvement. The paper then sponsored a fair where people were encouraged to get involved with the profiled groups.

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*What is ...*

# Community Journalism



Covering issues  
important to  
the community

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OUTREACH AND EXTENSION

# COMMUNITY BUILDING THROUGH COMMUNITY JOURNALISM

## Where to find community journalism

When you find a newspaper that concentrates on local coverage, has a tone that is positive and supportive, and strives to find solutions to community issues, you have found a newspaper that practices community journalism.

Community journalism is the belief that newspapers have an obligation beyond just printing news. Journalism can help empower a community or it can help disable it. In the small towns and cities of America, the local newspaper is one of the links that connects people to each other. It is one of the ways the community is maintained. It is part of the local discussion on issues concerning a community.

In a large city, the newspaper can only represent so many views at one time because the readership is measured in the hundreds of thousands. True community journalism is intensely local coverage provided by small newspapers. The American Society of Newspaper Editors draws the line between large and small newspapers at 50,000 circulation. That means there are about 1,533 "small" daily newspapers and 7,437 small weeklies in America.

Southwest Missouri is dominated by small newspapers, which throw their news and editorial weight behind providing local coverage. The finest community newspapers know they are key stakeholders in the forces that help build their communities.

## Factors in community journalism

Accessibility is the most critical factor in determining whether a newspaper is practicing community journalism. How physically accessible is the newsroom to its readers? Are reporters protected and out of touch with readers? How easy or difficult is it for the public to get in touch with editors, reporters and photographers by phone?

Community newspapers often rely on their own limited resources. A publisher at a larger newspaper has the resources of a corporation. If he faces unexpected disaster, those resources are at his disposal. If staff gets sick, there are personnel who can fill in. At many community papers, if the editor gets sick, there's no one to fill his shoes.

In small communities, the publisher, editor and reporters are recognized on the street and members of the community can take them to task, or praise them, about something in the paper. The people at the newspaper belong to the same local organizations and churches as the rest of the community, their kids attend the community's schools and play softball in the community leagues. For the most part, the people at the newspaper fall into the same economic bracket as most of the community members. There is an accessibility and interactive quality that is lacking at most larger papers.

## Don't go soft on the news

Providing the news and information that helps hold a community together doesn't preclude telling the hard stories or voicing unpopular opinions. Community journalism isn't synonymous with mediocrity. Community journalism means having newspapers concentrate on being a fair-minded participant in public life, with journalists as citizens, instead of reporters



being detached. It means the local newspaper does more than describing what is going wrong; it imagines what "going right" would be like and how the proper connections can be made. It also means the local newspaper goes beyond seeing people as merely readers to seeing them as actors in arriving at solutions to public problems.

## What about "civic journalism?"

"Civic journalism" is a different term that is sometimes confused with community journalism. Civic journalism means equipping readers with what they need to be responsible citizens. Therefore citizens become the primary stakeholders in the newspaper's news judgment. Citizens (ordinary people or non-experts) are invited to become involved with the story content of the paper through focus groups, community conversations and electronic connectivity. The focus of the reporting on any given issue becomes non-confrontational, positive and non-harmful as the paper seeks to become part of the solution, or at least to keep the dialogue open until the problem is solved. Civic journalism is often issue-driven and involves partnerships between media outlets.

## Let's get on with it!

The *Enterprise-Journal* in McComb, Miss. has the following on its nameplate: "*The one newspaper in the world most interested in this community.*" That sums up community journalism. Civic journalism and community journalism are two leaves on the same branch — alike, yet distinct. One is new (scholars agree civic journalism began in the late '80s), and the other has been around for a long time. It is time to get on with the work of both: enhancing and empowering the lives of citizens so they may engage in public life and maintenance of a free democratic society.