

**Amber Waves of Change: Rural Community Journalism in  
Areas of Declining Population.**

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### **Author Biography**

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### **Abstract**

A survey of county commissioners, chamber of commerce executive and journalists in western Kansas examined perceptions and attitudes toward change in a region of declining population. The surveys were augmented with follow-up interviews. The results showed a strong preference for locally generated news content and a belief that rural journalists should be both objective and community boosters. There was skepticism toward the Internet as a source of local news. 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.

## **Amber Waves of Change: Rural Community Journalism in Areas of Declining Population.**

Although he was a nineteenth century son of New England, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow accurately captured the major challenge of the Great Plains in the twenty-first century:

“From the ground comes up the laugh of children, the soft voice of maidens, and the sweet and solemn hymn of Sabbath worshippers. The low of herds blends with the rustling of the heavy grain over the dark-brown furrows. All at once a fresher wind sweeps by and breaks my dream. And I am in the wilderness alone.”

(Longfellow, 1876-1879)

Despite its vast vistas and plentiful resources, much of the middle of the United States is being abandoned. In a swath of prairie and foothills stretching from Texas to the Dakotas, the birth rate is failing to keep pace with the outmigration of young people seeking a better life. It is not a new trend. The decline dates back to Longfellow’s days before the Industrial Revolution and the Information Age. However, in the early twenty-first century, many communities are reaching a tipping point where their very survival is now an open question.

There were more than 17,000 weekly newspapers in the early 1900s. Many of them were along what had been the American frontier. “The history of newspapers in the rural West is a history of crisis and triumph in alternation,” wrote Krissy Clark and Geoff McGhee of the Bill Lane Center for the American West at Stanford University. They also noted that newspapers were instrumental in the growth of the West, often set up by town boosters to encourage growth. “Whether newspapers enabled or merely exploited the many waves of migration to the rural West during the nineteenth century, newspapers were certainly an ‘active agent in western urbanization’ and a ‘catalyst for social change.’” (Clark and McGhee, 2012) The advent of radio in the 1920s and television in the 1940s also helped to maintain rural community continuity.

For these small communities, technology has been a curse and a blessing. Because of technology, it is now possible to manage more acres of farmland and grazing lands with fewer people. This has led to consolidation and the advent of corporate farming. On the other hand, technological advances have allowed residents of these diffused populated areas to maintain a sense of community. It is also attracting people of different ethnicities to the region. Living in the American West has always been – and will always be – a tenuous balance.

“This legacy of turbulence finds rural newspapers relatively unscathed by the calamities currently facing many big city papers,” Clark and McGhee said. “Put another way, there is no crisis in rural Western newspapers: the crisis has always been there. And the papers are stronger for it.” (Clark and McGhee, 2012)

This article focuses on the amber waves of change sweeping the Great Plains. It is based on a pilot study and subsequent targeted interviews, the opening steps in an effort

to examine the role of rural community journalism in a rapidly evolving environment. It samples the attitudes of three groups of community leaders: journalists, county commissioners and chamber of commerce officials. Ultimately, the goal is to describe and understand the social, cultural, political and environmental forces reshaping a vast region of the United States.

### **Literature review**

The story of the newspaper industry parallels that of the blind man and the elephant – a description of its present condition and future health relies upon one’s perspective. Taken as a whole, the lumbering giant has been staggered by declining revenues and changing readership patterns. However, when examining individual aspects of the industry, very different narratives emerge.

That newspapers are facing a major sea change is undeniable. Total employment in newspaper publishing has dropped by more than 40 per cent, down from 414,000 in 2001 to 246,020 in 2011. (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2011) *IBISWorld* cited newspaper publishing in April 2012 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) One commentator in *Forbes* noted that the US newspaper industry is now smaller than Google. “But unlike many I see the dead tree version of the newspaper surviving rather longer than the few years that some give it.” (Worstall, 2012)

While some of the optimism is borne of a belief that technology can aid as much as threaten the ailing industry, it is also founded on the principle that 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)

This growing 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 in her book *Emus Loose in Egnar: Big Stories from Small Towns* “it is more than a little ironic that small-town papers have been thriving by practicing what the mainstream media are now preaching.” She wrote that the concepts of *hyper-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 nearly twenty years ago that these papers – especially those part of a newspaper chain – faced the same challenges evident elsewhere in the American economy, they were making money, but not enough money 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)

However, a more recent development, severe cutbacks in the US Postal Service, further aggravates 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 will see 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. “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,” she said. As for taking the paper online, she said, “A lot of people in this area, a lot of our subscribers, don’t have computers or the Internet.” (Landis, 2012)

### **Dying counties**

For many rural newspapers, the greatest threat comes from something over which they have no control, an ongoing decline in population. Approximately one in every three of the nation’s 3,142 counties is in a period of population decline. According to the US Census Bureau, counties losing population in the 2000s were clustered in Appalachia, the Great Plains, the Mississippi and the northern US border. (Mackum and Wilson, 2012)



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 condition helped coin the phrase "dying counties." 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. He said that two states, West Virginia and Maine, are experiencing a natural decrease on a statewide basis. (Yen, 2013)

Consider a rural, agricultural state like Kansas. While its overall population rose 6.1 per cent between 2000-2010 (9.7 per cent nationally), the overwhelming majority of its population is clustered in the eastern one-third of the state around Kansas City, Wichita and Topeka. "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 Laszio J. Kulscar in *Kansas Policy Review*. He noted that the proportion of urban population in Kansas was 71 per cent in 2000, compared to 52 per cent in 1950. Kulscar cites census data showing that six Kansas counties have lost population each decade since 1900 and another 37 that had a negative net migration each decade since 1950. (Kulscar, 2007)

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. Combined with a nationwide economic downturn 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?

“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)

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, said in an April 2012 column 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)

## **The battle for a future**

“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 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) This study dovetails with one published nearly 40 years earlier which concluded that a majority of small town community leaders believe the proper role of their hometown

newspapers is to “work jointly with community leaders to initiate projects.” (Edelstein and Schultz, 1966)

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 – 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 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)

The difficult position rural residents and the journalists who serve them find themselves in was summed up earlier this year by someone often seen as their champion.

“Unless we respond and react, the capacity of rural America and its power and its reach will continue to decline,” said US Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack. “Rural America, with a shrinking population, is becoming less and less relevant to the politics of this country.” (Doering, 2013)

This discussion raises these research questions:

- 1. How do perceptions of the quality of and prospects for community journalism differ between rural community leaders and rural journalists?*
- 2. How do perceptions of concern for declining population differ between rural community leaders and rural journalists?*
- 3. How often do rural journalists and community leaders turn to the Internet for news and do they see it as a viable alternative to traditional media?*

### **Pilot study area description**

This study is the opening salvo of an extensive research initiative that will look at the state of journalism in areas of declining population. The major focus of this study will be the Central Great Plains covering portions of Oklahoma, Kansas, Colorado and Nebraska. It will examine the role of rural and community journalism in areas of declining population, as well as the social, cultural, environmental and political implications of this decline.

The focus of this pilot study is a 39-county region in western Kansas, stretching west of a line from and including Phillips County on the Nebraska border to Comanche County on the Oklahoma border. The largest county in this region in terms of size and population is Finney County. Its county seat, Garden City, is a regional center of agribusiness, especially the meat processing industry. Other population centers in the region include Dodge City, Hays and Liberal. According to the 2010 US Census, the 33,897 square-mile region had a population of 251,419, approximately 8.8 per cent of the state's population. (US Census Bureau, 2010) While the region's population grew .8 per cent between 2010-13 in the most recent Census Bureau estimates, more than half of the region's 39 counties lost population during that three year period. (US Census Bureau, 2013)

The average household income during 2006-2010 was \$43,554 compared to the statewide average \$49,424. The population density in 2010 was 7.42 people per square mile, compared to 34.68 per square mile statewide. While the overall population of Kansas rose by 6.1 per cent during the first decade of the new millennium, it dropped by 4.1 per cent in the 39-county region. Of the 39 counties, only six experienced population increases from 2000-2010. The census year of maximum population is 1930 or earlier in 23 of the counties. (*Kansas Statistical Abstract*, 2012, 425) Stevens County, located in the southwestern corner of the state, had the region's high percentage population increase during the 2000s at 4.8 per cent. In terms of numbers, Ford County's 1,390-person increase in population was the region's highest. At the other extreme, Kiowa County saw the most dramatic percentage drop in population, 22.1 per cent. That is attributable to the May 2007 tornado that destroyed 97 per cent of the county seat, Greensburg. Only half of

the 1,600 people who lived there in 2000 have since returned. Numerically, Finney County saw the greatest population drop in western Kansas, losing 3,747 residents in the 2000s.

While the region's story has been one of population decline, there has been a significant migration of Hispanic and Latino residents into the 39 counties covered by this pilot study, a rise of 26.1 per cent between 2000-2010. This is consistent with national population trends. According to the US Census Bureau, the Hispanic/Latino population grew most significantly in the South and Midwest during the 2000s, by 57 and 49 per cent, respectively. (Ennis, 2011)

All but four of the counties in the pilot study area increased their Hispanic/Latino population during that decade, with Ness County having the highest percentage increase, 340.4 per cent, and Ford County having the highest numerical increase, 5,090. Statewide, the Hispanic/Latino population rose during the 2000s to 300,042, a 59.4 per cent increase. This, in turn, raises a fourth research question:

4. *To what degree do rural journalists and rural community leaders embrace the growing diversity of rural areas?*

Demographically, the average age of the population of western Kansas has been steadily increasing, following state and national trends. However, because of a large outmigration of Baby Boomers from the region in the 1980s and 1990s, there is increasing disparity between the number of older and younger residents. (Ennis, Rios-Vargas and Albert, 2011) Psychographically, this trend is evident in a review of Nieslen's

*MyBestSegments* lifestyle segmentation database. Using the service's PRIZM online zip code search engine, the most frequent lifestyle categories generated in the 39-county region have names such as *Simple Pleasures*, *Back Country Folks*, *Golden Ponds*, *Blue Highways* and *Mayberry-ville*. All of these psychographic categories depict an older, more conservative, and childless constituency. (Nielsen, 2013)

The pilot study region has eight daily newspapers and 24 weekly newspapers. (*Kansas Statistical Abstracts*, 2012, 138-142) There are also 36 radio stations and seven television stations. (Kansas Association of Broadcasters, 2013) However, most of the television stations licensed in the region retransmit broadcasts from Wichita stations outside the 39-county region. Some of the stations have local news drop-ins within the Wichita newscasts.

## **Methodology**

Survey questionnaires along with addressed and stamped return envelopes were mailed to 184 individuals in the 39-county pilot study region. Specifically, the surveys were sent to the 121 county commissioners within the region listed by the office of the Kansas Secretary of State. (Because commissioner e-mail addresses are often channeled through a third party, usually the county clerk, use of the postal service was deemed the most reliable method for reaching this group.) Another 24 surveys were sent the executive director of the chambers of commerce within the pilot study region as identified by the Kansas Chamber. An additional 39 surveys were mailed to the region's



newspaper editors, as identified by the Kansas Press Association, or radio/TV news directors, as identified by the Kansas Association of Broadcasters.

There were two reasons for choosing this targeted, albeit small sampling frame. Each group had a duality of personal interests – serving the needs of itself and those of a much broader constituency. Working in combination, the three-targeted groups presented a reasonable approximation of the political, economic and cultural interests of western Kansas. That the commissioners, chamber executives and journalists were each identifiable publics and accessible aided in the administration of the survey instrument.

The surveys were mailed mid-February 2012. Forty-seven of the questionnaires were returned, representing a 25.5 per cent return rate. There were similar percentages of returned questionnaires within the three classifications of respondents: 24.0 per cent for commissioners, 33.3 per cent for chamber executives and 25.6 per cent among the journalists. While the rate of return was less than desired, it provided a confidence level of 95 per cent with a confidence interval of 10.78, sufficient for a pilot study.

The survey was useful in identifying topics and clarifying the direction and focus of the larger research effort. That included targeted interviews with individuals from within the region, as well as individuals who are experts in subjects relevant to the survey. Their reactions to the survey results have been incorporated into this article.

## **Analysis**

### *General Characteristics of Respondents*

All of the survey respondents had access to the Internet and identified themselves as being white with the exception of one individual who chose not to respond to the race/ethnicity query. More than two-thirds of the respondents said they are males. However, a majority of journalists (54.5 per cent) and chamber executives (87.5 per cent) said they are females. Almost 93 per cent of the county commissioner respondents said they are males. More than 57 per cent of the respondents said they are between the ages of 46 and 64. Responding journalists were more likely to fall within this age range (63.6 per cent) than county commissioners (57.1 per cent) and chamber executives (50.0 per cent). Overall, respondents had lived within their current county of residence approximately 33 years. However, the elected officials averaged significantly longer in their current county of residence (43.1 years) than the journalists (34.2 years) and the chamber of commerce executives (23.3 years).

*RQ1: How do perceptions of the quality of and prospects for community journalism differ between rural community leaders and rural journalists?*

There was consensus among all respondents that local media do a better job of covering rural issues than their regional or national counterparts and that regionally based media do a better job of reporting on those issues than the national media. As indicated in Table 1, a higher percentage of journalists (81.8 per cent) agreed or strongly agree with

the statement “local media within my county do a good job of covering the issues that face rural residents” than chamber of commerce officials (50.0 per cent) and county commissioners (55.2 per cent). However, the level of agreement among respondents in all three categories followed a similar pattern, rating local media the highest, followed by regional and then national. (Preacher, 2001)

**TABLE 1 – Approval of coverage of issues faced by rural residents (per cent)**

	Local Media		Regional Media		National Media	
	Agree	Disagree	Agree	Disagree	Agree	Disagree
<b>All</b>	28 (59.6)	15 (31.9)	21 (44.7)	13 (27.7)	3 (6.4)	34 (72.3)
<b>Journalists</b>	9 (90.0)	1 (10.0)	5 (50.0)	3 (30.0)	0 (0.0)	6 (60.0)
<b>Chamber officials</b>	4 (50.0)	3 (37.5)	2 (25.0)	4 (50.0)	0 (0.0)	7 (87.5)
<b>Commissioners</b>	15 (57.1)	11 (37.9)	14 (48.3)	6 (20.7)	3 (10.3)	22 (72.4)

*p-value: .00 df=4  $\chi^2 = <.001$*

The “more local, the better ” pattern continued when the respondents were asked their degree of agreement to questions about how well the local community is informed about issues confronting their local, state and federal governments. Table 2 shows a similar pattern to one demonstrated in Table 1, the closer to home the government entity, the more likely the issues facing it are understood. While the overall sample is statistically significant, this particular cross-tabulation is not – most likely because of the small sample size.

**TABLE 2 – Belief local residents understand issues facing government (per cent)**

	Local Government		State Government		National Government	
	Agree	Disagree	Agree	Disagree	Agree	Disagree
<b>All</b>	25 (53.2)	13 (27.7)	14 (29.9)	20 (42.6)	10 (21.3)	21 (44.7)
<b>Journalists</b>	6 (60.0)	0 (0.0)	3 (30.0)	2 (20.0)	2 (20.0)	3 (30.0)
<b>Chamber officials</b>	5 (62.5)	3 (37.5)	4 (50.0)	4 (50.00)	1 (12.5)	2 (25.0)
<b>Commissioners</b>	14 (48.3)	10 (34.5)	7 (24.1)	14 (48.3)	7 (24.1)	16 (55.2)

*p-value: .00 df=4  $x^2 = <.001$*

When asked whether the media report on “things important to me,” a similar pattern emerged. Overall, 63.8 per cent of the respondents were in agreement when asked about local media, compared to 48.9 per cent for regional media and 34.0 per cent for national media. This pattern held for each respondent classification, although the tabulation was more statistically significant for local media ( $x^2 = <.001$ ) than for regional media ( $x^2 = <.01$ ) or national media ( $x^2 = .02$ ).

The “more local, the better” pattern also emerged in the analysis of the response to questions about local resident perceptions of trust of local, regional and national media. Overall, 63.8 per cent of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “the people of our community trust locally based media.” That compares to 46.8 per cent agreement when asked about regionally based media and 10.6 per cent for the national media ( $x^2 = <.001$ ). This pattern held for each of the respondent classifications.

One of the most interesting findings was the perception of the media’s role within the local community. A high percentage (85.1 per cent) of respondents agreed with the statement “It is the role of local media to report the news, what ever it is, without regard to how it will be seen by those outside of the community” ( $x^2 = <.001$ ). There was a

small level of disagreement with this statement, 4.3 per cent overall. However, a similarly high percentage of respondents (91.5 per cent) – including 90.0 per cent among journalists – were in agreement with the statement “it is the role of the local media to serve as a booster and advocate for the local community ( $x^2 = < .001$ ).” None of the respondents expressed disagreement with this statement.

“You have to make sure that people understand that when you report something negative that it is not being an ‘anti-booster’ of your community, but that it is part of the fabric of the community,” said Kansas Association of Broadcasters President and Executive Director Kent Cornish. He added that reporting stories critical of a major employer in town runs the risk of hurting a station’s bottom line. (Cornish, 2013)

There were several positive signs for the future of media in areas of declining population. There was overall agreement (89.4 per cent) with the statement that “the presence of local media is an aspect of maintaining community cohesion ( $x^2 = < .001$ ).” Once again, none of the respondents expressed disagreement with this statement. Another 80.9 per cent – including 75.9 per cent of the commissioners – said “the presence of local journalists makes it easier for officials to communicate ( $x^2 = < .001$ ).” There was even stronger agreement (83.0 per cent) when respondents were asked if their communities “would be adversely affected if there were no local media ( $x^2 = < .001$ ).” As Marysville, Kansas, newspaper publisher Sarah Kessinger said, “It is a symbiotic relationship. We have to have a good range of local news in the paper for our community to support us.” (Kessinger, 2013)

“Community cohesion is something that western Kansas communities struggle with all of the time because if you are so small, you have to be cohesive to be

successful,” said Marit Ehmke, who was raised on a farm near Dighton, Kansas, and is employed as a copy editor for an eastern Kansas newspaper. She said that the survival of local schools and local newspapers take on added importance in rural communities. “People look forward to something they can identify with commonly,” she said. “In Dighton, that’s not a lot of things.” (Ehmke, M., 2014)

*RQ 2 - How do perceptions of concern for declining population differ between rural community leaders and rural journalists?*

Respondents were asked a series of questions concerning their county’s declining population. Specifically, respondents were asked on a scale of one-to-five (with one representing “very little” and five representing “a great deal”) the degree to which they were concerned about the decline. They were then asked about their perceptions of the concerns of local residents, county officials, local news media, and regional news media (organizations serving, but based outside of each county). Those results are summarized in Table 3:

**TABLE 3 – Mean of perceptions of concerns about declining local population.**

	<b>The Respondent’s Concerns</b>	<b>Local Residents’ Concerns</b>	<b>County Officials’ Concerns</b>	<b>Local Media’s Concerns</b>	<b>Regional Media’s Concerns</b>
<b>All</b>	4.28	3.78	4.30	3.78	2.87
<b>Journalists</b>	4.10	4.00	4.10	4.00	2.70
<b>Chamber officials</b>	4.63	4.25	4.63	4.38	2.75
<b>Commissioners</b>	4.25	3.57	4.29	3.54	2.96

*n=47; p-value: .00 df=4  $\chi^2 = <.001$*

The results suggest that there is concern for the region's declining population, and that respondents tend to think they have a higher level of concern about the decline than others. It is not a surprise that journalists felt their local media colleagues have a higher level of concern for the decline than others. Local officials, represented by both the county commissioners and the chamber officials, felt the same way about the level of concern among county officials. Consistent with "the more local, the better" pattern already discussed, regional media were perceived as being the least concerned about the region's declining population rate.

The respondents were also in agreement – as a whole and among the three respondent classifications – that their local community has "a bright future." Overall, 57.4 per cent either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, while 19.1 per cent either disagreed or strongly disagreed ( $\chi^2 = <.001$ ).

*RQ 3: How often do rural journalists and community leaders turn to the Internet for news and do they see it as a viable alternative to traditional media?*

The Internet was a source of national news for a larger percentage of respondents, 83.0 per cent, than it was for regional news, 70.2 per cent, or local news, 59.6 per cent ( $\chi^2 = <.001$ ). These numbers are likely skewed by the journalists' Internet habits, although the cross-tabulation analysis is statistically insignificant because of the small number of respondents. More than 60 per cent of the commissioners and the chamber officials said they received both regional and local news from the Internet. However, only 40.0 per cent of journalists received regional news and 27.3 per cent received local news via the

Internet. One logical hypothesis is that as the generators of local and regional news, the journalists had less reason to go online.

Despite the high level of Internet use among the respondents, there was skepticism about its role as a source of local information. When asked if the Internet “can adequately inform people about local issues,” only 17.0 per cent of the respondents agreed and 63.8 per cent disagreed ( $\chi^2 = < .001$ ). The journalists disagreed the most (80.0 per cent), followed by the commissioners (62.1 per cent) and the chamber officials (50.0 per cent). There was a slightly different pattern when the respondents were asked if, in the future, the Internet would serve as “the primary source” of local information. Again, more disagreed with the statement, 48.9 per cent, than agreed, 29.8 per cent ( $\chi^2 = .02$ ). However, more chamber officials agreed (62.5 per cent) than disagreed (25.0 per cent). More journalists and commissioners disagreed with the concept than agreed. While the overall sample is statistically significant, the cross-tabulations are not because of the small sample size.

Some rural, but not all, rural newspapers view the Internet as an ally and a way to extend the newspaper’s reach. “You want to get the event on your website right away, before somebody else gets it up,” said *Marysville Advocate* news editor Sally Gray. “But then you turn around and try to develop sidebars and develop a bit more to the story.” (Gray, 2013)

“We struggle with an attitude that if we do anything to point people away from the print product we are cutting our own throats,” said the Kansas Press Association’s Anstaett. “We have to try and convince people that the Internet turns a weekly into a 24/7



daily newspaper. It can still, if it really does its job, continue to be the first place that people turn to.” (Anstaett, 2013)

*RQ 4: To what degree do rural journalists and rural community leaders embrace the growing diversity of rural areas?*

In what may be the most significant results of this survey, the respondents have decidedly mixed feelings about future population growth. Every respondent either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “I welcome the prospects of new people moving into the community ( $\chi^2 = < .001$ ).” Eighty-nine-point-four per cent said their community felt the same way ( $\chi^2 = < .001$ ). However, when asked if they are “comfortable with the knowledge that the only population segment to grow within rural areas since 2000 has been the Hispanic and Latino populations,” only 19.1 per cent responded in the affirmative and 55.3 per cent in the negative ( $\chi^2 = < .001$ ). Their perceptions of community attitudes were more negative, with only 8.5 per cent in agreement and 59.6 per cent in disagreement ( $\chi^2 = < .001$ ). The pattern held true for cross-tabulations of the three respondent categories in both questions (See Table 4).

**TABLE 4 – Comfort With Hispanic/Latino Growth In Rural Areas (percentage)**

	All		Journalists		Chamber		Commissioners	
	Agree	Disagree	Agree	Disagree	Agree	Disagree	Agree	Disagree
Respondents' personal comfort level	9 (19.1)	26 (55.3)	2 (20.0)	5 (50.0)	0 (0.0)	5 (62.5)	7 (24.1)	16 (55.2)
Perceptions of the community comfort level	4 (8.5)	28 (59.6)	1 (10.0)	6 (60.0)	0 (0.0)	6 (75.0)	5 (17.2)	16 (55.2)

*p-value: .00 df=4  $\chi^2 = <.001$  (both questions)*

One sign of the cultural strains respondents feel may be found in their answers to questions about community cohesion. When asked whether they “live in a close-knit and cohesive community where most people share the same values,” 70.2 per cent were in agreement, compared to 8.5 per cent who disagreed ( $\chi^2 = <.001$ ). However, when asked whether their community is “more close-knit and cohesive than it was 10 years ago,” only 14.9 per cent agreed and 34.0 per cent disagreed ( $\chi^2 = .10$ ).

## **Discussion**

When it comes to *RQ 1*, the perceptions of the quality of prospects for community journalism, the respondents, overall and in their subgroups, strongly endorsed the idea of “the more local the news, the better.” A higher percentage of the local journalists, chamber of commerce officials and county commissioners said their hometown reporters do a better job of covering rural issues than their regional or national media counterparts. A higher percentage of those three groups also felt local citizens were better informed of issues facing their local governments than they are for the state or federal governments. In general, the respondents had a higher level of trust in their local journalists, considered

the presence of locally based journalists important, and felt their communities would be adversely affected without local news sources.

One potential surprising result was the duality of the expectations for rural community journalism. While all three groups were comfortable with the local media covering the news without regard to how it reflects on the community, the same three groups – including 90.0 per cent of the journalists – endorsed the potentially conflicting role of local media as community boosters. That may help explain why more almost 90 per cent of respondents agreed with the statement that local media is important to community cohesion. Anstaett said communities are continuing to seek their “news identity” and fear that the loss of local media would result less favorable and less overall coverage of their community by “outsiders.” (Anstaett, 2013)

With regard to *RQ 2*, the respondents expressed concern over the region’s declining population. The numbers suggest that each of each group thinks it has a higher level of concern and that all groups felt there was a significant drop-off of concern among media based outside of the local area. While a majority (57.4 per cent) of the respondent agreed with the statement that their community has a bright future, there is a significant minority (42.6 per cent) who either expressed no opinion or disagreed with the statement.

*RQ 3*, questions about Internet use and its viability as an alternative to traditional media, brought conflicting answers. An overwhelming majority of respondents said they use the Internet to access news; accessing national news at significantly higher percentage than local or regional news. However, a majority expressed doubt about the Web’s ability to inform them of local news and whether it would evolve into the primary source for local government information.

It was *RQ 4*, which dealt with the migration of people of Hispanic or Latino ethnicity into the region that yielded the most significant result: While every man and woman who responded to the survey said they welcome the prospect of people moving into their community, only one in five indicated that he or she was comfortable with the increasing number of Hispanics and Latinos in the region. Even worse: They said they felt that ratio was only one in 10 among the residents of their community. While they feel their communities are close knit with shared values, there may be some doubt as to whether they will remain that way.

Donald Worster, an acclaimed historian who wrote *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s*, noted that plains residents used to refer to German and Russian Mennonites immigrants to the region as being non-white. “Clearly there was ethnic tension and a racial hierarchy,” Worster said. “But, at the same time, you look around today as see how much assimilation or integration has gone on.” (Worster, 2014)

Assimilation may prove to be a greater challenge for today’s Hispanic/Latino and Pacific Rim immigrants. “You have population growth, economic growth, and opportunity growth,” said Bruce Dierking, owner of six rural Kansas radio stations. “But, on the other said, you are speaking seven different languages in your schools and your kids are in a very different culture than you grew up with.” Citing the experience of his own German immigrant family, Dierking said he thinks these rural communities will eventually adjust to their new diversity. (Dierking, 2013)

While Worster also agrees that these communities will adjust, he doesn’t believe attracting immigrants to the smaller towns of the region is the long-term solution to the

problem of population decline. “It is not going to save them,” Worster said. “There are just too many of these towns out there.

“I can’t see how they will survive.” (Worster, 2014)

### **Limitations**

The response rate to the survey was disappointing, but not totally unexpected. While an online survey with the capability of sending respondents several reminders would have been preferable. However, as has been noted, it was impractical. While Internet penetration into the region does not appear to be a problem, e-mail addresses for individual elected officials are often not posted on the county website – a practice which seems a viable subject for future research.

Since the administration of this survey, subsequent research has identified public attitudes toward the use of water pumped from the Ogallala aquifer as a critical factor in the future of the region. In hindsight, questions concerning public attitudes toward water issues could have provided relevant information about the role of media in public education. These questions will be explored in future inquiries. Also in hindsight, the question about community cohesion and shared values could have been better worded: Just because things may not be better than a decade ago does not necessarily mean that they are worse.

### **Conclusion**

As noted, this survey and follow interviews came at the start of a much larger research effort. Additional interviews with journalists and community leaders throughout

the southern high plains is planned with the goal of generating a book reflecting the challenges the people – especially the journalists – of the region face, as well as the spirit and determination with which they face them. Change is both frightening and inevitable. History is replete with examples of peoples and regions forced to adjust to new realities. This region, sparse in population but rich in spirit and resources, is facing both challenges and opportunities. This research is first step in chronicling those forces of change.

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