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Strong newspapers, strong communities need each other

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Newspapers are, at best, in transition and, at worst, under siege. But they remain important. Newspapers are part of the stitching that holds cities, counties, states and nations together. Newspapers give us a sense of community.

Psychologists John McMillan and Larry Chavis define "sense of community" in four parts. It is a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter (to one another and to the group), and a belief that members' needs will be met through the community.

Newspapers have created that sense in the past, and they can do so in the future. It is key to their survival that they do so in the future.

Membership is the feeling of belonging. The sense of membership in any community can come from geography or history or more. It also can come from the newspaper. As newspapers plumb their archives for historical photos in picture books, they generate that shared history.

The continuing existence of two papers in Duluth and Superior demonstrates the importance of membership in defining a community. The community in Superior holds its own sense of membership.

A sense of membership will lead to shared emotional connection, the belief that members will continue to share history and to encounter similar experiences.

How many of us bought a newspaper the day after the presidential election -- a way to say "I was there" for a day important to our national history and for less than a dollar?

Newspapers create emotional connections with wedding announcements and death notices -- experiences we all inevitably share. And we see our connections to a global community in small things like the schedules for ships that bring goods to and from around the world.

Members of a community feel they matter, they make a difference. Members must feel some influence over the community, and the community must have some influence on its members. The art of the human-interest story is showing that one person can make a difference to the community.

But can the newspaper show us that the community makes a difference to us? By community, here, I mean more than "red plans" and tax levies and other ways government influences our lives. What does it mean to say that being a member of the Duluth community matters to us, as members?

We are conditioned to think the answers to newspapers' worries are on the Web. The Web is no answer. We are too conditioned to screech at each other on the Web, to treat discussion boards as places to express ourselves. We want to make a difference on those boards, but where do the boards make a difference to us?

Members of a community feel that members' needs will be met by the resources received through their membership in the group.

"A strong community is able to fit people together so that people meet others' needs while they meet their own," McMillan and Chavis wrote in 1986. No tool is better for this purpose than the newspaper. Newspapers can instill a sense of community while connecting businesses to customers and governments to citizens. No matter how clever Web portals become, they can't serve the complex purposes that a newspaper can in building a community.

Maybe some of the ideas for tomorrow's newspapers can be found in new ways to create a sense of community in readers today.

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