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A study of retention and recruitment at southern and midwestern weekly U.S. newspapers

By **JESSICA FARGEN WALSH** and **JILL MARTIN**

Editor's note: This article was the top paper submitted to the 2021 research paper competition sponsored by ISWNE and the Huck Boyd National Center for Community Media at Kansas State University. The selection was made by a panel of ISWNE members who are current or retired community newsroom veterans. Entries were judged on the basis of their value to small newsrooms.

Abstract

Daily and weekly newspapers are closing at alarming rates, leaving readers without local coverage in many parts of the country. More than 5,000 of the remaining newspapers in the United States are weeklies, providing meeting coverage, agricultural news and keeping small towns informed. Yet, not nearly enough research exists about the people working at those newspapers. More than 1,000 email surveys were sent in early 2021 to weekly news editors, publishers or owners in seven states seeking opinions on successes and challenges in hiring and retaining weekly journalists. Survey results and follow-up interviews revealed a number of insights including data indicating weekly newspaper leaders are challenged by lack of funding, lack of qualified candidates and candidates lacking an interest in living in rural America. The weekly newspaper leaders also indicated that staffing challenges have negatively affected local news coverage. Workplace culture and community engagement were two of the main reasons journalists stayed in their jobs.

Keywords: rural journalism, weekly newspapers, hiring, retention, employment, community journalism

Introduction

Weekly newspaper editors, publishers and owners are small business owners or working journalists, but they are also community pillars. They cover parades, municipal meetings, crime, elections, the schools and development. They work long hours including nights, weekends and holidays, often with low pay. When these owners and publishers can't find people to work for them, the business and the community can suffer, and owners and their journalists are left frustrated.

"I mean, there's got to be qualified candidates out there. Where are they and how do we connect with them? There's got to be an easier way." – a weekly newspaper publisher in Nebraska

Limited research exists about staff recruitment and retention in community weekly publications, but evidence indicates that the number of employed local journalists is dropping, and people are losing access to local news. In the last 16 years, the United States has lost more than 2,000 weekly or nondaily newspapers (Abernathy, 2020). More than 200 of the 3,143 counties in the United States have no newspaper, and half the counties have just one newspaper (Abernathy, 2020). Of the 7,112 remaining newspapers, about half are in small and rural communities (Abernathy, 2018). Of those 7,112 papers, 5,829 are weeklies.

More research needs to address "place-specific" concerns in journalism, particularly in small, rural towns, and especially amid concerns about news deserts and shrinking or closing newspapers (Örnebring, Kingsepp, & Möller, 2020). Too much newspaper research focuses on large, metro dailies when in fact most U.S. newspapers are weeklies (Reader, 2018), and weekly newspaper trends are not well-documented (Coulson, Lacy, &

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Riffe, 2014). Smith (2019) noted that community newspapers are an “underinvestigated segment of the media industry.”

The longevity of local news is important because people trust local news more than national news (Knight Foundation, 2019), and local newspapers provide a “lifeline” to residents (Garfrerick, 2010). When people have to rely on larger, non-local newspapers for political coverage, they are less informed and less politically engaged (Hayes & Lawless, 2015). When local newspapers close, readers turn to national news outlets, which results in increased polarization (Darr, Hitt, & Dunaway, 2018).

In addition, journalists are increasingly living and working on the coasts (Shafer & Doherty, 2017), further challenging journalism in rural areas and smaller communities. Fewer people live in rural areas (Parker et al., 2020), yet rural weekly newspapers make up more of the proportion of the country’s weeklies than they used to (Coulson, Lacy, Riffe, & Blom, 2012). According to 2010 U.S. Census figures, 59 million of the 308 million in the United States live in a rural area, or 19.1% (U.S. Census, 2010). Rural areas not only suffer from a lack of newspapers and journalists. It is also challenging to find doctors and lawyers to work outside of urban areas (Jackson et al., 2003; Alsgaard, 2014).

Some concern about newspaper research in recent years has focused on the lack of research on newspapers in small towns and communities outside of metro areas (Coulson et al., 2014; Örnebring et al., 2020; Reader, 2018). There is a great deal of societal value in understanding the challenges weekly newsrooms face in recruitment and retention, how that is impacting news coverage and what can be done about it.

The purpose of this exploratory study was three-fold: to examine the impact of turnover and recruitment struggles at rural weeklies with circulations under 10,000, identify successful recruitment and retention strategies and understand the reasons for weekly recruitment and retention challenges. Like many studies on journalism practice, this study was guided by the pragmatist-participatory approach, which emphasizes empirical data and allows the research to remain close to the practice of journalism and seek answers (Ahva & Steensen, 2019). The study employed an explanatory sequential design, which includes a dominant quantitative portion followed by a smaller qualitative phase “to follow up and explain the quantitative results” (Doyle, Brady, & Byrne, 2016).

Literature review

The role of weekly newspapers

Weekly newspapers have been covering communities for more than 150 years in the United States, documenting agricultural news, social happenings, accidents, community infrastructure, births and deaths (Russo, 1980, p.24). Beyond covering local happenings, weeklies provided a sense of unity and community spirit, promoted the community, provided a forum for the exchange of ideas and educated readers on global trends (Barnhart, 1949, p.48).

Garfrerick (2010) wrote: “In essence, the weekly publisher-editor served as the author of a community’s life story through

birth, marriage, and death announcements, the comings and goings of the social elite as well as the ‘commoners,’ the accomplishments of local students, and the gatherings of community clubs, business and professional organizations, and church groups.”

Hess (2015) argued that local news media can create social bonding in a community by fostering a sense of community or a “collective.” Tezon (2003) noted that, “Rural community newspapers are the lifeblood of the towns they serve,” but at the same time weekly publishers are concerned about their organization’s future sustainability and are seeking alternative sources of income.

Barnhart organized weekly newspapers into three types: small-town, suburban and community. Among these small-town weeklies, he identified characteristics of the small-town weekly including reporting on local goings on, editorializing on local topics, a similar typography and layout, local circulation and advertisement of local products and companies.

Weekly newspapers are still fulfilling this role despite digital disruptions, population loss and increased urbanization.

Small newsrooms face unique management and personnel challenges. Values, routines and organizational management are structural constraints facing news editors, with organizational management having unique applications in small, rural newsrooms (Donohue, Oilen, & Tichenor, 1989).

Thus, small weekly newspapers face internal and external challenges that a newspaper in a larger, more pluralistic community does not. Editors who work at locally owned papers in small towns report, handle advertising, circulation and management issues, usually with a staff of four or fewer (Donohue et al., 1989).

Crockford’s 2008 study focused on the challenges posed in recruiting writers for rural weekly publications and discussed the positive quality of rural life in Montana, but mentioned “thrifty” wage scales and cold winters as challenges with retainment. He attributed compensation and benefits as one of the primary reasons they had difficulties in recruiting staff. Salary is important for many reasons, particularly when recent graduates are taking into account student loans. Two-thirds of undergraduates take out loans to pay for college and that debt influences where they work and live (Velez, Cominole, & Bentz, 2019).

Research on small-market newspapers has become outdated, and there’s not enough known about how smaller newspapers operate (Radcliffe et al., 2017). Smith (2019) called the work done in small, rural newspapers one of the most “understudied topics” in media scholarship. Her 2019 study looked at how news is produced in small-town weeklies and how external and internal influences impact that. Among the topics she examined through interviews and observations at three small-town newspapers were staffing, ownership, advertising, loyalty and newspaper organization. Findings included that journalists in these small-town weeklies followed some, but not all, of the traditional practices and ethics taught in journalism colleges, and that they struggled with concerns about advertising.

While some recent studies have examined weekly newspa-

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pers (Smith, 2019; Coulson, Lacy, Riffe, & Blom, 2012), there is still not enough attention focused on weekly newspapers. A 2006 study showed most entry-level hiring is done by smaller daily publications, indicating the same is likely true for weekly publications (Becker et al., 2006). Guth's 2015 study focused on attitudes of rural newspaper editors and publishers in the U.S. High Plains, and respondents were generally positive about the future of the publications but were concerned about who would take their place when they were gone (Guth, 2015). The 2012 "The State of the Weekly Newspaper Industry" examined weeklies' digital presence, group ownership and compared 1997 and 2009 data on weekly newspapers (Coulson, Lacy, Riffe, & Blom, 2012).

Modern-day newspaper trends

Much research exists on the challenges of running a successful newspaper in the 21st century. Although much of this research focuses on daily newspapers, weeklies are facing the same challenges. The disruption of the internet, loss of classified ad sales, the rise of social media, an increasingly fractured news ecosystem and increased newspaper consolidation have put newspapers of all sizes in a precarious position (Pew Research Center, 2021; Abernathy, 2020; Ali, Schmidt, Radcliffe, & Donald, 2019). Overall, U.S. newspaper advertising revenue decreased to \$8.8 billion in 2020, down 29% from 2019 (Pew Research Center, 2021).

Group ownership is increasing (Abernathy, 2020), which can result in "ghost newspapers" and closures. In 2016, six of the 10 largest newspaper chains were owned by investment entities (Abernathy, 2020) that owned 15% of U.S. newspapers.

All this has changed the way people get news.

For example, 86% of Americans get news via a smartphone often or sometimes (Shearer, 2021) and only 10% often get their news from print publications. About half of Americans get news via social media (Shearer, 2021).

News organizations have responded in a number of ways. There has been a resurgence in news organizations' use of newsletters to keep readers loyal and increase subscriptions and readership in part because they become part of a consumer's news habit (Hendrickx, Donders, & Picone, 2020). Newsletters also provide a way for publishers to regain some control lost to social media by engaging with readers via their inboxes (Hendrickx et al., 2020).

In the wake of newspaper consolidations and closures and concern about shrinking local news, hyperlocal startups, digital nonprofit newsrooms and citizen journalism have risen. New ways to bring in revenue have been found. News organizations have gotten creative with funding streams by embracing events, printing services and consulting businesses (Lehtisaari, Villi, Grönlund, Lindén, Mierzejewska, Picard, & Roepnack, 2018), but revenue remains a challenge.

According to the Institute for Nonprofit News (2021) annual INN Index survey, work created by nonprofit news organizations generally focuses on in-depth coverage and public service journalism and in 2020 was regularly published or aired by 3,800 third-party outlets. Successful nonprofit newsrooms

include large-scale statewide efforts such as the *Texas Tribune*, and smaller news sites such as the *Montana Free Press*. According to the Institute for Nonprofit News (2021), more than 300 nonprofit member nonprofit newsrooms employ more than 2,000 journalists.

Research Questions

RQ1: What are the hiring and retention challenges facing weeklies with circulations less than 10,000?

RQ2: What lessons can be learned from surveying and interviewing weekly news editors about hiring and retention?

RQ3: What resources do weekly newspaper editors need in order to recruit and retain employees?

Methodology

This mixed method study used a survey emailed to 1,049 weekly newspaper editors, owners and publishers in seven states and follow-up interviews with those who responded to better understand issues facing weekly journalists. Publishers, owners and editors were surveyed because they are the decision-makers when it comes to hiring and maintaining a workplace culture.

Researchers used a list-based sample of high-coverage populations model for the survey (Couper, 2000). Researchers obtained contact lists from press associations in Georgia, Oklahoma, South Dakota, Wyoming, Nebraska, Texas and Kansas, which represented two regions of the country that have spans of rural areas served by weekly newspapers.

Emails were sent on Feb. 8, 2021, Feb. 18, 2021, and Feb. 23, 2021. Responses were cut off on March 1, 2021. Of the sampled editors, publishers or owners (n=1049), 101 completed or partially completed the survey for a response rate of 9.6%. In total, 11.9% did not get the email invitations due to their emails bouncing back or failing. Duplicate emails were sent to 5.2%. The adjusted response rate accounting for ineligible was 11.6%.

The response rates were computed using the American Association for Public Opinion Research's calculation for Response Rate 2.

To administer the survey, the researchers contracted with the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Bureau of Sociological Research (BOSR), which is a member of the Association of Academic Survey Research Organizations and a member of the American Association for Public Opinion Research. Researchers worked with representatives at the BOSR to design the survey and questions. The email questionnaire included 49 questions on a multitude of topics including demographic information, recruitment and retention of journalists, strategies used to recruit and retain journalists, funding needs and salary and benefit information. Questions were a mix of multiple choice, Likert Scale and open-ended.

The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software package was used to process and document the dataset. BOSR removed any cases that were duplicates, blank or younger than 19 years of age. Frequency distributions were run on each of the variables in the survey to check for out-of-range values on all survey items. For cross tabulations, the BOSR used Fisher's

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exact test to assess for statistical significance.

At the end of the survey, respondents were asked if they would be willing to be interviewed. Interviews were semi-structured and conducted from February 24, 2021, to March 5, 2021. Survey responses were not linked to interviewees.

For the participant interviewee selection process, random purposeful sampling was used (Sandelowski, 2000a) because the participant pool was rich with meaningful information. Participants were selected for follow-up emails based on the order in which volunteer contact information was received. Thirty-seven participants responded and 32 were contacted. Of those who were contacted, nine responded and were interviewed. Participants were asked 18 questions pertaining to issues related to recruitment and retention of employees at their weekly newspapers.

A mixed-method approach was used because mixed-methods studies can “deepen insights” for researchers (Sandelowski, 2000a). A descriptive approach was used for interview analysis. Researchers discussed themes and revisited themes multiple times from the interviews and surveys. Themes were developed around commonly discussed topics, and responses were grouped into four general themes surrounding hiring, retention, funding and revenue, and news coverage effects. Descriptive studies use everyday terms to describe events or phenomena, and researchers stay close to their data and surface meanings (Sandelowski, 2000b). It is the method of choice for “straight descriptions of phenomena” (Sandelowski, 2000b). The goal of qualitative descriptive studies is the rich description of an event (Neergaard et al., 2009). The descriptive approach also works well in mixed methods studies and is a way to gain insight into participant views on a topic (Neergaard et al., 2009). The quantitative and qualitative data were integrated in the data analysis, and the narrative weaving approach was used to report results by theme (Fetters, Curry, & Creswell, 2013).

The study was limited by several factors including sample size and a relatively small number of interviews mostly with Midwest journalists. Small, rural weekly newspapers are not hiring very often because of budgets, small staff size or lack of candidates, so the answers concerning hiring successes were not as illuminating as expected.

Survey demographics

Job title: Of 101 respondents, 57.4% were publishers, 40.6% were editors, 19.8% were managing editors, 45.5% were owners and 3% had another news editorial title. Those who selected “other” as a title on the survey (3%) were screened out. Some respondents had multiple roles.

Publication: The 101 respondents worked at weekly newspapers as defined as those publishing one, two or three days a week. Those who indicated they did not work at a weekly newspaper as defined above were screened out.

Community: The population of these newspapers’ coverage areas was predominantly small. Of the 96 respondents, 71.9% worked at newspapers with coverage areas of 9,999 people or fewer. Coverage areas were as small as 499 people or fewer (7.3%) and as large as 15,000 people or more (21.9%).

Ownership: Of the 96 respondents, 84.2% worked at independently owned newspapers.

Staff: Of the 95 respondents, 34.7% had just one full-time employee, 17.9% had two full-time employees and 20% had three full-time employees. The remaining respondents had four or more.

Identity: Of the 94 respondents, 87.2% self-identified as rural journalists.

Circulation: Of the 94 respondents, 17.7% had circulations of 4,000 to 4,999 and 13.5% had circulations of 5,000 or more. The remaining had a circulation of 3,999 or less.

Survey and interview results

Running a small weekly newspaper is marked by challenges beyond the control of many newsroom managers, and they are lacking resources to be successful. The experiences of these editors, publishers and owners are reflected in the four main themes that emerged from the analysis of interviews and survey results. First, they have trouble finding qualified candidates because they live in a rural area and because, in part, they cannot afford to pay enough to new hires. Second, a family-like work environment, community spirit and flexible schedule are positives in a small-town newsroom. Third, revenue for salaries and benefits is lacking and outside funding is a desired yet unmet need. Finally, these recruitment and retention challenges are hampering their ability to cover the news.

Hiring

Survey respondents were asked when hiring which of the following were very, somewhat, a little or not at all challenging: salary expectations, expectations of benefits, finding qualified candidates, location, recruitment costs and other. Of the 80 survey respondents, 58.8% said finding qualified candidates was very challenging and 45% said salary expectations were very challenging. Of 78 respondents, 38.5% said that expectation of benefits was very challenging. Additionally, of the 79 respondents, 35.4% said location was very challenging and 27.8% said it was somewhat challenging. Of 72 respondents, 48.6% said job recruitment costs were not at all challenging.

Of the 91 respondents, 30.8% had hired a full-time journalist in the last two years.

Of the 28 respondents who had hired someone in the last two years and answered the question about starting salary, 32.1% offered a starting salary between \$25,000 and \$29,999 and 28.6% offered a starting salary between \$30,000 and \$34,999. Only 7.1% of new hires had a starting salary between \$40,000 and \$44,999. On the lower end, 7.1% of starting salaries were less than \$19,999. Of the 29 respondents who had hired an employee in the past two years, 89.7% still had this person employed at their news organization.

The smaller the newspaper circulation, the less likely it was that the newspaper offered paid time off other than sick time to full-time employees. The association between circulation and whether paid time off other than sick time was offered to full-time employees was statistically significant, as assessed by

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Fisher's exact test, $p = .01764$. For example, of the 80 respondents, 54.7% of newspapers with circulation less than 1,999 offered paid time off compared to 81% at newspapers with circulations 2,000 to 3,999 and 100% at newspapers with circulations 4,000 and greater. For statistical analysis, six circulation categories from the questionnaire were combined into three categories: up to 1,999, 2,000 to 3,999 and 4,000 and above.

The association between circulation and whether health insurance was offered to full-time employees was also statistically significant, as assessed by Fisher's exact test, $p = .0064$. For example, of the 80 respondents, 75.5% of newspapers with circulation less than 1,999 did not offer health insurance compared to 52.4% at newspapers with circulations 2,000 to 3,999 and 16.7% at newspapers with circulations 4,000 and greater. For statistical analysis, six circulation categories from the questionnaire were combined into three categories: up to 1,999, 2,000 to 3,999 and 4,000 and above.

There was also an association between low starting salary and likelihood of challenges finding qualified candidates. The association between starting salary and the challenge from finding qualified candidates was statistically significant, as assessed by Fisher's exact test, $p = 0.0053$. For example, of the 79 respondents, 75% of newspapers with a starting salary between \$19,999 and \$24,999 said finding qualified candidates was very challenging, compared to 57.1% of newspapers with starting salaries \$25,000 to \$34,999 and 26.7% of newspapers with salaries \$35,000 and greater. For statistical analysis, six salary categories from the questionnaire were combined into three categories: up to \$24,999, \$25,000 to \$34,999 and \$35,000 and above.

In other cases, there was no statistically significant difference between smaller and larger newspapers. For example, the association between circulation and starting salary was not statistically significant, as assessed by Fisher's exact test, $p = .6964$. Of the 28 respondents, 60% of newspapers with a circulation less than 1,999 offered a starting salary less than \$29,000 compared to 58.3% of those with circulations between 2,000 and 3,999 and 33.3% at papers with circulation 4,000 and above. For statistical analysis, six salary categories were combined into two categories: less than \$29,999 and \$30,000 and above. Six circulation categories were combined into three categories: less than 1,999, 2,000 to 3,999, and 4,000 and more.

In interviews, news editors and publishers talked about hiring difficulties and successes and described a narrow approach to advertising for jobs. Of 101 respondents, 14.9% reported advertising for open positions in local newspapers, 10.9% advertised through state press associations and 7.9% used journalismjobs.org. Only 3% advertised in both in-state and out-of-state publications or sites.

In a follow-up interview, an editor (E4) of two weekly publications who purchased the publication 10 years ago said he didn't anticipate hiring challenges. "The biggest thing for us is trying to find people that want to live in a small rural town in America."

In an interview, one publisher (P3) hired someone who saw the publication's ad on a community job board. The hire was the

only applicant and moved to this rural state from a nearby state. One publisher (P2) with a newspaper with a circulation under 1,000 found a full-time employee by posting on social media. Because of the post, she hired someone from out of state six years ago. On social media, she voiced frustration over weekly publications not being able to attract applicants. "Basically, I said I don't understand why people don't want to work in small weekly newspapers, because that's where you cut your teeth ..."

In another interview, one editor (E2) said of finding job applicants, "We try not to spend a lot of money on advertising." A publisher (P3) would like to advertise on a bigger scale "because maybe we could draw some candidates from another area. I just don't know how to go about that really." This publisher does not pay for job advertisements.

One editor (E4) has thought of advertising in other states, and they would also try to find a graduating senior from college if they were to "broaden the scope."

Retention and workplace culture

The majority of respondents did not offer health insurance or retirement, but did offer some paid time off. Of 80 survey respondents, 65% did not offer health insurance as a benefit and of 75 respondents, 76% did not offer a retirement plan. Of 79 respondents, 60.8% did offer paid sick time and of 80 respondents, 65% did offer other paid time off.

Employees who had left their job in the last two years told their supervisors that they left for varying reasons. Respondents who had an employee leave in the last two years were asked to answer yes or no to whether each of the following were reasons for leaving: low pay, family circumstance, unhappy with benefits, unhappy with workplace, unhappy with the community, different job or other. Of 17 respondents, 29.4% said low pay was the reason. Of 16 respondents, 50% said family circumstance and of 13 respondents, 15.4% said benefits. Of 13 respondents, 7.7% said they were unhappy with the workplace culture and of 14 respondents, only 7.1% said they were unhappy with the size of the community. Of 21 respondents, 66.7% left for a different job.

During follow-up interviews, respondents included examples such as stress, other job opportunities, family, life circumstances, more money and personal reasons as examples employees have communicated for resigning from positions at the weekly publications. An editor (E3) said the organization hasn't ever lost someone to another journalism job but said that people "get burnt out" and resign because of low pay.

Survey respondents were asked how challenging each of these were for employee retention ranging from very, somewhat, a little or not at all challenging: low pay, family circumstance, unhappy with benefits, unhappy with workplace culture, unhappy with community, different job or other.

Of 72 respondents, 38.9% said salary expectations were very challenging and of 71 respondents, 32.4% said benefit expectations were very challenging. Of 70 respondents, 27.1% said location was very challenging and 30% said it was somewhat challenging. Conversely, of 67 respondents, 61.2% said

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newsroom culture was not at all challenging. And of 69 respondents, 49.3% said the schedule was not at all challenging.

In follow-up interviews, there were similar themes when discussing newsroom culture. An editor (E1) said people stay with newspapers because of the scheduling flexibility but mentioned challenges around pay and benefit exceptions. She said the workplace culture is authentic and supportive.

A managing editor (E3) said the workplace culture is “tight knit,” and the organization tries to hire people who are happy to be in a laid-back culture.

Some interviewees discussed employees' connections with the community. Editor (E4) talked about the community embracing one of the journalists who was active in community engagement. According to the editor, the employee also liked the relaxed working environment and “not being micromanaged.”

Another editor (E5) hosts weekly meetings to keep “people in the loop, making sure that they're in-the-know and making them feel heard.” The editor said one reporter said she loves her job. “She said that this is like her dream job. She gets to go out and talk to people and take pictures and be a part of people's stories and telling their stories.” They conduct reviews twice a year with opportunities for raises.

Another publisher (P1) said employees told him they were proud of their contributions to the newspaper and community, and that the organization was an “honorable place to work.” An editor (E3) talked about employee buy-in. “I think that people really care about what they're putting out. They care about the communities they're covering, and I think it's kind of fulfilling for a lot of people. At least it's fulfilling for me,” the editor said. Another publisher (P1) recounted how the newsroom made T-shirts to support a colleague who was battling cancer.

Financial and resource needs

Survey respondents were asked what resources they needed to help with the challenges of recruitment and retention and answered yes or no to any of these options: outside funding, digital training, leadership training, more money for benefits, more money for salaries, more resources to improve workplace culture, more revenue and more external financial investment in their small community to make it a more attractive place. Of 62 respondents, 64.5% said outside funding, and of 61 respondents, 72.1% said digital training. Of 63 respondents, 79.4% said more money for benefits, and of 65 respondents, 87.7% said more money for salaries. Of 59 respondents, 62.7% said they did not need more resources to improve workplace culture. Of 64 respondents, 90.6% said they needed more revenue. Of 63 respondents, 82.5% said they wanted more investment in community development to make their community more attractive to job candidates. Advertising remains a significant part of these newspapers' budgets, but most are finding other sources of revenue. Of 67 respondents, 29.9% at least 81% of their budget relied on advertising and 46.3% said 60% to 80% relied on advertising.

Lack of funding and resources is preventing newspapers from launching websites. Of 71 respondents, 83% had a website and 16.9% did not. Of the 11 respondents who were asked why

their newspaper did not have a website, 63.6% said lack of staffing and 54.5% said employees lacked the skills.

Respondents were not specifically asked about their resource or technology needs during interviews, so interview responses on this topic were not as illuminating. Interviewees did discuss lack of revenue and its impact.

“Probably the biggest obstacle we face is compensation,” said one editor (E6). “We can't pay as well as some other, you know, maybe bigger organizations could.” The lack of revenue can sometimes mean less money for staff, which affects the community, said publisher (P3). “Local newspapers (are) the heartbeat of the community. We are the main source of information for a lot of businesses in town for a lot of groups that operate,” publisher (P3) said.

Effect on news coverage

Survey respondents were asked to answer yes or no as to whether recruitment and retention difficulties had these effects on news coverage: lack of sourcing depth, difficulty building relationships with stakeholders, less credibility, lower quality news coverage, lack of manpower and other. Of the 66 respondents, 75.8% said it affected manpower and the ability to cover events or topics. Of 64 respondents, 46.9% said it diminished the quality of news coverage. Of 66 respondents, 45.5% said it led to a lack of depth of sourcing for stories. Relationship building and credibility were affected, but to a lesser extent. Of 64 respondents, 26.6% said it affected community relationships and of 65 respondents, 29.2% said it led to less credibility.

In a follow-up interview, an editor (E4) said the lower number of staff means the less they can cover. That publication no longer covers the court system except for large cases. This editor (E4) said, “Well, we used to do a very good job of covering the court system and the cases within the county and the city, and we just don't have the manpower to do that, so it basically goes uncovered. So I mean unless it's really big stuff... we don't cover the court systems anymore.”

The editor said the newsroom also doesn't do as many feature stories or cover as many meetings. They don't have as creative of photography packages as they used to. “I just don't feel like we're doing what we're supposed to do,” editor (E4) said. A publisher (P2) said hiring is key. “I mean we want people who are solid writers and good journalists to go out and cover the stories that need to be covered,” the publisher said. “We rely on that for our success. I can't do it all. Some days I feel like I do.”

One editor (E3) said retention also affects news coverage and credibility. For example, in this newspaper's coverage area, there is one particular ethnic population with hard-to-spell last names. When reporters cycle in and out, there is a learning curve. This editor (E3) said, “Retention for a longer period of time is important just because you build up a ton of institutional knowledge, even if it's something like learning how to spell names. And so you know that institutional knowledge is really important.”

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Discussion

The experiences of these editors, owners and publishers are evidenced in the four main themes that emerged from the analysis. They struggle to find qualified candidates because they live in a rural area or offer low salaries or both, but employees who stay like the family-like work environment, the community feel and flexible schedule. These newspapers lack revenue for salaries and benefits, and outside funding and more revenue could help. These challenges mean fewer events and stories get covered.

For one editor (E6), salary is the driving force that determines hiring and retention success, which in turn determines the success of the newspaper. This editor considers their newspaper the best of three newspapers in the county because of the organization's staff.

"You know, if we don't have good people doing the job, then our readers and our advertisers aren't going to consider it. ... We have the reputation of being the best newspaper because we do the best work. And that's important to us here."

In regard to the *first research question*, which sought to identify the hiring and retention challenges facing weeklies, the findings show that weekly newspaper leaders are challenged by a lack of funding or revenue, which hinders their ability to pay higher salaries or offer adequate benefits. They have difficulty finding employees who want to live in rural America and staffing issues are impacting what local news gets covered. This is in line with what we know about the increased urbanization of American and of the media (Parker et al., 2020; Shafer et al., 2017; U.S. Census, 2010). Little evidence existed to show that newsroom managers are using social media to advertise open positions. There was just one example provided in the interviews of a local news manager using social media to find job candidates. In addition, job position advertising approaches may be too narrowly focused on local sources.

These findings answer the first research question, which is significant because to find solutions, problems must be identified. There are no similar recent published studies that quantify the unique hiring and retention challenges facing weekly news editors in the largely rural parts of this country, where journalists are increasingly choosing to not work.

The majority of surveyed weekly newspapers were offering starting salaries to new employees between \$25,000 and \$34,999, which is well below the national median salary for journalists. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics in the U.S. Department of Labor (2020), the median salary for a journalist in the United States in 2020 was \$49,300 a year. Living in rural America means a lower cost of living than larger cities, but taking expenses and student loans into account it's no wonder recent graduates balk at this salary and make employment and housing decisions based on student debt (Velez, Cominole, & Bentz, 2019).

In some cases, the smaller the newspaper, the less likely it is new hires will get health insurance or paid time off other than sick time. The smaller the salary, the harder it is to find qualified candidates. This is significant because it demonstrates what could be the greatest obstacle to hiring qualified candidates:

salary and benefits. Overall, these findings are similar to what other studies have found in regard to two other community stakeholder groups: lawyers and medical professionals (Jackson et al., 2003; Alsgaard, 2014).

The *second research question* asked what lessons can be learned from surveying and interviewing weekly news editors about hiring and retention. Results indicated less consensus. Weekly newspaper editors, publishers and owners in interviews outlined individual success stories that could be replicated including advertising on college job boards to find recent graduates who are qualified and willing to work for less or advertising in local sources and through state press associations. In one instance, a news editor used social media to attract an out-of-state candidate. In interviews and survey responses, no discernible trends indicated there was any systematic way weekly news editors and publishers were approaching the hiring process, which made it difficult to compile information on lessons learned. For example, new employees were being hired in traditional ways via journalism colleges and job ads, but also through word-of-mouth and without any job posting at all.

According to respondents, one of the overwhelming perks of working for a weekly newspaper is the family atmosphere and connection to a community. These findings are significant because they indicate that those journalists working for small, rural weeklies appear to enjoy their jobs, despite the lower salary and lack of benefits. This bolsters what other community journalism researchers have found (Crockford, 2008; Hess, 2015).

Another trend was the tendency to advertise for jobs in a geographically limiting way. This makes sense as nearly nine in 10 survey respondents identified as rural journalists. Still, this appears to be a lost opportunity. Hiring trends were difficult to discern for another reason: Some newspapers only have enough money for one employee. One publisher and editor (PE1) only has one employee. "Honestly, it just doesn't make enough money to hire anybody," this publisher editor said.

Perhaps the most concerning finding is that news coverage is suffering because newspapers are offering salaries that are too low, can't find qualified candidates or don't have enough revenue. The number of journalists around the country is continuing to shrink (Abernathy, 2020). When there's only one newspaper in the town or county and that newspaper can't find or pay journalists, a news desert forms (Abernathy, 2018). That can have ramifications for democracy and society because fewer news sources can mean less political engagement and more polarization (Hayes & Lawless, 2015; Darr, Hitt, & Dunaway, 2018).

These concerns echo concerns of other journalism scholars. Finding journalists to work at community weeklies is the most daunting challenge (Crockford, 2008). Radcliffe et al. (2017) identified challenges for small-market newspapers that include low pay, long hours, limited career mobility and lack of diversity.

Our findings also found low pay was an issue, but unlike the larger newspapers studied by Radcliffe et al. (2017), long hours were not an issue. We share other researchers' concerns about

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the lack of attention to this issue. Radcliffe et al. (2017) wrote, “This is a discussion we need to have if the sector is to be continually replenished and refreshed by young journalistic talent; and if the local newspaper sector is to be a viable career option for this age group.”

The *third research question* asked what resources weekly newspaper editors need to recruit and retain employees. We found that weekly newspaper leaders need more internal and external revenue and resources, and that some are open to outside funding. The vast majority want to see more state or local investment in their communities to make their community more attractive to job candidates. Like many newspapers, there is a reliance on advertising at weeklies. For the majority of respondents, advertising makes up at least 60% of the budget. And nearly a third rely on advertising for 80% or more of their budget. These findings also suggest that the status quo of low prospects for rural journalism job candidates and low starting salaries for smaller newspapers mean that without external intervention or increased internal funding, small rural weeklies are going to continue to struggle. It also suggests that these news leaders understand that they alone cannot solve their own hiring and retention problems; they need outside help.

Recommendations

This exploratory study identified some of the common hiring and retention challenges facing weekly newspaper owners, publishers and editors. It lays a baseline that identifies specific challenges and needs facing weekly newspapers that can provide guidance in finding solutions. We believe it paves the way for more studies of weekly newspapers. A mixed method study using a survey and then a qualitative study using criterion sampling (Sandelowski, 2000a) could be a better way to better discover more of these success stories. A similar, shorter survey sent to a wider audience with a longer time period for responses is also called for.

Since financial resources were needs identified by the majority of respondents, more should be done to connect weekly news editors with funding opportunities.

The Facebook Journalism Project, the Lenfest Institute, Report for America and more all provide financial or manpower resources to news organizations. A guide updated each year and designed for weekly newspaper leaders should be created that could include contacts, grant guidelines, deadlines and nonprofit or private funding information to connect weekly news editors with the growing financial resources available to help shore up local journalism in this country. For example, the Lenfest News Philanthropy Network offers free training on fundraising and development for news organizations. The Facebook Journalism Project offers free digital training and grant funds for news organizations.

The News & Observer, a newspaper in Raleigh, North Carolina, designed such a grants guide, but it is designed for newspapers of all sizes (News Media Alliance, 2020).

It's clear that advertising revenue and subscribers will continue to shrink, so new business models need to be considered. The majority of weeklies surveyed are already doing this by relying not solely on advertising and subscriptions for revenue. But

perhaps there is a bridge that needs to be built to connect news leaders with these resources.

The above-mentioned organizations can also provide digital training. While most of the newspapers surveyed had websites, about 16% did not, and staffing and lack of training were the reasons they did not have a digital presence. The number of print subscribers is shrinking, so website development should be a priority as newspapers look to the future.

Weekly newspapers, if they are not already, can take advantage of free in-depth coverage offered by their nonprofit digital statewide newsrooms. The newsrooms have formed in response to a decline in journalism and are doing good work.

Finally, while it is unlikely there would be public support for funding journalists' salaries at rural weeklies, particularly in conservative states given the current political culture, private and nonprofit grant funders should consider designating grants for rural incentive funds - enough to cover a majority of an applicant's student loan debt - to encourage journalism graduates to move to a rural community to practice the craft of journalism and become a part of a community.

**When referencing the interviews conducted for this study, respondents are identified by a unique number and by a (set of) letter(s) that reflect(s) their role(s): J = journalist, P = publisher, E = editor, X = other. The codes are sometimes combined, as some respondents had more than one role.*

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Appendix

A Survey on Weekly Newspaper Retention and Recruitment

The first section pertains to our research on weekly newspaper recruitment and retention.

1. Are you 19 years of age or older?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No – Thank you for your participation. Unfortunately, we are only looking for responses from those 19 years of age or older. [end survey]
2. What is your title at your primary news organization? (Yes/No grid)
 - a. Publisher
 - b. Editor
 - c. Managing Editor
 - d. Owner
 - e. Other news editorial title
 - f. Other – [If they ONLY select 'Other' they will get this message] Thank you for your participation. Unfortunately, we are only looking for responses from those in owner, editorial, or publisher positions. [end survey]
3. Using the definition of a weekly newspaper as one that publishes one, two or three days a week, do you work at or own a weekly newspaper?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No – Thank you for your participation. Unfortunately, we are only looking for responses from those that work at or own a weekly newspaper. [end survey]
4. What is the approximate population of your news organization's coverage area? (Please only list the coverage area for the primary news organization you work at.)
 - a. 499 or fewer
 - b. 500-999
 - c. 1,000-1,499
 - d. 1,500-1,999
 - e. 2,000-2,499
 - f. 2,500-4,999
 - g. 5,000-7,499
 - h. 7,500-9,999
 - i. 10,000 -14,999
 - j. 15,000 or more
5. Are you the owner of a newspaper or newspapers?

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