

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

Associate Professor David W. Guth, APR.
William Allen White School of Journalism and Mass Communications
University of Kansas
Email: dguth@ku.edu / Website: www.dguth.journalism.ku.edu

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?



Research Questions

- 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 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. 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. Twenty-four editors and/or publishers participated in the survey for a response rate of 26.9 percent. 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.



Respondent Profile

- 85% worked at non-daily newspapers
- 55% worked for chain newspapers
- 65% male
- 60% were between 46-64 years old
- 60% were owners/publishers
 - 75% male, 25% female
 - 100% lived in community
- 35% were non-owners/publishers
 - 57% male and 43% female
 - 11% lived in community

Key Findings

1. Respondents were comfortable with the dual role of community watchdog/booster.

	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

2. Respondents see value in the Internet as an extension of their print editions, but do not see it as a replacement for what they provide.

	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

3. High Plains editors and publishers appear to lack confidence in their ability to find replacements for their staffs and for themselves.

	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

4. While High Plains editors and publishers feel they live in communities where most people share basic values, they also think that their communities are less close-knit than in the past. They remain positive about the future of their newspapers, communities, region and the profession of journalism.