

Knowing their news: Library workers as informants to journalism studies research

Connaître l'actualité : Le personnel des bibliothèques en tant qu'informateurs dans le cadre de la recherche sur le journalisme

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ABSTRACT

This research note describes a new role for the public library: a knowledge base of community media information in the context of a larger journalism research project. In rural areas of the Canadian province of Alberta, professional journalism has been struck by a series of cutbacks as newspaper titles have closed or merged to form regional publications. In studying this, efforts to generate a census of Alberta newspapers were stymied by incomplete search results when looking online to identify the titles of publications in scores of rural towns. Public libraries provided the solution: they were easily locatable online, and the library workers were aware of their community's information ecosystem and were eager to help the researcher in a quest for information on local journalism. This article describes the process and outcome, and encourages further partnerships between small town libraries and academic research.

RÉSUMÉ

Cette note de recherche décrit un nouveau rôle pour la bibliothèque publique : une base de connaissances sur les médias communautaires dans le contexte d'un projet de recherche plus large sur le journalisme. Dans les zones rurales de la province canadienne de l'Alberta, le journalisme professionnel a été frappé par une série de coupures, les titres de journaux ayant fermé ou fusionné pour former des publications régionales. Dans le cadre de cette étude, les efforts déployés pour recenser les journaux de l'Alberta se sont heurtés à des résultats de recherche incomplets lorsqu'il s'agissait d'identifier en ligne les publications d'un grand nombre de villes rurales. Les bibliothèques publiques ont apporté la solution : elles étaient facilement localisables en ligne et les employés des bibliothèques connaissaient l'écosystème de l'information de leur communauté et étaient désireux d'aider le chercheur dans sa quête d'informations sur le journalisme local. Cet article décrit le processus et le résultat, et encourage d'autres partenariats entre les bibliothèques des petites villes et la recherche universitaire.



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INTRODUCTION

Journalism and libraries share many points of intersection, despite differing missions and structures. Most obviously, libraries have often been distributors of the content created by journalists. But intersections happen at other junctures as well. For example, journalists may rely on libraries (public and private) when doing research for their articles. Libraries also train and support citizens on critical consumption of journalism through news media literacy programming, and libraries may work with newspapers and journalists as part of outreach efforts. More overt partnerships to serve the public are becoming increasingly common: libraries are collaborating directly with journalists to provide local news, provide space for newsrooms and in some cases even starting community newspapers (Beard, 2017, 2018b; Coal Cracker, 2018; LeBeau, 2018).

Despite these increasing collaborations, the individual trajectories of these institutions have diverged in recent decades. While journalism (and especially print journalism) has struggled immensely with the transition from a printed newspaper to digital distribution, public libraries have repositioned themselves as altruistic information hubs that more holistically fill the general information needs of a community, providing access to digital resources as well as physical ones. Polls conducted by Gallup and Pew Research in 2018 indicate the public perceives no profit motive in public libraries and now trusts libraries more than they do news media (Beard, 2018a).

This article outlines a new form of collaboration between libraries and media researchers: the use of local library workers¹ as informants to a journalism studies research project. Specifically, this paper recounts how a research project in Alberta tapped into the expertise of local library workers for information on local media in their communities. First, the antecedents to the research project are outlined, then the methodology and results are presented. Finally, the article discusses future possibilities for journalism research by collaborating with public libraries.

THE RURAL NEWSPAPER SITUATION IN ALBERTA, CANADA

The techniques outlined in this article were developed to address a specific need in a larger newspaper research project that sought to develop a more complete list of rural Alberta newspapers than is currently available. As “keystone media,” newspapers are the main providers of local news information in many communities: news providers that often enable other news media to perform their work (Nielsen, 2015). Nevertheless, there are often other forms of news media in a rural community (for example, radio, digital media, and occasionally television). The survey described in this article sought to capture several forms of news media in the interest of diligence, despite newspapers being a focus. This article, too, will focus on newspapers, but mention other news media forms where appropriate.

The setting for this research project is the Canadian province of Alberta, with a population of approximately 4.5 million. About one third of the population lives in rural areas, outside the main urban areas of Calgary and Edmonton (and their adjoining suburbs). These rural areas are sparsely populated, with towns usually dozens (and sometimes hundreds) of kilometers apart, separated by vast agricultural land in the south, or by forests in the north of the province.

Traditionally, most small towns in Alberta had at least one newspaper, and sometimes two competing titles. Publication was in print, and most commonly a new edition of the newspaper was produced each week. Many newspapers ran their own presses. Over the past few decades, the situation has changed significantly. First, advances in transportation and press technology made it feasible for individual newspapers to outsource their printing to larger printing plants. Then, newspaper chains (some regional, and some national) began seeing the economic value in owning small publications that are tightly integrated to community needs. They began buying up local newspapers as owner-operators wanted to retire, paying sometimes startlingly large sums for small publications.

¹ While the term “librarian” is used in popular vernacular as a synonym for any worker at a library, librarians in Canada require specific credentials, including a master’s degree in library science (Government of Canada, 2023a). A library worker (or library technician) may have a bachelor’s degree, a two-year diploma from a college or polytechnic, or no formal library training at all—especially in the case of a volunteer-run rural community library (Government of Canada, 2023b).

The real changes, however, came with the crisis in print journalism following the advent of the internet and, later, social media. Newspapers traditionally relied on two revenue streams: subscriptions and advertising. The Canadian newspaper classified advertising market utterly collapsed in less than a decade, from \$846 million in 2007 to \$119 million in 2015 (Public Policy Forum, 2017, p. 17). Display advertising also collapsed as advertisers realized the improved targeting and metrics available with online advertising and began to redirect their advertising money away from the local paper.² The loss of government ads has been particularly devastating to local newspapers (Lindgren et al., 2019). Subscription revenue, too, ebbed as residents increasingly sought out community news on social media instead of the local paper.

Such dramatic challenges to the community newspaper business model led to a correspondingly dramatic shift in the geographical presence of newspapers in rural Alberta. As newspaper revenues decreased, competing publications would merge or close, leaving communities with a single newspaper title. Also, newspaper chains closed publications in adjoining towns, sometimes forming a regional title that serves several communities. Since 2008, there have been 59 closures and 27 reductions of service at local news outlets in Alberta, with the vast majority of those changes at newspapers (Lindgren & Corbett, 2023, p. 10). Often, the communities served no longer have a resident reporter—only an itinerant one that serves two or more communities, sometimes an hour apart by car.

Contrasting with the situation in newspapers is that of the rural public library. As with newspapers, the previous generation of libraries was focused on print as a primary medium. But unlike newspapers, libraries have weathered the transition from print to digital with few library closures. As a result, most rural communities in Alberta have a public library. While libraries have occasionally endured budget freezes (e.g., CTV News, 2019; McKay, 2023), no cuts to date seem to have shaken these institutions the way that the financial situation has curtailed newspapers.

The numbers speak for themselves: currently

in Alberta, there are approximately 110 newspaper titles and approximately 325 public library branches.

THE CHALLENGE

The author of this article is a journalism researcher. As part of a larger project, he needed to create a census of the remaining rural newspapers in Alberta. This was a challenging project in several regards. The industry association for local newspapers in Alberta does not include every community newspaper on its website, because not every newspaper in Alberta is a member of the newspaper association (Alberta Weekly Newspaper Association, n.d.). Often, entrepreneurial or unconventional start-up newspapers are not members of industry associations, and those publications are sometimes the most interesting to researchers.

Further, internet searches to uncover titles in each community are incomplete and inconsistent because some newspapers are available in print only. A few do not even have a website or social media presence. This is sometimes intentional at small newspapers—they want to distinguish themselves from the competition posed by online information sources. Also stymying internet searches is the lingering presence of some titles; as newspapers have closed and merged, their websites may persist. There are also a number of “ghost newspapers”—titles that remain online and are updated with content, but that are no longer producing local news (Lindgren et al., 2019). Their websites are kept alive by owners (often chains) that fill the sites with “wire copy”—provincial or national news that is republished on local websites (Abernathy, 2020). Evaluating each site to see if it’s a ghost newspaper is a time-consuming task for an outsider to the community.

When trying to complete this census, town offices provide one possible solution as a contact point for researchers, but even this is insufficient. In Alberta, some rural communities, including fairly large ones, are unincorporated (also called hamlets) meaning they are administered by their county and don’t elect a local town council (Gov-

² For expanded discussion, overall declines in ad revenue from 2012 to 2022 by media type (radio, TV, newspaper) are reported here: https://thinktv.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/2022-Net-Ad-Volume_Nov22_23_Final.pdf

ernment of Alberta, 2023c). Yet, unincorporated communities sometimes have newspapers. County offices are of little help to the researcher either. Counties often administer several unincorporated communities across large geographic areas and cannot be relied on for information on specific businesses operating in each one.

AN ALTERNATE APPROACH: PUBLIC LIBRARIES AS RESEARCH INFORMANTS

Despite the closure and regionalization of Alberta rural newspapers, most communities (incorporated or not) have a public library. Moreover, libraries can even be found in very small communities. An example are the Alberta communities of Duffield (population 67), Eaglesham (population 78) and Niton Junction (population 38), each of which has a public library. Of course, these population numbers are for the community itself, and such libraries also serve a larger audience of patrons from nearby farms and resource extraction sites. Few Alberta communities are without a public library.

Unlike newspapers, public libraries in Alberta are regulated and supported (financially and with non-monetary resources) by the Alberta provincial government, as well as their local governments. Under the provincial Libraries Act, each public library must be governed by a board appointed by the local government (Government of Alberta, 2023b). There is a chairperson of the board, as well as a non-board-member library manager. The manager is responsible for the day-to-day operations of the library and reports to the local library board. The chairperson and the library manager roles must be filled by different people. Depending on the budget of the library, the size of the community, and other factors, the library manager may be the only worker at the library and might even work as a volunteer. In large libraries, the library manager is often a full-time job, overseeing other paid employees and volunteers.

The Alberta government maintains a comprehensive list of public libraries in the province – and

that list is publicly accessible (Government of Alberta, 2023a). It contains contact information for the library, as well as the names of the chairperson and library manager. Although most public libraries are governed and managed by the local county or community, rural public libraries are usually also part of a regional library system – there are seven of them in Alberta – which provide small libraries with access to technology, expertise, digital resources, and other supports, as well as forming networks of small libraries for inter-library loans of materials (Lohnes, 2021). The regional library systems generally facilitate the creation of websites for small libraries as well.

Small, rural libraries aim to serve the information needs of the communities. Because of their local management, they may custom-craft solutions that are relevant for individual communities (e.g., Reid & Howard, 2016; Boyce & Boyce, 1995). Some are open during business hours, some in the evening or weekend, and some are only open once a week. Programming and materials are different from library to library. Some libraries are located in local schools, or community offices, or sports facilities, while others have standalone buildings (Government of Alberta, 2023a). And the library workers are attuned to the specific needs of their community and patrons (e.g., Sikes, 2020).

These public libraries provide the researcher a unique opportunity: libraries in Alberta are located in even the tiniest of Alberta communities. Contact information for the libraries is comprehensive and publicly available, and most libraries have a website, email address, mailing address, and phone number. And, finally, the local library worker is familiar with the information ecosystem in their community (Most, 2011).

METHOD

To create a census of newspapers and other news media in each community in Alberta, a survey was created asking about the presence of newspapers, as well as other news media such as radio and online news.³ Questions were asked about whether reporters were resident in the com-

³ A difficult decision was made to not ask communities about television news stations. Subjectively, there are few known rural Alberta television news stations that are truly “local” and carry news. Dropping the questions about television news kept the survey shorter in aid of higher response rates.

munity (an important cue to the quality of journalism present). Library workers were also queried as to their impressions on community news provision, and on the use of social media for information gathering in their community.

In total, 23 questions were asked. The full survey instrument is included in Appendix 1. Qualtrics was selected as the online survey platform. After receiving ethics approval, the survey was sent to each of the 256 rural libraries in Alberta. For the purpose of this research project, rural libraries were defined as those outside Alberta's four largest cities (Calgary, Edmonton, Red Deer, and Lethbridge). Follow-up non-respondent emails were sent a week later.

RESULTS

Out of 256 libraries queried, 88 replied. Library workers collectively identified 58 newspapers, 37 radio stations and one digital news outlet. Further, respondents commented on the information ecosystems in their communities.

This article is focused on the potential for other researchers to collaborate with rural community libraries, so the data shared below is high-level and focused on illustrating some of the unique potential in conducting research using rural libraries. Highlights from the results include:

Previously undiscovered newspapers. The survey added to the author's list of newspapers in Alberta. Seven additional newspapers were identified that the author was previously unaware of.

News deserts. Four respondents identified that they are not served by a local newspaper, or radio station that carries news specific to their community, or news websites.

Insight into local community attitudes. Respondents identified a variety of local attitudes to community newspapers. Themes included a perceived decline in the quality of local news; seniors and middle-aged residents as the primary consumers of community news; and the precariousness of local news organizations as a threat to community life and informed citizens.

A desire for future collaboration with researchers. Respondents indicated that future collaborations between academics and libraries would be useful to them. Library workers also identified the need for online learning modules, workshops (for patrons and for workers) and other types of resources.

DISCUSSION

While responses were received from library workers at only 34% of Alberta rural libraries, the information garnered was an invaluable contribution to the author's work of creating a census of local news outlets. Through the survey results, the author was able to identify a number of outlets that he was not aware of, and get updates on publications that were assumed to be ongoing enterprises but were actually closed. Further, the insights in the qualitative sections of the survey provided an important window into the functioning of information flows within small communities.

The data from such inquiries cannot be accepted without further verification or scrutiny. For example, one of the news deserts identified by a respondent is not, in fact, a news desert. Although not served by a paper that was based in the same community of the library, there is a regional weekly newspaper that regularly covers events in the respondent community. While work with local libraries can reveal previously unknown data points, there is only a single response from each community, which means the data are susceptible to error. For this reason, without independent verification, the technique of surveying libraries is more useful to identify unknown publications (as a discovery tool) than it is to reveal news deserts. In the case of this project, newly-identified media outlets were verified through direct contact. Conversely, it is impossible to prove a negative (that no media are present in a community), so without additional verifications from other sources in a community, a conclusive categorization of a news desert is impossible. The purpose of this library survey technique is to verify existing data and to identify where further inquiry is needed, not a standalone tool.

In general, library workers endorsed the project. Though there were nonrespondent libraries, the author received no actual negative feedback from any library. Library workers, it seems, are eager to provide information about their communities to researchers. That considered, the response rate of 34% was well short of comprehensive. Perhaps a shorter survey instrument would have aided the response rate, but already difficult decisions were made to shorten the survey as much as possible, such as the decision to not query respondents about local television news.

For researchers, the value of the small community public library remains mostly untapped. Rural libraries are one of the few formal structures that is predictably present in even the smallest of communities. They provide an important point of contact for researchers (academic and otherwise) seeking to gain an understanding of rural areas.

However, small community libraries are a well that cannot be drawn from without limit. In conducting research in very small rural libraries, researchers need to recognize that rural library workers are often part-time and sometimes entirely volunteer. Their primary function is to serve community members, not outside researchers. Researchers should be alert to the potential for overloading workers with queries and should be vigilant for opportunities to compensate research participants adequately or provide benefits to the library as an institution. In this study, the survey included a question about which news literacy resources might be useful to libraries. Discussions of how these resources might be provided are ongoing.

A NATIONAL LOCAL NEWS CENSUS?

While libraries have traditionally played a role in serving the information needs of their local community, they can also play an important role in connecting local communities to outsiders. As members of perhaps the only formalized institution in very small communities, libraries have a unique positionality that allows them to represent information ecosystems to outsiders. This is a reversal of the traditional role of libraries as conduits of outside information to local community members.

The methodologies outlined in this article have

the potential to significantly improve documentation of local media. While listings of local media in Canada exist, they are incomplete and out of date (e.g., CBC, n.d.). As noted by Lindgren (2023), a comprehensive census would contribute significantly to academic and lay understanding of local media in Canada. One of the largest barriers to such a census is that there is no single parent membership organization to which all media outlets belong (startup publications in particular are often not members of industry associations), and that local media is present (or not present) in thousands of communities in our very-large country. Further exacerbating the challenge is that many of these communities are remote. The methodology in this article proves library workers as viable informants to a national census. If paired with other research techniques such as industry listings, media searches, and snowball techniques, and subjected to verification, the knowledge of library workers offers an important cornerstone in a large-scale project.

A challenge in such a census is the burden that is placed on the library workers themselves. This might be lessened by using the library workers to verify information instead of to report it. Further, the questions used in this pilot study (and included in the appendix) were tuned to a very specific need (a census of newspapers in the context of a larger project) and should no doubt be refined to the specific needs of a larger census. Probably, the instrument could be shortened to reduce the time for each participant to complete it. In addition, using this technique at a larger scale, enlisting the formal participation or support of regional library systems, library associations, and library conferences would no doubt increase participation rates.

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APPENDIX A

Library Survey Questions

(*) Required Question

General Questions

- Name of library*
- Job title of person completing the survey (for example, “Library Manager”, “Librarian”, etc.)*
- Are the people in your community served by other local public libraries? Please list them.*

Local Newspapers

- Are there any printed newspapers with physical offices in your community? Please list them.*
- Are there any printed newspapers that regularly cover news specific to your community but that do not have a physical office in your community? Please list them.*

Local Radio

- Are there any radio stations with physical offices in your community that regularly have news broadcasts that focus on news in your community (as opposed to provincial, national, or international news)? Please list them.*
- Are there any radio stations that regularly cover news specific to your community but that do not have a physical office in your community? Please list them.*

Local websites and social media

- Are there any websites (without associated newspapers or radio) dedicated to covering news in your community in a news-journalism style? Please list them.*
- Are there influential social media groups (such as Facebook pages) that are important to residents in your community for staying up-to-date with community events and news? Please list them.*

Local media closures or reductions in service

- Is there any other type of news media available in your community not covered by this survey? What are they?*
- Are you aware of any closures or reductions in your community’s local news coverage within the last 10 years (newspaper, radio, website or social media)? Please tell me about them.*
- Are you aware of any new additions to your community’s local news coverage within the last 10 years (newspaper, radio, website or social media)? Please tell me about them.*

Community perceptions

- What is your opinion on the value of professional local journalism (like community newspapers, or local news radio) to members of your community?
- How do you think people in your community view local Facebook groups (or other social media) in comparison to local journalism (like community newspapers or local news radio)?
- Do you believe that people in your community have a positive or negative perception of professional local journalism (like community newspapers or local news radio)? Please tell me what their viewpoints might be.
- As a community information specialist, what other things do you think is important for a study on the transformation of news media in rural communities today?

Follow up

- What resources on the rural community news media would be most useful to you and your community? (for example, a workshop, online learning module, in-person conversations, partnerships, or other things)
- Are there other key community members or stakeholders that I should speak to as my research continues?
- May I contact you for further information or for participation in later stages of the project? (this information will be kept confidential)*
- Would you like a summary report of the survey’s findings emailed to you? (this answer will be kept confidential)
- Name of person completing the survey (this information will be kept confidential)*
- Branching required conditional on questions 18 and 19 Email address of person completing the survey (this information will be kept confidential)*
- Is there anything else you would like to tell me?