

High Stakes in the High Plains: Attitudes of Rural Editors
and Publishers in Areas Facing Depopulation.

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**High Stakes in the High Plains:
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Abstract

This survey research focuses on the attitudes of rural newspaper editors and publishers in the U.S. High Plains. The region faces depopulation that threatens the existence of their newspapers and communities. The editors and publishers are comfortable in their potential conflicting roles of community watchdog and booster. While respondents have positive attitudes toward the future of their publications, they are concerned about succession – Who will take their place when they are gone?

High Stakes in the High Plains: Attitudes of Rural Editors and Publishers in Areas Facing Depopulation.

Newspapers have always played a central role in the settlement and survival of the American West. Four years before becoming best known as publisher of the *New York Tribune*, Horace Greeley gave his most memorable advice – “Go West, young man, and grow up with the country.” Greeley saw the vast, unsettled region as a “safety value” to relieve pressures building in eastern cities from the flood of European immigrants. (Sloan, 2008) When a new settlement was established, among the first items shipped in was a printing press. Frontier newspapers were started for a variety of reasons, including the desire to promote political points of view and promote additional settlement within the community. (Folkerts, Teeter, Caudill; 2009)

Nearly two centuries later, Greeley County, Kansas, named after the eastern publisher who encouraged settlers to inhabit a great frontier, struggles to survive. The latest population estimate for the county is 1,290, a greater than 60 percent drop since the 1960s and a nearly 20 percent drop since the turn of the century. The county’s population density is less than two persons per square mile. (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014)

Director Jeremy Hill of the Center for Economic Development and Business Research at Wichita State University predicts that the county’s population will be less than half its current size within 25 years. However, county government and business leaders, using a variety of local and state initiatives, recently have met this challenge with

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modest success, witnessing a 4 percent increase in the local population since 2010.

(Peters, 2013) At the center of this effort to revive a dying community is the local weekly newspaper, the *Greeley County Republican*. It's future is tied to the community's future – and both remain in doubt.

There is a large region of the United States that is often referred to as “fly over country” or “the empty middle.” Yet, because of its agricultural and energy resources, the Great Plains plays an integral role in the U.S. economy. Wedged between the fertile farmlands along the Mississippi and Missouri river valleys and the Rocky Mountains, lies a region known as the High Plains. And it is there, in the dozens of Greeley counties within eight states, that a struggle against depopulation is being waged. Newspapers played an important role in the region's settlement. This paper focuses on the question of whether the leaders of those same newspapers, facing turbulent times within their own industry, feel they can help these sparsely populated areas maintain community cohesion and, in turn, help ensure their own publication's survival.

Literature review

The newspaper industry continues its slow and, at times, painful evolution. The numbers tell the story: Total employment in newspaper publishing in the United States dropped by more than 52 per cent, down from 414,000 in 2001 to 217,650 in 2013.

(Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2013) *IBISWorld* proclaimed in 2012 that newspaper publishing was one of “the 10 fastest dying industries in America,” with a 6.4 per cent annual rate of revenue decline over the last decade. (Badkar, 2012) Newspaper

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advertising revenues (daily and Sunday) dropped 8.6 percent in 2013 from the previous year to \$17.3 billion. (Newspaper Association of America, 2014) One commentator in *Forbes* noted that the US newspaper industry is now smaller than Google. (Worstell, 2012)

Regardless of rapid technological transformations, many believe news and information will remain valuable commodities no matter what business or delivery models may evolve. “I believe newspapers that intensely covered their communities have a good future,” said Warren Buffet, whose Berkshire Hathaway multinational conglomerate owns 65 newspapers including the *Buffalo News*, the *Omaha World-Herald* and the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*. “No one has ever stopped reading halfway through a story when it was about them or their neighbors.” (Buffett, 2012) Buffet’s optimism may be born out by industry figures that show advertising revenue losses being somewhat offset by a rise in circulation and modest increases digital advertising and direct marketing revenues. (Newspaper Association of America, 2014)

This cautious sense of optimism appears greatest among the 7,500 small-town rural newspapers that dot the American landscape. “The community newspaper business is healthier than metro newspapers, because it hasn’t been invaded by Internet competition,” said Al Cross, director of the University of Kentucky’s Institute for Rural Journalism and Community Issues. “Rural papers own the franchise locally of the most credible information.” Broadcast journalist and USC Professor Judy Muller wrote, “It is more than a little ironic that small-town papers have been thriving by practicing what the mainstream media are now preaching.” She also wrote that the concepts of *hyper-*

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localism, citizen journalism and *advocacy journalism* have been around for a long time in small-town newspapers. (McGhee, 2011)

This is not to suggest that community and small-town newspapers are not feeling the same economic pinch facing their big-city brethren. Newspaper consultant John Morton wrote 20 years ago that these papers – especially those part of a newspaper chain – faced the same challenges evident elsewhere in the American economy. He said they were making money, but not enough to satisfy the home office. He also noted that in the face of local agricultural and business consolidations – he called it the Wal-Mart Effect – even locally owned newspapers were facing hard times. (Morton, 1995)

Severe cutbacks in the U.S. Postal Service further aggravate the situation. From the earliest days of the American republic, newspapers have been aided by favorable postal rates and timely deliveries. But with pressure to increase rates and a proposed elimination of services, including weekend delivery, the tide appears to have turned. *The Willard Cross Country Times* in Missouri serves as an example: With the consolidation of a regional mail processing center to a more-distant facility in Kansas City, subscribers saw a delay in their newspaper delivery. “It will take them three to four days to get their paper, which would make the news stale,” said publisher Laura Scott in 2012. “It will be really hard on the newspaper business. I don’t want to be the one to shut down a 130-year-old paper.” (Landis, 2012) Unfortunately, that was her fate as the *Cross Country Times* was sold and consolidated with the *Ash Grove Commonwealth* on January 7, 2015.

Survival on the High Plains

A greater threat to the future of rural newspapers is the loss of circulation and advertising revenues because of population declines. Approximately one in every three of

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the nation's 3,142 counties experienced a population decline during the 2000s. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, counties in decline were clustered in Appalachia, the High Plains, the Mississippi and the northern U.S. border. (Mackum and Wilson, 2012) Fifteen percent of the nation's population (46.2 million people) resided on 72 percent of the nation's land area in 2013. (USDA/ERS, 2014)

A major factor in rural population decline is a phenomenon known as natural decrease, when a county's death rate is higher than its birth rate. This is exacerbated with the exodus of younger residents looking for better-paying non-agricultural jobs.

According to 2012 census estimates, 1,135 counties faced natural decreases, compared to only 880 three years earlier. "These counties are in a pretty steep downward spiral," said Kenneth Johnson, a demographer at the University of New Hampshire. (Yen, 2013)

One rural newspaper that fell victim to declining population was *The Raton Range* in New Mexico in July 2013. "My hope was that things would turn around," wrote publisher Paula Murphy in a letter to her subscribers. "My company is saddled with so much debt that it would take the glory days of advertising revenue to pay it back.

"I don't see that happening in the near future." (Murphy, 2013)

Reversing this trend is complicated by what some describe as an innate hostility within traditional communities toward outsiders. As Common Cause founder John Gardner noted, these communities tend to be homogeneous, experience relatively little change, appear to resent changes that do happen, and are unwelcoming to strangers. (Gardner, 1990) This tendency is especially problematic in areas such as western Kansas, where the Hispanic and Latino population increased by 26.1 percent, mostly through migration, during the first decade of the 21st century. A soon-to-be published study of the

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region's community leaders in the *Journal of Applied Journalism and Media Studies* reports that while all respondents said they welcome newcomers, only one in five indicated they were comfortable with the rising numbers of Hispanics and Latinos in the region. (Guth, 2015)

While it may seem counter-intuitive, urbanization is yet another threat. Families are moving from the country and smaller towns to larger regional centers. Again, Kansas is a good example, where the overwhelming majority of its population is clustered in the eastern one-third of the state. The state's urban population was 71 percent in 2000, compared to 52 percent in 1950. While most western Kansas communities are in population decline, a handful of communities such as Garden City and Colby have experienced modest growth. "Despite the image of Kansas as part of the nation's breadbasket, urbanization has been one of the most profound changes of the twentieth century," wrote Laszlo J. Kulscar in *Kansas Policy Review*. (Kulscar, 2007)

For rural family newspapers, the question of who will take over once the editor/publisher is gone looms large. Rod Haxton, editor and publisher of the *Scott City News* in Kansas, is, for all intents and purposes, his entire new staff. "There was a guy here who used to joke that I am Underdog because 'you're everywhere, you're everywhere!'" It is a grueling lifestyle that few hearty souls love. "I kind of wonder of J-schools are turning out somebody who will want to come in and take on this kind of operation," said Haxton. (Haxton, 2014)

"I have no clue what I am going to do," said C.F. David, editor and publisher of the *Boise City News* in the Oklahoma panhandle. "I have no children who are interested in doing this." (David, 2014) David is in a particularly vulnerable position. Boise City is

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the county seat of Cimarron County, the epicenter of the Dust Bowl in the 1930s. It has lost 35 percent of its population since 2000. The population density is 1.27 persons per square mile – technically classified as frontier. (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014)

The *Scott City News* and the *Boise City News* lie within the physiographic region the U.S. Geological Survey classifies as the High Plains, where the greatest hurdle to growth is the dwindling supply of fresh water. Once known as the “Great American Desert,” the region receives an average of 10-20 inches of annual rainfall. Since the middle of the 20th century, the region’s agriculture-based economy has depended on water pumped from the High Plains Aquifer, a vast underground ocean of fresh water. The problem is that the water is being pumped out much faster than it is being replenished. The Ogallala Aquifer, the largest of the underground systems that comprise the High Plains Aquifer, contains enough water to fill Lake Erie nine times. However, since the 1950s, the Ogallala’s volume has been reduced 11 percent – the equivalent of one Lake Erie (Ashworth, 2006). Declining water reserves have become especially acute in recent years, as much of the southern High Plains have experienced drought that rivals the Dust Bowl days of the 1930. According to the Kansas Geological survey, the High Plains Aquifer has dropped an average of 36 feet in the southwest corner of the state in the last 18 years. (KU News Service, 2015)

The battle for a future

The implications of declining population and dying counties are significant for locally based journalism. Many young people leave these regions for a better life elsewhere. And it can be difficult to lure young journalists to these communities.

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Combined with a sluggish national economy that exacerbates the challenge of already dwindling advertising revenues, survival is problematic.

However, the greatest implication, at least as far as the conduct of a civil society is considered, is the potential for the loss of a local watchdog to monitor the public life of local towns and rural counties. In this wireless and digital age, will it become easier for local residents to know what is happening in far away places than it is to follow activities at their own county courthouse?

Kathryn Olmstead, a community correspondent for the *Bangor Daily News*, has written “a town or region without a newspaper that cares about it more than any other place loses a gift of democracy.” Olmstead, a former associate dean of journalism at the University of Maine, has written that a local newspaper “helps define and preserve the personality of a town and enables those who have moved away to stay connected. It fosters the local marketplace in a time when people are realizing that the future of their communities depends on supporting local businesses.” (Olmstead, 2012)

Some see the role of their local newspaper in a different light. “The local weekly newspaper is a community bulletin board with not much more than land auctions and school sports,” wrote Layton Ehmke, formerly a Chicago-based free-lance writer who has bucked the out-migration trend and chosen to return to his native western Kansas. “The ‘Word of God’ column always makes the front page – placed next to the weather and grain markets as if it were given, sobering fact, no matter the verse.” (Ehmke, L., 2014)

“The community newspaper’s greatest glory and strength is at the same time a reason for its weakness as a social force and for seeming obscurity among the mass media or communication: it is so personal,” wrote former publisher and professor John

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Cameron Sim. “The readers of a weekly tend to regard it with a proprietary interest (“our hometown paper”) and they see its virtues or tolerate its defects just as they do members of the immediate family.” (Sin, 1969)

Boosterism has been a long-standing practice in rural journalism, evidenced by the 1937 textbook *Country Journalism*. Charles Laurel Allen wrote that being a community booster is the most important thing a successful country newspaperman should do. “Boost, even when something needs correcting; a positive suggestion showing the way to better the town will accomplish far more than showing how poor the town is,” Allen wrote. (Allen, 1937)

A survey of midwestern rural weekly newspaper publishers found widespread agreement with the notion that they have to be “married” to their communities by devoting many extra hours to civic duties. Most of the respondents indicated that they felt that they could handle any conflicts of interest that could arise from this kind of relationship. However, as the principle investigator in that research noted, “The majority of recorded mission statements for these community weekly publishers included some reference to promotion or the role of cheerleader for their towns.” (Tezon, 2003) “I, at times, have to be a cheerleader for the community,” said Managing Editor Dena Sattler of the *Garden City Telegram* in Kansas. “I want this community to succeed, because, frankly, my business succeeds when it does.” (Sattler, 2014)

Doug Anstaett, executive director of the Kansas Press Association, said he felt this pressure early in career. While serving as the editor of a small-town newspaper, he said he had to remove one of his journalists from writing a weekly column after the writer

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– to the horror and disgust of local merchants – suggested it was easier find Christmas gifts for his family at a mall in a nearby town. (Anstaett, 2013)

With digital technology as the fuel to power local journalism, many have looked to the Internet and services such as AOL’s Patch, a hyper-local news aggregation site, as a means for filling local information needs. However, most of these sites are clustered in metropolitan areas and have little or no presence in rural areas. And while converting newspapers to an online product has some attraction, rural publishers face the same challenge as their big-city counterparts when it comes to finding a viable economic model. (Shors, 2012) There is also resistance to using non-journalists as the eyes and ears of the community. (Stinle and Brown, 2012) Citizen journalism also attracts a different audience than traditional newspapers; people who, at best, are moderate consumers of local journalism and have also no contact with national media. (Bentley et al., 2006) When studying how people get their local news and information, a Pew Internet and American Life Project study concluded that rural residents are most likely to rely on traditional news platforms and “most likely to worry about what would happen if their local newspaper no longer existed.” (Miller, Rainie, Purcell and Rosenstiel, 2012)

Sarah Kessenger, editor and publisher of the *Marysville Advocate* in north central Kansas, said it is important for her paper to have a Web presence. “I do agree that we are giving away a lot of news,” she said. “But we have a large portion of our readership who still are not regular Web readers. So they want their paper in hand.” She added that she expects some “blowback” when the newspaper inserts a pay wall to its website.

(Kessenger, 2013)

This discussion suggests the following research questions:

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- RQ1 How do rural editors/publishers in the High Plains reconcile their potentially conflicting roles as community watchdog and community booster?*
- RQ2 To what degree do rural editors/publishers in the High Plains see the Internet as a viable option for providing information within their communities?*
- RQ3 To what degree do rural editors/publishers in the High Plains have confidence in their ability to find replacements for departing staff and for themselves?*
- RQ4 How much confidence do rural editors/publishers in the High Plains have in the future of their communities, newspapers and profession?*

Methodology

This research represents a natural progression from an initial pilot survey administered in February 2012 to newspaper editors, county officials and chamber of commerce officials in 39 western Kansas counties. The response rate for that mail survey was 25.5 percent. That area was chosen for the pilot study because its location in and near the High Plains Aquifer, which straddles the borders of eight western U.S. states and is the geographical focus of this research. The results of that survey helped refine a questionnaire used in a series of personal interviews with newspaper editors and community leaders in Kansas, Oklahoma, New Mexico and Colorado during summer 2014. In turn, those interviews and the earlier pilot study were used to create the online survey instrument used in this research.

The survey frame was created through the use of membership directories of the state press associations in the targeted region – which, for purposes of clarity, will be referred to as the High Plains. The targeted area consists of 99 counties in eight states

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(Colorado, Kansas, Nebraska, New Mexico, Oklahoma, South Dakota, Texas and Wyoming) covering 132,217 square miles. According to the 2010 U.S. Census, the population of these High Plains counties was 3,431,387, 1.1 percent of the total U.S. population. The population density of the High Plains Region is 26.4 persons per square mile, compared to the national average of 88.4 persons per square mile (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011).

Of the 98 daily, non-daily and online High Plains newspapers listed within the various state association membership directories, nine had non-functioning e-mail accounts – reducing the survey sample to editors and/or publishers at 89 publications. Following an institutional human subjects review, an e-mail invitation containing a link to a Survey Monkey website was issued on 15 February 2015. A follow-up reminder was delivered eight days later.

Twenty-four editors and/or publishers participated in the survey for a response rate of 26.9 percent. While all of the respondents answered most of the 36 questions on the survey, four declined to answer demographic queries and, therefore, their responses are not included within the cross-tabulations included within the analysis. The final sample is, from a statistical standpoint, of insufficient size for meaningful analysis. However, considering the small sampling frame and that a 26.9 percent response rate for an e-mail survey is generally considered good, these results should serve as a strong indicator of the attitudes among rural High Plains editors and publishers.

Eighty-five percent of the respondents worked at non-daily newspapers, while 15 percent worked at daily newspapers (defined for this purpose as newspapers that publish five or six times a week). In terms of ownership structure, 55 percent of the respondents

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worked for chains, companies that publish more than one newspaper. Forty-five percent said they are affiliated with stand-alone independent newspapers. Sixty-five percent of the respondents identified themselves as male and 35 percent identified themselves as female. In terms of age, 35 percent were 30-45 years old, 60 percent 46-64 years old, and 25 percent 65 years old and older. All of the respondents willing to identify their race and/or ethnicity said they were white.

The respondents were presented a series of rating scale questions that asked the degree to which they either agreed or disagreed with various statements. The scale utilized in this study was 1 (strongly disagree), 2 (disagree), 3 (neutral), 4 (agree) and 5 (strongly agree). Therefore, responses with a mean greater than 3.00 are considered a measure of agreement and those with a mean of less than 3.00 are considered a measure of disagreement.

Analysis

General description of the respondents

Sixty percent of the respondents described themselves as an “owner/publisher” of their newspaper. Of those, 75 percent said they were male and 25 percent said they were female. Another 35 percent described themselves “non-owner managing editor,” with 57.1 percent of those male and 42.9 percent female. The remaining 5 percent, a female, described herself as “other.” Among owners/publishers, 91.7 percent said they “live within the local community,” compared to 14.3 percent of the non-owner managing

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editors. When broken down by gender, 41.2 percent of the nondaily newspaper respondents were female and 58.8 percent were male. All of the daily newspaper respondents were male. The male to female breakdown at independent newspapers was 72.8 percent to 27.2 percent. At chain newspapers, the male to female ratio was closer, with 55.6 percent male and 44.4 percent female. There was a greater discrepancy when it came to where respondents said the owners of their newspapers lived: 100 percent of the owners said they live within the local community, compared to only 11.1 percent for the chain newspapers.

RQ1 How do rural editors/publishers in the High Plains reconcile their potentially conflicting roles as community watchdog and community booster?

As shown in Table 1, the respondents were in agreement (mean 4.35) with the statement that “it is a role of local media to serve as a booster and advocate for the local community.” A bivariate analysis showed only one group, respondents affiliated with daily newspapers registering slight disagreement (2.67). That compares to a mean 4.65 among respondents from non-dailies. Respondents who were also owners of their newspapers were in stronger agreement with the statement (4.58) than those who said they were non-owners (3.86).

Table 1 – Boosterism versus objectivity (<3.00 is negative, >3.00 is positive)

	All	Non-dailies	Dailies	Ind. papers	Chain papers	Live inside	Live outside	Owner	Non-owner
Serve as a booster and advocate for the community?	4.35	4.65	2.67	4.64	4.00	4.58	4.00	4.58	3.86
Report news without regard to how outsiders see it.	4.40	4.41	4.67	4.36	4.44	4.36	4.38	4.50	4.14

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Despite a desire to advocate on behalf of their local communities, the respondents were in near-equal agreement (4.40) to the statement that “it is the role of local media to report news, whatever it is, without regard to how it will be seen by those living outside of the community.” The level of agreement remained above the 4.00 threshold in all cross-tabulations.

RQ2 To what degree do rural editors/publishers in the High Plains see the Internet as a viable option for providing information within their communities?

Skepticism is evident when it comes to the use and future role of the Internet. Eighty percent of the respondents said their newspapers had their own website. Of those newspapers with websites, 56.3 percent restrict some content behind a subscription pay wall. The remaining respondents provide web access to all of their content.

As shown in Table 2, there is general agreement (3.70) when it comes to the posting of breaking news affecting the local community on the newspaper website prior to publication in the print edition. However, respondents at daily newspapers (4.67), those at chain newspapers (4.11), those who live outside the community where the newspaper is published (4.13) and non-owners (4.00) were stronger in support of posting breaking news than their counterparts.

Table 2 – Newspapers and the Internet (<3.00 is negative, >3.00 is positive)

	All	Non-dailies	Dailies	Ind. papers	Chain papers	Live inside	Live outside	Owner	Non-owner
Appropriate to post news on web before publication?	3.70	3.53	4.67	3.36	4.11	3.42	4.13	3.50	4.00
Web can adequately inform about local government?	2.20	1.76	1.91	2.56	1.83	2.75	2.00	2.00	2.57
Internet as primary source of government information?	2.50	2.41	3.00	2.36	2.67	2.33	2.75	2.33	2.86

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While the editors and publishers saw value in using the Internet as an extension of their print editions, they were universal in their belief that the Web cannot be a replacement for what they provide. There was strong disagreement (2.20) among respondents when they were asked about the statement “I believe that the Internet can adequately provide information about local government and local issues.” They also disagreed, albeit to a slightly lesser degree (2.50) with the statement “I believe that in the future the Internet will be the primary source for information about local government. There was also a gender difference on the Internet adequacy issue (not shown in Table 1), with women more negative (1.86) than men (2.36).

RQ3 To what degree do rural editors/publishers in the High Plains have confidence in their ability to find replacements for departing staff and for themselves?

Rural editors and publishers in the High Plains appear to lack confidence when it comes to the issue of succession. As indicated in Table 3, the respondents expressed a lack of confidence when it came to filling vacant reporting positions (2.70), vacant editor positions (2.55), and replacements for themselves upon their retirement or death (2.75). While cross-tabulations show little differences in recruiting reporters or editors, that did not hold true on the question of finding the respondents’ own replacements. Respondents affiliated with dailies were slightly positive (3.25) while those at non-dailies were slightly negative (2.65). That pattern held for those at chain newspapers (3.33) compared to those at independents (2.24). Respondents living outside of the community of publication were positive (3.38) and those living inside were negative (2.33). Non-owner respondents were

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neutral about the prospects for finding their replacements (3.00) while owner respondents were slightly negative (2.67).

Table 3 – Succession (<3.00 is negative, >3.00 is positive)

	All	Non-dailies	Dailies	Ind. papers	Chain papers	Live inside	Live outside	Owner	Non-owner
Confident I can fill vacant reporter's position in a timely manner?	2.70	2.71	2.67	2.73	2.67	2.54	2.63	2.92	2.43
Confident I can fill a vacant editor's position in a timely manner?	2.55	2.47	3.00	2.36	2.78	2.42	2.75	2.67	2.43
Confident that my own replacement can be found in a timely manner?	2.75	2.65	3.25	2.24	3.33	2.33	3.38	2.50	3.00

RQ4 How much confidence do rural editors/publishers in the High Plains have in the future of their communities, newspapers and profession?

There is a dichotomy among rural High Plains editors and publishers when it comes to the cohesiveness of their communities: While they feel they live in communities where most people share the same basic values (3.80), they also disagree with the statement that their communities are more close knit today than they were ten years ago (2.80). However, as indicated in Table 4, the editors and publishers also have a strong belief (4.35) that the presence of local radio and newspaper is an aspect of maintaining community cohesion.

This was one of the few areas where gender (not shown in Table 4) appeared to be a factor. Female respondents were more positive than their male counterparts on the question of whether their community today is close knit (4.14 to 3.62), on the question of whether their community is more close-knit than 10 years ago (3.14 to 2.62), and the on

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role of local media in community cohesion (4.57 to 4.23). There were also differences based on each newspaper's Internet presence (not shown in Table 4). Respondents from newspapers who share all of their content online responded negatively to the statement that their community is more cohesive than it was 10 years ago (2.57). That compares to 3.11 from respondents whose newspaper use a pay wall to restrict access and to 4.50 for the newspapers with no Internet presence.

Table 4 – Community Cohesion (<3.00 is negative, >3.00 is positive)

	All	Non-dailies	Dailies	Ind. papers	Chain papers	Live inside	Live outside	Owner	Non-owner
I live in a close-knit community where most people share basic values.	3.80	3.82	3.67	3.82	3.78	3.83	3.75	3.83	3.86
My community is more close-knit and cohesive than it was 10 years ago.	2.80	2.82	2.67	2.91	2.67	2.92	2.63	2.92	2.71
The presence of local media is an aspect of maintaining a cohesive community.	4.35	4.47	3.67	4.55	4.11	4.58	4.00	4.58	4.00

Taken as a whole, rural editors and publishers in the High Plains say they are positive about the future of their communities (3.60), region (3.75), newspapers (3.60), and journalism, itself (3.80). And as Table 5 also shows, this optimism may stem from the higher degree of trust they feel they enjoy from their readers (4.32), compared to regional media that cover their community (3.22) and national news media (2.53).

Each publication's Internet presence (not shown in Table 5) was the only variable where respondents exhibited different attitudes toward the future of their newspapers and of journalism. Respondents affiliated with newspapers with open access to their content were most affirmative in their attitudes toward the future of their newspapers (4.29) and journalism (4.57). In comparison, respondents from newspapers with restricted online

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content were less enthusiastic about the future of their newspapers (3.56) and journalism (3.89). Respondents from newspapers without an Internet presence expressed negative attitudes toward the future of their newspapers (2.50) and journalism (2.75).

Table 5 – Attitudes About The Future and Trust (<3.00 is negative, >3.00 is positive)

	All	Non-dailies	Dailies	Ind. papers	Chain papers	Live inside	Live outside	Owner	Non-owner
I think my community has a bright future.	3.60	3.59	3.67	3.36	3.89	3.50	3.75	3.58	3.43
I think my region has a bright future.	3.75	3.76	3.67	4.91	4.00	3.67	3.88	3.58	3.43
I think my newspaper has a bright future.	3.60	3.53	4.00	3.36	3.89	3.50	3.75	3.75	3.57
I think journalism has a bright future.	3.80	3.76	4.00	3.55	3.38	3.67	4.00	3.75	3.71
My community trusts local news media.	4.32	4.38	4.00	4.20	4.44	4.20	4.38	4.36	4.14
My community trusts regional news media.	3.22	3.31	3.33	3.30	3.33	3.27	3.38	3.18	3.43
My community trusts national news media.	2.53	2.63	2.00	2.80	2.22	2.73	2.13	2.64	2.14

Conclusions and Limitations

After two surveys and extensive travel to interview editors and publishers throughout the High Plains, one cannot help but come to the conclusion that they are hardy and optimistic lot. However, as the results of this survey shows, they are also hardened realists – and that some of their responses may be attributable to “putting on a brave face.”

The survey respondents felt that the people of their communities trust them more than news delivered from outsiders. This echoes what community leaders when asked about trusting media in a 2012 survey (Guth, 2015). The respondents also expressed a strong belief that their newspapers play a vital role in maintaining community cohesion. They are also comfortable straddling the line between community watchdog and booster.

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“I get the county commissioners mad at me every now and then because of something we write,” said Editor Sharon Friedlander of the *Colby Free Press* in northwest Kansas. “Someone has to be there and fulfill that need.

“We are right up there banging on the drum every chance we get for Colby. That’s also part of our role,” said Friedlander. “We should be a cheerleader.” (Friedlander, 2014)

However, even with the many expression of optimism, signs of doubt are evident within the survey. The respondents said they see their communities as being less cohesive in terms of shared values than just a decade ago. They also acknowledge that succession – the concept of who will take over when they are gone – is problematic.

“I have no clue what I’m going to do,” said *Boise City News* Editor C.F. David. David, 69, with a history of heart trouble, said during that June 2014 interview that he health prevents him from covering the news as aggressively as he once did. “I figure that the community deserves to have somebody that will be more aggressive in investigating,” he said. “But I don’t know how to find that person.” (David, 2014)

The survey results suggest independent newspapers and chain newspapers view the succession problem through different frames. The smaller rural papers are more concerned about turnover at the top – it’s hard to find someone willing to buy a newspaper and wear many different hats in the manner of Boise City’s David. However, chain newspapers within the High Plains are less concerned about management turnover than they are about recruiting entry-level reporters. “On the news side, it is hard to recruit people to come out here,” said *Garden City Telegram* Managing Editor Dena Sattler. “It’s hard to get people to consider this side of the state.” (Sattler, 2014)

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Some of the survey respondents have readily adapted to the technological, cultural, social and climatological changes that are redefining the High Plains. Others seem to understand that if they don't make adjustments to the way they do business, their survival will be at risk. This attitude appears to play out in the Internet presence cross-tabulations. The respondents affiliated with newspapers that operate websites expressed significantly more optimism about the future of their publications and their profession than those who are not online.

Lance Maggart, editor of the *Lamar Ledger* in eastern Colorado says he “posts everything” to Facebook and Twitter, linking them to the paper's website. “Our subscribers are mostly people the older folks who are not online,” said Maggart. “So Most of the people who are going to see the paper in print are not the people looking at it in the digital realm.” (Maggart, 2014)

The limitations of the research are related to the very issues it has studied. Geographically, the High Plains is enormous. However, in terms of population – especially when it relates the resident newspaper editors and publishers – the numbers are relatively small. The choice of using an online survey instrument was dictated by time and cost considerations. Even if there had been a highly improbable 100 percent response rate, the sample would still have been small. The best way to ensure people will talk to you is to go out and meet them. But again, there are time and cost considerations when considering a 134,000 square-mile region. The author's 1,500-mile road trip through four states may not have exhaustively covered the High Plains, but provided valuable insight that aided in the preparation and analysis of the survey.

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It would be a mistake to see this research as being about a few small-town newspapers in the backwaters of journalism. In reality, it is about the role journalism plays in the lives of 3.4 million Americans – people responsible for the production of much of the meat and grain that are staples of the American diet. The people of High Plains play an important role in the nation’s economy and have had left a lasting impression on the country’s collective consciousness. In many ways, the region is still as much a frontier as when settlers in pursuit of a better life joined the native peoples of the High Plain two centuries ago. If anything, this survey of rural editors and publishers demonstrates that these 21st century journalists share the spirit of tempered optimism that guided their predecessors through many storms – figuratively and literally – since the mid 19th century.

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