Our News, For Us, From Us:

Social Identity and Rural News and Information

A Dissertation

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Abstract

This dissertation explores how rural residents obtain news and information that is salient in their everyday lives and what guides their evaluations of their choices. Utilizing 40 in-depth interviews with residents of Nelson County, Virginia, this study finds, participants express a rejection of the weekly newspaper that has covered the county for almost 150 years and an acceptance of a location-based Facebook group that serves as a supplement, if not an outright replacement, to the traditional news organization.

The participants perceive the weekly news organization to be "not local" on three levels — the organizational level, the content level and the journalist level. Participants express that they want their news and information to be about them and from them, meaning from a person who lives in the county, is engaged in the county and cares about the county. Alternatively, participants turn to a location-based Facebook group, created by county residents, moderated by county residents and sourced by county residents. Participants perceive the Facebook group content is useful news and information, meaning real-time, immediate tools for daily living. They also value the democratic nature of the platform, how everyone potentially can have a voice.

Theoretically, drawing from social identity theory, rural social identity and collective psychological ownership, I argue that participants perceive "local" as "ours," or a "shared sense of ownership." In this vein, the participants do not perceive the county news organization is "ours." In response, I conclude that news organizations should strive toward a theoretical notion of Our Good Neighbor.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

In early 2022, as I started my dissertation fieldwork in rural Nelson County, Virginia, I had a story in mind from across the state, near the West Virginia border. In April 2020, in the height of the coronavirus pandemic, Anne Adams, the owner, publisher and editor of a nearly 150-year-old weekly newspaper for the last three decades, wrote an editorial to her rural readers. “Five weeks from now, *The Recorder* faces the toughest deadline it has ever been asked to meet,” wrote Adams (2020). The pandemic forced the closure of dozens of newspapers across the U.S., and *The Recorder* was on the verge of becoming another victim. Adams told readers the newspaper, which first published in 1887, had just five weeks left before shrinking finances would force its closure. “We urge those who find *The Recorder* important to your lives to consider ways you can help us keep publishing,” she wrote. “Right now, we have no choice but to ask for your help.” The community came to the rescue. Non-subscribers started subscriptions. Subscribers extended subscriptions into the future. Businesses bought advertising. Donations came in droves. Two years later, *The Recorder* is still publishing. “I had to sort of swallow my pride and ask for help,” Adams said in a later interview. “It was amazing. Our readers really came through for us” (Ralston, 2020).

Any assumptions I had based on that reader response, about it serving as an example of a strong relationship between a weekly news organization and its rural audience members, were shattered with my first fieldwork interview. Adam[1] was the first of 40 in-depth interviews I conducted with residents of rural Nelson County. He is in his 20’s and, to use Nelson County participant parlance, he is a “from-here,” meaning a

[1] Pseudonyms used to protect the anonymity of participants. Further details in Chapter 3.

Nelson County native. Adam is about as from-here as it gets. "Mama's family goes back 400 years," Adam said of his Nelson County roots. I met Adam at a locally owned restaurant. Adam knows the owner well and thought it would be a good place to chat. As we got settled at our table, I placed my recorder down and pressed the record button. The first words of this project's overall transcript were from Adam. "Let me fill you in about Nelson County," he said. Our 80-minute conversation was off and rolling.

Adam was patient as I asked question after question. Because it was the initial interview, Adam was the first to teach me about Nelson County, its history and its people. He talked about the significance of Hurricane Camille, which changed the face (and faces) of the county in 1969. He taught me about the "from-here's," like him, and the "come-here's," who have migrated to the rural county. He mentioned a location-based Facebook group. "You need to write this down, Nelson Knows," he said of the group's name. In many ways explored throughout this manuscript, especially in a battle for consumers attention, Nelson Knows is a competitor to the 148-year-old weekly newspaper, the *Nelson County Times.*

About halfway through that first interview, the conversation steered more directly toward news and information about Nelson County. Almost in passing, Adam said, "I would love to have a local reporter in the county."

> Me: There is one, right? With the *Nelson County Times?* What do you mean?
> Adam: They are not local.
> Me: What do you mean?
> Adam: *Nelson County Times,* they are not local. Every single (reporter) around here that I've dealt with is not from here. ... They're usually from Pennsylvania, New York, wherever. They're not from here. And they don't live here. They live in Lynchburg (about a half-hour away), or somewhere else, not Nelson County. They just sporadically come in when they need something.

Adam explained more. He knew the *Nelson County Times* is owned by a corporation, though he did not know which one (it is Lee Enterprises, Inc.).[2] The newspaper's reporters, he perceived, do not live in Nelson County, commuting from elsewhere for events. The *Nelson County Times* office is not based in Nelson County, he explained. "It's just not local," Adam said. "What isn't?" I asked. *"The Nelson County Times."* I asked him to confirm this thought. "I don't want to put words in your mouth, but you seem to be saying in so many ways that the only local news organization, that's been the only local news organization for almost 150 years, is not local." He repeated his words, "It's not local."

This first interview did not shape the focus of this dissertation. Adam was just one interview, and he is unique because he deals with reporters regularly. Only 20% of U.S. adults have talked with or been interviewed by a reporter (Pew, 2019). So I did not want to read too much into Adam's comments. Then came my second interview. "I know it's not local. It's not locals who run and manage it," the participant said of the *Nelson County Times.* I asked, "so what does that mean to you?" He responded, "They're not going to be invested. The guys at the top, just want circulation. … They're not invested in Nelson County." My third interviewee said, "It doesn't feel like a local paper." Then came Dorothy, my fourth participant. She said she wants to read local news about Nelson County. She said she has close friends and family members who are longtime journalists. She said she appreciates good journalism and voraciously reads national news content. Dorothy, who is in her 50's, moved to Nelson County five years ago. Until our interview, Dorothy was unaware of the existence of the *Nelson County Times*. "That you said there

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[2] Lee Enterprises, Inc., is a publicly traded company that publishes 77 daily newspapers and more than 350 weekly newspapers. It is based in Davenport, Iowa.

was a paper for Nelson County, I didn't even know that." I asked her to confirm what she said, noting that she has been in the county, and active in the county through volunteering, for five years. "So there is no sense of presence of the *Nelson County Times* at all for you?" I asked. "No," she stated clearly. "That is not good for them," I said. "No, no," she responded.

Returning to Adam, he got animated as the conversation became more focused about the people who create and distribute news and information in Nelson County, both the professional reporters at the *Nelson County Times* but also the Nelson County residents on the Nelson Knows Facebook group.

> Adam: It's simple. We just fucking want our news to come from one of us.
> Me: You seem to be getting fired up. I didn't mean to push too much or upset you.
> Adam: I'm not upset. But I am fired up. I mean, it would mean a lot to me. It would mean a lot to us.
> Me: What would?
> Adam: To have a reporter be one of us, live in the county, truly live in the county, be here. Be one of us.
> Me: Why does that matter?
> Adam: They would know the real story of Nelson County.
> Me: And that is not the case with the *Nelson County Times?*
> Adam: Fuck, no. Not at all.
> Me: So what does that mean?
> Adam: Nelson Knows.
> Me: What do you mean?
> Adam: I turn to Nelson Knows. It's from us.

This dissertation explores the themes introduced above, namely the participant perceptions of the local-ness of the weekly news organization at three levels — the organization, the content and the journalists. In turn, this dissertation examines the role of a location-based Facebook group as a source of news and information. This one-county case-study paper finds that the participants in rural Nelson County, Virginia, express wanting *Our News, For Us, From Us.*

The goal for this dissertation is to investigate how people in a rural environment obtain news and information that is salient to them in their everyday lives and what guides their evaluation of their options. At the theoretical level, social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1985; Hornsey, 2008; Neville et al., 2021) and, more specifically, rural social identity (Cramer, 2016; Lyons & Utych, 2021; Lunz Trujillo, 2022) serve as the spine to this dissertation's arguments. Together, these theories help illuminate the important lens through which rural people view their own identities and way of being.

Empirically, I focus on the rural news and information ecosystem, news consumption behaviors and the perceptions of journalistic roles and practices. I interviewed 40 residents of Nelson County, Va., a rural county home to 15,000 people, a nearly 150-year-old weekly newspaper and, as it turns out, a vibrant location-based Facebook group that serves as an alternative to the county's only traditional news organization. I use my fieldwork in Nelson County to answer the following three research questions:

> RQ1: How do rural residents perceive "local?"
> RQ2: How do rural residents express obtaining news and information that is salient in their everyday lives — and why?
> RQ3: How do rural residents think about the role of journalists and journalism as compared to Facebook as a source of news and information about their locality?

This dissertation addresses these questions through a bottom-up inductive approach. Instead of pre-determined definitions for concepts — such as rural, local or news — participants were encouraged to frame concepts in their own words. More specifically, this project's interview protocol included questions such as "what does rural mean to you" and "when I say 'local news,' what does that mean to you?" (Appendix F). Scholars have debated definitions for these concepts as well, as explored in Chapter 2.

In this introductory chapter, I offer a contextual background for this project, describing the current rural news and information environment. Then, I offer an overview of each of the elements of the six-word title, *Our News, For Us, From Us,* previewing this dissertation's contributions. Then, I close this chapter with a roadmap for the remainder of the dissertation.

Dissertation Background

This research is especially important now as dire economic conditions, including those forced by the coronavirus pandemic, decimate the news industry. Since 2004, the U.S. has lost a quarter of its newspapers – including 70 daily newspapers and more than 2,000 weekly or non-daily newspapers (Abernathy, 2020). Also since 2004, more than 500 rural newspapers have closed or folded into another title (Nicolaou, Fontanella-Khan, & Fortado, 2019). Still, there remain 6,700 newspapers – including about 5,500 non-daily or weekly newspapers – in the U.S. (Abernathy, 2020).[3] Compared to research on metropolitan and national news organizations, there is dramatically less research on rural media environments (Finneman & Thomas, 2021; Wahl-Jorgensen, Garcia-Blanco & Boelle, 2021). However, this dissertation adds to a recent surge in research on rural, community and weekly news organizations, which has tended to focus on the journalists and journalism practices rather than the audiences. (Örnebring, Kingsepp & Möller, 2020; Finneman, Mari & Thomas, 2021).

[3] This is the most recent data available. Even the National Newspaper Association, which is the major national organization for weekly newspapers, currently utilizes data from 2010. That data identifies (generically) 7,000+ non-daily newspapers.

Coupled with overall closures of news organizations, there are growing concerns of delocalization of news organizations, meaning a decline of local control and local content (Croteau, Hoynes, & Hoynes, 2006; Saffer et al., 2021; Mahone et al., 2019). Until about the 1980s, independent and family owned newspapers were prominent and profitable (McChesney, 1999; Bagdikian, 2004). Since then, there has been a string of ownership changes, with large corporate mergers and hedge-fund takeovers (Soloski, 2019; LeBrun, Todd & Piper, 2022). As of May 2021, half of the daily newspapers in the U.S. are owned by seven corporations[4] (Future of Media Project, 2021). Franklin (2005) suggests that some local newspapers are "local" in name only, with the town name on the newspaper masthead remaining as a lone local feature. This dissertation explores the ramifications of these trends in rural spaces.

To combat the problems associated with delocalization, and to a larger extent the shuttering of news organizations, there is an increasing number of digital news initiatives, many centered at trying to reach underserved communities (Fu, 2021; Harlow & Chadha, 2021; Carlson & Usher, 2016). For example, there are non-profit investigative journalism centers, like Wisconsin Watch (Jacob, 2021), community or neighborhood startups, like Block Club Chicago (Jacob, 2020), rural news startups, like Ledenews.com in Wheeling, W.V. (Miller, 2021) and start-ups specifically created to reach communities of color, like the Milwaukee News Service (Shahriari & Roseman, 2022). One study identified more than 700 digital startups in 2020, compared to just 120 in 2010 (Kizer, 2021). However, the study found only 20% of the startups report they are financially sustainable. Research has found that a main reason for startup failures is because of overoptimism by founders,

[4] The seven corporations are: Gannett, Alden Global Capital, Tribune Media, Lee Enterprises, McClatchy, Hearst, Advance Local.

who are often former journalists at mainstream news organizations and not naturally entrepreneurs (Buschow, 2020).

Scholarship specifically on weekly newspapers often lump these organizations with larger daily newspapers (Reader, 2018), or dismiss them as "smaller, low-quality versions of the larger daily counterparts" (Garfrerick 2010, p. 151). Weekly newspapers, though, have a long history and are unique, with different approaches, audiences and relationships to their audiences as compared to daily newspapers. A weekly editor once said his newspaper was "paper of the neighbor" and was "direct and intimate" (Schramm & Ludwig, 1951, p. 314). The weekly newspaper has been expected to serve as a local leader, to be a "guiding start in time of trouble, a counselor and a friend" (Safley, 1930, p. 383). Such news organizations have a "nearness to people" (Byerly, 1961, p. 25). It is also important to note that rural and weekly news organizations have been criticized for deferential treatment of local power leaders (Wenzel, 2020) and for excluding people of color in coverage at the expense of white officials and business leaders (Mathews, 2021). This dissertation challenges any idyllic notions of weekly news organizations.

Local newspapers, of course, are not the only options for news and information in rural areas. Rural residents can turn to nearby metropolitan news organizations, but research has found that those organizations no longer deliver to outlying rural counties (Abernathy, 2020), leaving residents to feel "abandoned" by the organizations (Usher, 2019, p. 120). More than eight-in-ten U.S. adults (86%) say they get their news from a digital device (smartphone, computer or tablet) often or sometimes and 68% get news from television at least sometimes (Shearer, 2021). For those who get their news on digital devices, 53% report getting news on social media at least sometimes. Since the

digital revolution, location-based online groups have become options for news and information (Dickens, Couldry & Fotopoulou, 2015, Chen et al., 2012). These groups include user-managed groups within larger social networking sites, such as Facebook and Nextdoor (Mosconi et al., 2017). The platforms fill perceived gaps in news and information but also generate a sense of community, with scholars even comparing them to “local weekly newspapers” (Swart, Peters & Broersma, 2019, p. 198).

Even in the most rural areas of the country, there are still options available for news and information. In this dissertation, I utilize social identity theory as a lens to examine how rural residents evaluate their media options. Briefly, and detailed much further in the forthcoming chapters, social identity theory states that individuals structure their social worlds into groups — such as race, gender or political party — and that individuals define themselves psychologically through the social groups in which they belong (Tajfel & Turner, 1985). Social identity theory states that people seek to maintain a positive self-esteem by aligning with fellow group members. In-group favoritism can serve as a lens for understanding how people make media choices (Cramer, 2016; Peck, 2019). For example, Morton and Duck (2000) found identifiers to the gay community were more likely to consume gay media. Holt and Carnahan (2020) also found people even preferred reading negative stories about their own racial in-group compared to other stories about out-group members. Previous research on social identity and media choices largely has focused on audience studies of marginalized groups, such as ethnic communities (Abrams & Giles, 2007; Chan 2014, 2017). This dissertation inserts social identity into a study on the rural and local news spaces.

Dissertation Overview

Here, I offer a preview of each of the elements from the six-word title, *Our News, For Us, From Us.* Each two-word element of the title relates to one of the three findings chapters, Chapters 4-6, respectively. In this overview, I articulate this dissertation's findings and detail how this dissertation utilizes and builds on a theoretical framework of social identity theory.

Our News

"Our" is a means to illuminate a sense of "local" in Nelson County, Virginia, the rural home to this dissertation's case study. The term "local" endures vagueness in scholarship, with researchers even arguing that the term is virtually worthless in journalism studies (Usher, 2021). In this dissertation, I attempt to offer a contribution to the conversation of local in journalism research, specifically the lived experience of local or a bottom-up view of local. I argue that participants in Nelson County perceive "local" as a "shared sense of ownership," or "ours."

This distinction connects the work on social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and collective psychological ownership (Pierce & Jussila, 2010) and places it in dialogue with journalism studies research. Research on collective psychological ownership explores how individuals identify as group members (or "us") and feel strongly that a target of ownership is "ours." This is a state of mind "in which individuals feel as though the target of ownership … or a piece of it is 'theirs' (i.e., 'It is MINE!')" (Pierce, Kostova & Dirks, 2001, p. 299). In Nelson County, residents articulated a shared sense of ownership of businesses owned by Nelson County residents. For instance, participants describe making decisions that are not in their best interest but instead are in

the best interest of a Nelson County business. To these participants, a local restaurant is "our" restaurant, with its success being our success.

Considering local as a shared sense of ownership, participants perceive the traditional mainstream source of news and information for the county, the 148-year-old weekly *Nelson County Times,* is not "ours." The news organization is owned by an outside media conglomerate and does not have a physical office presence in Nelson County, despite having the county's name in the newspaper's name.

The findings in this chapter demonstrate the perceived motivations of journalism, including financial, are just as important as the journalistic content itself. The participants express feelings of being taken advantage of, with notions that the news organization only cares about money, not the county and not the county's residents. These findings contrast previous research that found weekly newspapers offer a special connection with their communities (Lowrey et al., 2008; Mathews, 2022). Perhaps, when news organizations had a monopoly on audiences that was more of the case, but, now, audience members perceive having options, including themselves.

For Us

"For us" refers to the Nelson County participants' desire for news and information that is for us, as in Nelson County residents. Or, put another way, the participants express wanting a source of news and information that is about Nelson County. Nelson Knows, established by Nelson County residents, emphasizes content that strengthens participants' rural social identity. Photos of the county, good news about fellow residents and posts about how residents can help each other are considered valuable content on the Facebook group. This Nelson Knows content demonstrates to the residents "why we love" Nelson

County, as one participant said, reinforcing the sense of in-group identity with other Nelson County residents.

This type of content has been found to be a strength of weekly and community newspapers, which offer a sense of "our us-ness, our extended familyness" (Lauterer, 2006, p. 14). However, this current study, contrasts this prior research, an important empirical contribution. Participants perceive the news organization has deserted their duty of sharing local news and instead force feeds them too much content that is not about the county. The news organization's non-local news choices were one reason participants said that they canceled their subscriptions, with other reasons including delivery issues and cost.

From Us

"From Us" refers to the Nelson County participants wanting news and information that is from us, emphasizing the significance of obtaining news and information that is not only about them but from them, fellow in-group members. The participants say they want professional journalists who live in the county and are active in the county. That is not the case in Nelson County, as the participants describe the *Nelson County Times* journalists as out-group members in Nelson County. Alternatively, participants said they are comfortable obtaining news and information "from us," meaning fellow in-group members on the location-based Facebook group Nelson Knows.

The desire to obtain news that is "from us" is especially noteworthy in relation to content aligned with the journalism's traditional monitorial role. The role focuses on gathering, deciphering and distributing news and information (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009;

Lichtenstein, Herbers & Bause, 2021). While there were exceptions — such as a participant who worked with government officials before and said “I know what happens when legislatures have really no oversight by the press” — participants said they were “more than fine” or had “no problem” receiving news and information straight from the county’s elected officials on Nelson Knows, circumventing the weekly news organization. “We know them,” one participant said of the elected officials. “We trust them. They’re our neighbors.”

Dissertation Roadmap

In Chapter 2, I provide the theoretical framework for this study, making three key arguments. First, people in rural spaces see themselves differently from those in metropolitan areas. The argument draws from work on social identity theory (Ferrucci & Vos, 2017; Tandoc & Takahashi, 2014) and articulates a rural social identity. Second, people in rural areas, compared to those in metropolitan areas, have fewer options for local news and information, especially from professional news workers; however, they still have valued options — including themselves. This points to how, in the digital environment, content created by residents can compete side-by-side with content from professional journalists. Third, people in rural spaces tend to place a premium on a stronger connection to their news organizations, which plays a role in their media options.

In Chapter 3, I explain why I made my methodological choices, including how I recruited participants, who the participants are and why I choose to utilize in-depth interviews. This chapter offers an overview of Nelson County, home to this dissertation’s fieldwork. I wanted the location for this dissertation to meet two criteria. First, it had to

be a rural county. Second, I wanted it to have a weekly newspaper organization. As part of exploring how people obtain news and information, I sought to investigate the role of a weekly newspaper, seemingly a product of a bygone era, in today's modern 24/7 news and information ecosystem.

In Chapter 4, I explore what "local" means to those in Nelson County. In Nelson County residents have pride in their county and support for other county residents. They describe how there is a unique way of life in Nelson County, such as taking their garbage to the dump, and they also describe how Nelson County is often ridiculed or ignored by outsiders, including journalists. Research in sociology has found similar sentiments in rural areas, articulating a rural social identity (Cramer, 2016; Hochschild, 2018). When in-group members especially perceive resentment, animosity or a threat, their in-group identity prevails over in-group differences, such as the distinction between natives and newcomers in Nelson County (Sternisko, Cichocka & van Bavel, 2020).

In Chapter 5, I detail three separate yet interwoven themes that emerged as factors in how participants obtain news and information that is salient in their everyday lives. First, the source of the content should produce local content — meaning content that is about Nelson County. Second, content that is salient in everyday life should be timely and serve as tools for daily living, such as information on road conditions. Third, the content should also be accessible, with limited obstacles (e.g., delivery issues) in the way of consumption. Participants expressed that each of these factors pointed to advantages of Nelson Knows and obstacles with the *Nelson County Times.*

In Chapter 6, three ideas emerged in relation to how Nelson County participants think about the role of journalists and journalism in the *Nelson County Times* compared

to Nelson Knows. First, participants identify the *Nelson County Times* reporters as outsiders, or out-group members in Nelson County. Participants perceive the journalists do not live in the county, are not active in the county and do not "care" about the county. Participants perceive the journalists lack the local knowledge to report effectively on the community. Second, participants perceive the *Nelson County Times* places too much of an emphasis on its monitorial role, especially in coverage of government meetings, and does not provide enough of a voice to Nelson County residents with its facilitator role. Third, participants expressed value in the Nelson Knows as it contrasts with the negative views of the weekly news organization. In particular, participants like on Nelson Knows that any who is a part of the group and lives in Nelson County can have a voice.

In Chapter 7, I offer a thorough discussion of the theoretical contributions of this research, including introducing the theoretical construct, Our Good Neighbor. I also discuss this dissertation's limitations and future research possibilities stemming from this study.

Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework

We live in a modern "high-choice" news and information environment, one overrun by traditional news, online news, television punditry, political blogs, among others (Prior, 2007). The seemingly endless world at our fingertips, or the "ocean of media" as Lamb (2005) called it, is ours to navigate, largely on our own. The high-choice environment can produce an inequality of news and information exposure, as those who do not want to assume news and information can easily avoid it and those who want to consume news and information could more easily do so (Edgerly, 2021; Toff & Kalogeropoulos, 2020). Or, as Hayes & Lawless (2015, p. 450) framed it, "the information-rich get richer, and the information-poor get poorer." In other words, more options, and more control over those options, lead to a growing divide of news and information consumption.

Those who live in rural areas have fewer options for news and information compared to their metropolitan brethren, especially from professional news workers. They face a paucity of local news and a scarcity of internet access. Since 2004, more than 500 rural newspapers have closed or folded into another title (Nicolaou, Fontanella-Khan, & Fortado, 2019). Larger newspaper organizations, with their depleted newsrooms and resources (Walker, 2021), rarely report on rural communities and infrequently deliver the product to their houses (Usher, 2019). Nearly a quarter of rural Americans lack access to broadband infrastructure (FCC, 2020). Scholars and practitioners have sounded alarms about the decaying local news scene, sounding off about a decline in local political knowledge, civic engagement and sense of community (Schulhofer-Wohl & Garrido, 2013; Shaker 2014; Rubado & Jennings, 2020; Mathews, 2022).

There is much we do not know about rural residents and how they navigate their everyday lives with regard to their news and information behaviors. In short, there is a need for rural research, especially audience-centric rural research, in media studies. Örnebring, Kingsepp and Möller (2020) noted there is a "metropolitan bias" in journalism research. That is a motivation for this dissertation. This chapter helps set the stage for the research project at large, situating the findings and forthcoming chapters. Through a focused literature review, I make three key arguments in this chapter.

First, people in rural spaces see themselves differently from those in metropolitan areas. I will draw on the theoretical lens of social identity theory (Hogg, 2016; Spears, 2011) and articulate a rural social identity (Ham & Woolock, 2022; Diamond, 2021). This establishes an in-group and out-group dynamic, a function of resentment by rural residents, the in-group in this case. Second, people in rural spaces have limited options for news and information, compared to those in metropolitan areas, but they still have valued options — themselves. In today's high-choice environment, especially on Facebook and other social media spaces, news and information from professional journalists is directly beside news and information other in-group members. Third, people in rural spaces have different expectations of journalism than those in metropolitan areas.

Unpacking the Theory

This dissertation draws heavily on social identity theory, which articulates a person's sense of who they are based on group memberships (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Tajfel, 1982; Hornsey, 2008) and offers a useful theoretical lens to understand the dissertation's investigation of rural spaces, rural people and the rural lived experience.

This social identity theory framework was developed through a series of studies in the 1970s conducted by social psychologists Henri Tajfel and colleagues, including graduate student John Turner. Their work explores how people differentiate with others, resulting in comparisons between one's own group (in-group) and others (out-groups), a dynamic central to this dissertation. According to social identity theory, a person's self-image includes an individual and a group component, a personal identity and a social identity. Social identity is further defined as "that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the emotional significance attached to that membership" (Tajfel 1974, p. 69).

There are two key components of social identity. First, people seek membership in groups with like-minded people. These groups, official and unofficial, create and maintain a person's self-identity (Turner, 1982). These groups range from political parties to church organizations to chess clubs. Second, people want to feel appreciated by other members of their group (Tajfel, 1982). For example, groups can host exclusive gatherings, celebrate a person's success and/or ask for input. These two components create a positive social identity. Put another way, there is a cognitive component, in which a person identifies a group with similar characteristics of their own, and an emotional component. There are emotions such as love, like and appreciation for one's own group, and emotions of hate, dislike and animosity toward an outgroup.

Social identity theory states that people want to gain or maintain a favorable social identity and, in turn, boost one's self-esteem (Wong, 2019). Like Goffman (1959), the theory assumes a person prefers a positive, rather than negative, self-image. This is achieved through favorable comparisons between one's own group and others

(Klandermans, 2014). As Brewer (1999, p. 432) states, "ingroup formation involves differentiation of the social landscape into those that are acknowledged to be 'us' and those that fall outside that boundary." Because improved self-esteem is a driving force behind social identification, group members attempt to promote positive in-group characteristics (Branscombe et al., 1999; Grubenmann & Meckel, 2017).

There are two main ways to positively differentiate the in-group from the out-group. First, in-group members establish positive values associated with the group. A political party is a prime example. The positive values, for instance shared conservative values in the Republican party or shared liberal values in the Democratic party, promote the group's reputation in society. Second, in-group members try to attribute negative characteristics to the out-group, especially if the in-group members perceive a threat or animosity from the out-group (Sternisko, Cichocka & van Bavel, 2020; Huddy, 2003). These negative connotations make the in-group appear better to potential members (Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019). The creation of an out-group by in-group members generates the norms and trust within the in-group (Nahapiet and Ghoshal 1998). Norms, here, refer to the consensus within the in-group (Bicchieri & Funcke, 2018), or, in other words, the "expectations that bind" (Kramer & Goldman, 1995), and the trust demonstrates the willingness to invest in the positive outcomes of the others' behavior (Mell et. al, 2022).

Rural Social Identity

A line of research has utilized elements of social identity theory to conceptualize a meaningful rural social identity (Cramer, 2016; Hochschild 2018, Lunz Trujillo, 2022).

The rural social identifiers feel the "need to create a positive in-group distinction" because they feel "devalued by society" (Lunz Trujillo, 2022, p. 5). The polarization of the rural-urban dynamic is critical in the creation of this social identity (Lyons & Utych, 2021). Research suggests the rural social identifiers feel "othered" by urbanites, who are seen as the "norm" (Ching & Creed, 1997). Urban areas are perceived as sophisticated and progressive, while rural areas are characterized as backward or inferior (Lay, 2012). Rural residents believe those in urban areas look down on rural areas, ignoring them in decision-making (Cramer, 2016; Woods et al., 2012). Sociological studies have found that the rural social identifiers' resentment intensifies when there is competition for resources (Mason, 2018), with the perception that urban areas receive unfair allocation of resources at the expense of rural communities.

Studies of rural areas have found out-group resentment in rural identifiers toward visitors, including temporary visitors and permanent newcomers. In less-populated rural areas, a small number of tourists can create problems for the community (Butler, 2020). This anti-tourism resentment is not exclusive to rural areas, though, as metropolitan areas, including those internationally, have seen resident uprisings against visitors (Novy & Colomb, 2016). New permeant rural residents, in particular new residents from metropolitan areas, bring expectations of services they are used to from their city of origin. They also bring their own social identity to the community in which they migrate. This can create a "culture clash" between newcomers and long-time residents (Price & Clay, 1980; Smith & Krannich, 2000; Ulrich-Schad & Qin, 2018). As Jobes writes, a culture clash causes tension and animosity because "the cultural and social systems of

small towns composed of locals are markedly different from the systems of the metropolis" (1995, p. 13).

The rural social identity is well illustrated in the works of Hochschild (2018) and Cramer (2016). Using five years of ethnographic study in Louisiana, Hochschild linked the othering of rural Americans with animosity toward former president Barack Obama and support of political outsider Donald Trump. In her analysis, Hochschild points to many of the above slights, namely the feeling of being "devalued by society," as part of a "deep story" that resonated with rural residents.

> In that story, strangers step ahead of you in line, making you anxious, resentful and afraid. A president (Obama) allies with the line cutters, making you feel distrustful, betrayed. A person ahead of you in line insults you as an ignorant redneck, making you feel humiliated and mad. Economically, culturally, demographically, politically, you are suddenly a stranger in your own land (p. 222).

In her work in rural Wisconsin, Cramer (2016) identified a "rural consciousness" among participants, "an identification with rural people and rural places (that) denotes a multifaceted resentment against cities" (p. 6). Rural consciousness articulates "a sense that rural folks have fundamentally distinct values and lifestyles, which are misunderstood and disrespected by city folks" (p. 12). The residents were proud of their rural way of life, emphasizing the value of hard work and common sense, seen in opposition with the city's intellectualism. Cramer found residents shared a "sense of pride" with rural life (p. 77), with one participant even identifying a "rural class" (p. 83).

The rural social identity, observed by Cramer, emphasized a feeling of not only being looked down upon but also being told how to live their lives. The identity, thus, is not politically motivated, instead steeped in cultural differences with metropolitan areas, the out-groups. This identity is "infused with a sense of distributive injustice — a sense

that rural folks don't get their fair share." (p. 12). In fact, Cramer's participants discussed how "economic injustice" was just a "fact of rural life" (p. 84). While the rural consciousness perspective was reflected in fieldwork and survey data, it was not found in a news media content analysis. Cramer argued that the findings reinforced what the rural residents believe – "their communities are overlooked, ignored and misunderstood by urbanites" (p. 109). In short, feelings of disrespect, resentment or anger are central to a rural social identity.

Conceptualizing Rural

With the theoretical framework of a social identity theory, and the resulting rural social identity, established, it is prudent to offer a conceptual discussion around two terms central to this dissertation, rural and local.

What is rural? The United States Department of Agriculture published an article headlined "Defining the 'rural' in rural America" (Cromartie & Bucholtz, 2008). On the surface, such an article and its title might cause a pause. As one scholar noted, "we might express concern that the agency responsible for farming in America needed an article to figure out what rural meant" (Ali, 2018, p. 2). But diving deeper, it is understandable. At one point, there were at least a dozen definitions of "rural" used by various U.S. federal agencies (Coburn et al., 2007), demonstrating no universally preferred definition even by policy makers. Wuthnow (2019, p. 46) argued that the United States Census Bureau has changed its definition of "rural" so frequently that long-term comparisons are "misleading." Rural often is simplified to be what it is not, urban (Ali, 2018).

No matter the by-the-book census definition, the rural is a big space with small communities and a shrinking, and changing, population. Of the 19,000 incorporated places in the U.S., 18,000 of them have populations less than 25,000. Eighty percent of rural residents were born in a small town or rural area (not necessarily their current one) (Wuthnow, 2013). They have more than made peace with decisions to live in their rural communities. They *want* to live in the rural communities. Still, in 1810, 95 percent of the U.S. population was rural. In 1910, it was 55 percent. In 2020, it's about 20 percent.

Urbanization is not new. In many small towns across America, their populations peaked in the 1920s and have been declining since (Wood, 2008). "Cities and suburbs are where the action is," Wuthnow (2019, p. 45) writes. "Rural communities are falling behind." The general out-migration of rural areas is highlighted by younger and more educated residents leaving for metropolitan opportunity, a trend identified as the "brain drain" of rural areas (Carr & Kefalas, 2009; Petrin, Schafft & Meece, 2014). This has created a rural America that is older and less educated. In 1980, the median age of people in rural areas and big cities almost matched; today, the median age in rural areas is 41 years, 5 years higher than big cities (Adamy & Overberg, 2017). A *Wall Street Journal* analysis found that rural areas have worse outcomes in several key measures of life. Compared with people in cities, people in rural areas die younger, are poorer, have less formal education, have higher rates of teenage births and divorces and have less social mobility (Adamy & Overberg, 2017). With that in mind, there have been concerted efforts to counter this out-migration, with rural areas offering incentives – from tax breaks to free housing to employment assistance – to attract new residents (Wood, 2008).

With a continued out-migration and without new diverse and young residents, rural areas become insular. That is the common image of rural America, one of racial and ethnic homogeneity – essentially, where white people live. But the reality has changed in recent years. About 22 percent of the rural population accounted for racial and ethnic minorities (USDA, 2018). By comparison, those groups accounted for 42 percent of the population in metro areas. In rural America, Hispanics are the fastest growing segment and account for 9 percent of the population (compared to 20 in urban areas). This rural immigration can be linked to the global agro-food system, as low-skilled and (often undocumented) immigrants are recruited to work in rural food processing plants (Lichter & Brown, 2011). Additionally, Black residents account for 8 percent of the rural population. All told, more than 10 million non-white people live in rural America.

Like the changing rural landscape, the concept of rural has changed within scholarly conversations. The definition is often different depending on the context. "The quest for any single, all-embracing definition of the rural is neither desirable nor feasible," Halfacree (1993, p. 34) says. Hoggart (1990) even argued to completely "do away with rural," as it was a confusing, chaotic concept lacking explanatory power.

The conversation of the rural has shifted from exclusively statistics and to include more of a cultural discussion, one focusing on the lived experiences of rural residents. This highlights a socially constructed understanding of rural, showing that the "importance of the 'rural' lies in the fascinating world of social, cultural and moral values that have become associated with rurality, rural spaces and rural life" (Cloke, 2006, p. 21). This cultural approach thrives because the rural "and its synonyms are words and concepts understood and used by people in everyday talk" (Halfacree, 1993, p. 29). The

everyday conversations, of course, are spurred, at least in part, by portrayals of the rural in the news media and media at large. These representations often underscore "the rural idyll," which is at the heart of the urban-rural dichotomy and in representation of the rural, rurality and rural Americans (Sutherland, 2020; Peeren, Souch, 2019).

This stereotype is observed in the media at large, but also in the academy. It is that powerful and omnipresent, argues Little (1999, p. 439).

> The rural idyll seems to have captured the imagination (or perhaps the unimagination) of rural geographers to the extent that no discussion of rural society or community appears complete without some reference to the peaceful, wholesome, tight-knit, caring, timeless, etc., etc., myth that is the rural idyll.

The lineage of the rural idyll is an urban construction, and the object of desire as anti-modern in an agreeable way (Darby, 2000; Cloke, 1994; Bell, 2006). It is a vessel for shoring up national, moral and kindhearted identity and ideologies and an entry point for nostalgia of the golden past. (Lichter & Ziliak, 2017). It marks a symbolic boundary between the revered rural community and threatening outsiders (Nicholls, Menjívar & Alvord, 2021). The manufacturing of the rural idyll is a presumption of purification, an act of denial and exclusion (Kristeva, 1982; Murdoch and Marsden, 1994; Sibley, 1995).

The rural idyll reflects a romantic representation of rural life, infused with racialized and class norms (Keller, 2019). In this assessment, the rural idyll represents a white, middle-class, hard-working culture, denying the presence of minorities (Hubbard, 2005). And like rurality itself, the rural idyll, changes, morphing to fit the current time. As Mingay (1989, p. 6) posits, "each generation of country dwellers and observers sees what it wants to see in the land: romantic beauty, nostalgic traces of the rustic past, peace, tranquility."

On the other end of the dichotomy from the rural idyll is an anti-idyll, one in which rural communities are cast as "dangerous wastelands inhabited by uniquely backward individuals" (Leap & Heath, 2021, p. 110). In some media portrayals, especially in movies and television but also in journalism, the anti-idyll is the utter underbelly of the rural (Bell, 1997). Such representations include hillbilly, redneck, poor, and white trash. The anti-idyll illuminates Fulkerson and Thomas' (2019) "urbanormative" representation, one that frames cities as the ideal in the urban-rural dichotomy (Creed & Ching, 1997). This framing maintains the rural as the "other."

Conceptualizing Local

The term "local" endures similar vagueness as rural. Ali (2017, p. 33) writes that local means "different things to different people at different times," and Usher writes in journalism studies, "the word, 'local' [in journalism research] is imprecise to the point of being meaningless" (Usher, 2021, p. 20). Like rural, local can be descriptive and objectively defined or it can be personal and cultural. Defining local has been addressed by numerous fields in the academy, including media, sociology, psychology, political science, agriculture and geography, to name a few. Here, I identify four lines of research related to defining local — distance, boundary, proximity and community.

Distance is perhaps the most traditional baseline measurement of local (McKenzie, 1926). As an example, an agricultural study explained local food as "food produced within 100 miles of an individual's residents" (Rose et al., 2008). Similarly, local as a boundary is objectively defined. Boundaries, like county or city lines, are marked by people, and they matter in important issues such as taxes, funding and

representation (Althaus et al., 2009). Local as a proximity is subjective and personal. For instance, local food is produced in the locality close to where "I" live (Eriksen, 2013). There is a connection here to the value of proximity, seen in the "eat local" or "buy local" initiatives (Eriksen, 2013). As Ali writes, this view of local conveys "morality, values, trust and quality" (2017, p. 31). In this vein, local is a cultural construct, meaning, it offers "an air of 'we know it when we see it'" (Usher, 2019, p. 96).

While there is ample research on a rural social identity, and the resulting in-group and out-group dynamics, there is less work exploring how this dynamic relates to rural people's consumption of news and information and attitudes toward their available options for news and information. To situate that conversation, this dissertation's first research question is as follows:

RQ1: How do rural residents conceive of "local"?

The News and Information Environments

As noted above, we live in a modern "high-choice" media environment. Improved internet access plays a significant role in our ability to discover more and more news and information options. In the U.S., 93% of adults use the internet (Pew, 2021a). That statistics is brought *down* by the fact only 75% of adults 65 years and older use the internet. For those 18-29 years old, it's 99% use. The 7% who do not use the internet are older, less educated and poorer than the general population (Pew, 2021a). Across the globe, one study found that 60 percent of the world's population, 4.72 billion people, use the internet (Kemp, 2021). Eighty-five percent of U.S. adults have a smartphone (Pew, 2021b), and 77% of U.S. adults have internet access at home (Pew, 2021a). There

remains a noticeable digital divide, the chasm between the “haves” and “have nots” of digital technology and access (van Dijk, 2020). This divide maps on top of pre-existing inequalities of geography, race, income and education (Turner, 2016). The urban-rural divide frequently aligns with the digital divide. While broadband infrastructure is prominent in metropolitan areas of the U.S., the FCC (2021) reports that one-in-five rural Americans, a total of 16 million people, lack broadband access.

This section addresses three features of the “high-choice” environment for audience members. First, with a seemingly endless supply of news and information options, their habits play a significant role in when, how and where they consume news and information. Second, they want news and information *now,* placing a premium on immediacy. Third, the source of their news and information is not exclusively from professional news workers, but can include friends, family and everyday citizens.

News and Information

Before addressing those sub-sections, however, it is important to acknowledge the lack of distinction between news and information in this dissertation. As mentioned in the introduction chapter, this study leaves it to participants to define various terms — including rural, local and news and information. This allows participants to socially construct their definitions for concepts, framing concepts in their own words rather than react to predefined categorization by researchers. This gives more influence to participants and fits into the ongoing “audience turn” in our field (Costera Meijer, 2019).

This approach is emic, exploring a phenomenon “from the view of its members or participants” (Hanitzch, 2007, p. 370). By comparison, an etic approach utilizes common

definitions for terms and concepts set by researchers. The strength of an etic perspective is the "ability to compare different empirical sources in order to generate more general theorizations" (Jansson et. al, 2021, p. 10). Thus, the limitation to an emic approach is that the findings might not necessarily translate from one context to the next (Hellmueller, 2017).

News can be defined differently by those who study news and work in news, compared to those who consume news. This is especially the situation in today's modern news and information ecosystem. The discussion of news goes further than the simplistic temporal aspect of news, though, as Rantanen (2009, p. 2) argues, "there is probably nothing as temporal as news." In most languages, the word news refers to its temporality — news in English, nouvelles in French, etc. Beyond the "new" aspect of news, scholars consider news as "an output of journalism" (Tandoc, Lim & Ling, 2018, p. 130), though also acknowledging that defining journalism is "something of a fool's errand" (Vos, 2018, p. 2).

News as a product of journalism brings with it a set of norms, standards and practices. Journalism is expected to provide "independent, reliable, accurate and comprehensive information" (Kovach & Rosenstiel 2007, p. 11). Above all things, news as a product of journalism is factual (Zelizer, 2004). One example of a definition of journalism incorporates such fundamental elements: "Journalism is a set of transparent, independent procedures aimed at gathering, verifying and reporting truthful information of consequence to citizens" (Craft & Davis, 2016, p. 34). The American Press Institute similarly states that journalism practices emphasize a "discipline of verification" (n.d.). Schudson (2012, p. 3), for one, adds that journalism is a "business or practice."

Audience scholars have found participants have difficulty distinguishing what does or does not count as news. Costera Meijer's and Groot Kormelink's (2015) study of news consumption demonstrates a broadening definition of news to include not just events covered by journalists but everything that is new – including updates in the personal lives of Facebook friends. Wrote Swart, Peters and Broersma (2017, p. 1354), news users "lack a vocabulary to describe these new kinds of information. Be it interpersonal social media updates, hyperlocal citizen blogs or traditional news coverage, in everyday language, these are all classified by the one word 'news' " (2017, p. 1354). In one study, Robertson (2021, p. 8) found participants even "divorce (news) from its ties to journalism or the news media, with journalists de-centered."

There are ramifications for studies, including this dissertation, that allow audience members to consider news and information in their own terms. One might argue that an unfixed definition of news allows the concept to be as pointless or limitless as a term such as "content." Furthermore, without a set definition of news or a clear distinction between news and information, this dissertation allows participants to consider news from individuals on Facebook equally with news from established mainstream news organizations. This welcomes issues of disinformation and misinformation rampant on social media (Swart, 2021; Kapantai, 2021), which legitimizes unverified news and information and blurs original mainstream sources of news and information (Tandoc, Lim & Ling, 2018). Overall, some might see this dissertation's approach as problematic as it allows participants to include "news" that does not incorporate norms and standards, including verification.

While there are limitations or concerns with this emic approach to this dissertation, the decision prioritizes the perspectives of audience members. Journalism is seemingly in a constant state of disruption. Paying attention to audience members might offer insights into how news organizations can better serve their audiences, survive financial tumult and, potentially, thrive in the changing media environment. Thinking beyond industry concerns, though, this dissertation's inductive approach allows us to capture open and unfiltered thoughts about news at a time in which the perceptions of news are far from universal. The decision not to offer a pre-determined distinction of what encompasses news might allow sources of news and information that some, especially scholars, might consider flawed. However, even such flawed sources help participants make sense of their world. If this dissertation were to exclude news and information that did not meet the standards of journalism described above — for instance, a Facebook post from a fellow resident or local politician — it would risk excluding news and information important to people's everyday lives. This approach emphasizes the dissertation's motivation to think of the audience as the starting point of inquiry, not the news and information the audience members consume.

Importance of Habits

Until about the 21st century, the arrival of news was predictable. The newspaper hit our doorsteps in the morning, and the national news broadcast appeared on our televisions at 6 p.m. News reached us at the exact moments we anticipated it, and, often, only at the exact moments we anticipated. Media organizations controlled the dissemination of news, governing when, where and how people consumed news. The

news structured our days in that regard (Scannell, 1996; Silverstone, 1994). With the emergence of new communication technologies, especially mobile devices and social media, news consumption behaviors have changed fundamentally (Napoli, 2011; Newman et. al., 2021). Now, we can access news "literally at any place and at any time" (Westlund, 2015, p. 154).

The changing news and information environment has renewed academic interest on audience habits (LaRose, 2010; Palmer & Toff, 2020; Broersma & Swart, 2021). Habits are "automatic behavioral responses to environmental cues, thought to develop through repetition of behavior in consistent contexts" (Lally & Gardner 2013, p. 137). Research across the academy, from psychology to neuroscience, articulates the importance of habits in our everyday lives. Almost half of our daily activities occur in the same context virtually every day (Wood & Neal, 2009). Consider brushing your teeth, pouring a cup of coffee or checking your smartphone in the morning. Such actions are not caused by cognitive or emotional motivations, but they are tasks completed automatically. Research suggests that habits control our behaviors because they dominate over our goals (Gardner & Lally, 2018). A person may *say* they want to go for a run, but instead they *actually* spend time on social media on their smartphone. On the other hand, habits make it easier for people to accomplish tasks without expending mental energy (Schnauber-Stockmann & Naab, 2019).

Habits play a large role in our news consumption. However, adopting news habits and changing news habits are difficult (Graybiel & Smith, 2014). News habits often are developed at a younger age and stick with people through adulthood (Westlund & Weibull, 2013). Ghersetti and Westlund (2018) found, "older generations developed their

media habits when legacy media were at their prime, and have largely persisted in using these, whereas younger generations have formed media habits in a digital mediascape" (p. 1041). An empirical study found news consumption habits were "striking habitual" (Swart, Peters & Broersma, 2017, p. 1349), despite that news consumers "did not always enjoy the news media in these routines" (p. 1352). In agreement with the larger literature on habits, the study found "it appeared to be very difficult to break with news habits, because these are so closely embedded in news users' everyday lives" (Swart, Peters & Broersma, 2017, p. 1352). Moreover, scholars have found the ever presence of mobile devices develops automatic behavior, as mobile devices have become "taken for granted" and, at the same time, "forgotten" because of their necessity in everyday life (Ling, 2012). In terms of news consumption, people check their mobile devices for news without paying attention or having a true information-seeking goal (Chatzisarantis & Hagger, 2007).

Importance of Immediacy

There is no more waiting for the news to arrive at a certain time, like the morning newspaper or evening news. Before the digital era, it was the news consumers who scheduled their activities around the news, not the other way around (Madianou, 2009; Jensen, 1995; Silverstone, 1994). Now, as one young woman said even 20 years ago, "Waiting for the evening TV news would seem like going back to the dark ages. News fits around you now" (Hargreaves & Thomas, 2002, 52). We live in a world of "news *now"* (Sheller, 2015, p. 13, emphasis added).

The “news now” environment has placed an even further emphasis on immediacy in news and information. New communication technologies greatly contribute to “our modern obsession with speed” (Chesneaux, 2000, p. 408), as scholars have argued this “valorization of speed” has society “caught in the here and now of ‘real time,’ untethered from history, a sense of the past and of the future” (Keightley & Downey, 2018, p. 95). Digital technologies are accountable for the speed of communication and the dramatic increase in the quantity of information available (Castells, 2009). Technology always has played an important role in more rapid dissemination of news, from the printing press to the telegraph wires to the telephone to the internet (Usher, 2018). Now, news and information circulate throughout society faster than ever before, illustrating that temporal considerations of news are essential to comprehending today’s news environment (Usher, 2018).

In journalism, the concept of immediacy is a core value and a critical element in maintaining authority (Schudson, 1981; Usher, 2018). Immediacy articulates the dissemination of information quickly, with as little lag as possible between when the content was gathered and produced and delivered to audiences (Lim, 2012; Buhl, Günther & Quandt, 2019). Demonstrations of this include newspaper “extra editions” during extreme news events to live break-in coverage from radio and television stations to push notifications on our mobile devices (Benjaminson, 1984; Wheatley & Ferrer-Conill, 2021).

Immediacy historically has played a role in journalistic success, with “those who had the fastest (and most reliable) information were likely to be successful” (Usher, 2018, p. 22). The competition to be first with news has only intensified as news organizations

have transitioned to 24/7 digital news operations, increasing the speed of the creation and distribution of news (Domingo, 2008; Diekerhof, 2021). "ASAP journalism," referring to the "journalistic culture of incremental story updates" (Usher, 2014, p. 23), and/or the "hamsterization" of news is a by-product of that transformation (Starkman, 2010). Journalists produce an endless stream of updates to quench the perceived unrelenting demands of digital audiences.

News organizations at large have "borrowed" from television and shifted toward a culture of high-speed coverage (Saltzis, 2012), fostering an environment in which "everyone has the same deadline — NOW!" (Usher, 2018, p. 25). This is even the case for the smallest news organizations in the most rural environments, which, like larger metropolitan news organizations, "understand that audience expectations around the availability of content is shifting" (Radcliffe & Ali, 2017, p. 47). Researchers found "speed and efficiency appear to be valued more — or perhaps more precisely, the lack thereof is disliked — making the experience of time become intensified" (Groot Kormelink & Costera Meijer, 2020, p. 282).

Facebook and News

Changing news habits and the desire for news now relate to the increasing frequency of obtaining news digitally. Just 32% of Americans get news often or sometimes from print publications, but 86% get news often or sometimes digitally (through news websites, apps or social media) and 53% get news often or sometime via social media (Shearer, 2021). Americans gets their news from Facebook more than any other social media platform, with 36% of respondents reporting getting their news on

Facebook regularly (Shearer & Mitchell, 2021). People turn to the platform because it fits into their daily lives, is convenient and free (Chen, 2021; Hågvar, 2019; Boczkowski, Mitchelstein & Matassi, 2018; Schmidt et al., 2017). In a 46-nation survey, 69% of participants reported using Facebook in the last week, for instance (Newman et al., 2021).

While Facebook originated as a platform for interpersonal updates, leisure time and entertainment, it has evolved into a powerhouse source for news and information (Carlson, 2018; Asri & Sualman, 2019). Its evolution has included frequent changes to its algorithmic news feed, which has been a controversial part of the platform since its introduction in 2006 (boyd, 2008). Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg has discussed its algorithmic changes in public statements. In 2018, Facebook altered its news feed filter to prioritize posts from friends and family over non-advertising content from publishers. At the time, Zuckerberg said, "I'm changing the goal I give our product teams from focusing on helping you find relevant content to helping you have more meaningful social interactions" (Mosseri, 2018). These changes followed public criticism of how information was disseminated on Facebook during election campaigns (Hern, 2018; Ingram & Sandle, 2018). More recently, in July 2022, Facebook announced it will de-emphasize posts from friends and family in favor of content from creators, especially video creators (Nix, 2022). As Zuckerberg said, "our discovery engine will recommend the content we think you'll care most about." This is an attempt to compete against popular video platforms such as TikTok and attempt to reverse a recent trend. In 2021, Facebook lost daily users for the first time in its 18-year history (Dwoskin, Oremus & Lerman, 2022).

Such an acute reversal of course points to Facebook's pursuit of financial gain over any commitment to news. Its prioritization of popularity over substance, for instance, impairs a news organization's local civic affairs reporting or in-depth investigations from drawing attention and competing on a platform in which news represents a fraction of the overall content (Carlson, 2018; Vaidhyanathan, 2018). Facebook, along with other social media platforms, removes the human decision making in the distribution of news stories, giving power to ever changing algorithms. In general, algorithms, which are far from neutral, continue to gain in significance in selecting the news content we view (Diakopoulos, 2015; Swart, 2021). This is concerning as algorithms often are "black boxes" in that "their inner dynamics are hidden even as the consequences from these dynamics are easily seen" (Carlson, 2018, p. 7).

Facebook's influence over journalism has grown over the years. Facebook has altered editorial practices and upended news organization finances. In newsrooms, Facebook statistics, such as shares, likes and comments, are closely monitored by journalists and impact their editorial decisions (Christin, 2020; Cohen, 2019; Dwyer & Martin, 2017). News organizations continue to use valuable, and limited, resources on the platform. Nearly eight-in-ten news organizations in the United States have a Facebook page (Holcomb, 2018), yet producing sustainable and "direct monetization on social media is still a challenge" (Cornia et al., 2018, p. 18; Myllylahti, 2018). Social media platforms themselves, along with search engines, account for as much as 80% of total advertising spent in many media markets (Myllylahti, 2020). Pickard (2020) identified this as the "Facebook problem" for news organizations.

Facebook, and other digital spaces, also have sparked the "democratization of media production" (Lewis, Kaufhold, & Lasorsa, 2010, p. 164). Historically, the idea of journalism was one that was closed off to the masses, as news organizations maintained strict editorial control, theorized especially in work on gatekeeping theory. This research articulated the top-down editorial process by which journalists sort through the innumerable messages available and allow worthy news and information through the gate to the news consumers (Robinson, 2007; Wallace, 2018; Reader, 2021). Now, as gatekeeping theory scholars wrote, news consumers now have "their own gate" (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009, p. 124).

There are two noteworthy ramifications of the democratization of the news process. First, there is increased competition. In an already high-choice media environment, audience members' content is a choice right alongside professional news producers' content (Chadwick, 2017). Second, as Hermida (2012, p. 310) argues, it is now fair to question "the institutional power of the journalist as the professional who decides what is newsworthy." Put another way, audiences no longer must rely on news institutions to get news they deem newsworthy out to the public.

While few audience members contribute citizen journalism, participatory journalism or user-generated content (Gillmor, 2004; Borger, van Hoof & Sanders, 2014), the opportunity is there, especially on social media. This possibility of participation is a defining characteristic of the digital revolution, signaling a shift to a more collective news ecosystem. Research on citizen journalism spiked in the early 2000s, with the widespread introduction of the Internet and digital devices, but has dropped sharply since, with researchers even asking, "is citizen journalism dead?"

(Mutsvairo & Salgado, 2022). Citizen journalism, though, is thriving in countries with limited media options (Zeng et al., 2019).

Social media has enabled the exchange of news and information as audience members create their own online communities (Dickens, Couldry & Fotopoulou, 2015, Chen et al., 2012). In many communities, for instance, Facebook groups of neighbors have been established to share happenings in the community and build social integration (Mosconi et al., 2017). Researchers have even comparing the groups to the "integrative role of local weekly newspapers throughout the twentieth century" (Swart, Peters & Broersma, 2019, p. 198).

One of the most impactful changes in the digital era, in this high-choice environment, is the increased personalization of news consumption (McCollough, Crowell & Napoli, 2017; Purcell et al., 2010). Consumers now have the ability to build their "personal news menu" (Costera Meijer, 2020, p. 391). Those news menus are not necessarily filled with news organizations. This is especially true in rural areas that have more options for local news from professional journalists. Instead, in rural areas residents can turn to each other for news, as their personal news menus include friends, neighbors and other in-group members.

In sum, the bounty of research above suggests the volume of news and information has grown exponentially in our high-choice environment and that content is available *now* and from a wide range of sources. There is less research on how these dynamics play out in rural spaces and how those in rural spaces make their news and information decisions.

This dissertation's second research question is as follows:

RQ2: How do rural residents express obtaining news and information that is salient to their everyday lives — and why?

The Motivations for News and Information Consumption

In simplest terms, the preceding section examined the *supply* side of news and information and this current second addresses the *demand* side of news and information. In other words, this second explores the reasons *why* people consume news and information. First, I investigate information-seeking motivations at large. Second, I dive into the more specific research on motivations for news consumption, which include informational and non-informational reasons. Third, I more closely look at how the motivations for news consumption are different in small, local and rural markets than larger, metropolitan areas.

How and why people obtain news and information has been the subject of inquiry across a wide variety of academic fields for more than a century. Such fields, just to name a few, include media studies, communication studies, political communication, health communication, psychology, library and information sciences and human-computer interaction. Human information behavior is another. Human information behavior, or just "informational behavior," is the "study of how people need, seek, use and share information in various contexts" (Gorichanaz & Venkatagiri, 2021, p. 2). The field of research began in the 1900s, studying mostly printed materials in the library, but eventually drew in the mass media (Case & Given, 2016). By the 1960s, the field shifted toward a user-centered focus, moving from information "needs" to information "behaviors" (Ibid).

People obtain information in both conscious and unconscious manners. People actively seek information based on cognitive or emotional motivations. In terms of cognitive motivations, uncertainty is a primary reason, as Montesi (2021, p. 456) notes, "all models of human behavior in the consumption of information emphasize uncertainty as the factor that triggers the search for information itself." Emotions, such as anxiety, optimism or even fear, factor into conscious information seeking (Kuhlthau, 2005). People obtain information in unconscious ways, acquiring it incidentally or unsolicited through everyday activities, such as television watching or talking with friends and family (Savolainen, 1995).

The focus of "everyday life" information seeking is a relatively new focus of the information behavior field, beginning with the work of Savolainen (1995). This focus shifted the investigation from only library-based, scholarly and work-related information to "everyday life" information. Savolainen's Everyday Life Information Seeking model (ELIS) features two key concepts that explain the motivations for everyday life information behavior — way of life and mastery of life. Way of life is defined as "order of things" (Savolainen, 1995, p. 259), or how people priority their daily activities. One example of way of life information seeking would be reading the newspaper to find the start time for a local festival. Mastery of life, on the other hand, is "keeping things in order" (Savolainen, 1995, p. 259). Life does not run automatically and must be cared for. During life's calm moments, this information seeking routine, simple monitoring of everyday life events. But in times of trouble, the mastery of life component is active problem-solving information seeking (Savolainen, 1995). Built on the habitus theory proposed by Bourdieu (1984), Savolainen's model emphasizes that information-seeking

choices are not purely individual, instead impacted by social and cultural factors. Thus, one's group, discussed previously, factors into such information seeking behaviors.

Motivations for News Consumption

Researchers have studied the benefits that news provides news consumers, especially through information "transmission," as Carey identified (1975). Survey and experimental research has found, for example, that consumers name "informational utility" as a main reason why they consume news content (Eveland, 2001; Hastall, 2009; Knobloch-Westerwick et al., 2005). Other qualitative studies found one reason why consumers select news is for practical information (weather reports, etc.), called "tool(s) for daily living" (Berelson, 1949, p. 118).

A second focus on reasons why people consume news is based on non-informational benefits, related to Carey's "ritual" view of communication (1975). The transmission view of communication is about information, while the ritual view is "directed not toward the extension of messages in space but toward the maintenance of society in time" (1975, p. 15). This ritual perspective encourages us to consider news "less as sending or gaining information and more as attending a mass, a situation in which nothing new is learned but in which a particular view of the world is portrayed and confirmed" (1975, p. 16). This view was more closely attuned to cultural studies prominent in Europe, and it established media studies along with other disciplines, such as anthropology, sociology and history, that "turned to ritual as a 'window' on the cultural dynamics by which people make and remake their worlds" (Bell, 2009, p. 3).

Ritual-related studies are rooted in uses and gratification approach, which Wimmer and Dominick (1994) argue began in the 1940s when researchers explored why audience members engaged in various behaviors (Ruggiero, 2000; see Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch, 1973, for famous research on uses and gratification theory). Other scholars have taken similar approaches to explore why news consumers select some news over others. For instance, Costera Meijer (2020, p. 397) called for scholars to explore the "pleasure principle of news use," writing it may "help scholars to come to terms with the difference between what people truly enjoy as valuable and worth their while and other pleasurable experiences of news." Twenty years prior, Glasser (2000) called for the study of the "enjoyment of news use," writing news use could not be explained simply by rational, utilitarian and extrinsic motivations.

The ritual view of communication emphasizes that "news not only transmits information but is also situated – symbolically and spatiotemporally – within people's everyday life" (Costera Meijer, 2020, p. 393). The view includes affective rewards of news such as comfort of routines (Bird & Dardenne, 2008; Silverstone, 1994) or escapism (Barnhurst & Wartella, 1991; Berelson, 1949, Coleman et al., 2009). The relationship of ritual to journalism, then, is about how the news media is a "shared symbolic system that constructs, organizes and shapes the social reality around us" and provides "individuals with various opportunities to contribute to the construction of that social reality" (Sumiala, 2013, p. 3).

Specifically, newspaper consumers read the newspaper for more than just information. In his legendary 1945 study of newspaper strikes, Berelson found the newspaper provided social connection. In a similar study a half-century later, Bentley

(2001, p. 14) found the same, concluding, "the unifying function of the newspaper … was of social integration." He added, "the newspaper made survival in their community much easier and enjoyable, a function of the community building ability of the press." News audience research has examined how news creates a "public connection" necessary for democracy (Couldry, Livingstone & Markham, 2010). Swart, Peters and Broersma (2017, p. 906) defined public connection as "the various shared frames of reference that enable individuals to engage and participate in cultural, social, civic, and political networks in everyday life." Importantly, the authors note, "the concept of public connection starts from the assumption that people do not navigate through everyday life as atomized individuals, but are part of larger networks" (Swart, Peters & Broersma, 2018, p. 4331). While news often is consumed in isolation, news possesses a fundamentally social dimension. In this way, social media can act as spaces for "public connection," providing users with shared frames of reference that enable them to engage and participate within their social networks, or in-groups (Couldry, Livingstone & Markham, 2010).

While researchers have examined the informational and non-informational benefits of news separately, it is often the situation in which the benefits overlap. Even Carey was careful to underscore that the benefits are not completely disconnected (1975). News is not exclusively information, nor is it exclusively ritual. Tabloid magazines, for instance, provide a reprieve for audience members, but offer informational value (Gripsrud, 2000). Recent research has identified the significance of considering the two views in combination. Moe, Ytre & Naerland (2021) explored coverage of Donald Trump's 2016 election in the U.S. from the perspective of audience members far removed, in the Nordic region. They found the news coverage provided information but

also had narrative qualities beyond the transmission of facts and information. The accounts provided drama, which the audience members described feeling intense emotions from the coverage.

Motivations in Small Markets

The monitorial role of journalism, including traditional watchdog journalism that holds government accountable, is “cherished and valued as a standard of ‘good journalism’” (Ryfe, 2009, p. 199). However, not all communities and cultures value the monitorial role of journalism above all else (Perreault, M. & Perreault, P., 2021; Mellado, 2015). Compared to larger media markets, in smaller communities, journalists produce less watchdog journalism (Harry, 2001; Tichenor, Donohue, and Olien, 1980) and audiences seek less watchdog journalism (Poindexter, Heider & McCombs, 2006; Costera Meijer, 2010).

Scholars have found smaller news organizations are less critical of community issues and community leaders (Mathews, 2021; Wenzel, 2020; Hindman, 1996). This is not a new notion, as Janowitz (1952, p. 283) observed “the maintenance of community consensus by the community press is built on the emphasis of common values rather than on the solution of conflicting values.” Researchers have found that smaller news organizations cater to business leaders and advertisers, avoiding critical content that might lead to withdrawal of revenue (Richards, 2013). Instead of critical content, smaller news organizations tend to favor journalistic boosterism, or “everyday news that highlights the positive qualities of local environments” (Gutsche, 2015, p. 499). Research

has found that weekly newspapers chronicle the "story of average American daily lives," such as recording births, marriages and deaths (Garfrerick, 2010; Smith, 2019).

Scholars have argued that the relationships between audience members and journalists in rural areas is the reason for less critical journalism. Smith (2019, p. 533) found that weekly newspaper journalists "must constantly and simultaneously engage with and participate in the community on a personal and professional level," and Rosenberry (2012, p. 25) wrote the "defining characteristic of community journalism is the intimacy that the organizations and the people who practice it share with the institutions and individuals they cover."

In smaller communities, residents to not tend to turn to their local news organizations primarily for watchdog journalism, negatively viewing such journalistic behaviors as assertive, or even hostile. In a survey study, Poindexter, Heider and McCombs (2006) presented participants with choices of watchdog journalism or "good neighbor" journalism. With "good neighbor" journalism, the journalists demonstrate "caring about the community, reporting on interesting people and groups, understanding the local community, and offering solutions" (Poindexter, Heider & McCombs, 2006, p. 78). The survey found respondents preferred the good neighbor role, while journalists strived for watchdog content. The expectations of the newspaper, from the news consumers and news producers, thus, are in conflict. Or, as the initial "good neighbor" scholars noted, the journalists and audiences "are on separate tracks headed in different directions (Heider, McCombs & Poindexter, 2005, p. 962).

Mutual expectations of journalists and audience crucial to a positive experience for those involved (Wilhelm, Stehle & Detel, 2021). The watchdog-good neighbor

disconnection could factor in the declining levels of media trust (Toff et al., 2021) and the increasing number of news avoiders (Palmer, Toff & Nielsen, 2020). Audience members in general, not those specific to rural areas or community news organizations, often see journalists as powerful people themselves, rather those who help hold the powerful accountable (Palmer, 2018).

Researchers have not developed the "good neighbor" construct beyond initial conceptual definition from Heider, McCombs and Poindexter (2005). However, tenets of a "good neighbor" align with "solutions journalism," which pinpoint and spotlights a community's flaws but also motivates leaders, and readers, to contribute to societal change (Wenzel, Gerson & Moreno, 2016; McIntyre, 2019; McIntyre & Lough, 2021).

In sum, there are many reasons why people consume information and news, and the motivations can be different in different communities and cultures. This dissertation's third research question emerged iteratively from both the literature and fieldwork. The final research question is as follows:

RQ3: How do rural residents think about the role of journalists and journalism as compared to Facebook as a source of news and information about their locality?

Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter was to review the theoretical context that shapes this dissertation's investigation of the rural news and information ecosystem. Social identity theory serves as the lens for this research's investigation. Social identity theory argues that a person's sense of who they are is based on group membership (Tajfel, Turner & Worchel, 1979; Hornsey, 2008). The theory states that people seek membership in groups

with like-minded people and that attribute positive characteristics to fellow in-group members and negative characteristics to out-group members, especially if there is a perceived hostility toward the in-group (Sternisko, Cichocka & van Bavel, 2020). Researchers have established a rural social identity, as people in rural spaces feel the "need to create a positive in-group distinction" because they feel "devalued by society" (Lunz Trujillo, 2022, p. 5). Rural social identifiers believe their unique way of life is not appreciated, or even is ridiculed, by those in metropolitan areas. They feel they are misunderstood, disrespected or ignored, including by journalists (Cramer, 2016).

At first blush, this dissertation examines how and why rural residents consume news and information. More deeply, this research's spotlight shines on the *who* in the process, meaning the significance of who is creating the news and information the residents consume. Through a focused literature review, this chapter sets the stage for that discussion in the forthcoming chapters. In the next chapter, I explain my methodological choices for this dissertation. First, it offers an overview of Nelson County, Virginia, the rural county at the heart of this research.

Chapter 3: Methods

A main motivation for this dissertation was to investigate how people in a rural environment obtain news and information that is important to them in their everyday lives. As part of understanding their methods (and motivations) for obtaining news and information, I wanted to learn about them, as people, and about the place they call home. So, I asked them about their lives and I visited their home, as in their community, and, on many occasions, I visited their actual homes.

In four weeks of fieldwork, using a rental car, I drove 1,600 miles, covering virtually every square mile of windy, mountainous roads in Nelson County, Virginia. I interviewed people at the county library, the Mexican restaurant, a community center, two coffee shops, two breweries, a vineyard, a pizza restaurant and a church. I visited 12 homes, including one multi-million dollar house near the top of a mountain resort and a few houses in the small valleys between mountain ridges, called “hollers” by the participants. I sat at kitchen tables, home offices and living room couches. At two homes, I sat outside on decks, soaking in mountain views. On one colder day, I huddled under two blankets and around a wood stove in the center of a 600 square-foot house. That small house would comfortably fit in the living room of the multi-million dollar mountain home.

All told, I interviewed 40 residents of the rural county. To be sure, we talked about media, news and information. But we also talked about them, their lives and their county. A survey-based approach to such audience-centric initiative would not suffice. It would not surface the deep conversations, reactions and emotions that underscore this dissertation.

In this chapter, I will explain why I made my methodological choices, starting with the reasons behind the selection of a rural county in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Central Virginia. I will then detail how I recruited participants, who the participants are and why I choose to interview the participants. I then will examine two key limitations to this dissertation, primarily its use of in-depth interviews and a case study, and how I responded to those limitations. Finally, in a section of reflexivity, I acknowledge my own pre-project assumptions and my positionality as an outsider, university researcher and former professional journalist in the Central Virginia region.

Case Study: Nelson County

I wanted the case study location for this dissertation to meet two criteria. First, it had to be a rural county. Second, I wanted it to have a weekly newspaper organization. As part of exploring how people obtain news and information, I sought to investigate the role of a weekly newspaper in today's modern 24/7 news and information ecosystem. Nelson County is among the most rural of the 95 Virginia counties, with a population per square mile of 31.9. That is significantly lower than Virginia's state-wide population per square mile of 202. Nelson County is home to one traditional media publication, the weekly *Nelson County Times,* which was founded in 1874. On paper, Nelson County met my two criteria. In this section, I offer an overview of Nelson County, including details about its demographics, its history and its politics.

Nelson County has 14,775 residents, according to the 2020 U.S. Census estimates. That's down 15% from its peak of 17,277 in 1920. Nelson County is more homogenous in terms of race (85% white, compared to 69.4% state-wide) than the rest of Virginia, and

it is just slightly less educated (30.4% to 37.9% bachelor degree) and slightly poorer ($64,000 to $74,000 median income) than Virginia as a whole. The town of Lovingston is the county seat and has about 500 people. Lovingston sits roughly 150 miles from Washington, D.C., and 100 miles from the state capital of Richmond (See Appendix A and B for state and county maps). Nelson County is part of the Charlottesville Metropolitan Statistical Area. Nelson County is home to a robust tourism scene, highlighted by 12 wineries, seven craft breweries, three cideries, three distilleries and Wintergreen Resort, a four-season mountain resort and one of the most well-known skiing resorts in the mid-Atlantic region of the U.S. Still, there are limited options for restaurants and other amenities many take for granted. There is one grocery store and one stoplight. Both are in the county seat of Lovingston.

There are two main roads in Nelson County, State Routes 29 and 151. Lovingston is on Route 29. Route 151 is the center of the tourism scene, with the wineries and breweries lining the road. Wintergreen Resort, which started solely as a ski resort in 1975 and blossomed to include a golf community in the early 1980's, is on 151. Blue Mountain Brewery, which opened as the county's first brewery in 2007, is on 151. Routes 29 and 151 run parallel, with a roughly 6-mile stretch of Route 6 connecting the roads. This stretch winds around a mountain ridge that splits the two main routes. The divide between Routes 29 and 151 – between old and new parts of the county – is significant to understanding the culture of the community.

The most significant moment in Nelson County history occurred in 1969. Hurricane Camille struck in the overnight hours of Aug. 19-20. Twenty-five inches of rain deluged the area, leveling buildings, industries and much of the county's

infrastructure. Officially, 124 people died. Every year, the county marks the moment. A lifelong Nelson County resident said, "growing up, that was the one thing that I remember everyone being like, holding hands and remembering. It's kind of like a 9/11 kind of thing." In the aftermath of the storm, land in Nelson County was inexpensive. That drew new residents from all over the country, in particular the Northeast corridor of the U.S. One resident said the county was "overrun" with newcomers, and another called it an "influx of hippies, lots of hippies." Note, the legendary Woodstock Music and Art Fair was held in the week before Hurricane Camille hit Nelson County. The native-versus-newcomer dynamic is a recurring theme in this dissertation's findings.

Nelson County is *very* competitive in presidential elections and offers a fair predictor of the election's winner. The last time any presidential candidate eclipsed 55% of the vote was in 1984, when Ronald Regan won the election in a 49-state landslide. Since 1984, in seven of the nine presidential elections, Nelson County went with the future president, including four Republicans (Ronald Reagan, George H.W. Bush, George W. Bush and Donald Trump) and two Democrats (Bill Clinton and Barack Obama). In 2000, Nelson County offered an illustration of the competitive nature of the election. Al Gore won 48.4% of the vote nationally, compared to George W. Bush's 47.9%. Bush, however, won the electoral vote 271-266, after the Supreme Court ruled 5-4 to end a recount in Florida. In Nelson County, Bush won the county by *six* votes (2,913-2907). In 2004, it was even *closer* in Nelson County. Democrat John Kerry won the county by *four* votes (3,543-3,539), but lost the overall national election to Bush in his re-election bid. As mentioned, there were two times since 1984 in which Nelson County did not go with the eventual president. The first was in 2004, with Kerry. The

second came in 2020, when the county went 51.6% in favor of Donald Trump. Joe Biden won the presidency in 2020.

Nelson County is a political anomaly compared to U.S. rural counties at large. In his losing effort in 2020, Donald Trump drew 65% of the national rural vote, almost 14 points higher than in Nelson County (Igielnik, Keeter & Hartig, 2021). Perhaps this difference is because of Nelson County's close proximity to Charlottesville, a liberal hotbed home to the University of Virginia, or because of the influence of newcomers from other areas of the country. From the 2000 to 2020 presidential elections, rural counties in general have shifted further to the right than the urban areas have moved to the left (Van Dam, 2020). In other words, there is a growing political urban-rural divide, and Nelson County remains in the middle.

Participant Recruitment

In this section, I will describe my tactics for recruiting participants and offer an overview of the participants themselves. First, I explore failed recruitment tactics and successful strategies, including the role of the Nelson Knows Facebook group. Then, I provide a statistical overview of the participants, as well as a table with numerous details about the participants.

Before this project began, I did not personally know a person in Nelson County. I intended to use two recruitment tactics that never materialized. First, I planned to contact Justin Faulconer, the editor of the weekly newspaper, the *Nelson County Times.* I wanted to ask Faulconer to facilitate interviews with subscribers of the newspaper. Cramer (2016) used a similar tactic in research in rural Wisconsin. I interviewed Faulconer in

September 2021 for a different project. I attempted to contact him multiple times in January 2022 (two emails, one voicemail), but he never responded. From the beginning, I aimed to have a participant pool that offered a mix of current subscribers, former subscribers and those who never subscribed. I anticipated current subscribers would be the most difficult people to find, and that proved true. I was hopeful Faulconer might assist. In the second failed tactic, I planned to post IRB-approved recruitment language on the Nelson Knows Facebook group (see Appendix C). However, it is a private group, and I was not granted access. When I attempted to join the group, I was greeted with an automatic screening question, asking if I was a Nelson County resident. My "no" answer, apparently, prevented me from joining. However, the Nelson Knows Facebook group, ultimately, was the most successful recruiting vehicle.

Table 3.1. Recruitment results

How participants learned of the dissertation project	**No.**
Nelson Knows, private county-specific Facebook group	19
Snowball sampling, personal connection of participants	12
Residents approached me after overhearing another interview in public	2
Neighborhood newsletter, specific to Wintergreen Resort home owners	2
A participant's (unsolicited) post in Nextdoor community forum	1
Flyer posted at county restaurant, one of several locations I posted flyers	1
Unsolicited story/blurb about my dissertation in nearby monthly newspaper	1
Front-page advertisement I purchased in the *Nelson County Times*	1
Initial contact, via a mutual friend	1

A mutual friend facilitated my first interview with a Nelson County resident. That resident, unsolicited, asked if I would like him to post about my survey on Nelson Knows. I said, yes, and emailed him a link to my Qualtrics screening survey. He posted the link later that day. Of the 40 participants, 19 cited Nelson Knows as where they learned of my survey.

Other than Nelson Knows, "snowball" sampling (Noy, 2008) resulted in the most participants, with 12 citing personal connections as to how they learned of my survey. Snowball sampling is a useful tactic to harness the dynamics of social networks and contact hard-to-reach areas of population (Noy, 2008). At the conclusion of many interviews, I asked participants if they knew of anyone else who might be interested in participating in the research project. If they did, I offered them my name, contact information and the Qualtrics link to pass along. For this dissertation, snowball sampling helped, especially, to find participants of color, younger participants and current subscribers of the newspaper. As a qualitative study, this is not representative of Nelson County. (I discuss this further below in the limitations section). However, I wanted to reach across all different demographics — gender, race, wealth, etc. — to more fully tell the story of Nelson County.

Other than Nelson Knows and personal connections, via snowball sampling, participants cited six other ways in which they learned about this research project. First, two participants approached me while they overheard me interviewing another resident in a public space and expressed interest in participating. Second, I posted flyers with IRB-approved language in several county locations, including restaurants, gas stations, laundromats, etc. The flyers were headlined "Research participants needed in Nelson

County." The flyers identified me by name as a research from the University of Minnesota and noted I was recruiting residents "for a study about news and media consumption in Nelson County." The flyers noted that interviews would take 45- to 60-minutes and that participants would be paid $25 (Amazon gift card) for their time. At the bottom of the flyer, it asked for those interested to reach out to me via email or to directly visit the initial Qualtrics survey link (See Appendix D). One person cited a flyer as to how they learned of the project. Third, one person cited the online forum Nextdoor, after an unknown participant posted the Qualtrics link on Nextdoor. Fourth, two people cited an electronic newsletter sent to residents of the Wintergreen mountain ski resort. I had an informal conversation with a county official, who sent the survey link to the person who distributes the Wintergreen newsletter. Fifth, one of the participants is a freelance writer for a monthly newspaper based in a nearby county to Nelson County. I did not know this fact before our interview. Without telling me they were going to do so, they wrote a short blurb about my study in the monthly newspaper. One person learned of the study from that content. Finally, I bought a $200 front-page ad to the weekly *Nelson County Times.* I used the IRB-approved recruitment language in the advertisement. One person cited the advertisement.

I used the Qualtrics survey to collect basic demographics of residents and help with screening. Every interview participant first filled out the survey, and I then emailed them to organize a meeting day, time and place. Data collected included age, number of years lived in Nelson County, gender, race, education, employment, household income and whether they currently or formerly subscribed to the *Nelson County Times* (See Appendix E for Qualtrics questionnaire). I collected this information, as well as how the

participant learned of my study, in a spreadsheet. All names in the findings section are pseudonyms to protect the identity of the participants. I also recorded each person's age by decade and the number of years they lived in Nelson County in five-year increments (Table of participants below).

Of the 40 participants, 22 were female, 18 male. Thirty-four participants were white, compared to six non-white. Of the non-white participants, two self-identified as Black, two as Hispanic and two as "mix." Twenty-seven participants had at least a bachelor's degree. Twelve were retired. In terms of household income, 15 had a household income of more than $100,000, 14 were between $50,000-$99,999 and 11 were less than $49,000 (including four less than $20,000). Ten participants were subscribers of the *Nelson County Times* at the time of the interview, and 15 were former subscribers. Fifteen never subscribed to the weekly newspaper.

Table 3.2. Participant list

Name	Age	Years*	Gender	Race	Education	Income	Subscribe
Adam	20s	25-30	Male	White	Bachelor	150+	Never
Brian	30s	35-40	Male	White	PhD	100-149	Former
Carla	40s	15-20	Female	Hispanic	Bachelor	150+	Never
Dorothy	50s	0-5	Female	White	Masters	100-149	Never
Erin	60s	25-30	Female	White	Masters	90-99	Former
Frankie	40s	10-15	Female	White	Masters	100-149	Never
Greg	70s	30-35	Male	White	Bachelor	150+	Current
Henry	20s	25-30	Male	Black	Bachelor	30-39	Former
Isabelle	40s	25-30	Female	White	Some coll.	>10	Former
James	50s	30-35	Male	Mix	Some coll.	80-89	Former
Kevin	60s	15-20	Male	White	Masters	150+	Former
Lisa	40s	0-5	Female	Hispanic	Some coll.	150+	Former
Maria	60s	15-20	Female	White	Masters	100-149	Current
Nicole	30s	20-25	Female	White	Some coll.	50-59	Former
Olivia	60s	15-20	Female	White	Bachelor	100-149	Never
Paula	60s	0-5	Female	White	Bachelor	100-149	Current
Quincy	60s	5-10	Female	White	Associate	20-29	Never
Richard	60s	10-15	Male	White	Bachelor	150+	Former
Sarah	30s	5-10	Female	White	Some coll.	50-59	Never
Teresa	70s	35-40	Female	White	Associate	60-69	Current
Ulysses	50s	0-5	Male	White	Bachelor	100-149	Never
Vanessa	60s	5-10	Female	Mix	Masters	90-99	Current
Wendy	70s	70-75	Female	White	Bachelor	80-89	Current
Xavier	60s	15-20	Male	White	Masters	100-149	Current
Yasir	70s	45-50	Male	White	Masters	90-99	Current
Zachary	20s	20-25	Male	White	Bachelor	10-19	Former
Aaron	70s	45-50	Male	White	Some coll.	40-49	Current
Ben	30s	30-35	Male	White	Associate	60-69	Former
Carson	70s	25-30	Male	White	Masters	80-89	Current
Danielle	40s	35-40	Female	White	> HS	50-59	Never
Elton	50s	35-40	Male	White	Bachelor	50-59	Former
Fred	40s	15-20	Male	White	Some coll.	30-39	Never
Gina	70s	15-20	Female	White	Bachelor	40-49	Former
Helen	50s	20-25	Female	White	Some	20-29	Never
Ian	50s	20-25	Male	White	Bachelor	60-69	Never
Jack	60s	0-5	Male	White	Bachelor	30-39	Never
Kim	20s	0-5	Female	White	Bachelor	50-59	Former
Lezlie	60s	5-10	Female	White	Masters	150+	Former
Marci	60s	65-70	Female	White	Some coll.	10-19	Never
Nancy	70s	50-55	Female	Black	Bachelor	10-19	Never

* Numbers of years lived in Nelson County

Participant Interviews and Analysis

I interviewed the 40 residents of Nelson County in January and February 2022. I gave each participant a $25 Amazon gift card for their time. All but two of the interviews were in person, with those two interviews over Zoom. Both of those participants requested to meet virtually because of concerns related to the coronavirus pandemic.

At the beginning of each interview, I asked participants to tell me a bit about themselves and their family, what brought them to Nelson County (if not natives) and what they do for a living. This was designed to get participants talking and start to build a rapport (Weiss, 1995; Padgett, 2016). General topics that followed included: Describing their county, describing how they obtain local news and information relevant to their everyday lives, describing how social media played a function in their news and describing the weekly newspaper and its role in the county (See Appendix F for interview guide).

I tried to merely facilitate conversations with the participants and not lead a straight, back-and-forth, question-and-answer session. I attempted to keep the tone of the discussion conversational, weaving naturally between points of interest, and I attempted to lead participants to "tell stories rather than just answer questions" (Tracy, 2013, p. 140). Again, this is to keep the participants as relaxed and comfortable as possible during the interview. This approach allowed for the "discovery or elaboration of information that is important to participants but may not have previously been thought of as pertinent by the research team" (Gill, Stewart, Treasure & Chadwick, 2008, p. 291).

The interviews were iterative, changing slightly during the course of fieldwork (Tracy, 2013). For instance, conversation topics about ownership, reporters and the

localness of the weekly newspaper were not part of the interview protocol. In early interviews, these topics surfaced when I asked participants to "describe the weekly news organization." These specific topics, as detailed in the chapters that follow, form central themes to this dissertation.

Interviews were recorded and transcribed, via a professional transcribing service. In total, the transcripts were 1,609 pages and 406,000 words. I analyzed this data in February and March 2022. To carry out the analysis, I conducted three close readings of the transcripts. I read through the entirety of the transcript once without taking any notes, attempting to immerse myself in the data (Yin, 2015). This took about a week in total, reading several interviews at a time at the end of February 2022. I then conducted a second reading, coding the transcripts with mostly descriptive inductive codes (Corbin & Strauss, 2014), such as "inexperienced reporters," "letters" (letters to the editor) or "Devil's Backbone." The codes were put into categories and subcategories in a grounded and iterative manner (Saldaña, 2011). For instance, "Devil's Backbone" is a Nelson County-based brewery that was established by a Nelson County native but sold to a world-wide corporation. As discussed in Chapter 4, "Devil's Backbone" related to the code "*Nelson County Times* corporate" in that neither organization is owned by a Nelson County resident. Abstracted out further, and examined through the literature, neither organization was perceived as local.

Interviews in Audience Research

As in-depth interviews are the primary method of data collection for this dissertation, I will offer an overview of the method. The most fundamental advantage of in-depth interviews is that they provide more detailed, and varied, information, especially

when compared to restricted quantitative, survey-based research (Boyce & Neale, 2006). In interviews, researchers can gain an understanding of not only a person's behavior but also how people make sense of their behaviors in relation to others. Through interviews, scholars gain access to "representations, classification systems, boundary work, identity, imagined realities and cultural ideals" through which people see themselves in the social world (Lamont & Swidler, 2014, p. 157). The best way to get at these meanings is to ask people. "For many people" Lamont and Swidler write, "the imagined meanings of their activities, their self-concepts, their fantasies about themselves (and about others) are … significant, and we generally cannot get at those without asking" (p. 159). A skilled interviewer can get at these meanings by probing the meanings of ordinary events and highlighting the "magnified moments" that resonate in memory (Hochschild, 2003, p. 16). Methodology scholars encourage "active interviewing," or treating "participants explicitly as meaning co-creators to produce insightful data" (Hathaway, Sommers & Mostaghim, 2020, p. 116).

In a thorough defense of in-depth interviews, Pugh (2013) describes four kinds of information that can be discovered in interviews: the honorable, the schematic, the visceral and meta-feelings. In the honorable, interviews give answers that present themselves in the best light. A skilled interview will probe beyond these simple factual statements or beliefs. In the schematic, participants use language – metaphors, jokes, turns of phrase – to show how they view the world. In the visceral, "interviewees inhabit an emotional landscape of desire, morality and expectations that shapes their actions and reactions, a landscape that researchers must somehow be able to divine and portray" (Pugh, 2013, p. 50).

The fourth, and most important, is meta-feelings, or "how we feel about how we feel" (Pugh, 2013, p. 51). With meta-feelings, participants "tell us not just what they think and feel, but how it feels to feel that way – for example the emotional environment that they inhabit and the particular pressures that this cultural world puts on them" (Pugh, 2013, p. 49). The meta-feelings also are a "measure of the distance between how someone feels and how they feel they out to feel" (Pugh, 2013, p. 52). The meta-feelings give a sense of how proud or embarrassed someone might be when they discuss a particular feeling or their behaviors. I noticed this, especially, when participants discussed their pride in Nelson County and what "local" meant to them.

In-depth interviews allow for follow-up questions to participants, beyond a collection of standard information about participants, and they offer flexibility to researchers (Brennen, 2013). Because of this flexibility, interviews can reveal unforeseen and unexplored areas with participants. Researchers can adapt a line of questioning throughout a study, as they gain insight into areas of exploration. In this way, researchers should allow the first few interviews to "go in whatever direction they want" (Luker, 2009, p. 173). The early interview protocol is based on a thorough review of the literature and previous research surrounding a topic, but it is important to remember the initial questions "are only hunches" (Luker, 2009, p. 173). The semi-structured in-depth interviews allow researchers to look "for the road map that this person carries around in his/her head" (Luker, 2009, p. 173). After the initial few interviews, the researcher will be more confident about the line of questioning.

Another significant advantage to in-depth interviews is that they offer a more relaxed and comfortable experience for participants as opposed to filling out a survey

(Tavory, 2020). To the participant, the conversation feels like more of a regular everyday conversation than a stodgy research project. Of course, there is a significant difference between a regular everyday conversation and a research in-depth interview. In everyday conversations, each person asks and answers questions. In the qualitative interview, "the interviewer, as a representative of the study, is responsible for directing the respondent to the topics that matter to the study" (Weiss, 1995, p. 4).

The end of the research interview is important, and it is not a time in which researchers can relax (Warren et al., 2003). In this dissertation fieldwork, at the end of every interview, I asked the participant to describe the highlights from our conversation that they would relay to a family member or friend. This ensured that I understood the most important elements of our conversation. I asked if they had any final questions or comments for me. At that time, many participants asked about the dissertation project at large. That is a common occurrence at the end of interviews as participants have a better understanding of the project from the interview (Warren et al., 2003).

Limitations and Responses

Like all research, this dissertation has its limitations, chiefly it uses in-depth interviews and that it is a case study. First, good interviews, ones that produce quality research, require skilled interviews and not simply a person reading off a series of questions to a participant. As Pugh (2013) emphasizes, "interviewers are not stenographers" (p. 54). It is important to build a good rapport with the participants and avoid yes-or-no or leading questions (Boyce & Neale, 2006). Second, participants can give biased answers to questions or, as Pugh (2013) described, "the honorable"

information that puts them in the best light. Social desirability effects account for some of the answers (Robinson, 2014). For example, a person might report being interested in public affairs news but only doing so because there is a social expectation placed on such behavior (Couldry, Livingstone & Markham, 2010). In fact, being an informed citizen is such a widely accepted expectation that people often lie about their knowledge or apologize for their lack of knowledge and feel embarrassed (Graber, 1984; Hagen, 1997). Third, results cannot be generalized with small sample sizes, as interviews often focus "on the views of individuals" and include a data collection that can lead "us down the slippery slope of methodological individualism when it comes to explanation" (Lamont & Swidler, 2014, p. 5). Finally, at their "best incarnation" in-depth interviews, and qualitative methods at large, build "middle range theories," but fall short of building "any kind of cumulative body of theory" (Luker, 2009, p. 37).

One alternative method of study could be a survey sent to every resident of Nelson County. Such a study would be costly, of course, but it also would place pre-determined boundaries around subjects of inquiry. Questions would have limited number of answers, for example. This dissertation's approach, through in-depth interviews and conversational tone, encourages a "voyage of discovery" (Luker, 2009, p. 46). For instance, a reader might consider this a study about localness, and not just about media or, even, the newspaper industry.

Another possible critique of this project is the choice of Nelson County as a case study. I am a resident in the Charlottesville Metropolitan Statistical Area, which also includes Nelson County. Some might believe that I selected Nelson County solely because of its location. I will not lie, it was nice to sleep in my own bed every night

during field work. Plus, the selection of Nelson County saved money, in comparison to staying in a hotel elsewhere for a month. However, I will note there could have been *more* convenient case study locations than Nelson County. For example, Greene County is closer to my home. However, it has roughly three times the population per square mile as Nelson County.

More than a quarter of the participants (12 of 40) were found via personal connections and snowball sampling. One concern with snowball sampling is the risk of disclosure of participant identity, especially in such a low population area such as Nelson County (Sadler et. al, 2010). In the case of this research, participants will know that I interviewed other participants that they helped connect, but the use of pseudonyms and broader demographics should prevent Nelson County residents from connecting people to their comments. There can be concerns of bias in participant selection when using snowball sampling (Parker et. al, 2919). For instance, women can be over-represented within snowball sampling due to their likelihood to be more cooperative (Noy, 2008). In this dissertation, 22 of the 40 participants were female, and I did utilize snowball sampling to help find more male participants.

I also utilized snowball sampling to find participants of color. Six of the 40 participants (15%) were non-white, which matches the non-white percentage in Nelson County. According to the U.S. Census, 13% of Nelson County residents are Black. However, only 5% of participants identified as Black. No matter the numbers, it is impossible to tell the full story of what life is like in Nelson County for Black residents.

Of the 40 participants, 21 had a household income of higher than $70,000. The state's average household income is $64,000, and the national average is $67,521,

according to the U.S. Census. Also, the participants were *significantly* more educated than the state and national averages. Twenty-seven of the 40 participants (67.5%) had at least a bachelor's degree, compared to 39.5% state-wide and 37.9% nationally (25+ years old).

As it is a case study, this research's findings cannot be generalized. However, as Luker (2009, p. 44) notes, case studies "cannot generalize statistically, (but) we can generalize logically." Since the selection of participants was not based on random sampling, aimed at matching the demographics of Nelson County, Virginia or the U.S. large, for example, this case study cannot be generalize statistically. However, through a sound methodologically approach, we can "generalize logically" and understand the findings *could* illustrate a county such as *this,* with people such as *this,* with a media environment such as *this.*

Pew Research Center's Local News Report

With the limitations in mind, of both qualitative data collection and a case study, I attempt to bring a broader context to the dissertation with original secondary data analysis of the 2019 Pew Research Center's Local News Report (Pew, 2019). The 2019 Pew Research Center's Local News Report is based on a large nationally representative survey of 34,982 adults in the U.S. Researchers conducted the survey, via a mix of online and phone, from October 15 to November 18, 2018. The data analyzed and presented in this dissertation is from survey results at a national level. The national survey was just part of the overall Local News Report. Pew also specifically targeted 99 core-based statistical areas — a federal government term for a central city and its surrounding area

— for other portions of the overall report. Rural areas do not figure into the portion of the report.

The Pew Research Center used survey weights for the total sample and used data quality checks to remove 84 cases. Pew Research Center's recruitment and methods allowed for both English- and Spanish-language survey-takers. This survey addresses several of the key issues at the heart of this dissertation. In the bibliography section, there is a link to the full report. Questions centered on how often respondents get news and information from a variety of sources, including daily and specialized newspapers (beyond the daily) and online forums or discussion groups, and how well they believed local news organizations were covering their communities.

The survey includes 7,909 urban responders (24.9%), 18,653 suburban responders (48.0%) and 8,110 rural responders (25.8). It is important to note, the responders self-identified their location, answering the following survey question: "How would you describe the community where you currently live: (1) Urban, (2) suburban or (3) rural?" During the in-depth interviews, I did not directly or systematically ask Nelson County residents this question. However, interview participants overwhelmingly described the area as rural.

I conducted secondary data analysis on this complete data set to separate the rural respondents and identify differences in responses with urban and suburban responses. I did so for every question in the survey. In many instances, the differences were slight and unnoteworthy. However, in the findings, I identify instances of differences between the groups. I used the quantitative analysis tool R to analyze the complete dataset.

Secondary data analysis, a common method in the academy, highlights data collected by someone else for another primary reason. In regards to this dissertation, the Pew Research Center's report did not highlight the rural population. Evaluating the dataset for its appropriateness is a crucial aspect of secondary data analysis. To analyze the appropriateness of a dataset, researchers should ask such questions as (1) What was the purpose of the initial study, (2) who was responsible for collecting the information and (3) when was the information collected (Johnston, 2017). In the instance of this dissertation, all answers point to the appropriateness of the 2019 Pew Research Center's Local News report for secondary data analysis. First, the Pew Research Center's purpose of its study aligns with the purpose of this dissertation, broadly to explore the local news environment in the U.S. Second, the Pew Research Center is recognized as one of the top research centers in the U.S., and around the world, and its datasets and findings are utilized in research throughout academia and mainstream media. Third, the data was collected in the final months of 2018. There is a three-year gap between the Pew Research Center's collection and the qualitative data collection for this dissertation. However, this is the most recent Local News report from Pew.

Reflexivity

It is important for researchers to think about themselves in relationship with fieldwork (Hand, 2003; Giddens, 1984). They must consider their relation to the space they inhabit. Such reflexivity is useful in research projects, as researchers are transparent about their roles, backgrounds and assumptions (Brennen, 2013).

At the very beginning of this project, during the proposal stage, I assumed that my fieldwork would demonstrate a significant role that the weekly newspaper played in the lives of county residents. The assumption was the result of two parts of my life, academic and professional. My first research project, based off my master's thesis, explored the impact of the closing of a rural, weekly newspaper on former subscribers. It was one of the first qualitative studies inside a news desert (Mathews, 2022). In hindsight, it was naïve to only interview former subscribers. That project's findings, of an overall negative on the former subscribers' sense of community, factored into my initial assumption about this project's potential findings.

I was a former journalist for almost 20 years. I acknowledge I have an empathy for journalism and, more specifically, journalists. Also, I have a minor connection to the *Nelson County Times.* I was the former regional editor-in-chief for Berkshire-Hathaway and oversaw news operations for three daily newspapers (Charlottesville *Daily Progress*, Waynesboro *News Virginian* and Culpeper *Star-Exponent*) and three weekly newspapers (*Greene County Record*, *Madison County Eagle* and *Orange County Review*). My primary focus in my position was as the editor of the *Charlottesville Daily Progress,* where my office was located. Nelson County sits in the *Daily Progress'* circulation area. However, it was a rarity that the *Daily Progress* reporting staff covered anything in Nelson County, an observation noted by interview participants. The Berkshire-Hathaway publications were sold to Lee Enterprises in March 2020. The *Nelson County Times* is a paper within the same company. However, I never had anything more than casual conversations with employees of the news organization and I do not know the current editor, Jeff Faulconer.

As I began fieldwork, I pushed myself not to bring in my own experiences into the findings. Any concerns of my assumption leading the data, however, quickly vanished. Four of my six initial interviews were with people who never subscribed to the weekly newspaper. The other two were with residents who were former subscribers. As noted in the introductory chapter, about halfway through my first interview, I asked the resident why he had never subscribed to the weekly newspaper? "It's not local," he said. I had to ask him what he meant. That thought shattered my assumptions.

Another important aspect of reflexivity is to understand and consider your relationship with participants. I am an outsider to Nelson County, a university researcher and former newspaper editor. Currently, I live in the Charlottesville (Va.) metropolitan area, the same designated area as Nelson County. Some in the county have a resentment toward tourists. "There are two layers of Nelson County," one participant said. There is a layer for the residents, those who live and spend most of their time in Nelson County. "Then, there's the tourist layer." I am part of the tourist layer.

Even before this dissertation fieldwork, I spent much time visiting Nelson County. I have been to Wintergreen Resort a few times. I have been to many of the county's vineyards and breweries. Two of my favorite places in all of Central Virginia are in Nelson County, Blue Mountain Brewery and Afton Mountain Vineyard. Whenever anyone asks me how I relax, I respond, "Grab a drink and stare at mountains."

The story told in the next chapter addresses localness and the significance of "local" to Nelson County residents. There were numerous examples of when I felt like a non-local, an outsider, during fieldwork. For example, during an interview at the county's only Mexican restaurant, the owner sat down at our table because she knew the

participant. There were times when being a non-Nelson County resident was beneficial. For instance, when I frequently asked "why" in relations to a comment about Nelson County or localness, it came across, I hope anyway, as genuine curiosity in wanting to learn more. Of course, there were other times in which I pretended not to know much about what participants were discussing. For example, I knew of the Nelson Knows Facebook group before interviews began and I knew a *lot* about the Facebook group's dynamics within the first week of interviews. But I feigned ignorance — "I've heard a little bit, but why do you say that …" — to encourage further conversation.

For a month, I drove back and forth to Nelson County from my home near Charlottesville, often about an hour-long drive. While driving home one night, I certainly felt like an outsider to Nelson County. Nelson County residents know how to navigate the mountain roads, and they know how to navigate those who do *not* know how to navigate the mountain roads. Like me. It was around 9 p.m. when I left one participant's home in the small town of Schuyler. I drove slowly down a one-lane, windy, dirt mountain road. I relayed this adventure to another participant.

> Me: My geography's terrible. Where's Schuyler from here?
> Nancy (pointing out her living room window): Over the mountain.
> Me: So, I was coming back at night, pitch black. You can't see anything.
> Nancy: That's us.
> Me: And I was like, 'I have no idea where the heck I'm at.' And I came across somebody who was coming up the road. And I was like, 'You're going to have to back up. I have no idea what I'm doing.'
> Nancy: And they did.
> Me: They did.
> Nancy: Most people know that. We know the rule.

If I conducted a survey-based project of Nelson County residents, I would not have gained the depth of knowledge of the county or its residents that I did. I was only in the field for a month. While I got my fill of Mexican food, I never once stayed in Nelson

County overnight. Thus, my research allowed a deeper understanding of the county, but it, in no way, gave me a *complete* understanding.

I do not know how my positionality as an outsider, a university researcher or a former newspaper editor impacted the interviews. But it would be naive to think my background did not have some impact on the conversations. Overall, I found the participants were eager to talk about this dissertation's topics. Of course, the residents reached out to me to participate, and they were given a gift card for their time. However, I have a feeling that the participants rarely talked about many of the subjects of our conversation with others. In fact, I directly asked some participants if they ever talked about contents of the weekly newspaper with their friends, and they responded with some variation of "almost never." So, in some ways, it was like I turned on the faucet, and their thoughts came pouring out.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I sought to detail and defend the methodological decisions aimed at exploring how people in a rural environment obtain news and information that is relevant to them in their everyday lives. As part of the investigation, I wanted to learn how a weekly news organization fits in today's high-choice, 24/7 news ecosystem.

First and foremost, I selected Nelson County as the case study location because it met two benchmarks: (1) It is among the most rural counties in the state of Virginia, (2) it is home to a weekly news organization. Nelson County, however, offered so much more than that. Its demographics, its history and its politics make it an interesting location. In this chapter, I detailed my strategies for participant recruitment, including the prominent

roles of the Nelson Knows Facebook group and snowball sampling in drawing participants. I provided an overview of the participants, as well as offered a table with many participant details (including age range, numbers of years lived in Nelson County, and if they currently or have ever subscribed to the weekly newspaper).

I concluded this chapter with two important sections, one on limitations and another on reflexivity. The primary limitations are the use of in-depth interviews and a case study, neither of which allow generalizability. In the section of reflexivity, I acknowledge two important aspects. First, I acknowledge my pre-project assumptions, based on my previous academic research and my nearly 20-year professional journalism career. Second, I discuss my positionality as an outsider to Nelson County, Virginia.

Overall, this chapter's goal was to set the stage for the next three findings chapters. In the next chapter, specifically, participants describe what "local" means to them.

Chapter 4: Local as a Shared Sense of Ownership

Sarah and her family live on one of the few busy roads in Nelson County. One year, with her husband at work, Sarah put up the exterior Christmas lights. As she neared the top step of the ladder, she slipped and fell, crashing hard to the ground. Three people, who just happened to be passing by, rushed to Sarah's aid. "I didn't know who they were," she said. "But they were super kind." For Sarah, they exemplified the rural Central Virginia county. People are friendly, good-natured and responsive, especially in the moment, like when you fall off a ladder. Sarah, however, did not maintain a connection with the good samaritans. Relationships are difficult to get beyond the moment, to get beyond the surface level, she said. Deep, meaningful personal relationships are hard to develop in Nelson County. Sarah is in her 30's and has lived in Nelson County for almost a decade. She is friendly with other parents whose children go to the same school as her children. She has friends who are colleagues. She has church friends. The relationships remain siloed. "It's hard to get that to translate over into other parts of life," she said. "We've done it, but it's *very* hard. As far as building a community, I feel like there's a very big loss of that in Nelson County."

There are three distinctions that foster Sarah's frustrations. First, there is a geographic separation, with a mountain ridge splitting the county. "What happens over on the other side of the county doesn't compute to what's happening here," Sarah said. Second, there is a wealth gap. Sarah sees it with her job as a youth programmer, in which she often drives children to their homes. There are families "living on food stamps and paycheck to paycheck and in some of the worst housing," she said. And there are others who "can afford things we can never even imagine being able to afford for our kids."

Third, there is a distinction between the newcomers, like Sarah, and the natives. “Unless you have a grandparent that lived here, and you can make that connection with somebody, it’s not the same to them,” Sarah noted.

Sarah’s husband’s business is the family’s primary source of income. For eight months during the pandemic, his business was unable to offer its services. Nelson County clients, though, paid him anyway, for services that could not be rendered. “They would still send money,” Sarah said. “We wanted to turn around and honor that. There were people supporting us through times of hardship. How can we do the same?” Despite living on a tight budget, Sarah and her family continued to go to their favorite restaurant. “We ate out *way* more than we could afford,” Sarah said. “I think at one point we were just taking turns buying food to-go. I was like, ‘There’s no way our restaurant is closing.’”

In this chapter, I explore themes raised in Sarah’s illustrative story. Specifically, this chapter addresses this dissertation’s first research question: *How do rural residents perceive “local?”*

Overview

This chapter argues that the lived experience of “local” is ours, or a “shared sense of ownership.” This is not actual financial ownership, but a sense of shared experience. For example, as noted above in the introduction, a local business is ours, as in “our restaurant.” This chapter’s theoretical contribution, defining local as a shared sense of ownership, focuses on the lived experience of local of those in rural America, builds on research in social identity theory (Kalin, & Sambanis, 2018; Tajfel & Turner, 1979), rural social identity (Munis, 2020; Cramer, 2016) and collective psychological ownership

(Pierce & Jussila, 2010; Verkuyten, Maykel & Borja Martinovic, 2017) and brings it into discussion with local and local media.

Considering local as a shared sense of ownership, meaning a sense of "ours" or collective ownership, this chapter's findings demonstrate that Nelson County's weekly newspaper, the only traditional news organization in the county, is *not* perceived as local. The *Nelson County Times* was founded in 1874, but is now owned by a conglomerate from afar. One participant said of the newspaper, "in terms of this is ours … it doesn't feel that way." This result contrasts research on small, local newspapers that identify a strong connection between local news organizations and their communities (Park, 1922; Lowrey et al., 2008; Mathews, 2020), even generating a sense of "ownership" by local community readers (Bowd, 2003).

This chapter's findings weave a narrative that points to the perception of local as a shared sense of ownership. First, it explores the place itself, Nelson County, and its people. Nelson County is a large, rural space, separated geographically with a mountain ridge running down its spine. Nelson County has just one stoplight and regularly challenges residents, who do not have amenities others take for granted. Participants said they wear the difficulties like a "badge of honor." Nelson County is not for everyone, but it is for them.

This chapter explores three distinctions in Nelson County — the geographic separation, the wealth gap and the difference between natives and newcomers. Of these distinctions, the last, identified as the "come-here's" and "from-here's" by numerous participants, is the most pronounced and most meaningful in this dissertation. The darkest day in Nelson County's history fortified this final divide. Hurricane Camille killed 124

people in Nelson County in 1969. The horror hardened the survivors, pulling them closer and drawing a metaphorical circle around the county. Natives were cautious of newcomers, and participants say that mentality remains more than a half-century after the storm. Participants said despite the distinctions, there is unity in Nelson County. This offers a sense of, no matter if you are a come-here or a from-here, you are here, in Nelson County. Participants expressed pride in Nelson County, especially in supporting locally owned businesses.

Ownership in Context

This section explores two distinct lines of research on ownership: (1) collective psychological ownership, (2) ownership of media organizations.

There is a rich line of research on in-groups, out-groups and the related "us versus them" dynamics, but less is understood about the ramifications of thinking in terms of "ours" and "theirs," or in a sense of collective psychological ownership (Pierce & Jussila, 2010; Gregg, Mahadevan, & Sedikides, 2017). In general, psychological ownership is when a person feels that a thing is "mine" (Shu & Peck, 2011). Legal ownership may accompany psychological ownership, but it is not required (Reb & Connolly, 2007). People can have a sense of ownership toward things material, like products and homes, and immaterial, such as ideas. This emotional attachment demonstrates that the concept of possession plays a prominent role in the owner's identity (Belk, 1988; Gao & Riley, 2010). As Sartre (1969, p. 591) writes: "The totality of my possessions reflects the totality of my being. … I am what I have … what is mine is myself." The word "mine," writes, Rudmin (1993, p. 55), is a "is a small word. It is deceptive, it is power and importance. It controls our behavior, but we rarely notice."

Extending from individual ownership and individual identity to group ownership and group identity incorporates work on social identity theory and rural social identity theory. Social identity theory observes that a person's sense of who they are is based on group membership and that people differentiate between "us" and "them" (Liu, Thomas & Higgs, 2019). Research on collective psychological ownership finds that when people have a sense of "us," they can also have a sense of "ours" (Nijs et al., 2021). This describes a state of mind "in which individuals feel as though the target of ownership … or a piece of it is 'theirs' (i.e., 'It is MINE!')" (Pierce, Kostova & Dirks, 2001, p. 299).

Collective psychological ownership research predominantly has been used in organizational behavior literature. A line of research has found that a sense of ownership is valuable to employees and that team members can perceive their team has ownership of their work, their work space and work outcomes (Avey et al., 2009; Pierce & Jussila, 2010; Van Dyne & Pierce, 2004). Another study found that passive leadership negatively impacted employees' sense of ownership of a family owned business (Bernhard & O'Driscoll, 2011). Research also has argued the targets of collective psychological ownership can include countries (Brylka et al., 2015; Verkuyten & Martinovic, 2017). Such collective psychological ownership rhetoric is frequently used by right-wing populist messages, such as, "This country is OURS!" (Nijs et al., 2021).

The second line of research on ownership in this section explores media ownership. Newspapers were "cash cows" for decades, bringing in double-digit returns for their owners (Soloski, 2019). By the mid-1980s, though, journalism changed (Benson, 2018). Family owned newspapers, with their substantial returns, were bought by larger companies, removing local ownership from communities (Sybert, 2022). The trend

continues today. As of May 2021, half of the daily newspapers in the U.S. are owned by just seven corporations (Future of Media Project 2021), including Gannett, which alone owns 500 daily and weekly publications (Tracy 2019). While a connection to a larger chain can lead to economies of scale, especially for advertising (Jenkins & Nielsen, 2020), it can result in a lack of local flexibility (Ali et al., 2020). One scholar, who studied consolidations in the Czech Republic, even asked, "should we consider local newspaper chains local?" (Císařová, 2017).

Newspapers owners once "were likely to bump into readers at the grocery store or serve alongside them on the boards of local civic organizations" (Madison & DeJarnette, 2017), but now there is no local "face" for these organizations. This is especially noteworthy in rural areas, where journalists and readers alike bemoan the lack of local ownership (Smith, 2019). Outside purchases, especially those from hedge funds, often lead to aggressive cost-cutting and slashing of personnel (Abernathy, 2018). To save money or generate funds, local newspapers sell their long-time buildings for smaller, cheaper locations. Newspaper buildings once were "at the center of town and always the center of its life" (Mair, 2013, p. 21), a reminder of the newspaper's prominence in the community (Wallace, 2005). When a rural weekly newspaper moved its offices out of a community's downtown area to a sister publication's site in an adjacent county, it infuriated residents. As a local resident said, "Don't tell me this is a local paper anymore" (Mathews, 2022, p. 1257).

The next section offers Nelson County participants' perceptions of Nelson County. The participants demonstrate tremendous pride in their county, describing a unique way of life in the rural county, exhibiting characteristics of a rural social identity.

'Beautiful, Rural. Rural … Beautiful'

I asked every interview participant to describe Nelson County. It was a toss-up between which of two words came up first in their answers: Beautiful or rural. "Beautiful, rural," Erin said immediately. "Rural," Fred said, followed second later with "beautiful." When Danielle married, she moved away from her native Nelson County. "I cried all of the time" while away, she said. She and her husband moved back as newlyweds. "It's just wonderful here," Danielle said. When Kim split with her boyfriend, she could have moved back to her hometown area outside of Nelson County. "He wanted to leave Nelson County," Kim said of her ex. "But I just fell in love with it here. Like I love it here. I love, love, *love* Nelson so much." When their children were little, Erin and her husband would "flip a coin" every school morning. The winner got to drive the kids to school. "It was such a beautiful ride," Erin said. James said he has traveled the world. Few places compare to his home. "Nelson County is probably one of the most beautiful places I've ever been," he said. To the Nelson County participants, rural is beautiful.

Nelson County is 470 square miles. With just 14,775 people, it has a population per square mile of 31.9, among the lowest of the 95 Virginia counties. In many places in the county, houses are few and far between. For example, I emailed back and forth with Frankie to set up our interview. She gave me directions to her family home. They started easy enough. "You'll turn off (Route) 29 onto our road," she wrote. "From there, GPS is not very accurate." She gave point-by-point directions, including "look for the arrows for assurance you're going the right away (You are)." She finished with, "our road is dirt and gravel. If we get bad weather that might impede you. I'll let you know." Frankie's directions were perfect. When I made the final turn, I saw her family's home. When I

asked Frankie to describe Nelson County, before I could complete the question, she uttered, "rural." I pushed her further. "What do you mean?" She responded, "this," stretching out her arms. "Lots of space between houses. You're not seeing your neighbors every single day. We're a quarter-mile from a major road, but because we're on a little ridge here, we've got a good amount of space around us." To participants, seclusion is a fundamental feature of rural life in Nelson County.

Living in a less populated, rural area comes at the expense of many of the conveniences and services others take for granted. Garbage service is one example. Few Nelson County residents have garbage service available at their homes. The great majority of residents drive their garbage to a dump, centrally located in the county. It wasn't until he was an adult that Ben learned of the home garbage service many Americans take for granted. "Wait, a company comes to your house to take trash? Really?" he recalled. "But I can just drive 10 minutes down the road once a week and not have to pay anything." It might be a surprise to some, but, in Nelson County, it makes sense. Garbage trucks would struggle to navigate the windy, mountain roads. Driving garbage to the dump likely would be seen as a nuisance to people in metropolitan areas. In Nelson County, it is not an inconvenience, but expressed as just being the way of life.

Participants perceive that Nelson County offers a different way of living from metropolitan areas. Adam, a Nelson County native and property manager, knows this well. There was once a person Adam identified as a "yuppy" from the Washington, D.C. area who wanted to rent a place in Nelson County, "to live that rural thing." Adam had a feeling Nelson County was not a good fit for the metropolitan resident. "When I wrote the lease, I gave him a 30-day out," Adam said. "I said, 'You are the only one who could

break this lease, not me." When asked why he would do such a thing, Adam described Nelson County.

> I said you're going to get bit by ticks. You got mosquitoes. You're going to be harassed by every animal that exists, including the neighbors' dogs. Power's going to go out a little bit more than you prefer. You're going to get snowed in and lose power. You're going to get cold. You're going to get wet. You got to take your trash to the damn dump.

The renter lasted longer than 30 days. "Six months, that's it," Adam said. "Just six months." With this story, Adam mocked the "yuppy" from the metro area who, in Adam's eyes, could not make it longer than a year in rural Nelson County. Such ostracization echoes research on rural social identity that finds rural residents believe they have "fundamentally distinct values and lifestyles, which are misunderstood and disrespected by city folks" (Cramer, 2016, p. 12). Rural social identifiers are proud of their way of life, proud of the toughness it instills.

Nelson County is a one-stoplight community. It was installed in 2006. Participants use the one-stoplight distinction in describing Nelson County. "It's a super, small country town," Nicole said, when asked to describe Nelson County. "I'll say things like, 'We've got one stoplight, and that's it. No Wal-Marts. Just got a Food Lion 20 years ago, and that's it.'" The Food Lion, the county's main grocery store, arrived just before the stoplight, which ushers cars into the grocery store's parking lot. At about the same time, a McDonald's moved in. "When they put the Food Lion in *and* they built the McDonald's, I was like, 'We're getting a Food Lion and a McDonald's? We're worthy of that?'" Carla said. Participants said they are proud of the one-stoplight distinction. "I think people around here wear the fact that it's a one-stoplight town with a badge of honor," Sarah said. Such characteristics in Nelson County emphasize a way of life for the

rural residents, differentiating with the everyday lived experience of those in metropolitan areas.

Rarely did participants disparage their home county, though not every participant profusely identified with Nelson County. Kevin, who first vacationed in Nelson County but has lived in the area full-time for almost 20 years, said he does not identify with the county but with his specific area. When I asked, “When you tell people about Nelson County, how do you describe it?” he responded, “I don’t. I describe Wintergreen.” When I asked Ulysses, who has lived in Nelson County just a couple of years, how he describes Nelson County to friends and family, he said, “Well, we describe Charlottesville. That’s where we spend a lot of our time.” That both Kevin and Ulysses are not Nelson County natives could factor into their lack of identity with Nelson County here.

Participants articulated that Nelson County is not for everyone, like the person Adam called a “yuppy.” The idea that Nelson County is not for everyone, though, heightens the sentiment that is for *them.* The participants demonstrated tremendous pride in their county. Its ruralness is obvious to virtually anyone. Its idiosyncrasies, such as the one stoplight and the dump, are less obvious, but they are the characteristics that foster the love for residents. As Sarah said, those idiosyncrasies are worn like a “badge of honor.” Or, as she said in the introduction, Nelson County residents are “proud of the struggle.” Like other research in rural spaces, participants have not only made peace with where they live but they have reasons for wanting to stay (Wuthnow, 2019). The participants articulate a unique Nelson County lifestyle, one different from those in metropolitan areas. They are proud of their rural way of life, demonstrating telltale characteristics of rural social identity.

The Distinctions of Nelson County

While participants shared a sense of pride in Nelson County, a pride that is part of their rural social identity, they also described distinctions in the county. This list is not exhaustive and does not include such distinctions as race, ethnicity or politics, all of which were discussed by participants but none of which were discussed with discernable significance. Especially regarding race and ethnicity, the topics were addressed only after I specifically asked participants about them, meaning they did not surface organically like the three most prominent distinctions below. The first is the most tangible, the geographic separation. The second is the most emotional, wealth gap. The third is the most significant in telling the story of Nelson County, the difference between the newcomers and natives, the come-here's and the from-here's.

Geographic Separation

There are two main roads through Nelson County. U.S. Route 29 runs northeast to Charlottesville and southwest to Lynchburg. Virginia state route 151 runs parallel to 29 through much of Nelson County. There are just two ways in which the roads connect. At the northern end of the county, state route 6 runs six miles and connects the main roads. At the southern end, state route 56 runs 10 miles and connects them. Helen has lived on both sides of the county during her 20 years in the area. "There's a mountain chain that runs right down the middle," she said. "When we lived over there, we didn't know anybody over here. And, it's funny, now that I live over here, I so infrequently go over there." Said Xavier: "Someone once told me, 'My people over here, they don't give a fuck about what's going on over there.' And we both agreed, nor should they." I said,

"But they're six miles apart." He responded, "Might as well be 600." The geographic separation in the county can isolate residents to their specific area of the county.

If you think of Nelson County in two halves, separated by the mountain ridge, each half has its own amenities, such as restaurants (though few), gas stations and community centers. There are few things that bring all residents together. One thing is the dump. Participants said there are no major annual county-wide events that draw people together from both sides. They said people come together around their children, at Nelson County High School athletic events, for instance. But those events' attendees are limited, mostly, to parents of students and athletes. They are not for the *whole* county.

In short, participants perceive that each half of Nelson County has its own individual community. Research has found that a key aspect of a sense of community is that people believe they have shared similar experiences (Stewart & Townley, 2020; McMillan, 2011; McMillan & Chavis, 1986). With the geographic separation, which prevents people from experiencing the other half of the county, participants believe that Nelson County lacks an overall sense of community.

Wealth Gap

On a perfect sunny, winter morning, I stood in the enormous, pristine and picturesque living room of a multi-million dollar house. The house sits near the top of Wintergreen mountain resort. My host that day was Kevin, who above noted that he identified with Wintergreen and not Nelson County. Kevin, who has an advanced college degree and a household income of $150,000-plus, described the day as ideal for skiing. He skied earlier that morning, returning from the slopes in the hour before I drove up the windy, mountain road to his house. As we stood together in front of the floor-to-ceiling

windows, which presented views of the mountain range and ski slopes, our conversation offered important insights into the rural Virginia county.

> Kevin: Here at Wintergreen, the sunrises 330 days a year are spectacular. It actually comes in from below the horizon because we're up above it. So it's actually a down slope to where the sun comes up.
> Me: Where does it come up?
> Kevin: It varies. We're looking Southeast. So it's basically right there (pointing).
> Me: Oh, man. So I see why you grab your iPad and come up here and sit every morning.
> Kevin: Well, I mean, yeah. I sit right there (pointing to his couch).
> Me: So, from your door, to being on the slopes … door-to-door … how long does it take?
> Kevin: Longer than it should. … I think, if need be, we can be on the slopes in 15 minutes (walking).

I sat in another house in Nelson County that *comfortably* would have fit in the multi-million dollar house's living room. The small house was modest, but by no means represents the poor end of Nelson County's wealth gap. For that, I turn back to Sarah, who has seen the poorest of Nelson County in her job.

> We are working with kids who literally come (to the program) because they need a free meal at night, because they don't know that they're going to have a meal at night otherwise. I mean, the kids that we drive home sometimes live in places that technically should be condemned, but Nelson doesn't condemn them because they know they don't have other housing options for a family. There's a huge housing shortage in Nelson. But then, on the other side of that, you go two seconds down the road and there's a piece of property being sold for half-million dollars. It's like 60 acres and nothing, just 60 acres. I don't know how people live in a county where they can't afford to build a life for themselves.

Sociologists worry about when wealth inequality is divided by geography, as in the example of Wintergreen and Nelson County. Such situations are identified as income segregation, for example (Reardon & Bischoff, 2011). Researchers have found that the income of a person's neighbors indirectly impacts a person's own social, economic or physical outcomes (Sampson et al., 2008). This suggests that in an area like Wintergreen,

the wealthy households are advantaged not only by their own income but by the income of their neighbors.

Participants offered numerous examples of poverty in Nelson County. While volunteering at a food bank, Maria saw a man sleeping in his vehicle. "He was an itinerant carpenter and had all his crap in his car and was sleeping in his car," Maria said. "That stuck in my head. He was a working guy. He was working hard." Ian said he knows of members of his church "without even indoor plumbing." Another participant, James, said "my neighbor doesn't have running water still, right now." In January 2021, Central Virginia was blasted by a winter storm that knocked out power for many residents. I lost power for five days, for instance. "There are definitely still places in Nelson that when we were without power, those places didn't care," Sarah said. "They don't have power or they don't have running water."

Adam, a Nelson County native with a household income of $150,000-plus, explained the wealth gap in an emotional way. "The person who lives on the other side of Nelson County versus the person who lives on the top of Wintergreen have nothing in common other than the fact they both breathe air — and live in the same county," he said. In a part of the county already isolated, at the top of a mountain, the residents are even *further* isolated by financial means. There is a perception from those who live, as Isabelle described it, "down in the hollers," that the county's wealthy do not understand what it is like for the *real* rural residents of the county. "People in Wintergreen, they think they live a rural lifestyle," Adam said. "That's a fucking lie. Dude, 'Fuck yourself.'" The animosity toward the rich could not be more clear.

The participant comments in this section offer another example of the lack of sense of community of Nelson County as a whole. Previous research on sense of community argues that when community members have a sense of community they perceive a shared sense of personal relatedness (Hill, 1996). Because of the income segregation — from the top of the mountain to "down in the hollers" (Reardon & Bischoff, 2011) — the personal relatedness, between the wealthy and others in the county, is challenging. The income inequality in Nelson County is not unique to Nelson County. A Pew Research Center study found that the wealth gap between the upper-income and lower- and middle-income families has increased since 2000 (Horowitz, Igielnik & Kochhar, 2020). From 2001-2016, upper-income families were the only income tier to build on their wealth, adding 33% at the median, while the middle-income families lost 20% and lower-income families lost 45% of their wealth.

'The Come-here's and the From-here's'

In the overnight hours of Aug. 19-20, 1969, Hurricane Camille changed Nelson County forever. Twenty-five inches of rain crushed the county, killing 124 people. "We preface everything with before Camille and after Camille," said Marci, a Nelson County native in her 60's. "I believe that the county found out how resilient we were, during the hurricane and after the hurricane." By comparison, Marci's family was relatively unscathed through the storm. In the morning after, she went with her father to aid neighbors. "We could not drive anywhere," she said. "There was absolute chaos." Fifty-plus years later, Marci still was on the verge of tears recounting the devastation. "I knew a lot of people who passed away in Hurricane Camille," she said. "I will always keep their memories alive." The storm brought people together. "We grew closer and we found

ourselves in this tight-knit Appalachian community," Adam said. "Out of that came such a unity in Nelson." Researchers have shown similar responses of resiliency and togetherness following disastrous events as residents galvanize to rebuild their communities (Schumann et al., 2020; Carroll et al., 2005).

Hurricane Camille also introduced the third and final difference in Nelson County. While the natives drew closer, the storm drew in new residents. The hurricane damage dramatically lowered land values in the county. "What ended up happening was all these folks from New York and Pennsylvania were moving to Nelson County," Adam said. "It's got the aesthetic, the beauty, the land's cheap. Before you know it, you have this very ethnically and culturally diverse area." Put a bit more colorfully, as Nelson County native Brian described it, there was an "influx of hippies, lots of hippies." Or, as Sarah, a county newcomer, said, "there is a very eclectic group of people here. There's a nudist farm right over there." Marci, who saw the impact of the hurricane with her own eyes as a child, has witnessed the change in the county.

> Sometimes, I feel like we were overrun with people moving here. There were a lot of people coming in that nobody had ever heard of before. This is a rural county. There are a lot of people here that just don't want to deal with outsiders at all. And we had outsiders coming in by the droves.

In this instance, the "outsiders" were the non-Nelson County natives, who brought in their own culture and own expectations of what they were used to from their area of origin. This can create a "culture clash," making it difficult to develop a unified sense of community (Sherman, 2018; Price & Clay, 1980).

Many of the natives in Nelson County have a long, *long* history in the county, a fact well understood by all participants. Henry, who is Black and a Nelson County native, is doing genealogy research on his family. "I'm figuring out what plantations that my

actual slave ancestors worked on," he said. "The history is deep here." Carson moved to Nelson County almost 30 years ago. He recognizes the history of the Nelson County natives.

> Carson: There's a very clear distinction here between the come-here's and the from-here's.
> Me: Which are you?
> Carson: I'm a come-here. The from-here's are ninth generation Nelson County folk. One neighbor is ninth generation. Her grandkids are 11th generation Nelson. If you look at the last names in the graveyards, they're going back to the 18th century.

A person who moves to Nelson County will never be a native of Nelson County. But Carson's comment demonstrates that even 50 years after Hurricane Camille there remains a strong differentiation between the natives and newcomers, and that differentiation is recognized today.

The newcomers, the come-here's, described the challenges of first moving to the county. "The native people of Nelson County are a *very* tight-knit group," said Ian, who is in his 50's and has lived in the county for 20 years. "They're very hard to get into that group. Very hard to get to know them." Said Xavier, who is in his 60's and lived in the county for almost 20 years, "Slow to warm. I wouldn't call it suspicious, but I might call it more cautious." These comments are noteworthy, illustrating strong memories for Ian and Xavier, who first both moved into the county nearly two decades ago. Fred, who also has lived in Nelson County for almost 20 years, is a pastor, with many parishioners who are natives.

> Nelson is a tight-knit community. When you move in, you're still viewed as not one of us. And it takes a while. It took me a while before I was to become the actual pastor of the church, instead of just a preacher on Sunday. And I have sat with people as their loved ones were dying. Once they realized, 'OK, this is not a stepping stone. He's going to be here for a while,' then it changed.

That description comes from a person who has spiritual and personal relationships with people. It is even more difficult for a regular citizen to feel accepted. And even *more* difficult for a newcomer to gain a position of prominence in the community. “The thing that makes it hardest for me to live in Nelson County, it is still stuck in the past of a good old boys county,” said Olivia, who moved to Nelson County 15 years ago. Those in elected positions, she said, have been in office “for a long time, and it’s hard for new people to take over until that person decides, ‘I’m done.’” Said Isabelle, a Nelson County native, “there’s a good old boy network here.” A critical element to a person having a sense of community is feeling that they can have influence in the community (Evans, 2007). For respondents, like Olivia and Isabelle, both females but one a newcomer and one a native, that is missing in Nelson County.

In sum, there are three main differentiations in Nelson County. These differentiations contribute to the difficulty in generating a sense of community for the county as a whole, but it also shapes their understanding of local. The geographic separation prevents residents in one half of the county from enjoying similar experiences as those on the other side of the county. A wealth gap creates challenges for residents to share a sense of personal relatedness, especially when the income inequality is segregated by geography, like in Nelson County. The difference between the native Nelson County residents and the Nelson County newcomers makes it challenging for newcomers to feel accepted and even more challenging for them to feel a sense of influence in shaping the community’s life and politics, another important element in feeling a sense of community. Despite these distinctions, participants also portrayed a united pride in the county, a pride that shines through especially in discussion of local.

Local in Nelson County

While the above section explored the way people made differentiations in Nelson County, this section investigates what unifies Nelson County. No matter if a resident is a come-here or a from-here, they are here, in Nelson County. This section illustrates how Nelson County participants express pride in Nelson County, especially toward businesses that they perceive to be "local." For the Nelson County participants, a "local" business means "our" business. In this vein, a business might not be "local," even if it is based in Nelson County.

I had lunch with Fred at a Nelson County restaurant. Before we sat at our table, Fred had a friendly conversation with the restaurant owner. Shortly after we sat down, our conversation focused on supporting Nelson County businesses. "I'll shop locally, at almost all costs," Fred said. "I come here all of the time. I know (the owner). I mean, he is there sponsoring youth basketball leagues. Any time you can help who you know, you do."

Participants discussed sacrifices, big and small, in order to support local. Dorothy, for instance, dislikes Mexican food. "Anything spicy I don't like," she said. "But while the pandemic was going on, the restaurants were tanking and I didn't want to see them tank." She said she had more Mexican food during the pandemic than the rest of her life combined. Xavier said he and his wife do not go out to eat very often, but, when they do, they stick to Nelson County restaurants. "And we tip outrageously," he said, "because we know who these people are." Dorothy said she'll even pay outrageous prices for local products. "I was paying $9.50 for a gallon of milk, so that I could support a local dairy. We're all each other's neighbors." Vanessa discussed choosing a locally owned

convenience store, instead of national franchise Dollar General. “I don’t want them to go out of business,” she said of the locally owned store. I asked why. “Because,” she said, pausing, as if the answer should be obvious, “it’s local.” Noteworthy, these three participants — Dorothy, Xavier and Vanessa — all have household incomes of about $100,000.

The support-local sentiment was not universal across the participants. For instance, Jack, who has lived in Nelson County less than five years and has a household income of about $30,000, said, “let’s face it: If I’m in Charlottesville, I’m shopping at Walmart or at Costco. I mean, price matters.” Ian, who is not a Nelson County native but has lived in the county for more than 20 years said that people like to *say* they support local. “They’re not always buying local, even if they say, ‘I want to try and support the local folk,’” said Ian, whose household income is around $50,000. He said that he does not go out of his way to support local. “Only if it’s good and relevant to me,” he said. One consideration of participants’ willingness to support local could be their financial ability to support local, or their ability and willingness to spend more for local products and services compared to cheaper alternatives.

Other participants described making decisions that were not in their best interest, either because of personal tastes or finances, but instead were in the best interest of a Nelson County business. Such comments demonstrate that participants’ perceive that a local business’ success is *our* success. When asked why they make sacrifices for a Nelson County business, participants simply responded because “it’s local,” linking “local” to a collective psychological ownership (Pierce & Jussila, 2010).

In 2008, Nelson County native Steve Crandall, who died in 2021, and his family founded Devils Backbone Brewing Company in Nelson County. It is stationed near the base of Wintergreen mountain. It is popular for visitors to Wintergreen resort. In 2016, Crandall sold the Nelson County brewery to global beer company Anheuser-Busch (Schkloven, 2016). "We're still the same people we've always been," Crandall said during the announcement. The transaction changed participants' perceptions of the brewery. "You felt going there, that you were having a great time and were empowering local people to do well with local business," said Gina, who is in her 70's and has lived in Nelson County for almost 20 years, "but, now, it's Anheuser-Busch, right?" Said Sarah: "To me, that's not a local business. (Crandall) was a great guy. He did amazing things for Nelson. But once it was sold to whatever, Anheuser-Busch, I'm like, 'Not a local business. Why am I going to concern myself?'" Devils Backbone's signature beer is Vienna Lager. Sarah's husband tolerated it. "It was not his favorite," she said. "But he would always buy a Vienna Lager. Just to support. As soon as it was sold, 'Well if it doesn't matter I'm going back to buying Yuengling,' which is his favorite." Danielle said when the Crandalls owned the brewery, "we did frequent there more, but I haven't been there in years."

Not all participants condemned the Nelson County native's decision to sell the brewery. Ulysses, who has lived in the county less than two years, said that Nelson County residents should be "be rejoicing" for the success of a fellow resident. "I don't know the person, but he was actually a local, right? A person that grew up here? That's great," Ulysses said. He challenged people to think about it more deeply. "If it happened to you, you wouldn't be mad," he said. "You would've sold it, too." Because the business

was no longer owned by a person who lives in Nelson County, participants perceived that the business was no longer "local," even though it was still based in Nelson County.

This builds on research on collective psychological ownership, defined as a group-level sense that an entity is collectively "ours." Collective psychological ownership can lead to a sense of ownership for a variety of things, including restaurants, businesses or even countries (Gray, Knight & Baer, 2020). A sense of collective psychological ownership intensifies an in-group bond of those who share the sense of ownership (Verkuyten, Maykel & Borja Martinovic, 2017), in this case the Nelson County participants.

Local Newspaper is Not 'Local'

When the keys to Devils Backbone were no longer in the hands of a local person, it was no longer perceived as a local business. Participants felt the same about the *Nelson County Times.* The weekly newspaper, a local mainstay since 1874, is not local, in their eyes. "That's not our paper," Xavier said simply. Currently, Lee Enterprises, a national media company, owns the *Nelson County Times.* From 1969 until 2018, the *Nelson County Times* staff was stationed in nearby Amherst County. The *Nelson County Times* shared a building with sister paper *New Era-Progress.* In 2018, operations for both publications were moved to *The News & Advance* office in Lynchburg. The *News & Advance* is another Lee Enterprises newspaper (Faulconer, 2022).

Brian, a Nelson County native and former subscriber, did not know who owned the paper.

> Brian: I know it's not local. It's not locals who run and manage it. I know it's some guy who owns another company that owns a company that owns the company that owns this company. But don't know who.

> Me: You said you know it's not local.
> Brian: Yes.
> Me: So what does that mean to you?
> Brian: They're not going to be invested. The guys at the top, just want circulation, this, that, and the other, and done. They're not invested in Nelson County.

Paula agreed with the concern, even though she is a current subscriber. "If you have a big corporation, why would they want to serve Nelson County? What's in it for them other than they get some revenue?" she asked. Said Quincy, who has never subscribed: "There's this fantasy image of local news in our heads, the honest paper run by young upstarts. And then there's the reality that it's so corporate now." Yasir, a 40-year subscriber, countered, "it provides coverage of local events, but I don't believe there is any kind of commitment to Nelson County." Said Carson, a current subscriber: "I don't think anybody around here looks at that as local, a local organization." The lack of local ownership connects directly to a lack of ownership for those in Nelson County, too. "There's no ownership of it here," Carson said of residents. "I mean, in terms of this is ours. It doesn't feel that way." Noteworthy, these comments predominantly come from participants familiar with the newspaper, either current or former subscribers. Though, these participants offer a mix of time lived in the county and a mix of county natives and newcomers.

The *Nelson County Times* is not helping its cause in at least *appearing* local, participants said. On its Facebook page, the *Nelson County Times* gives its address as Amherst, Va., its previous location in the adjacent county. Frankie scrolled the newspaper's Facebook account during our conversation. "They advertise it on here that they're in Amherst. I don't know that I would do that. Just leave that line out." On the opinion page, the newspaper instructs those interested to send letters to the editor to

Lynchburg, Va., at its sister newspaper. “Certainly, they could manage the optics better of where you send the letters to the editor,” Kevin said. In this sense, the participants suggest that the *Nelson County Times* should bury the fact that the news organization is not based in Nelson County.

Participants discussed that the *Nelson County Times* needs a “presence” in the county. “Let’s have an office here,” Carla said. “There’s plenty of little office spaces in Nelson where they could be running their business,” Frankie said. Said Henry: “It would be better if it was housed in the county because that just makes it more authentic.” In our interview, Paula talked about supporting other Nelson County businesses and restaurants. I paused the conversation and challenged her. “What’s interesting to me about that, is that you do not see the local news organization on the same line (as a local business),” I said. She responded, “Because they’re not local. They’re not one of us.”

In sum, participants perceive a business to be local if it is owned and operated by a local person, a Nelson County resident who is locally present and contributing to the community. Then, that business is *our* business, demonstrating a sense of collective psychological ownership. When a native Nelson County entrepreneur sold a brewery to a global beer powerhouse, his brewery was no longer perceived as local, even though it remains in Nelson County. It is the same for the *Nelson County Times.* The nearly 150-year-old weekly newspaper is owned by a national media conglomerate, someone outside of Nelson County, leading participants to perceive “that is not our paper.”

Conclusion

This dissertation’s first research question asks, “How do rural residents perceive ‘local?’” I argue that the lived experience of local is one of shared sense of ownership, a

sense of "ours." This chapter's findings demonstrate that participants perceive a local business is *our* business, for instance. Nelson County participants, in particular those of financial means, described making personal sacrifices to support local businesses. A participant said during the pandemic her family visited a local restaurant "way more than we could afford." Why? "There's no way *our* restaurant is closing" (emphasis added). The local newspaper, the *Nelson County Times,* however, is not owned by a Nelson County resident. The nearly 150-year-old mainstay is a product of the media consolidation trend, now owned by a national corporation. "That's not our paper," one current subscriber said simply, with another current subscriber adding, "they're not local. They're not one of us."

This theoretical contribution of local as a shared sense of ownership brings research on collective psychological ownership into the conversation of local and local media. A shared sense of ownership can intensify the bond between group members. This is noteworthy in Nelson County, where participants perceive distinctions in the county that for them make it difficult to create a county-wide sense of community. A group's identity is never secure, but it strengthens and proves more salient than intergroup differentiations when there is a presence of a threat or sense of loss (Wohl, Branscombe & Reysen, 2010; Grant & Brown, 1995). In Nelson County, they have suffered losses in the case of an historic hurricane, most seriously, and of prominent businesses being sold to outside conglomerates. To the Nelson County participants, what is truly local, or "ours," matters more because they are acutely sensitive to what they have lost and, perhaps, fear about what they may continue to lose.

In the next chapter, I explore how participants in Nelson County obtain news and information that is salient in their everyday lives. There are two primary sources, the weekly *Nelson County Times* and Nelson Knows, a county-specific Facebook group.

Chapter 5: Social Identity Theory and the Local-ness of News

Marci lived through Nelson County's darkest day. In the morning after Hurricane Camille killed 124 county residents in August of 1969, Marci walked around with her father, assisting neighbors who fared much worse than her family. In her 60's now, Marci vividly remembers the scene. "Homes destroyed, cars in trees," she said, holding back tears. As a child, Marci wrote about her experiences. She submitted a story to the weekly *Nelson County Times*. The newspaper printed her story, along with other stories from county residents, in its next edition. Marci still owns a copy of that edition more than 50 years later. Marci said it is one of her "many fond memories" of the *Nelson County Times.*

Marci is a former subscriber of the *Nelson County Times.* "I had the subscription for maybe 25 years," she said. "It's been a while … a long, long, long time ago." She said canceling was a cost-cutting decision. Instead of a weekly delivery to her house, Marci has since made weekly decisions about purchasing the newspaper at a convenience store. At the time of our interview in February 2022, she said she last bought a copy the prior August, when the newspaper honored the anniversary of Hurricane Camille. Marci turns to other options for news and information about Nelson County. She occasionally will watch local television news based out of Lynchburg, which is about 35 miles from her home. She said the news organization does a "middling" job of covering Nelson County. I asked her if there were any other avenues to obtain news and information about Nelson County. "There is a website," she said. "Very popular, called Nelson Knows."

Nelson Knows is a Facebook group, dedicated to Nelson County, a county of just 15,000 people. As of April 2022, Nelson Knows had more than 9,000 followers. Marci

said it is a platform where residents share news and information about what is happening in the county. “Don’t go up to Wintergreen. You’re going to get stuck behind the tractor-trailer that is stuck in the road,” she gave as an example. The in-the-moment content is important to Marci. “The immediacy is the real draw,” she said. The newspaper is not perceived as a source for such up-to-the-minute news and information. “By the time that the *Nelson County Times* is published, it’s just a moot point,” she said. “The tractor-trailer has been removed.”

Marci said she enjoys Nelson Knows because it highlights the best of Nelson County. When I asked what her favorite content on the Facebook group is, she responded “pretty pictures of Nelson” and “cute pictures of the kids.” I asked her if she sees that content in the weekly newspaper, on the rare instances she buys a single copy. “Not as much anymore,” she said. “It goes on Facebook now. Instead of in the paper, it goes on Nelson Knows.” The *Nelson County Times* provides content Marci does *not* want, as well. As part of the Lee Enterprises newspaper chain, the *Nelson County Times* reprints stories from other company publications, including from a weekly newspaper in neighboring Amherst County. “They do a lot of Amherst County stuff,” Marci said. “I’m not real happy with that. This is where I live. I want it to be Nelson County. Nelson Knows is only about Nelson County.” Thus, she said Nelson Knows is her primary source for news and information about the county. “There’s more news that affects people’s lives on Nelson Knows than in the *Nelson County Times,*” she said. “Plus, it’s a lot easier to get, and it’s free.”

In this chapter, I explore how Marci’s perceptions illustrate larger themes at hand, namely the local-ness of the *Nelson County Times* and Nelson Knows. This chapter

addresses this dissertation's second research question: *How do rural residents express obtaining news and information that is salient in their everyday lives — and why?*

Overview

In Chapter 4, I argued participants in Nelson County exhibit characteristics of a rural social identity and perceive of local as a "shared sense of ownership," or a sense of "ours." This chapter argues that participants seek to obtain news and information that strengthens their rural social identity.

Theoretically, the main contribution of this chapter is the application of social identity theory in relation to news consumption choices in the local news and rural news spaces. Previously, such discussions in the academy have been limited to audience studies of marginalized groups, such as ethnic communities (Saleem et al., 2019; Davis & Gandy Jr., 1999), gay communities (Morton & Duck, 2000) or rural audiences at a national scale (Peck, 2019). This chapter argues that rural residents seek to reinforce their social identity through news and information choices, similarly to marginalized groups.

Empirically, this chapter finds that participants turn to a location-based Facebook group over the county's nearly 150-year-old weekly newspaper and the reasons they suggest for doing so involve attributes that reinforce their rural social identity. Such content includes beautiful pictures of the county, good news about county residents and ways in which residents can assist other county residents. Previous research has found this type of content is a strength of weekly and community newspapers (Garfrerick, 2010). This current study, however, offers a contrast. Participants perceive the newspaper has abandoned its duty of sharing Nelson County news and information and, instead, force feeds county residents content that is not about the county. Participants say they

have canceled or have considered canceling their newspaper subscriptions because of the local newspaper's non-local content choices. Meanwhile, the location-based Facebook group exclusively hosts Nelson County news and information.

Overall, the perceived local-ness of content is the most prominent of three separate yet interwoven themes that emerged from interviews as factors in how participants obtain news and information that is salient in their everyday lives. First, the source of the content should produce local content, meaning Nelson County related content. Second, content that is salient in their everyday lives should be timely and serve as tools for daily living (Berelson, 1949). Third, the content that is salient in their everyday lives should be easily accessible.

Participants perceive timely, everyday useful news and information as a strength of the location-based Facebook group and a weakness of the weekly newspaper. For example, news and information about county-specific weather or traffic or even posts about cows loose in the county is viewed as valuable on the Facebook group. Participants perceive the weekly newspaper does not have the resources or desire to chronicle such news and events that are salient in their everyday lives. Also, participants lament the lack of immediacy from the weekly newspaper. Research has found that weekly newspaper journalists perceive that rural audience members want immediate news and information updates in digital spaces and that weekly journalists have struggled to break their historic work routines (Finneman & Thomas, 2021). This research confirms the rural journalists perceptions' of the demand for immediacy and details from the audience perspective the ramifications of the journalists' struggles.

Finally, the ease of access to the content plays a factor in how participants obtain news and information. Participants perceive that the location-based Facebook group fits seamlessly into their current use of the social media platform. Conversely, participants articulate a laundry list of obstacles to accessing the newspaper. This chapter reaffirms research on the significant role that habits play in news consumption (Westlund & Weibull, 2013, Graybiel & Smith, 2014), but also finds that audience perceptions of their news environments can be based on previous habits, even though the news environment and news habits have changed.

Social Identity Theory and News Consumption in Context

This section discusses two lines of research explored in this chapter: (1) the application of social identity theory to news and information consumption, and (2) non-local news and information in local publications.

As explored in greater detail in Chapter 2 and Chapter 4, social identity theory states that individuals structure their social worlds into groups — such as race, gender or political party — and that individuals define themselves psychologically through the social groups in which they belong (Kalin & Sambanis, 2018; Huddy, 2003). The theory argues that individuals seek to maintain a positive self-esteem, which motivates them to evaluate their own in-group more positively than the out-group. This in-group favoritism can impact media preferences.

In regards to media preferences, social identity theory argues that people prefer content that paints their group in a positive light versus content that might be disparaging of their group. This bolsters their group and individual self-esteem (Abrams & Giles, 2007; Harwood, 1997, 1999; Joyce & Harwood, 2020). For example, early work found

participants who were given fake television show descriptions were more likely to select programs that heavily featured their own age group (Harwood, 1997). One study found that Black news users spent more time with news that presented Black people positively (Appiah, Knobloch-Westerwick & Alter, 2013), and another study found that Black television viewers were motivated to avoid programming that presented Black people in a negative light, such as through stereotyping or overrepresentation as criminals (Abrams & Giles, 2007). In the political context, especially, similar findings have sparked concerns about selective exposure (Stroud, 2011; Knobloch-Westerwick & Hostel, 2010; Wojcieszak & Garrett, 2018), with, for instance, liberals tending to watch programming on CNN and MSNBC and conservatives watching Fox News (Peck, 2019).

While there is ample research applying social identity theory to news consumption choices of marginalized groups, less is understood about social identity theory's application to audiences of local and rural news. In her work in rural Wisconsin, Cramer (2016) found a lack of coverage of rural issues in her examination of the *Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel.* She concluded that the lack of coverage "reinforces what many people in rural areas told me: that their communities are overlooked, ignored and misunderstood by urbanites" (p. 109). Cramer's content analysis was conducted on a metropolitan newspaper, and her interviews with rural residents discussed media at large and not specific media preferences. Her participants identified the "news media" as just another institution that is "out of touch with ordinary rural Wisconsinites" (p. 109).

Research has found that rural residents appreciate the efforts of local publications in shining a positive light on the communities (Mathews, 2022). Participants in one study said their county was only positioned negatively by larger regional publications but it was

different with the county weekly newspaper. “A lot of times all we hear … is the bad stuff,” one resident said. But the weekly newspaper “was there to promote the good stuff” (p. 1259). Another resident said the weekly newspaper “makes us feel special. … (The paper) galvanized everyone’s mind, ‘Hey, this is Mayberry. My God. This is great’” (p. 1259). This aligns with a line of research on community news, which scholars likened to “cheerleading” (McCombs, 1997). Partially because of such journalistic decisions, community newspapers, including weekly newspapers, have been found to have an “extraordinary hold” on their readers (Schramm & Ludwig, 1951, p. 301). This research on community, weekly and rural news suggests, as per social identity theory, that audience members would be inclined to consume content that places their group, and their community, in a positive light.

The second line of research explored in this section relates to this chapter’s finding that non-local content in a local publication upsets audience members. This empirical contribution in the local and rural news space appears unique in the academy, but there is some research tangentially related on willingness to pay for content and on reasons for canceling subscriptions. One study found that people are more likely to pay for specialized local content rather than general national and international news (Goyanes, 2015). Another study found that consumers’ support of local news was determined more by community-oriented factors, including sense of belonging, than actual editorial content (Park, Fisher & Lee, 2021). In a 2021 Nieman Lab research project, they obtained 500 responses when they asked for reasons why people canceled news subscriptions. At 31% of respondents, money was the No. 1 reason. Non-local content was not one of the top reasons for cancellations, but it was mentioned in

responses, such as "the paper has become thinner. Too thin. Too many AP stories, too few local stories" and "very little local news content." Overall, motivations to cancel news subscriptions is an underrated area of journalism studies.

The 2019 Pew Research Center's Local News Report found that 47% of overall respondents report that local news media mostly covers another area. With this survey question, my secondary analysis found a wide gap between urban (34.8%) and rural (56.9%) residents who report that local news media mostly covers another area. In other words, only 43% of rural respondents reported that local news media mostly covered their local area. This echoes previous research, which argues that rural counties are provided "only sporadic coverage" by nearby metropolitan news organizations (Abernathy, 2018, p. 16). Previous research also has found that news organizations have increasingly turned to non-local, duplicative stories from parent companies and wire services (Lewis, Williams & Franklin, 2008) to publish a higher volume of content under their masthead with lower costs (Johnston & Forde, 2011). Specific to news organization Facebook posts, research has found that news organizations owned by corporations are more likely to post duplicative, repurposed content and national, hard news stories over unique local content (Toff & Mathews, 2021).

The Local-ness of Content Source

Three themes emerged from interviews as factors in how participants obtain news and information that is salient in their everyday lives — the local-ness of the content source, the usefulness of the content and the accessibility of the content. The two most prominent sources of news and information mentioned by participants were the weekly newspaper, the *Nelson County Times,* and a location-based Facebook group, Nelson

Knows. Participants expressed frustration with the *Nelson County Times* for giving them content that is not about Nelson County. Meanwhile, Nelson Knows' perceived strength is that it is about Nelson County, and *only* Nelson County.

Before diving further into the *Nelson County Times* and Nelson Knows, there were other sources of news and information discussed by participants. For instance, regional daily newspapers, such as The Charlottesville *Daily Progress* and Lynchburg *News & Advance,* and regional television stations, based in Lynchburg, Roanoke and Charlottesville, were discussed. The *Daily Progress* and *News & Advance* are sister papers of the *Nelson County Times,* all owned by Lee Enterprises. Greg said he reads the Lynchburg newspaper regularly online. He said, "it's not about Nelson County really, but it's somewhat regional information that I wouldn't get on national news." As for the television stations, participants perceive they only cover major or controversial news in Nelson County. For example, the local television news station based out of Lynchburg does a "middling" job of covering Nelson County, Marci said. "It has to be major for them to come here, dramatic." Marci added, "we're not as important as Lynchburg." Marci's comment aligns with two distinct lines of research. First, rural counties are provided "only sporadic coverage" by metropolitan news organizations (Abernathy, 2018, p. 16). Second, the feeling of "we're not as important" as a metropolitan city suggests a sense of resentment toward bigger cities, a telltale characteristic of rural social identity, as explored in previous chapters.

Participants did not mention other sources of news and information sometimes found elsewhere. For instance, they did not mention radio organizations, non-profit news organizations, nor websites or blogs from local residents. Just 7.8% of respondents in the

2019 Pew Research Center's Local News Report said they prefer getting news and information via radio, so the dearth of such talking points in the study is unsurprising. Additionally, participants did not directly discuss incidental exposure to news and information (Tewksbury, Weaver, & Maddex, 2001). I did not probe specifically for any of these specific sources of news and information, as the *Nelson County Times* and Nelson Knows were overwhelming the primary options in the county.

Research has found interpersonal communications, such as "friends (and) the grapevine)" (McCollough, Crowell, and Napoli, 2017, p. 111), remain prominent sources of news and information (Örnebring & Hellekant Rowe, 2022; Duffy & Ling, 2020). That was true in Nelson County as well, in particular for long-time residents. Nancy, a Nelson County native who is in her 70s, is not a subscriber to the newspaper, nor active on social media. She said she gets "the news that matters to me" during happenstance meetings at places like the grocery store. "The Food Line is for me," she said of her source of news and information. "You go there on a Sunday or a Saturday and spend half of your time talking with neighbors." I asked Elton, a longtime resident, where he would turn to for news regarding the county board of supervisors. "I go straight to the supervisors," he said. I responded, "just physically call them? Because you know them?" He said, "Yep. And I have, too. I have no problem straight up asking them whatever I want to ask." While word of mouth and regional news organizations, including both print and television, were discussed by participants, they primarily identified two sources to obtain news and information about Nelson County, the *Nelson County Times* and Nelson Knows.

The 2019 Pew Research Center's Local News Report offers a sense of scale to the two major sources of news and information explored in this chapter. More U.S. adults obtain news and information often or sometimes from a local online forum, such as Nelson Knows (37.6%), than from a community or specialized newspaper, like a weekly newspaper (32.8%). Only about 5% more respondents (42.9%) get news often or sometimes from a daily newspaper than an online forum. Location-based online forums, such as Nelson Knows, thus, play a prominent role in the news and information ecosystems.

Nelson County Times

The *Nelson County Times* is a part of the Lee Enterprises media company. The *New Era-Progress,* in neighboring Amherst County, and the *News & Advance,* in nearby Lynchburg, are two sister Lee Enterprises publications. Participants said content from those newspapers often is republished in the *Nelson County Times.* Additionally, corporate structure caused participant confusion with the newspaper website. For instance, if you type www.nelsoncountytimes.com in a search browser, it redirects to this address: https://newsadvance.com/community/nelson_county_times/. Erin, a former subscriber in her 60's, said she stopped reading *Nelson County Times* content online because "it's really challenging to even go to the website, because it keeps sending you to Lynchburg *(News & Advance).*" This frustration is an example of the delocalization of news organizations explored in research (Franklin, 2005; Císařová, 2017). While corporations allow for economies of scale, they also result in a lack of local flexibility, like the design (and structure) of the website (Ali & Radcliffe, 2017).

Participants perceive that exposure to non-Nelson County news and information is a regular occurrence in the *Nelson County Times* digital and social media products. "It seems to be when they post stories, most of what they're posting is kind of regurgitated from the AP," Frankie said of the newspaper's website. Sarah expressed similar frustrations about the *Nelson County Times'* Facebook page. "The first article (on the newspaper's Facebook feed) was about something happening in North Carolina," she said. "It's not even local." Research has echoed these comments, finding news organizations that are part of corporations are more likely to post on Facebook repurposed content and national, hard news stories over unique local content (Toff & Mathews, 2021).

Participants especially expressed frustration regarding non-Nelson County news in the printed edition. Henry said he considered buying a single copy at the start of the high school football season, which was about six months before our interview. He scanned the edition at the grocery store. "In the sports section, they have more articles on the Amherst High School sports than they did Nelson," he said. I asked if he bought that edition. "No," he said, "and I have tried since." Yasir, who is a subscriber, said he has noticed an increase in the percentage of content that is about the neighboring county. "There'll be times that the *Nelson County Times* will only have Amherst County news in it," he said. "Well, maybe there are like one or two local stories, but mostly it's reprinted from other papers." Erin noted frequent content from the Lynchburg *News & Advance.* "That's not what I want to read about it," she said. "I don't care what's happening in Lynchburg." Vanessa, who subscribes to the *Nelson County Times,* Charlottesville *Daily*

Progress and *Washington Post,* mentioned her frustrations with non-Nelson County content a few times during our interview.

> Vanessa: There's really getting to be an awful lot of Amherst County.
> Me: You mentioned that a couple times now.
> Vanessa: Yeah. There's one time not too long ago, there was more Amherst County information than there was Nelson information.
> Me: In the printed product?
> Vanessa: In the printed product.
> Me: Does that upset you?
> Vanessa: It does, because I want it to be Nelson County.
> Me: Only Nelson County?
> Vanessa: I do. And sometimes their editorials, they're not really written by the *Nelson County Times.* They bring them in from other newspapers. Sometimes they'll put something in from a Richmond newspaper. And they'll put some state news in there. Well, I don't need state news in my county newspaper.
> Me: Even as a subscriber, you kind of feel that way.
> Vanessa: There's been a couple times I'll open it and I'll, 'Darn it. This is in Amherst County. Oh, this is not local.' It's really getting to the point that I'm thinking about canceling the local paper.

Vanessa has three newspaper subscriptions. She even said she would have a newspaper delivered "as long as I'm alive." But because of non-local content, it might not be the local, weekly newspaper she gets delivered.

The frustrations about non-local content came from participants across the board with a variety of backgrounds, including wealth, education, subscriber status and time lived in Nelson County. However, the non-Nelson County content, the regional content from other news organizations, in the *Nelson County Times* did not upset everyone. Olivia, who has never subscribed but occasionally buys a single copy, said, "I don't care as long as I still have the Nelson County content, because I do care beyond Nelson." James, a former subscriber who has lived in Nelson County for 30 years, agreed. "It doesn't bother me," he said of the non-Nelson County content. "To me, Nelson, Amherst, Lynchburg … it's all like one big ball of clay."

For those who do not like the non-Nelson County content, cancellation is the ultimate sign of frustration with the non-local content. At the time of our interview, Lisa, who has a household income of $150,000, had lived in Nelson County for less than two years. In that time, she started and canceled her subscription, both in print and digitally, to the *Nelson County Times.* She said the frequency of non-Nelson County content was the reason. "It was always about Lynchburg," she said. "Everything I got was Lynchburg news. I finally was like, 'That's the last straw. I'm out.'" A customer representative called Lisa to ask why she canceled her subscription. "I told him that the content was for towns that I didn't need to know about." While a non-peer reviewed 2021 Neiman Lab report found non-local content was cited as a reason for reader cancellations, motivations for news cancellations is a relatively underexplored area of research in journalism studies.

This subsection's findings demonstrate the ramification of news organization decisions to spotlight non-local content. Participants were frustrated about the non-local content, frustrated to the point of considering canceling a subscription or actually canceling a subscription. The non-Nelson County content is irrelevant to them, but, more so, one can see how their rural social identity makes these kinds of sleights all the more salient and frustrating.

Nelson Knows

While the *Nelson County Times* is perceived to have too much non-Nelson County related content, the location-based Facebook group Nelson Knows is perceived to have *only* Nelson County related news and information. Participants appreciate this fact.

When I asked Vanessa what she liked most about Nelson Knows, she responded that it "reminds people of how great Nelson County is." Chapter 4 established that participants in Nelson County have tremendous pride in Nelson County. The Nelson County residents are an in-group, to borrow social identity theory language. This sub-section's findings suggest that Nelson Knows, and not the weekly newspaper, is a source where participants go to maintain a positive self-esteem about their in-group.

Participants discussed how Nelson Knows content shows off the county's beauty and celebrates accomplishments of residents. At the time of our interview, Kevin had only recently learned of Nelson Knows. I asked him his perceptions of the content. "A lot of homeowners posting sunrise shots," he said. "Beautiful photos." Said Zachary of the Nelson Knows content: "Lots of sunrise pictures. Then, especially in the spring, people show their vegetables off. I think people like going to Nelson Knows for that content of being like, this is why we love Nelson." Paula said she likes seeing the accomplishments, big and small, of fellow Nelson County residents.

> Paula: The newspaper used to have wedding announcements in there. They just don't now. People don't send them in anymore. They just post it on Nelson Knows. Then, 'Here's my kid getting an award for growing the biggest flower.'
> Me: You have seen stuff like that on Nelson Knows?
> Paula: Oh, yeah.
> Me: But not in the newspaper?
> Paula: But not in the newspaper. It used to be in the newspaper, because we didn't have Facebook.

Participants described Nelson Knows as a place where people offer and seek help from fellow Nelson County residents. "A lot of people trying to sell stuff," said Kim, a former subscriber to the newspaper. "It's a lot of people looking for help," Sarah said, "like looking for somebody to fix my windshield, looking for someone who does plumbing, looking for recommendations." Said Kim: "If I lost my cat, I would post there. I would

send the picture to animal shelter, but I'd first post it on Nelson Knows. I know that's the best place that people are going to see it."

In sum, this study contrasts previous research on rural news organizations that found an intense local-ness of publications as a strength. Researchers argue that weekly newspapers record the news and events "as if in the pages of a cherished family album," chronicling everyday life milestones such as births, marriages and deaths (Garfrerick, 2010, p. 152). For instance, participants perceive that Nelson County residents no longer send milestone moments, like wedding announcements, to the newspaper and instead post the pictures themselves on Nelson Knows. Instead of playing to its former local strengths, the weekly news organization is perceived to spotlight too many non-local stories from parent company and wire services. Furthermore, participants say a strength of the location-based Facebook group is that it offers content that demonstrates "why we love Nelson," as one participant said. Aligned with work on social identity theory, this Nelson Knows content — such as beautiful photos of the county or posts celebrating county residents — strengthens residents identity and positive association with in-group Nelson County residents.

The Usefulness of Content

The usefulness of news and information is another factor in how Nelson County residents express obtaining news and information that is salient in their everyday lives. Participants discussed choosing to obtain news and information on the location-based Facebook group Nelson Knows, as compared to the weekly newspaper, because the Facebook group provides content that is perceived to be more timely and perceived to be tools for daily living (Berelson, 1949; Savolainen, 1995).

Nelson Knows is perceived as a vital tool for navigating everyday life in Nelson County, the participants said. Especially during winter, Paula, a current newspaper subscriber, said she checks Nelson Knows every morning before leaving the house. "I find out how the roads are," she said. Said Maria, also a current subscriber: "I'm looking for, 'Is this road closed?' That kind of immediate information. That's on Nelson Knows." When Nelson Knows first came up in our conversation, I asked Erin to describe it. Instead of generic thoughts, she pulled out her smartphone and started reading posts. "Here's one for a private school down the road doing a garden sale," she said. "Here's one about a cow in the middle of the road." I laughed out loud. "It's serious here," she said. Erin, a former subscriber, was not the only person to mention the subject. "There are a lot of cows are out posts," said Gina, also a former subscriber. While such posts about cows might be strange to outsiders, they matter to the everyday lives of those who live in rural Nelson County.

Participants made it clear the perceived immediacy of content is an advantage to Nelson Knows, especially compared to the *Nelson County Times.* "People love the immediacy," Adam said. "I think that's one thing that local media totally lacks is that it doesn't have that immediacy." For example, Adam said, there was a person in the fire department who was in a serious accident. "We all love him," Adam said. "Great guy. He's saved lives. Two weeks later, it was in the newspaper. It was on Nelson Knows within an hour. The community immediately came together for him." Other participants echoed Adam's thoughts about the significance of immediacy in how and where they obtain news and information. "If one thing we've learned from Facebook and from the internet, immediacy, immediacy, immediacy," Carson said. "Everything needs to be

available right now." Kim said that if she heard a "big bang," she would "check Nelson Knows obsessively to see if anything shows up, just because I'm being nosy." This curiosity led Kim, and other participants, to call Nelson Knows by a different name, "Nelson Nosy." This "nosy" content is perceived as useful in navigating life in Nelson County.

The newspaper's perceived lack of useful and immediate news and information has Frankie, who has never subscribed to the paper, worried for its future. She said:

> I don't know how well they're going to survive locally if they don't make changes to how they currently gather and deliver news in a timely fashion for local people. I think you would get more readership from folks like me if you kind of tapped into some of those immediacy type things that mean something to people that are happening on the ground.

Frankie's comment here aligns with Marci's thought in the introduction. Marci said she favors Nelson Knows as her primary source for news and information because "there's more news that affects people's lives on Nelson Knows than in the *Nelson County Times."*

Participants perceive the *Nelson County Times* does not have the resources, or desire, to report some news and information that is salient in their everyday lives. Such examples include cows on the road, road closures and weather reports. Research has found such tools for daily living are coveted by news consumers. Those tools for daily living were once a strength of small newspapers. Those tools are now found elsewhere, such as weather apps, job posting websites and location-based Facebook groups (Helleseter, Kuhn & Shen, 2020; Phan et al., 2018; Rose, 2006).

The Accessibility of Content

The accessibility of content is another factor in how Nelson County residents express obtaining news and information that is salient in their everyday lives. Participants discussed how Nelson Knows fits into their routine Facebook viewing, and they discussed a laundry list of difficulties in obtaining news and information via the *Nelson County Times.* This section finds that an obstacle for the weekly newspaper is the perception that the news organization is *only* a weekly newspaper, and not a modern 24/7 news operation with a digital and social media presence.

Carson, who is a current subscriber in his 70's, said his morning routine includes Facebook. "I'll check Nelson Knows once a day," he said. "When you go to your Facebook in the morning, as I do over coffee, every day, I immediately have available what's going on this moment in Nelson." Frankie, who is in her 40's and has never subscribed to the paper, described Facebook as her main source of news and information, about Nelson County and beyond. She said she checks Facebook "multiple times a day, really. It is the first and last thing I do each day." Said Marci of Nelson Knows, compared to the weekly newspaper, "it's a lot easier to get, and it's free." Nelson Knows content surfaces when Marci visits Facebook, "at least once a day, probably."

Facebook is not for everyone, of course. Greg, who is in his 70s, is not on Facebook, though he has heard of Nelson Knows from his wife. I asked him why he does not use the social media site. "Don't want to deal with it," he said. "I think those types of things are really contributing to the disinformation that's being spread in an exponential way." Richard recently retired. He joined Facebook just a week prior to our interview. "Why so long (to join)?" I asked. "There is no utility in that for me," he said. He joined

because of recent interest in outdoor sports, thinking it would be a good way of meeting others who might like to participate. I asked Richard if he would use his new Facebook account to keep up with news and information in Nelson County. "No," he said. "What I've heard and what I believe is that it can be a rabbit hole and a time-suck. It's a waste of time for me. It's not how I choose to spend my time."

The Nelson County Times has a Facebook page. Marci, who is active on Facebook and, as described in the introduction, has fond memories of the *Nelson County Times,* was not a follower before our interview. "I never really thought about it," she said of following the newspaper's Facebook account. Seconds later, she paused, grabbed her smartphone and followed the newspaper's Facebook page. "There, I am now," she said. "Now that I know that it's available." I made an observation to Marci.

> Me: You think of the news organization as a once-a-week printed newspaper.
> Marci: Yes.
> Me: And that's how you think of it?
> Marci: That's how I think of it. Yes.
> Me: So it does have a website, where they post content. It does have a social media feed just like in Nelson Knows.
> Marci: The fact that it's just published once a week, I think, is cemented in people's minds. It was one thing when it was the only news source. That's not the case anymore.

Even though the *Nelson County Times* has a website and a Facebook presence, participants largely said those news organization platforms do not serve as sources for news and information about Nelson County.

Participants who are active on Facebook said they have not considered searching to see if the newspaper had a Facebook account. When I told Sarah "the *Nelson County Times* has a Facebook page," she responded, "I didn't know that." Helen said she could not recall ever seeing a reference to the *Nelson County Times* on her Facebook feed. "I

think they're kind of out of sight out of mind," she said. During our interview, Frankie surveyed the *Nelson County Times'* presence on various social media platforms. "You've got to be omnipresent," Frankie said. "I have to look — Instagram for *Nelson County Times,* does it even exist? That is a no. That is a hard no." Its Twitter account "is just mirrored what their Facebook stuff is," Frankie said. When she got to the newspaper's Facebook page, its number of followers stuck out immediately, especially compared to the volume of Nelson Knows followers. "The *Times* has less than 4,000 followers," Frankie said. "Not even half of Nelson Knows (9,000-plus). That's very telling to me." I asked her what that meant. "The *Nelson County Times,* they want to deliver local news, but then they're not understanding how people are consuming local news." Put differently, the participants believe the *Nelson County Times* has not adapted as quickly as news consumers to the digital environment.

Perceptions of the weekly news organization as only a printed newspaper play a role in how Nelson County residents obtain news and information. "I think just so many people think of the *Nelson County Times* as a paper now," said Isabelle, a former subscriber in her 40's. "That's it. It's just the paper." Said Maria, a current subscriber in her 60's: "To me, it's profoundly a local pen-and-ink paper." Gina, a former subscriber in her 70's, described similar perceptions with the *Nelson County Times.*

> Gina: I would expect that they are working on a weekly deadline. And if they write a story on something, there's not going to be an update or a new piece of news about it, until a week later, because it comes out once a week. Whereas *New York Times,* if I want to see whatever they're saying about what happened in Congress, they're going to be updating it several times a day, with breaking news.
> Me: I would challenge you on that, because the *New York Times* has a digital website presence. So does the *Nelson County Times.*
> Gina: When I was a (print) subscriber, I was a digital subscriber, too, and I could access (the *Nelson County Times)* through their website. And that was what I was

> intending to do, but I found I wasn't doing it. I didn't think of it as being updated regularly."

These participants think of the *Nelson County Times* as a once-a-week delivery of news and information, even though they have digital platforms, just like the *New York Times.* These participants, of a variety of ages, are all familiar with the weekly news organization, either as a subscriber or former subscriber.

Participants' long-standing habits with the *Nelson County Times* are based around the once-a-week printed edition. Even though their habits have changed to include Facebook and even though the *Nelson County Times* has added a Facebook account, participant perceptions about the news organization remain centered on their habits with the printed product. Research has found that habits play a critical role in our news consumption behaviors, and that habits are difficult to change (Graybiel & Smith, 2014). The findings here show that even when habits with a news product do change, perceptions of that product are difficult to change.

***Nelson County Times* obstacles**

While participants described an ease of access to news and information on Nelson Knows, they described an exhaustive list of obstacles that keeps them from utilizing the *Nelson County Times* as a vehicle for how they obtain news and information. The list includes such things as customer service issues. For example, Adam said, "I actually did try to subscribe two years ago, but it wouldn't accept my credit card. I called them up, and they said, 'System's down. I'll call you when it's back up.'" Adam said he never got a return call. "I wasn't even that mad," he said. Another obstacle is the newspaper website. "When I click on it, they want my email address and want me to subscribe

immediately," Danielle said. "That's not the way to do that. I don't really want to subscribe to something if I haven't checked it out." Another obstacle is the cost. "Our budget is pretty tight," Jack said. "If I can get away with reading things for free, I'll do that." Perhaps the most surprising obstacle, however, is gaining access to a printed edition of the newspaper, either by delivery or single-copy purchase.

Participants said they have challenges with home delivery of the *Nelson County Times* and struggle to find available single copies around the county. Lezlie, who has been in Nelson County about 10 years, said she subscribed to the newspaper for the first year. She canceled because of delivery issues. Because of the remote location of her home, Lezlie uses a post office box for deliveries. The postal service delivers the newspaper to her post office box. "They wouldn't deliver it to my house," she said. "I didn't really like that. If it came to my house, I'd consider re-subscribing." Erin canceled her subscription because of postal office box issues.

> By the time you went to get it (at the post office box), you could just go pick it up (at a convenience store) if you want it that week. There wasn't really any point to subscribing. I mean, unless they (the news organization) have a person who's going to deliver it by hand, like every other newspaper does, forget it.

Zachary said he tried to get a delivery subscription to the *Nelson County Times,* but it was a failed experience.

> I had asked my mom for a subscription for Christmas. I was like, why not? It's something that'll be a gift year-round. Then, there was like a weird thing where they just weren't delivering it. So I just had to cancel it because it was never coming. It was like a couple weeks went by and never came. I followed up with them. They were like, 'Alright, we should get it straight now. It should be good.' Waited a couple more weeks, never came. I was like, you know what, I'm just good on this. It is a shame. Maybe I will try again because it would be nice to just have it in the house.

Put another way, it would be convenient to have the newspaper delivered to the house instead of making a weekly decision to pick up a single copy.

Current subscribers discussed delivery issues, which could deter others from subscribing to the newspaper. I asked Paula if she gets the newspaper delivered to her house. “No, no, no. Rural America, remember. They don’t deliver it here. You have to get at your post office box.” Carson gets the newspaper delivered to his house but called the service “spotty.” “Sometimes, I’ll get two papers (meaning two weekly editions) on the same date,” he said. If it is the newspaper’s fault or the postal service’s fault, the result remains the same, frequent frustration with access to the newspaper.

Participants said they face challenges in purchasing a single copy of the *Nelson County Times* as well. For example, participants said the news organization does not print as many copies of each edition around the county. “It’s discouraging,” said Nancy, who does not subscribe but buys an occasional edition. “They leave pretty early (meaning run out). There’s only a few in circulation. By the time I get there, there’s none in the store I go to.” Nicole, a Nelson County native, has noticed over the recent years a trend of fewer printed copies. “You used to see these big stacks out front of the gas stations, and now they’re like very little stacks,” she said. “So there’s not as many newspapers out and about as there used to be.” Nicole also has noticed empty newspaper boxes at locations around the county. At her current place of employment, Nicole said, “we’ve got a box out front, but they don’t fill it.” This comment suggests either the newspaper does not have the resources, either staffing or volume of editions, to fill the newspaper box or that previous reader demand in that location made it not worth the organization’s effort to fill that newspaper box.

Participants said one unique hurdle to purchasing a single copy of the *Nelson County Times* is having exactly four quarters. Participants said only a few locations in the county have copies inside a store, where they can add the newspaper to the rest of their purchases. In most places, participants said they need to purchase the newspaper out of a coin-operated box, which requires exactly four quarters. Erin described what she called an “antiquated” challenge.

> If it’s in a machine, you need four quarters. If you don’t have four quarters, that makes the decision for you. Honestly, a lot of times, more often than not, if I had four quarters in my pocket, I’d buy the paper. But if I don’t have four quarters in my pocket, I’m not buying the paper because I’m not going to go someplace else and buy it. It’s antiquated. I would say 90% of the time that I want to buy a paper, I don’t have four quarters.

Ben said that he occasionally will go into a convenience store and ask the clerk for change. “I might go ask them for four quarters, if I really want to get the paper,” he said. “But it’s a pain.” Zachary said he tries to always be prepared to make a newspaper purchase.

> Zachary: I try to keep four quarters around for the paper.
> Me: You keep quarters specifically for that?
> Zachary: Yeah, purposely to get the newspaper, grab it out, the little machine.
> Me: Is that the only reason you ever have quarters in your pocket?
> Zachary: Yep.
> Me: I find that to be a strange barrier. I mean, it would be for me.
> Zachary: It is. It definitely is. I don’t always have four quarters. If you have cash, and you don’t always have cash, then you have to ask the gas station attendant. Then sometimes they don’t like that, because they only have a few quarters left.
> Me: Interesting.
> Zachary: No one is going to constantly go to the quarter machines. It’s very archaic.

With asking for a subscription as a Christmas gift and purposefully trying to remember four quarters for the newspaper box, Zachary, who is in his 20’s and has a household

income of less than $30,000, demonstrates a desire to purchase the *Nelson County Times.* But the *Nelson County Times* makes it difficult for him.

From the perspective of news organizations, they would rather residents have a yearly home delivery subscription than rely on them to purchase single copies. The home subscription offers steady revenue for the news organization. Home delivery, however, is problematic in Nelson County because of its rural nature. Delivery is done via the United States Postal Service. If residents have a post office box, the newspaper is delivered there instead of at their house. Participants say they want the *Nelson County Times* delivered to their homes, "like every other newspaper does." Research has found that weekly newspapers rely on single-copy sales as a higher proportion of their revenue than metro newspapers, which rely more on subscription revenue (Radcliffe & Ali, 2017). Relying on single-copy sales means relying on residents to make weekly decisions to purchase the paper. This section's findings demonstrate that the antiquated nature of newspaper boxes even make single-copy editions less accessible.

Conclusion

This chapter addresses this dissertation's second research question: *How do rural residents express obtaining news and information that is salient in their everyday lives — and why?* In exploring this question, this chapter builds on arguments in the previous chapter. In Chapter 4, I found participants in Nelson County exhibit characteristics of a rural social identity and perceive of local as a "shared sense of ownership," or a sense of "ours." Here, Chapter 5 finds that participants express seeking to obtain news and information that strengthens their rural social identity and is steeped in local-ness.

Overall, this chapter maps out three themes that emerged from interviews as factors in how participants obtain news and information that is salient in their everyday lives. First, participants consider the local-ness of the content source when determining how they obtain news and information. Second, participants consider the usefulness of the content. Third, they consider the accessibility of the content. While the sections on the latter two factors offer rich empirical data, this chapter's most important contributions center on the discussion of the local-ness of the content source.

Theoretically, the main contribution of this chapter is the application of social identity theory in relation to news consumption choices in the local news and rural news spaces. This chapter argues that rural residents seek to reinforce their social identity through news and information choices, similarly to marginalized groups. This chapter finds participants prefer a location-based Facebook group over the county's nearly 150-year-old weekly newspaper because, at least in part, the Facebook group better emphasizes content that reinforces their social identity. Photos of the county, good news about fellow residents and posts about how residents can help each other are considered valuable content on the Facebook group.

In the next chapter, I explore the dissertation's third research question: *How do rural residents think about the role of journalists and journalism as compared to Facebook as a source of news and information about their locality?*

Chapter 6: Journalists, Journalism and Facebook

Isabelle was born in Nelson County and moved around the country as a young adult, but she always knew she would return. "It's home," she said. Now in her 40's, Isabelle has been back in Nelson County for almost a decade. She offered an insightful example of what it means to be a from-here in Nelson County. Isabelle said she had known one of the candidates for a recent county-wide election since I was "knee-high to a grasshopper" and he was a "cool guy who lived up in the holler behind my mom." Before the election, Isabelle crossed paths with the candidate for the first time in years. Isabelle relayed parts of the conversation. "I haven't seen you in so long," he told her. "You're going to vote for me, right?" Isabelle had no idea where the candidate stood on any issues related to the election. "This is how Nelson works," Isabelle said. "You know me. You're going to vote for me. It doesn't really matter what my stance is on something." Isabelle shook her head, recalling that moment. "Welcome to Nelson County," she said. "Having lived in other places, I realize how bizarre it is that Nelson's so focused on this local thing. If I hadn't lived in other places, I wouldn't understand that."

When Isabelle first moved back to Nelson County, she started a subscription to the *Nelson County Times.* "It's all we had," she said. Over the years, that was not the case. The location-based Facebook group Nelson Knows was created and started to become a possible option for Nelson County residents. Isabelle started to use it more and more frequently. "I look at it every day," she said. Within the last couple of years, she canceled her subscription to the newspaper. I asked her why. "You're not seeing a local reporter here," she said. "They're not bringing anything new to the stories. We already

know all that from Nelson Knows." I asked her why it matters to have a local reporter. "You'd actually have your thumb on the pulse (of Nelson County)," she said. I responded, "Can I ask how you feel that's not the case (with the paper)?" She said, "I keep coming back to, it's just not local. It's for us, but not from us."

In this chapter, I examine how Isabelle's perceptions illustrate larger themes at hand, namely the perception that the Nelson County journalists are outsiders while content on Nelson Knows is produced for and is from in-group members of Nelson County. Specifically, this chapter addresses this dissertation's third research question: *How do rural residents think about the role of journalists and journalism as compared to Facebook as a source of news and information about their locality?*

Overview

In Chapter 4, I found participants in Nelson County exhibit characteristics of a rural social identity and perceive of local as a "shared sense of ownership," or a sense of "ours." In Chapter 5, I found that participants seek to obtain news and information that reaffirms and strengthens their rural social identity. Participants express they want news and information to be about them and for them, specifically for them in Nelson County. The participants labeled the weekly *Nelson County Times* "not local," on two levels, first the organizational level, then the content level. In this chapter, I focus on how local residents perceived the news organization's journalists themselves as "not local" but also how the practice of journalism itself is often in tension with rural residents' expectations about who has the legitimacy to speak on behalf of the community. In other words, the

participants raise questions of if independent professionals are best suited to serve communities.

Building on the first two findings chapters and continuing to utilize the social identity theoretical framework, this chapter argues that participants express wanting news and information from fellow in-group members, their fellow Nelson County residents. Participants say they want professional journalists to live in the county and be active in the county. Alternatively, participants said they are comfortable — and often prefer — obtaining news and information from their neighbors on a location-based Facebook group. This chapter completes the dissertation's overall argument that rural residents express wanting news and information that is *Our News, For Us, From Us.*

Three themes emerged from interviews in relation to how rural residents think about the role of journalists and journalism as compared to Facebook as sources of news information about their locality. First, participants perceive the *Nelson County Times* journalists, the reporters tasked with covering the county, as outsiders, lacking in local knowledge to report effectively on their community and therefore lacking legitimacy. Second, participants express skepticism of professional journalists' conventional monitorial role as emphasized in journalistic theory, criticize their performance in their facilitator role and express unfulfilled desires for content that aligns with a "good neighbor" role of journalism. Third, participants perceive the location-based Facebook group Nelson Knows as another option to journalism's monitorial, facilitator and good neighbor roles. In short, this chapter discusses participant perceptions of journalists, of journalism and of Facebook for news and information.

This chapter is structured slightly differently than the previous two findings chapters. Instead of one condensed section dedicated to relevant literature in "context," this chapter introduces significant research at the beginning of each of the three separate findings sections. This is designed for efficiency and ease in reading and because of the slightly more varied lines of research involved in this chapter. While one can argue that these could, and perhaps should, be three individual chapters, I argue the sections coalesce around the *who* in this grander puzzle, developing an understanding of perceptions of the content creators.

The sections below address distinct areas of research, setting the stage for each section's key findings. The first section explores research on journalists' engagement in their communities and how, to an extent, journalism itself, with the precarity and instability ingrained in the industry, prevents the journalists from establishing roots in the community. The second section explores research on the roles of journalism, especially the monitorial function and the relatively underexplored "good neighbor" function. In doing so, this literature situates the participants' critiques of the weekly news organization in fulfilling roles. The final section investigates other options for community information, including message boards, forums and location-based Facebook groups.

The themes in this chapter emerged through three complete readings of the transcripts and an iterative process that involved moving back and forth between data, analysis and previous literature. During the first read of transcripts, I prefer not to take any notes, simply reading word for word the entirety of the transcript. This is an attempt, as Saldaña (2011, p. 44) writes, "to become intimately familiar with literally every word that was exchanged between you and the participant." In the second round of coding, I

conducted mostly descriptive coding, using a word, short phrase or participants' language as inductive codes. To offer specific examples from this chapter's first findings section (below), inductive codes included "journalists, not local," "journalists, no presence," "journalists, no investment," "journalists, inexperienced" and "journalists, rotation." Abstracting out further, these themes articulated participant perceptions that the *Nelson County Times* reporters lacked a commitment in Nelson County. They were not from Nelson County, not active in Nelson County's life and they only briefly served as *Nelson County Times* reporters. Taken out further, and examined through the social identity theoretical framework discussed throughout the previous chapters, the *Nelson County Times* reporters were perceived as outsiders by Nelson County participants. That is the first theme identified in this findings section.

Perceptions of Journalists as Outsiders

In this first section, I focus on participants' perceptions of the *Nelson County Times* journalists, who tend to be viewed as inexperienced outsiders, meaning not members of the in-group Nelson County residents. They perceive the journalists lack the local knowledge necessary to report on the community. The lack of insight stems, at least in part, from precarity and instability in journalism, which is not unique to rural Nelson County. However, a difference in Nelson County is the extent to which a rural social identity, as established in the previous two chapters, serves as a lens for evaluating the journalists. The perception that journalists are outsiders is much more acutely experienced because of this orientation. Furthermore, the participants perceive the journalists not only as outsiders but outsiders who do not care about the community. This

aligns with previous chapters' investigation of how those in rural communities can feel ignored and even exploited by outsiders, including journalists.

Small-town Journalism and Parachute Journalism in Context

This section engages with two key lines of research. First, prior research has found an intimate connection between smaller news organizations, like the *Nelson County Times,* and the communities they cover. Second, research has explored parachute journalism.

The 2019 Pew Research Center's Local News Report found that 81% of U.S. adults reported that they believe it is at least somewhat important for journalists to be personally engaged with their local community, with 41% deeming it very important. Scholarship has argued that the engagement of journalists in a community is a strength of smaller, community news organizations. In these communities, journalists are "intimately involving themselves in the welfare of the place, in the civic life of their towns, participating as an active member of the very community they are covering" (Lauterer, 2006, xiv).

In a study of weekly newspaper journalists, Smith (2019, p. 533) found that small-town workers "must constantly and simultaneously engage with and participate in the community on a personal and professional level," and Rosenberry (2012, p. 25) argued that the "defining characteristic of community journalism is the intimacy that the organizations and the people who practice it share with the institutions and individuals they cover." Scholars have argued that larger news organizations can learn from community journalism's approach, with staff members allowing and embracing community attachment (Altschull, 1996; Terry, 2011). Notably, much of this prior

research, meaning work on the intimate connection between small news organizations and the communities they cover, was conducted when local news was more vibrant than today.

It is also worth acknowledging that building such close relationships with neighbors and readers can be challenging based on the turnover in journalistic positions. This is not a new phenomenon, nor unique in rural areas or the U.S. Exhaustion and burnout have long been associated with journalism but have shown to have increased over the past decade (Reinardy, 2011; Bossio & Holton, 2019). The always-on nature of digital journalism recently has raised concerns of working outside of work hours (Cohen, 2019; Bossio et al., forthcoming). The always-on nature of the job can include areas of "work" outside of journalism. For instance, journalists' attempts to be active and build relationships in the community could be considered work. In research on lifestyle influencers, Duffy (2017, p. 80) called this "compulsory sociality," or "necessary networking where work and nonwork time bleed into one." Especially in rural spaces, like Nelson County, it can be difficult to fill reporting vacancies (Fargen Walsh & Martin, 2021). Research has identified a "brain drain" of rural areas, with younger and more educated residents leaving for metropolitan opportunities and rural areas finding it challenging to draw in younger and more educated professionals, like journalists (Carr & Kefalas, 2009; Petrin, Schafft & Meece, 2014).

Without reporters based in rural spaces, residents rely on journalists from afar. Research has investigated the perception of journalists as outsiders, most notably in work on parachute journalism. Most frequently, scholarship on parachute journalism revolves around international reporting, often in crisis and war coverage, and breaking news

coverage in non-metropolitan areas. For instance, in war or emergency coverage, parachute journalism can be "intrinsically misleading" (Seib, 2007, p. 161). News consumers are given the impression that an event erupted, when, in reality, it has been bubbling beneath the surface before the journalist arrived on scene (Burgess, 2013). The parachute journalists chase crises and breaking news, rather than getting ahead of stories or telling stories in a deeper, more meaningful manner (Wizda, 1997).

Parachute journalists, based at national news organizations, also descend on metro unfamiliar domestic areas during times of breaking news. Scholars have found in these situations that journalists "emphasize story elements that a local resident would not" (Wenzel, Ford & and Nechushtai 2020, p. 300). Parachute journalists have been described as skimming the sources of stories, with mischaracterizations about smaller communities spread to a larger audience (Fondren, Hamilton & McCune, 2019). Scholars recently have acknowledged such concerns in light of 2020 murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis. Örnebring and Schmitz Weiss (2021, p. 1903) wrote that parachute journalists make "narratives fit dominant hegemonic and racist ideologies."

Smaller news organizations, at the location of the breaking news, have criticized national parachute journalism, an act of reputation repair (Mathews, 2021). One study in Australia found small-town residents "outraged and frustrated" by a metropolitan news organization's depiction of their towns during murder coverage (Hess & Waller, 2012). The authors argued that the smaller news organizations "do not have the power to overturn the negative representation of their communities in the insertional and national media" (ibid, p. 124).

While the notion of journalists as outsiders in rural communities has been studied before, the context of most of that research is different than this dissertation. In most instances, the journalists in question are from national or international outlets far removed from the places they are coming from and largely are reporting for external audiences. The findings in this chapter address a different perspective. Participants perceive journalists as outsiders even though they are ostensibly local and trying their best to serve the community itself as the intended audience. This is noteworthy as scholars have found trust in local news is higher than national news (Knight Foundation, 2019) and argued that local news has been "lauded as a potential savor of journalism" and potentially offers a "pathway to strengthening relationships between media and communities" (Wenzel, Ford & Nechushtai, 2020, p. 287).

In Nelson County

Just as Nelson County residents differentiate between newcomers and natives, the come-here's and the from-here's as explored in Chapter 4, those I interviewed viewed *Nelson County Times* journalists as decidedly in the first camp. Participants perceive journalists do not live in the county, are not active in the county and do not care about the county. When I asked Quincy, a retiree who has lived in Nelson County for 10 years but still considered herself a come-here, how a new reporter would be viewed by Nelson County residents, she responded, "best of luck, best of luck." She explained, "I think there's a lot of suspicion here of new people." She said it would help, "if they lived here." Because they are not Nelson County residents, the reporters are seen "definitely not as

'us,'" Quincy said. Because no matter if a Nelson County resident is a come-here, like Quincy, or a from-here, they are here in the county now. The reporters are not.

Participants expressed a desire for *Nelson County Times* reporters to live in Nelson County. "There's just so much difference when you actually live in a community," Sarah said. "It's just hard to really be a part of a community when you don't live here." Asked Carla, "how tethered are they to the community if they don't even live here?" Jack suggested that reporters be required to live in the county, similar to other services. "It would be helpful to have people who understand the people in the community and understand where they're coming from," Jack said. "Not much different from requiring firemen and policemen to be residents of the communities they serve." One might believe that such perceptions of journalists as outsiders would be pronounced among Nelson County natives, but the four participants above — Quincy, Sarah, Carla and Jack — are all come-here's. James, who has worked as a first-responder previously, did not have such concerns. "If they live in Lynchburg, that's just right over there," said James, who has lived in Nelson County for about 30 years. "They can get here fast, believe me."

Participants perceive that reporters are not active in the Nelson County community either. "The editor of the *Nelson County Times,* I've talked to him before," Carson, a current subscriber, said, "but he's not a face. He's not a presence at all in the county." Said Maria, a current subscriber: "I don't know how embedded they are in the community. … If you're not spending your off time or energies in the county, you don't become a known entity." Quincy, who has never subscribed to the *Nelson County Times,* said at previous places she's lived, she has been interviewed by reporters for community-

building efforts and even befriended journalists. "You ran into them places," Quincy said of reporters at other rural communities she's lived in. "It felt much more like they were members of the community. I've never run into a reporter here."

Participants describe a rotation of *Nelson County Times* reporters, with inexperienced reporters not staying on the job long. "I've always considered their reporters to be juniors, the JV team," said Elton, a former subscriber who has lived in Nelson County for 30 years. "They're all young, they're cubs, they're working their way up." Said Xavier, a current subscriber in his 60's: "Most of them are young. Their professional qualifications consist of a journalism degree. A couple of them I talked to, this is really the first time they've done this." Xavier perceives the reporters "get a couple of bylines, tease themselves a resume and go on to something else." Wendy, a Nelson County native who has been a subscriber for more than 50 years, said reporters "change every year or two. We'd get to know them, then it would be somebody different."

Some contrasted their impressions of *Nelson County Times* journalists to how locally connected they felt journalists once were in the past. Long-time residents remember when the newspaper was independently owned and operated by a Nelson County resident. "Back in the day, the editors were local. The reporters were local. We had a local editor and reporter for years," Wendy said. Now, Wendy, and others, perceive that Nelson County journalists are stationed in Lynchburg, the regional hub for its parent company, Lee Enterprises. In 2018, the *Nelson County Times* operation, indeed, was moved to Lynchburg (Faulconer, 2022). "It seems to me when someone comes, it isn't a local reporter," said Isabelle, a Nelson County native and former subscriber in her 40s. "It's somebody from Lynchburg. That may be local to them. Nelson County doesn't think

of that as local." Said Fred, who is in his 40s and has lived in Nelson County for almost 20 years: "They are reporting on stuff that matters to Lynchburg folks and that doesn't matter to us. It's from an outsider's perspective." Carson, a subscriber who is in his 70s and has lived in Nelson County for almost 30 years, echoed the comment, saying, "it feels like somebody outside of Nelson County writing about Nelson County." From the participants' perspective, that is exactly the case.

Older participants who have lived in Nelson County for a long period of time might understand the difference between now and when the *Nelson County Times* had local journalists based in the county. That certainly can shape their views on the matter. But participants in their 40s, who never knew of Nelson County-based *Nelson County Times* reporters, still lament the journalists live outside the county, even if, as James said, they can be in Nelson County in short time.

For those in Nelson County who work with reporters regularly, the rotation of journalists makes it difficult to form relationships, with the participants even articulating a sense of abandonment from the journalists. The participants here offer a unique critique of the news environment. The Pew Research Center's Local News Report found that only 20% of respondents, with little difference in urban or rural respondents, have spoken with or been interviewed by journalists. Brian said he is interviewed by *Nelson County Times* reporters frequently. "Every time I made a connection, they always left us," he said. "Then, you'd get the next person 12 months later. You get really tired of constantly building bridges for someone you know that's going to be gone in 12 months." Nancy said her daughter was once interviewed by a *Nelson County Times* reporter for her accomplishments during high school. "My daughter had a good experience," Nancy said.

“But (the reporter) did not stay long. She left us and went somewhere else.” Brian said he has tried to help reporters add depth to their stories in the past. He would offer background material and speak off the record. He has ended the practice, though, because of the perceived rotation of reporters and their lack of “care” for Nelson County.

> I try to be helpful with off-the-records. I try to give lead-up information. ‘Look, here’s on-the-record stuff, but let me give you some background so you know what’s really going on here.’ But I just felt like all they want is a lame quote and they’re going on with their day. Well, why do I care? If I know they care and actually are not just invested in the story but in the county, then it means a lot more. Then I’ll help with anything. Let’s use the beat cop example. If police officers are supposed to be patrolling the area and they don’t know the area, how successful would they be at getting information to solve a crime? They don’t know the people, they don’t know the politics, they don’t have the connections. You’re going to get base level stuff. But the small stuff matters for the big stuff. If you take the small stuff, ‘Oh, it’s no big deal.’ Eventually, it’ll come back to bite you on the big stuff and everyone will know, well, they just don’t care.

With the phrase “left us,” participants perceive a lack of commitment to the county and its people. Social identity theory finds that when in-group members feel mistreated by out-group members, the in-group members intensify their bond with fellow in-group members and deepen the differentiations with out-group members.

To extend the conversation from Chapter 4, participants perceive a lack of investment from the reporters. As Isabelle said in the introduction to this chapter about *Nelson County Times*, “it’s for us, but not from us.” In short, participants express preferring news and information from “us,” and not from the parachute journalists, who are a distinct “them” in Nelson County (Lamont & Fournier, 1992).

Perceptions of the Roles of Journalism

In the preceding section, participants offered their perceptions of the *Nelson County Times* journalists themselves, identifying them as inexperienced outsiders who

therefore lacked legitimacy to report on their community. In this second section, I focus more broadly on what residents say they expect from local journalism, and what they believe it *ought* to look like. In doing so, the participants articulate value judgements about various roles of journalism. This section shines a spotlight on three specific roles discussed in past literature — the monitorial role, the facilitator role and the undertheorized notion of journalism that plays the role of "good neighbor." Participants were not critical of the *Nelson County Times* journalism when it came to its monitorial role. More damning, however, participants did not seem to value local journalism that played such a role. Participants were heavily critical of the news organization's facilitator role, believing the newspaper limits residents' voices in the publication. Finally, the participants expressed a desire for elements of the good neighbor role of journalism. In practice, this content serves to better the community, highlighting success stories and offering solutions to the county's problems. Those wishes are unfilled by the news organization.

Monitor, Facilitator and Good Neighbor in Context

This section highlights how journalistic cultures, meaning the journalistic roles and the perceptions of those roles, are not universal. Research emphasizes that journalistic roles are valued and enacted differently in different places. In rural areas, the emphasis on the monitorial role of journalism, vitally important in some contexts, tends to be less valued in these spaces in favor of other roles.

The concept of journalistic roles is one of the most theoretically and empirically explored areas of journalism studies, so this section will barely scratch the surface of the

wealth of literature in this space. Foundational work connected journalists' roles to the ideas of surveillance, correlation, transmission and entertainment (Lasswell, 1948; Wright, 1960), concepts that still form the normative framework of professional and public conversations about journalism's contribution to larger sociality (Christians et al., 2009). Reams of empirical research have identified a large number of roles, beginning with Cohen's (1963) differentiation between "neutral" and "participant" roles and Weaver and Wilhoit's (1986, 1996) classification of disseminator, interpreter, adversarial and mobilizer. Though not exclusively, journalism role scholarship has predominantly focused on journalism's relationship to democracy and political life (Hanusch, 2019), leaving everyday life roles relatively underexplored. In this section, I focus on three roles found in literature that were discussed most frequently by participants from Nelson County — monitor, facilitator and good neighbor.

First, the monitorial role focuses on information gathering, deciphering and distributing (Lichtenstein, Herbers & Bause, 2021). Christians et al. (2009, p. 139) described this role as observing the environment for "relevant information about events, conditions, trends and threats." Safeguarding the public, via traditional watchdog journalism, is an element of this monitorial role as well. Watchdog journalism, designed to hold government accountable, is "cherished and valued as a standard of 'good journalism'" (Ryfe, 2009, p. 199). For most Western countries, this is grounded in the ideal of journalism acting as the "Fourth Estate," critiquing leaders and, in turn, encouraging critically minded residents (Christians et al., 2009). This role is deeply ingrained, especially, into American journalism via newsroom and university socialization (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2018; Mellado et al., 2013).

Research has found a wide variety in global attitudes toward the media's watchdog role and large discrepancies in some nations between audience and journalist attitudes towards the role (Kalogeropoulos & Fletcher, 2019). For instance, in Brazil, 56% of respondents agree that the media monitor and scrutinize political people. That's compared to 45% of U.S. respondents and 17% in Japan. In Japan, 91% of journalists believe that monitoring and scrutinizing political leaders is vital for their work. In the U.S., 86% of journalists consider the watchdog role important to their work.

Second, not all communities and cultures value the monitorial role of journalism above all else. Journalistic roles are fluid, with journalists enacting different roles at different times, often based on specific constraints (economic, political or cultural). Mellado (2015, p. 598) put in succinctly, journalistic roles are "social phenomena." In many contexts, audiences place a far greater premium on other roles played by journalism in society, particularly playing the role of facilitator, encouraging social dialogue (Perreault, M. & Perreault, P., 2021).

Within newspaper organizations, letters to the editor sections highlight the facilitator role of journalism, designed with aspirations of broadening public debate (Garcia-Blanco & Bennett, 2022; Kelling & Thomas, 2018; Ananny, 2014). Nielsen (2010) argued that letters are a rare platform for readers to express disagreement with news coverage from the organization. Twenty years ago, Wahl-Jorgensen argued the letters to the editor sections were "one of a few arenas for public discussion by regular citizens" (2002a, p. 69), yet found editors' selection criteria was not conducive to fully open dialogue and privileged particular forms of expression. She found editors advantaged content that was relevant, brief, entertaining and authoritative. The

entertaining criteria, meaning punchy or witty content, and authoritative, which excluded ungrammatical writing or unconventional styles of writing, especially limited participation from potential letter writers. Wahl-Jorgensen also found journalists did not believe the letter-writers, with the journalists using the "idiom of insanity" to characterize their interactions with the letter-writers (2002b, p. 183).

Third, prior research has found that residents in smaller communities, like Nelson County, tend to place relatively lower emphasis on the monitorial role. They negatively view watchdog journalism as assertive. Although less present in the existing literature on journalistic roles, prior research has found that local audiences tend to want their news organizations to act as a "good neighbor" instead of a watchdog. Notably, researchers that have utilized this good neighbor construct (Moon & Lawrence, 2021; Costera Meijer, 2010) have not theorized or developed the concept beyond the original authors' description in which the journalists demonstrate "caring about the community, reporting on interesting people and groups, understanding the local community, and offering solutions" (Heider, McCombs & Poindexter, 2005). Below, I describe the "good neighbor" role in practice. In the next conclusion chapter, I develop the concept further, bringing in arguments from Chapters 4 and 5 as well.

Tenets of a good neighbor align with "solutions journalism," which pinpoints a community's flaws but also motivates leaders, and readers, to contribute to societal change (Wenzel, Gerson & Moreno, 2016; McIntyre, 2019; McIntyre & Lough, 2021). Kirkpatrick (2001) argued for elements of the good neighbor role in work on weekly newspapers, writing the publications should focus their efforts on regular citizens and the

stories of everyday life in the area, not necessarily holding government leaders accountable.

In Nelson County

Even though participants viewed the local journalists from the *Nelson County Times* as outsiders, when it comes to the monitorial role they play, they also generally expressed respect for how they covered the affairs of local government. For example, Yasir, a longtime subscriber, said, "They do a pretty good job of covering local government, at least the meetings and stuff like that." Zachary, in his 20's, said he appreciates the newspaper staff covering meetings in the middle of the work day. "What working person can be at a 2 p.m. meeting?" Zachary asked. "You'd have to literally take your vacation in the courthouse. We need journalists to be in these places that we can't be." Adam, a Nelson County native who has never subscribed to the paper, perceives that no other news organization coverages the routine county-level government meetings, unless there is "an issue that is of significance, like hot and controversial." Without the reporters, Adam said "you get these community people who then act like reporters, but they only show up to specific things that they care about. They don't go to everything." In general, participants described the weekly newspaper as accurate, reliable and trustworthy. "When I read something in the *Nelson County Times,* I don't suspect it to be slanted," said Carson, a subscriber. "I sort of take it as reliable journalism. I think that's a real asset for a small, rural community."

Current subscribers were heavily critical of the news organization's facilitator role, especially in regards to the letters to the editor section. The section was perceived by participants as a place where community members could offer their voice in the *Nelson*

County Times. However, participants perceive that the news organization limits the people who write letters. "It's like six people that contribute," Xavier said. "I don't know if there is only six people who write or the newspaper only publishes those six people." Xavier said, either way, he wants "more voices from Nelson County" in the newspaper. Many other participants discussed the limited number of letter writers. Said Greg:

> I will read the letters, but after 30 years of reading (letter writer), I know exactly what he's going to say. He's in there every week. I don't know if there's any oversight, but, if I was the editor of that paper, I'd want to have different people writing. Maybe nobody is writing and they have to fill the space.

Maria said the letters to the editor section is a "little dance of death." She said, "there are no new people that write in." She suggested that the news organization "solicit new contributors from the community." Paula said she has "written a few" letters and she reads the letters-to-the-editor section. "But it's usually the same people writing letters to the editor," she said. They are such regulars, that when one of the writers did not publish for a couple of weeks, Vanessa was worried. "I hope he's OK," she said of the regular writer. The frequency of the writers infuriates Erin, who unlike the other participants in this paragraph is not a current subscriber but a former subscriber. "Here's something that I hate about this paper," she said. "If you look week to week, they'll have two letters to the editor and they are always the same people. They'll write an entire page. And it's always the same guys. I swear to God, they pay them."

While participants expressed respect for the monitorial role of the *Nelson County Times,* they also expressed concerns that the news organization focuses *too* much on governmental and civic news, at the expense of good neighbor content. In practice, this good neighbor content highlights the good acts and successes of residents, offers

solutions to the worst of an area's problems and tells residents how they can help each other.

Participants express a desire for this type of content but perceive the news organization, instead, is dedicated to its monitorial role. As Brian said simply, "less meetings, more people." Vanessa said the news organization does a good job with the "easy stuff they give you," referring to government meetings that "I could watch if I wanted to." But she wanted more. "Work a little," she said. Said Maria: "If they want to be a richer and more useful instrument to the community, they need to flip over a few rocks and find the little stuff," she said. Maria was not referring to investigative journalism, or "gotcha journalism," as she called it, but instead of telling the untold stories of the county. "Tell the stories that aren't overt, that aren't obvious," she said. "Write about the cool things people in the county are doing." For examples, participants described wanting stories on social workers who are helping solve drug issues in the county, stories on how volunteers help the poorer residents and address the economic gap in the county and stories on the successes of small business owners.

Participants expressed wanting content that helps make Nelson County a better place for Nelson County residents. For instance, Sarah said, "we have a serious issue of affordable apartments for lower-income people." She said she wants a story offering solutions and telling her how she can "help those who need to be helped." When Brian, a Nelson County native, talked about why he canceled his *Nelson County Times* subscription, he described a desire for content that fits into the good neighbor role. When I asked why he canceled, Brian said, "why fund money to a newspaper when you don't feel like they are even adequately covering or taking care of Nelson?" I responded that,

"'Taking care of' is an interesting phrase. Can you expand on that?" He said, "Nelson County is being eaten alive by meth — no ifs, ands or buts. And the paper doesn't really cover it at all." Brian would like the news organization to spotlight the issue, show how other counties have addressed similar problems and offer ideas to fix the problem in Nelson County. The *Nelson County Times* "could help," he said, "if it cared about Nelson."

In sum, the expectations of the participants in Nelson County do not match the performance of the *Nelson County Times.* The participants perceive that the news organizations too heavily emphasizes its monitorial role, especially in coverage of government meetings. The participants, instead, seek more coverage in line with the good neighbor role of journalism. Additionally, Nelson County participants express wanting to hear a wider variety of Nelson County voices in the newspaper, including in the letters to the editor section. Mutual expectations of journalists and audience is crucial to a positive experience for those involved (Wilhelm, Stehle & Detel, 2021). This disconnection could factor into audience members choosing other sources for news and information, as detailed in the next section. Taken together with the preceding section, Nelson County participants perceive that the *Nelson County Times* reporters are outsiders who do not tell the stories of the insiders, in this case the regular residents of Nelson County.

Perceptions of Facebook Group

This final section builds on the first two sections of this chapter. The first section established that participants perceived the *Nelson County Times* reporters as outsiders in Nelson County and questioned their local knowledge in reporting on the people and

events in the county. As part of the second section, I examined how participants were mostly indifferent toward the news organization's monitorial role, critical of their performance as facilitators and expressed an expectation for forms of journalism that played the role of good neighbor. In this third section, I consider the appeal of the widely used Facebook group Nelson Knows as an option for Nelson County participants. Participants appreciate that the Facebook group allows anyone to offer their voice, which is counter to their criticisms of the letters to the editor section. The Facebook group allows participants — including local political officials — to circumvent the news organization altogether.

Facebook as a Source of News and Information in Context

This section connects this dissertation to two important lines of research. First, research has explored the appeal of digital platforms, including Facebook, for news and information consumption, namely the control and flexibility the platforms permit consumers. Second, research has explored the ramifications of these appeals for journalism, especially challenging the industry's traditional top-down approach highlighted in gatekeeping theory.

Since the advent of the internet, scholars of digital media have focused on the role played by message boards, online groups and social media as platforms through which individuals can find and engage with news and information. These venues offer individuals greater control and flexibility in selecting news and information based on the individual needs and interests (Yadamsuren and Erdelez 2016). Consumers no longer have to be loyal to a small number of avenues, and, instead, can build a "personal news menu" across a wide variety of platforms (Costera Meijer, 2020, p. 391). In 2008, the

New York Times magazine quoted news industry leaders discussing the personalized news trend. “Everyone’s composing their own flow. And once you start becoming the composer of your own flow, you can’t go back” (quoted in Webster, 2014, p. 65).

When there is a perceived lack of coverage from traditional local media, or even dissatisfaction with coverage, audience members can create and use location-based online groups (Dickens, Couldry & Fotopoulou, 2015, Chen et al., 2012). These groups include user-managed groups within larger social networking sites such as Facebook and Nextdoor (Mosconi et al., 2017; Mathews, 2020). In such groups, posts included personal experiences of residents, but also shared content from local government officials and local police (López et al., 2017). In addition to filling perceived gaps in news and information, the online groups generate conversation about news and a sense of community for members (Swart, Peters & Broersma, 2019).

In their study, which is the closest in relation to this dissertation, Swart, Peters and Broersma likened the location-based Facebook group to weekly newspapers (2019). Their study used focus groups and explored private Facebook groups more broadly. One of the focus groups (between 6-8 people; researchers were not specific) addressed a location-based Facebook group (other groups were work-related and leisure-related). The location-based focus group’s participants lived in a major regional city (200,000 people) in the Netherlands. This current dissertation study offers a unique examination of local-based Facebook groups in a small, rural community, and it allows a direct comparison to an established newspaper for how residents obtain news and information about their community.

Research has found that despite the appearance of openness in these spaces, they can be toxic, harmful and exclusionary. For instance, a recent study found that Nextdoor, which focuses specifically on connecting people within their local neighborhoods, was a source for the mass distribution of misinformation about the coronavirus (O'Brien, 2021). Research also has highlighted how these digital platforms have produced inequality and racism. Specifically to Nextdoor, research has found users articulate racial differences as criminality and threat, with participants policing and attempting to "push out Black residents (including by calling police) without ever explicitly saying they do not wish to live with them" (Kurwa, 2019, p. 2).

Digital technologies have increased access to the dissemination of news, allowing audience influence in the news process, and confronting journalism's traditional responsibility as a gatekeeper (Singer, 2014; Picone, De Wolf & Robijt 2016; Wallace, 2018). News consumers can circumvent news organizations altogether, with Robinson (2007, p. 318) writing, "the news is no longer the sole purview of the press." This clashes with research on gatekeeping theory (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009; Singer, 2014; Lewis, 2012). This work details a top-down editorial process by which journalists sort through the innumerable messages available and allow worthy news and information through the gate and to the news consumers (Wallace, 2018; Reader, 2021). Now, as gatekeeping theory scholars wrote, news consumers now have "their own gate" (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009, p. 124). This "democratization of media production" (Lewis, Kaufhold, & Lasorsa, 2010, p. 164) challenges journalistic authority, a ramification addressed in this chapter's conclusion (Carlson, 2017; Zelizer, 1990).

A fundamental component of the identified audience turn in journalism studies is challenging the assumption that news produced by journalists is informative, meaningful and salient to news consumers (Costera Meijer, 2020; Swart et al., 2022; Moe & Ytre-Arne, 2022). That simply might not be the case for some news consumers. The old-fashioned "we write, you read" (Deuze, 2003, p. 220) model of news and information with the "media imposing the content on users whose only option is to consume or not to come the news" (Karlsson & Strömbäck, 2010, p. 4) is a relic of the past. Audience members now have other options. They can ignore the news and information that is not informative, meaningful and salient, and they can create and distribute their own news and information on a variety of digital spaces, including Facebook.

In Nelson County

In this section, Nelson County participants express the value of Nelson Knows as an option for news and information that aligns with the three roles of journalism addressed above, the roles of monitor, facilitator and good neighbor.

As noted above, participants were not critical of the *Nelson County Times'* monitorial role of journalism, especially coverage of government and civic issues. More damning, they said they do not *need* the newspaper for such news and information. "We get our information from other sources now," said Carson, a subscriber in his 70's. "We didn't have those other sources before in Nelson County. But now we do. Nelson Knows." On Nelson Knows, participants said they get their governmental and civic news directly from the elected officials. "Straight from the horse's mouth," Carson said. "I like that." Participants said they value the effort of elected officials to post on Nelson Knows. Said Sarah, who has never subscribed to the newspaper: "I think people just appreciate

them trying to share as much information to anyone in the community as they can. (One elected official) shares all of his updates on Nelson Knows." Paula, a current newspaper subscriber, perceives the elected officials use the platform to encourage public attendance at meetings and events and do not use it for their political gain. "Hey, 'we're having a meeting on such and such a date, or a town hall,'" she said of examples. "It is objective. Announcements, that kind of thing."

Participants said other government agencies post on Nelson Knows, too. Nicole, a former newspaper subscriber in her 30's, said earlier in 2022 there was a shooting in the county. "I was following that (news) pretty closely," she said. I asked, "where were you following that?" She responded, "Nelson Knows. The Nelson County Sheriff's department posted updates into the Nelson Knows group." When residents' tax assessments spiked in early 2022, Fred said there was a lot of outrage on Nelson Knows, until one of the elected officials calmed the waters.

> He came on Nelson Knows and said, 'My assessment went up just like yours did.' That was helpful. He told folks, 'We are going to do something about it. It's just not happening tomorrow. But we are on it.' When he was able to go on and do that, then everything kind of calmed down.

Kevin, for one, does not like receiving information straight from government officials. He is a former subscriber and has lived in Nelson County for almost 20 years. Kevin said in his career he has worked with government officials. "I know what happens when legislatures have really no oversight by the press," he said. Kevin's example here refers to the national level, but he brought it up in context of Nelson County.

Other participants, like Dorothy, said they are "more than fine" without the independent vetting of a news organization for political and civic news and information. "The county officials do a good job of keeping us all updated on Nelson Knows," said

Dorothy, who in her 50's and has never subscribed to the paper in her five years of living in the county. I asked her if she was comfortable getting government and civic related news from the elected officials instead of independent journalists. "More than fine," Dorothy said. I asked Sarah, who has never subscribed to the paper in her decade in the county, the same, and she said she had "no problem with that." Ben, a Nelson County native and former subscriber, added, "I'm good with it." Said Dorothy, "we know them. We trust them. They're our neighbors." Especially for those, like above, who are not subscribers to the newspaper, the Facebook group offers an acceptable alternative to obtain news and information about governmental and civic issues. Important, as well, these above comments suggest it does not matter if a participant is a Nelson County native or not or depend on how long they have lived in the county.

Participants perceive they can rely on each other for non-civic news and information in the county, with county residents serving as "reporters," and replacements for the absent and outsider *Nelson County Times* reporters. During my interview with Gina, I asked her what the most important news topic was in the county. She said the evolving mask mandate related to the coronavirus pandemic. I asked Gina where she would read about that. "Nelson Knows," she said. "A friend, who has a high-school aged child, posts voluminously on Nelson Knows. She writes at length and she writes reasonably well. She probably would cover it." The word choice caught my attention. "You used the word 'cover.' That's interesting. That's a journalistic term." Gina responded, "Right. She is almost like a reporter." Any person, thus, can be a "reporter." As another example, Carla said she and a friend once drove up to an accident that had stopped traffic. Carla's friend got out of the car and talked to the attending police officer.

When Carla's friend returned to the car, she posted about the wreck on Nelson Knows. "You've got people that aren't trained reporters or journalists asking questions and trying to figure things out," Carla said.

Untrained reporters acting as reporters can lead to inaccurate information. Kim, a former subscriber in her 20's, recalled an instance in which someone posted incorrect information about a tiny-house community established in the county. Instead of the correct number of 6-10 houses, the post said the community would be 60 houses. "It incited a firestorm," Kim said. "Nelson Knows, you know when you're going in that this is just random people. They're just spitting shit. They don't know what they are talking about." Said Paula: "It's not a professional entity. It's not a professional organization, so you're getting misinformation." Added Olivia: "Sources aren't checked. Anybody can post anything. It's just out there, and it takes a life of its own."

Participants perceive the chance for any Nelson County resident to offer their voice as a strength of the location-based Facebook group Nelson Knows, a contrast to the critiques above of the *Nelson County Times'* facilitator role. In our conversation, Paula, a current newspaper subscriber, discussed the ability of distributing news and information on Nelson Knows. "Nelson Knows is democratic," she said. "Anybody can write on it. It's democratic, with a little 'd.' Don't you agree?" I responded, "I can see that. Is that a good thing or a bad thing?" "I think it's good," she said. Said Elton: "It's a free voice. It's a way to be heard by the masses of people that otherwise wouldn't give you the time of day." With Nelson Knows, "nobody is telling you that you can't do something," Nicole said. "You can post whatever you want." Xavier said content in the newspaper is "considered and scripted," versus "Nelson Knows, it's more raw. Raw. I mean, off the

top of my head kind of things that people are thinking about. It's more stream of consciousness stuff, which can give insight."

Posting "whatever you want" may include news and information about the county, commentary on happenings of the county or suggestions for how to help make Nelson County a better place to live. This is content that aligns with the good neighbor role of journalism. For instance, Fred described Nelson Knows as a "Yelp for Nelson County." As he said, "we don't live in the information age anymore; we live in an editorial age." Posts can be about great things going on in the county, like a farmers market or a new food truck starting. "I can keep up with local trends through that," Nicole said of Nelson Knows. "Food trucks that are new to the area, new businesses that are opening, new people that are in town looking for something."

Participants described Nelson Knows as the place to understand the pulse of the county. "It's the one that keeps us more in touch than anything else," Dorothy said of Nelson Knows, as a direct comparison to the *Nelson County Times.* Danielle, a Nelson County native, offered perhaps the ultimate piece of advice for the *Nelson County Times.* "If I was a reporter for the *Nelson County Times,* I would just go to Nelson Knows. What is the community talking about? Well, you go to Nelson Knows, that's the real story of Nelson County." In other words, for Nelson County participants, the "real story" is about us and *from* us.

Conclusion

This chapter concludes the dissertation's discussion that participants in rural Nelson County express wanting news and information that is *Our News, For Us, From*

Us. In this chapter, participants offered perceptions of the journalists, journalism and Facebook as an alternative to traditional journalism in Nelson County.

Participants in Nelson County perceive the *Nelson County Times,* which has covered the rural county for nearly 150 years, is, in fact, not local. The first two findings chapters examined this perception on two levels, the organization level and the content level. This chapter examines a third level, that of the journalists. Participants perceive the *Nelson County Times* reporters as not local, or outsiders who lack the local knowledge to properly understand the events, issues and people of Nelson County. Even worse, the participants perceive the reporters do not care about Nelson County or its residents. The perceptions align the Nelson County journalists with research on parachute journalism, where journalists from afar come into an area and misinterpret local context. However, previous research points to journalists from nearby metropolitan news organizations as the parachute journalists. What is noteworthy about this study is that it finds reporters from a rural news organization to be considered parachute journalists by the participants who live in the rural county covered by the organization.

This chapter also finds the participants do not express value in classic journalistic roles, especially the monitorial function of gathering, deciphering and distributing information. While not overly critical of the news organization's monitorial role, the participants simply did not value it. They were comfortable circumventing the weekly news organization, getting government and civic news and information straight from the county's elected officials on Nelson Knows. "We know them," said a participant who is not a Nelson County native and has lived in the county only five years. "We trust them,"

the participant said of the elected officials. "They're our neighbors." Meanwhile, they do not know the *Nelson County Times* reporters.

In the end, the perspectives articulated in this section call to question the journalistic authority of the weekly *Nelson County Times.* As Carlson (2017, p. 5) writes, "authority is the central element that makes journalism work." Journalistic authority relates to the legitimacy of journalists as acting as a surrogate witness, distilling the information and making sense of it in reports to the public (Zelizer, 1992). In short, Winch (1997) argues that journalism's authority "depends on the ability of people to distinguish between it and other kinds of mass communication" (p. 3). To be sure, questioning journalistic authority is not unique to Nelson County or this study. However, in Nelson County, the question is more about who is given the authority to provide news and information about Nelson County. The participants in Nelson County see the *Nelson County Times* journalists as outsiders, instead saying they place more value on Nelson Knows content because it is "from us."

To close this final findings chapter, I want to go back to the beginning, to the introduction chapter of this dissertation. It was there that I introduced the story of Anne Adams, the owner of a weekly newspaper in the western part of Virginia. Adams, who has owned *The Recorder* for 30 years, wrote to her readers that the publication was on the verge of death. The community members saved the organization, buying subscriptions and advertisements and flooding the news organization with donations. I relayed this story of Adams to participants if we discussed the financial futures of the *Nelson County Times* and/or news organizations at large.

I asked participants if a similar response would happen if the *Nelson County Times* faced similar survival challenges as Adams news organization. The overwhelming response was, "No." "I would be very surprised if they had that kind of a reaction," said Carson, a current subscriber. Participants perceived a personal connection between Adams and her readers, a relationship built over three decades. Participants said there is no such connection with journalists from the *Nelson County Times.* "She is the newspaper there," Carson said. "We don't know who the newspaper is here." Carla said that *The Recorder* readers demonstrated an "outpouring of love for one of theirs." Nancy used similar language, saying, "it was her paper. They weren't going to let her go down. She's cared and respected in the community. She was one of theirs."

Chapter 7: Conclusion

This dissertation draws from social identity theory (Brown, 2000; Shareef et al., 2020) as a framework to investigate rural spaces, rural people and the rural lived experience of news and information consumption. In Nelson County, Virginia, the rural home to about 15,000 people and the case study location for this dissertation, participants exhibit characteristics of a rural social identity, including a sense of pride in the county and a sense their lived experience is one of a distinct rural way of life, distinct from others in metropolitan areas (Alkon & Traugot, 2008; Hmielowski, Heffron & Munroe, 2021). In this dissertation, the perceptions the participants offer of what "local" means to them and what factors contribute to their sources of news and information suggest that they seek to reinforce that rural social identity. In other words, the participants seek content that puts the in-group Nelson County residents in a positive light.

This project sought to explore how rural residents obtain news and information that is salient in their everyday lives and what guides their evaluations of their choices. It also explores the role of a traditional weekly newspaper organization in today's 24/7 news and information environment. The weekly *Nelson County Times* has served Nelson County for nearly 150 years. Since its creation in 2016, Nelson Knows, a location-based Facebook group, has served as another option for news and information about Nelson County. This dissertation uses in-depth interviews with 40 residents of Nelson County, among the most rural of the 95 counties in the state of Virginia. As noted in Chapter 3, the participants included a mix of 10 current *Nelson County Times* subscribers, 15 former subscribers and 15 participants who never subscribed to the weekly newspaper. Twenty-two of the participants were female, and 18 were male. Thirty-four participants were

white, and six were non-white, matching the non-white percentage of residents in Nelson County (15%).

To unpack this dissertation's theoretical findings, this conclusion chapter's first four sections are divided as follows. First, I identify how Nelson County participants express a rural social identity. Then, I summarize the dissertation's three primary theoretical contributions. First, I argue that "local" is perceived as a shared sense of ownership, meaning Nelson County participants express a sense of "ours" in relation, especially, to businesses owned by Nelson County residents. This is not an actual financial ownership, but, instead, a sense of a shared experience. Second, I extend the applicability of social identity theory into audiences of local and rural news. This study finds that Nelson County participants express seeking content that reinforces their rural social identity and prefer content created by fellow in-group members of Nelson County. Third, building on the first two contributions, I offer the theoretical construct Our Good Neighbor for journalism studies literature. It serves a means to articulate a best practice, acknowledging many news organizations strive to meet the concept's ideals. This chapter concludes with a discussion of this dissertation's limitations and opportunities for future research projects.

A Rural Social Identity

This dissertation's theoretical arguments are constructed on the self-representations of rural participants in Nelson County. They exhibited characteristics of a rural social identity, which, as discussed in Chapter 2, refers to a positive in-group distinction with other members of Nelson County (Lunz Trujillo, 2022). This distinction

is important for this case as it serves as the lens through which the Nelson County participants view their world. In this section, I summarize the discussion in Chapter 4, in which interviews suggest the participants share a rural social identity.

Social identity theory has two key components. First, a person's sense of identity is shaped by association in a group with others like them. Studies have explored a variety of social groups, including ethnic groups (McKinley, Masto & Warber, 2014), age demographics (Knobloch-Westerwick & Hastall, 2010) and professional groups, including photojournalists (Ferrucci, Taylor & Alaimo, 2020). Second, people want to see themselves positively, building and maintain a positive self-esteem (James, 1890; Goffman, 1959). The concept of self-esteem refers to a person's evaluation of themselves. A theoretical review found the idea that people are motivated to sustain high levels of self-esteem as so widely accepted by scholars they use the concept "without providing justification or explanation" (Pyszczynski et al., 2004, p. 435). In short, a person's perception of themselves "derives from membership in a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership" (Tajfel, 1982, p. 63). People differentiate themselves with members of their own in-group and members of the out-group.

Social identity theory is not the only theory that has helped explain how people perceive identity. Another major theory often used to explore identity is identity theory (Stryker, 1968; Burke & Stets, 2009). Identity theory is based on symbolic interactionists principles, which detail how we define ourselves through the eyes of others (Mead, 1934; Quist-Adade, 2019). A core idea of identity theory is that a person identifies themselves as an occupant of a role, and these roles influence what a person does in a given situation

(Stets & Burke, 2000; Thoits, 2020). For example, a person may be an owner, a mother, a volunteer, among many other roles. Individuals obtain a sense of identity from these positions and their roles in groups (Bruskin, 2018; Hamilton, 2019). In exploring Nelson County, the role identity is not necessarily the salient distinction, rather this dissertation focuses on group membership as a Nelson County resident, a rural context.

Scholars have used the social identity framework and applied it to rural settings. Most frequently, political communications researchers use the framework to explore the differences between urban and rural residents as it relates to voting and political behavior (Mendelberg, 2017; Hochschild, 2018). As in this dissertation, these scholars found a rural social identity in which people feel the need to create a positive in-group distinction, a perception of being ridiculed or ignored by outsiders and a sense of loss or deterioration in the group (Jacobs & Munis, 2019; Nemerever & Rogers, 2021). This dissertation, though, does not engage with social identity theory in the political context, but in the context of understanding what "local" means to participants and how their rural social identity might influence their decisions regarding local news and information.

In Nelson County, participants exhibited a rural social identity, perceiving challenges that are unique to them in their rural way of life. For instance, participants described lacking amenities, like home garbage service, that others, especially in metropolitan areas, take for granted. The windy mountain roads and the wide spaces between homes make it untenable for garbage collection companies, so residents in must drive their garbage to the county. Participants also lamented employment opportunities, especially for the county's next generation, and even expressed understanding why younger professionals, including newly professional journalists, might not want to locate

in Nelson County, as there is less for them to do in Nelson County than in major metropolitan cities. The participants questioned if they were worthy of some of the amenities in larger communities, like a franchise grocery store or a global fast-food restaurant. This was especially the case for longtime residents, who understood what it was like, for instance, to drive a half-hour for a fast-food hamburger. These perceptions might suggest an insecurity of the county or questioning if it deserves the same amenities found in metropolitan areas.

The participants perceive they are ignored and not represented in regional news organizations, including television stations and regional newspapers within an hour of the county seat. They perceive these news organizations only cover Nelson County when news is "major," which participants described as controversial or news placing Nelson County in a poor light. Participants perceive these news organizations rarely provide stories that demonstrate the positive aspects the participants see in Nelson County.

Finally, the Nelson County participants sense they have suffered loss. The most notable loss came a half-century ago, when Hurricane Camille killed 124 county residents. They also articulated loss as it relates to local businesses. Participants, especially Nelson County natives, lamented the closure of a long-standing locally hardware store, for example. A participant called the business a "bedrock of Nelson" and that it was a "sad day when they went away," and another participant called it a "travesty" when it closed. Most pronounced, participants bemoaned when a brewery, founded and owned by a Nelson County family, was sold to a global conglomerate, removing ownership from the county. The interviews with Nelson County participants suggest a sense of precarity in Nelson County, or a concern for the county's future,

illuminating their rural social identity and aligning with prior research on rural social identity (Cramer, 2016).

A group's identity is never secure, but it is reinforced and proven more salient than intergroup differentiations when there is a sense of inferiority or loss, as noted above in Nelson County (Trujillo & Crowley, 2022; Bai & Federico, 2021). In Nelson County, participants discussed three distinctions that make the county unique to them. First, there is a geographic separation with a mountain ridge dividing the county. Second, there is a wealth gap between the poor and the rich. And, third, there is a distinction between newcomers and natives, or, as the participants describe, the "come-here's" and the "from-here's." Participants said these distinctions make it challenging to have a county-wide sense of community, which has been defined by social psychologists as a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling members matter to one another and a feeling members have a shared commitment to each other (Hassanli, Walters & Williamson, 2021; McMillan & Chavis, 1986). The Nelson County participants expressed a pride in the county, in particular as it relates to the success of local residents and local businesses. In the section below, I articulate how participants comments align with research on psychological collective ownership (Gray, Knight & Baer, 2020; Yttermyr & Wennberg, 2019), which has been found to strengthen the relationships between group members.

Local as a Shared Sense of Ownership

This dissertation uses a bottom-up inductive approach to interviews. Instead of providing pre-determined definitions for concepts, such as local, participants framed the concepts in their own words. In Nelson County, "local" especially was salient during

conversations about businesses owned by Nelson County residents. While collective psychological ownership is predominantly used in organizational and management research (Henssen et al., 2014; Dawkins et al., 2017), its framework aligned with participant perceptions in Nelson County. Participants expressed feelings of "ours," or a sense of shared ownership, especially in relation to local businesses (Pierce, Kostova & Dirks, 2001).

A sense of psychological ownership, a sense of "mine," is omnipresent and develops early in life, which children as young as 2 years old having a sense of ownership (Neary et al., 2009; Ross et al., 2015). For collective psychological ownership to emerge, individuals must have a sense of ownership toward the shared target, such as a restaurant, but also must have a sense of group identity with others who share ownership with that restaurant (Verkuyten et al., 2015; Brylka et al., 2015). Scholars have found that when group members have a sense of collective ownership, they are more likely to invest time and make personal sacrifices for the target, or entity of collective ownership, such as a restaurant (Kanngiesser et al., 2014; Levene et al., 2015).

In Nelson County, participants expressed making personal sacrifices for the success of local restaurants. This was especially noted during the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants said they frequented restaurants even though they should not spend money out at restaurants. They expressed a fear of the restaurant closing, adding to the previous losses in the county, without their financial support. In the case of a restaurant, one owned by a person who lives and is active in the county, that restaurant is ours. Its success is our success. When the Nelson County-founded brewery was sold to a global company, participants perceived the brewery no longer to be local, even though its

location in Nelson County did not change. Participants described not visiting the brewery and no longer buying its beer after the sale. In short, they were no longer invested in the brewery. To them, it was no longer ours. In the same vein, the *Nelson County Times,* which has served the county for almost 150 years, is not perceived as theirs.

This present study brings the work on collective psychological ownership into the conversations of journalism studies and, more broadly, about "local." The local is seen as subjective to the individual (Ali, 2017). For instance, local is different to someone in Nelson County than to a person in metropolitan Washington, D.C., and local may mean something different to people within different neighborhoods of Washington, D.C. (Barnhurst, 2016; Coleman et al., 2016). The vagueness is messy for scholars to utilize and operationalize (Napoli et al., 2017). Geographic-based meanings of local, especially, matter regarding policy. For instance, in late 2021, policymakers struggled to define "local newspaper" in formulating a proposal for providing a tax credit to local news producers in the United States (Kirkpatrick, 2021).

Geographic-based meanings of local matter for news organizations, including their coverage area, print delivery areas, etc. As Ali (2017, p. 32) wrote "the local cannot be reduced exclusively to geographic place, nor can geography be entirely ignored." Local is contextual and contingent on many things, such as stage of life. A person might feel more of a sense of local where they grew up, compared to where they current live. A person might live in a city served by one local government, work in another and spend their money in yet another jurisdiction. In short, Ali argues that a local *is* a place on a map, but it is also "an experience that differs from person to person and place to place" (p. 33).

This dissertation contributes to the discussion of local from a sociological approach with the Nelson County audience members shaping the meaning of local. Scholars argue that in order to give the local its due it requires understanding the relational quality of space, or what scholars have referred to as a "sense of place" (Robinson, 2018; Harvey, 1996). This harkens to the classical sociological distinction between Gemeinschaft (community) and Gesellschaft (society) (Tönnies, 1897). Gieryn (2000, p. 465) writes that "space is what place becomes when the unique fathering of things, meanings and values are sucked out. … Place is space filled up by people, practices, objects and representations." Roudometof (2019, p. 807) argues that "to think of local as a space becomes inherently deficient as an intellectual strategy." In other words, we must understand local not as a location but as a lived experience of those in the location. In Nelson County, the lived experience of local is one of a shared sense of ownership, represented through perceptions of personal sacrifices for the benefit of a locally owned business.

Reinforcing Rural Social Identity

This dissertation draws from the social identity framework, which highlights the importance of groups, in order to make sense of our social world and our place in it (Abrams, Lalot & Hogg, 2021; Steffens et al., 2021). Social identity theory argues that people differentiate between their own in-group and other out-group by either seeking positive values of their own in-group or negative characteristics to the out-group. Media plays a part in this process. A contribution of this dissertation is extending the application

of social identity theory into a study of American rural and local news and information seeking.

Previous research has highlighted that media has the potential to influence the significance of groups for members and contribute to audience perceptions of those groups. For example, research has found that Hispanic and Latinx Americans make media choices to bolster their social identity. A study found that Latino Americans associate positive group identity characteristics in Spanish-language television compared to associations of discrimination against Latinos in English-language television (Ortiz & Behm-Morawitz, 2015). Other studies have found Black news users spent more time with news that presented Black people positively (Appriah, Knobloch-Westerwick & Alter, 2013). Scholars have argued that media organizations can emphasize delivering and emphasizing a social identity rather than just information, a phenomenon recognized in partisan media, such as Fox News (Peck, 2019).

Though not specific to media studies, communication scholars offer findings that relate to this study. For example, scholars have found that a shared social identity may motivate individuals to be more receptive to a message and that people may pay more attention to a message from another in-group member (Bentley et. al., 2017; Kane, 2010). In an experiment, Greenaway et al. (2015) had participants build a model using instructions that were said to be created by an in-group or an out-group member. The researchers found participants made models of "objectively better quality" when working from communications created by an in-group member (p. 171). The authors argued that it is "shared social identity, rather than the content of the identity, that is the critical ingredient of successful communication" (ibid, p. 179).

In Nelson County, participants perceived the *Nelson County Times* journalists as out-group members, who do not live in the county nor are active in the county. Meanwhile, they find the content creators on the location-based Facebook group, Nelson Knows, as fellow in-group members. The participants also expressed seeking news and information that reinforces their rural social identity. They said they wanted content that painted Nelson County in a positive light and reinforced to residents why they love where they live. They said such content included beautiful pictures of the county, stories of success of the people in the county and stories of success of the locally owned businesses of the county. The participants indicated that they turned to a location-based Facebook group and not the nearly 150-year-old weekly newspaper, for such information and news.

This content could be considered to fit representations of the rural idyll. The rural idyll reflects a romanticized representation of rural, and scholars have argued it is a means to emphasize national and moral identity and serve as an entry point for nostalgia (Lichter & Ziliak, 2017; Heley, 2010). The rural idyll has been criticized for representing a white, middle-class, hard-working culture, denying space for minorities (Inwood & Bonds, 2017; Hubbard, 2005). Media scholars have found that smaller news organizations construct the rural idyll representation, instead of deliver information needs for the community (Scott & Biron, 2016; Williams, Harte & Turner, 2015). One study in Australia found that a small news organization emphasized notions of community togetherness "by refraining from publishing content that could contest those values. This suggests that rural news media are also responsible for contributing to rural idyll representations" (Freeman, 2020, p. 534). In Nelson County, content that could represent

the rural idyll is also content sought out by participants and content that reinforces their rural social identity.

"Our Good Neighbor"

Empirically, this study found the Nelson County participants do not perceive the weekly *Nelson County Times* to be local. They see this distinction on three levels. First, the news organization is not owned or operated by a Nelson County resident. Second, the news organization too frequently offers content that is not about them, meaning the Nelson County residents. Third, participants perceive the news organization's journalists do not live in the county, are not active in the county and do not care about the county. The participants identify the journalists as members of the out-group, compared to the in-group Nelson County residents. These empirical findings are detailed more in Chapters 4-6, respectively.

The question is: What are news organizations to do? The notion of Our Good Neighbor might be a way forward. This section articulates that idea.

In this dissertation, I have used the journalistic role of "good neighbor." Scholars developed this term as a contrast to the traditional watchdog role of journalism. Heider, McCombs and Poindexter (2006, p. 78) defined the role as "caring about the community, reporting on interesting people and groups, understanding the local community, and offering solutions." They used survey research, finding that residents in smaller communities, like rural Nelson County, preferred "good neighbor" journalism as opposed to watchdog journalism. That contrasted the journalists, who preferred watchdog journalism. Scholars have utilized the good neighbor construct (see Moon & Lawrence,

2021; Costera Meijer 2010), though there has been less of a theoretical discussion of the construct.

I propose to extend this work by arguing that news organizations and their journalists should strive toward building relationship with readers in which the readers feel the organization is not only *a* good neighbor, but Our Good Neighbor. This is not a dichotomy, or a choice between Our Good Neighbor and, for instance, watchdog journalism, as in the work noted above. In this theoretical construct, Our Good Neighbor is not a role, but a mission.

Building on the findings in Nelson County and the theoretical discussion above related to social identity and collective psychological ownership, especially, in this dissertation, *Our Good Neighbor refers to people and entities that have care, empathy, and service as central values, are present, embedded, and active in the community, foster relationships that generate a sense of ownership for community residents and, broadly, strive to make the community a better place to live through actions and journalism.*

First, this concept builds from the notion that rural residents' lived experience of "local" is "ours," or a "shared sense of ownership." As Our Good Neighbor, news organizations build relationships to the point where residents share a sense of ownership of the news organization. As observed in collective psychological ownership, if people can have a sense of "us," they can have a sense of "ours." As Our Good Neighbor, the news organization must be perceived as part of "us" in the community it covers. Second, a news organization must be a "good neighbor." First and foremost, Our Good Neighbor, in fact, is a neighbor. Unlike in Nelson County, journalists should live in the community

they cover, be active in the community they cover and, broadly, care about the community they cover.

What does that mean in practice? While this notion addresses the actual journalism, it goes beyond the mere emphasis on content. Our Good Neighbor has compassion as a goal. It shares similar characteristics of solutions or constructive journalism, which has been defined as "rigorous news reporting about how people are responding to social problems" by providing solutions (McIntyre & Lough, 2021, p. 1558). Solutions journalism is sometimes defined by what it is not, and it is not "good news" journalism. Davies (1999, p. 62) gave examples of individual success stories that have "little application to relevance to ordinary people." In this way, I argue that Our Good Neighbor differentiates from solutions journalism, because it *does* allow, and encourages, stories of individual success of those in the community. This notion shares ideas with journalistic boosterism (Hardin 2005; Gutsche, 2015), which has been described as teetering on "cheerleading," especially for local businesses.

Our Good Neighbor cares not only about the community at large, but the community members. The notion emphasizes caring for those who need care in the community. In this vein, it follows scholarship on an ethics of care in journalism. Journalism based on an ethic of care "is "based on maintaining and fostering relationships, and has empathy and responsibility as its central values" (Vanacker & Breslin, 2006, p. 196) and privileges "the problems, concerns, stories and counter stories of marginalized or subordinated people" (Steiner & Okrusch, 2006, p. 115). This does not mean the news organization should avoid criticism or fail to hold officials accountable. It

means that journalists should strive to "minimize harm," as some harm is "inevitable in the course of journalistic activity" (Thomas, 2018, p. 223).

Our Good Neighbor has respect for all stakeholders, the sources, the audience and themselves. The notion calls for elements of watchdog journalism, including keeping those in power accountable, but it is not "attack dog" journalism, or "gotcha" journalism, as one participant said referring to aggressive journalistic tactics. The notion does not call for journalists to serve as a journalist all of the time either, demonstrating respect for themselves. This idea encourages journalists not only to understand the local community but be a *part* of the local community. This means having a *presence* in the community. However, this is as the journalists feels comfortable as a person in their regular everyday lives.

Our Good Neighbor tells community members how to help others be good neighbors. In Nelson County, for example, participants wanted more stories that showed how to "help those who need to be helped." That was not the case with the *Nelson County Times.* One participant said the news organization was not helping with the community's meth problem. He said, the paper "could help, if it cared about Nelson."

A key finding in Nelson County was that participants expressed that they were comfortable with — and even preferred — obtaining news and information straight from elected officials on the Facebook group as compared to the news organization. In this case, both the elected officials and the county residents completely circumvent the county's traditional news organization. At a broad level, this could be seen to challenge the news organization's journalistic authority, and, as Carlson (2017, p. 5) writes, "authority is the central element that makes journalism work." Carlson argues that

journalistic authority is relational, fostered through interactions between journalists and the audience members. In Nelson County, and surely in other areas across the country, this relationship could be considered broken. To build, repair or strengthen these relationships, I would encourage to serve as Our Good Neighbor.

Limitations of the Study

To recap, this dissertation is based on a one-county case study. The findings cannot be generalized to rural Virginia or, more broadly, to rural America. This dissertation is lacking comparative elements to the findings based on the 40 in-depth interviews in Nelson County.

For instance, in Nelson County, perceptions of local and the significance of locally owned business factor into the participants' rural social identity. Their perceptions of the weekly newspaper overall, its content and its journalists might stem from their disappointment in the weekly newspaper's ownership. The news organization is part of a national corporation, owned outside of Nelson County. It would be prudent to compare the findings in Nelson County to an area with a weekly newspaper that is independently owned by a person in the community.

Another limitation of this project is based on the recruitment for participants. Of the 40 participants, 10 participants were subscribers of the *Nelson County Times* at the time of the interview. The current subscribers were difficult to recruit. I purchased a front-page advertisement in the *Nelson County Times.* That resulted in just one interview. I utilized snowball sampling to help with this difficult to reach group. This network-based recruitment approach has been criticized for not producing representative samples,

instead emphasizing participants who are more likely to cooperate in the study (Peters, Scott & Geddes, 2019).

The location-based Facebook group Nelson Knows is a central focus of this dissertation. Nearly half of the participants (19 of 40) cited Nelson Knows as to how they learned about this project. That may have led to an over-emphasis of the Facebook group in the analysis and findings. However, there are roughly 15,000 residents of Nelson County, and there are more than 9,000 members of the Facebook group. Only five of the 40 participants said they were not members of Nelson Knows. Two of them are not on Facebook at all. A person in his 70's said they were on Facebook but were unfamiliar with the group. A person in their 60's said they just started a Facebook account a week before our interview and was not aware of the group. One person, who is in their 60's and lived in Nelson County less than five years, had not heard of the Facebook group.

Future Research

I envision several possible follow-up studies, stemming from this dissertation's findings. The first possible study directly relates to the limitations of this project noted above.

First, another case study to compare to Nelson County. One possibility would be a rural county with an independent or family owned weekly news organization. This idea draws inspiration from the story of *The Recorder* and owner and publisher Anne Adams, mentioned in the introductory chapter and again in Chapter 6. Highland County, Virginia, home to *The Record,* certainly would be a possibility for such a comparative study. It would be interesting to interview residents three years after the community members saved the nearly 150-year-old weekly news organization. Such a study would build on

previous research on family owned news organizations (Sybert, 2022; O'Leary, 2003). Sybert argued that the archetype of a family owned newspaper has been used to prolong a glamorized version of journalism's past, impeding visions of potential futures.

Second, a study that explores the issue of people turning to a global corporation, such as Facebook, to suit their needs for "local" news and information. In this dissertation, participants expressed value in local and said they were displeased with the outside corporate ownership of the weekly news organization. However, they heavily rely on Facebook for their local news and information. A future project could directly tackle this tension, which is not investigated in this dissertation. Further research could probe participants to study this seemingly contradictory comfort with Facebook.

Third, a study on rural news leaders' strategies regarding Facebook. This dissertation found Facebook plays a significant role in news and information in Nelson County. In Nelson County, participants perceived that the *Nelson County Times'* Facebook feed, if they even knew of its existence, included frequent non-local content from across the region, state and nation, often posted by its corporate headquarters. This points to opportunities to build on this dissertation but also previous work which found that corporate influence can alter the Facebook feeds of organizations. For instance, one study found that news organizations owned by corporates are more likely to post duplicative, repurposed content over unique local content (Toff & Mathews, 2021). How can news organizations use Facebook to their advantage? How can they use Facebook to encourage community dialogue?

Fourth, a study exploring the role of professional opinion and editorial writing. Everyone can have an opinion and send it out into the world, if they want. So, what does

that mean for news organization editorial writers? I envision three separate studies in this space: (1) A national survey with readers, (2) a series of interviews with professional editorial writers and (3) a to-be-determine case study location, interviewing residents, both readers and non-readers. Opinion journalism is understudied in journalism studies, especially when compared to traditional reporting roles, even though a news organization's editorials offer a view into the perspectives of the news organization (Firmstone, 2019; Hallock, 2007; Thomas, 2019). Scholars, though, have noted the lack of audience perspective of editorial content and how their views of editorial content influence their feelings of the news organization at large (Kelling & Thomas, 2018).

And fifth, a study of The Mayor and The Media. One of the more interesting findings in this dissertation is that participants were "more than fine" receiving news and information straight from elected officials on Facebook, circumventing the news organization. What does this mean for the relationship between elected officials and news organizations? If given the time, I think an ethnography of a rural town, its mayor and the media would be fascinating and, potentially, important in understanding this dynamic. I have a case in mind. In the small Virginia town of Blackstone, Billy Coleburn is the publisher of the town's weekly news organization *and* the town mayor (Virginia Press Association, 2018). From an audience perspective, young citizens have been found to increasingly turn to social media platforms for political information (Chan & Chen, 2021; Parmelee, 2019). Marquart, Ohme and Möller (2020) argue they do so specifically to circumvent any potential influence of traditional news outlets. Research has found that bypassing news organizations is a motivation for audience members following national figures, like former U.S. president Donald Trump, on social media (Kreiss, Lawrence &

McGregor, 2018). Less is understood about such phenomenon at a smaller, more local level.

Conclusion

Roughly 20 percent of the U.S. population lives in a rural area, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. This figure has shrunk dramatically in the last century (in 1910, 55 percent lived in rural areas), as residents have flocked to the bigger cities. There is a sense that rural people feel "left behind" by their urban counterparts, as sociologist Robert Wuthnow (2019) argues. For many, though, the rural spaces are where they *want* to be. In Nelson County, participants expressed pride in the county, identifying challenges that distinguishes their way of life from those outside the county and describing a rural social identity. This social identity includes feelings of loss, insecurity and precarity.

This rural social identity helps shape their perceptions of what it means to be local and plays a role in their decisions about local news and information choices. In Nelson County, participants expressed wanting content that reinforces their rural social identity. Researchers have found strong connections between smaller news organizations and the areas in which they cover (Lauterer, 2006; Garfrerick, 2010; Mathews, 2022). This dissertation offers contrasting findings. Today, consumers seeking news and information have an abundance of choices, and those choices can include their fellow neighbors and just not professional news workers.

Audience members also have another choice: Avoid news entirely. In a 46-nation survey, 38 percent of adults said they "often" or "sometimes" avoid news, up about 9 percent from 2017. In the U.S., the number is 42 percent, up from 38% in 2017 (Newman

et al., 2022). Brazil (54%) and the United Kingdom (46%) are the only nations with a higher rate of avoidance than the U.S. Another study's principle finding was that individuals who believe that news does not impact their everyday lives exhibit lower levels of news consumption (Edgerly, 2021). This suggests a disconnect from what audiences want and what professional journalists deliver. Wilhelm, Stehle and Detel (2021, p. 1005) wrote that "the success of such a relationship depends to a large extent on the fulfillment of mutual expectations." This dissertation offers a view into the ramifications of such a disconnect, with the audience members shunning a nearly 150-year-old weekly news organization and turning to themselves on a location-based Facebook group.

The final question of this dissertation's overall puzzle is this: What are news organizations to do? This dissertation offers a sobering assessment of the rural, weekly newspaper scene for those, like me, who have been fervent proponents of local legacy news. The broader picture of the newspaper environment in the United States is bleak. The Pew Research Center (2021) reports that were half as many journalists in newspaper newsrooms in 2020 compared to 2008, and that is significant as newspapers have been found to set the agenda for their communities, with television and radio outlets relying on the newspapers for their content (Druckman, 2005; Mahone et al., 2019).

Filling journalistic vacancies can be especially difficult for rural news organizations as well (Fargen Walsh & Martin, 2021). To combat this situation, non-profit organizations are attempting to train regular citizens to act as journalists. For instance, in Sweden, an organization called Media Helping Media offers training resources for those in transition states, post-conflict countries and areas where the media

is relatively underdeveloped (Brewer, n.d.). In the United States, a weekly newspaper co-owner and former educator has created curriculum for a community journalism training course, with the goal of turning a "layperson to a functioning newspaper reporter" (Young, n.d.). That program is being adapted state-wide by the Kansas Press Association.

This dissertation points to practical ideas for news organizations. Even if news organizations are part of a national corporation, as in the case of the *Nelson County Times,* they must at least give the appearance of being local. For instance, offer location-specific contact information, even with phone numbers that are re-routed or a P.O. Box addresses, and create dedicated website addresses for the news organizations, instead of the confounding structure in place in Nelson County.

This dissertation suggests that weekly newspaper organizations must overcome the perception that they are *only* weekly newspapers. Either through marketing or sheer persistence, they must make it understood to their audiences that they are a 24/7 digital news operation, similar to larger news organizations. But how do they act as 24/7 news operations with supremely limited personnel? They must prioritize. In Nelson County, participants perceive that the *Nelson County Times* journalists fall back on norms of covering civic and governmental issues, leaving little time for other content. This audience-centered dissertation shows that journalists must prioritize what is important to their audiences — not to them.

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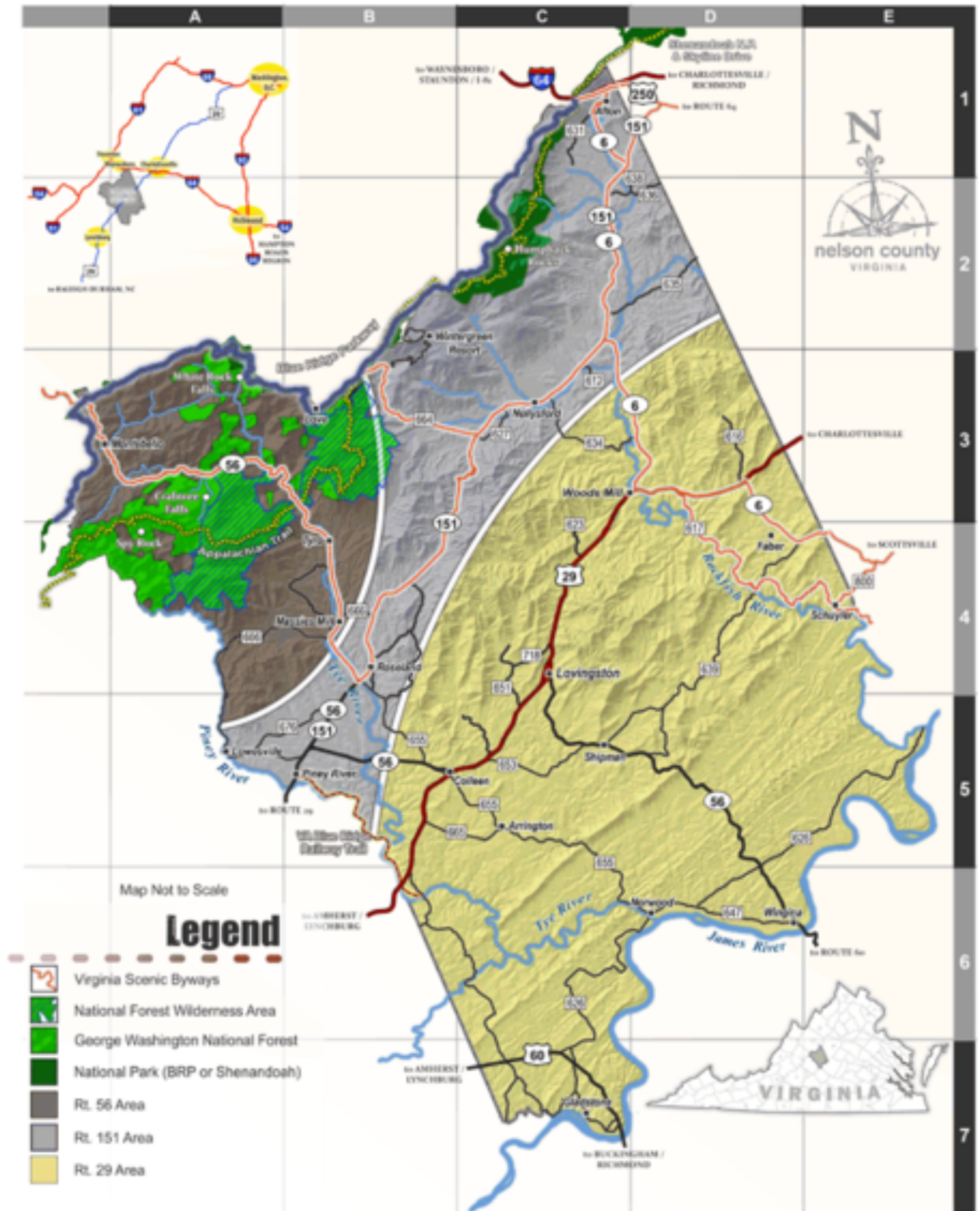
Appendix A: Virginia map

Appendix B: Nelson County map



Appendix C: Facebook Invitation

I am a university graduate student conducting research on news and media consumption in Nelson County. I anticipate the interviews taking between 60-90 minutes, and they can be conducted in-person at a location of your choice. If you are interested, please fill out a brief initial questionnaire at the link below (Qualtrics link, Appendix F). If you have any questions, you can email me at mathe712@umn.edu.

Appendix D: Recruitment Flyer

Headline: Research participants needed in Nelson County

Nick Mathews, a researcher from the University of Minnesota, is recruiting Nelson County residents (aged 18 and older) for a study about news and media consumption in Nelson County.

The study includes 45- to 60-minute interviews, which can be conducted wherever and whenever is most convenient to participants.

If you are interested in participating, please contact Nick Mathews at mathe712@umn.edu or visit tinyurl.com/nelsoncoresearch.

Appendix E: Qualtrics Questionnaire

You are invited to be in a research study of how people in Nelson County, Va., use media and obtain news. You were selected as a possible participant because you are between the age of 18 and 75 years old and a resident of the county. I ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by Nick Mathews, a graduate student in the Hubbard School of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Minnesota.

Procedures:

If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following things:

- Complete this 5-minute screening survey. This survey asks questions about your use of news as well as general demographic questions.
- If selected and interested in a follow-up interview, the interview will be between 60-90 minutes long to complete.
- I will audio tape the interview, if you consent.

Confidentiality:

The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report I might publish, I will not include any information that would make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely and only researchers will have access to the records. A company will have access to anonymized interviews. An agreement is signed with the company to keep the anonymity of the interview content which will not be associated with you. They will be erased when the analysis of the results will be completed.

Voluntary nature of the study:

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with the University of Minnesota. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

Will I be compensated for my participation?

If you agree to take part in this research study, and you are interviewed, I will pay you a $25 Amazon gift card for your time and effort.

Contact and questions

The researcher conducting this study is: Nick Mathews. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have any questions, you are encouraged to contact Nick at 832-509-9531 or mathe712@umn.edu or his advisor, Valérie Belair-Gagnon, at 612-625-1338 or vbg@umn.edu.

This research has been reviewed and approved by an IRB within the Human Research Protections Program (HRPP). To share feedback privately with the HRPP about your research experience, call the Research Participants' Advocate Line at 612-625-1650 (Toll Free: 1-888-224-8636) or go to z.umn.edu/participants. You are encouraged to contact the HRPP if:

- Your questions, concerns, or complaints are not being answered by the research team.
- You cannot reach the research team.
- You want to talk to someone besides the research team.
- You have questions about your rights as a research participant.
- You want to get information or provide input about this research.

You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.

Question 1: As a researcher, I am interested in your use and feelings about news. Would you be willing to complete a follow-up in-person interview in the coming months? If you select 'yes' and if you are chosen to be interviewed. Interviews will take an estimated 60-90 minutes.

(1) Yes, I am willing to be contacted by the researcher and complete an interview in the coming months.

(2) No, I am not willing to be contacted by the researcher and/or I do not want to complete a follow-up interview

Question 2: Are you a resident of Nelson County, Va.?

(1) Yes

(2) No

Question 3: How many years have you lived in Nelson County, Va?

Question 4: What is your age as of this interview?

Question 5: How would you describe your gender?

Question 6: How would you describe your race or ethnicity?

Question 7: What is the highest level of education you completed?

(1) Less than a high school degree

(2) High school graduate (or equivalent including GED)

(3) Some college but no degree

(4) Associate degree in college (2-year)

(5) Bachelor's degree in college (4-year)

(6) Master's degree

(7) Doctoral degree

(8) Professional degree

Question 8: What is your occupation?

Question 9: What is your estimated household income?

(1) Less than $10,000

(2) $10,000-$19,999

(3) $20,000-$29,999

(4) $30,000-$39,999

(5) $40,000-$49,999

(6) $50,000-$59,999

(7) $60,000-$69,999

(8) $70,000-$79,999

(9) $80,000-$89,999

(10) $90,000-$99,999

(11) $100,000-$149,999

(12) $150,000+

Question 10: Are you a subscriber or former subscriber to the *Nelson County Times?*

(1) Current subscriber

(2) Former subscriber

Question 11: If you are a subscriber, how long have you been a subscriber to the *Nelson County Times?*

Question 12: Where do you see news from the *Nelson County Times?*

(1) The printed newspaper

(2) The newspaper's website

(3) The newspaper's social media accounts

(4) Email

(5) Other means

(6) From friends

Question 13: What is your email address? I will reach out to you regarding the research interview.

Appendix F: Audience Interview Guide

Details of each interviewee: Name, Age, Location, length of residency, employment, highest academic completion, length of time a subscriber (if applicable).

General background

1. Tell me a bit about yourself, your background. How did you come to live in this community? Tell me about your family and what you do for a living.

The community

1. When I say, "your community,' or 'local' what does that mean to you?

2. Describe your community. What do you think, if anything, makes your community and its residents unique or special? How have you seen it change over time?

3. What does rural mean to you?

   a. Is rural a location, a population or something like a way of life?

   b. Would you say that you identify as a rural American?

   c. What else do you have in common with other rural Americans?

   d. What about globally? What do you think of as 'rural' outside the United States?

News / media routines

1. When I say, "media," what does that mean to you?

2. Walk me through a typical day or occasion in which you tend to use any form of media.

   a. For instance, do you check the news when you first wake-up in the morning?

News in the community

1. When I say, "local news," what does that mean to you -- what does it make you think of?

2. What would you say is the most pressing issue going on now in Nelson County?

a. Where do you turn to for information about that – or other significant issues that matter to you about the community?

3. Which news sources offer you the best information? (Facebook and weekly newspaper questions below, if they answer accordingly)

4. How does word of mouth play into you knowing what's going on in the community? Are there specific people you talk to to know what's going on?

Social media

1. Where on social media do you obtain the news and information that's important to you? What platforms, I mean? Specific Facebook pages, for example? What groups? Or is it just friends?

2. How would you compare "news" on social media to news you see / read in other outlets (either TV or newspaper)?

3. What are the pros and cons of getting the news on social media? In other words, how do you evaluate the role social media plays in local news and information?

4. Do you think people rely on social media for local news? If so, why? Is that a good or bad thing? What do you think that means?

Weekly publication

1. How would you describe the weekly news organization?

a. What does it do well? What does it struggle to do well?

b. What is missing from its coverage?

2. What role does the weekly news organization play in your life and the life of the community? (if at all)

3. If the weekly newspaper disappeared tomorrow, would that impact you? If so, how?

4. How much do you talk about the news from the weekly newspaper with friends and family?

5. How does the weekly news organization fit into your routine? Both online and in print.

6. What is the value to you in having a weekly printed newspaper (versus online-only)?

7. Do you know anyone who works at the weekly newspaper?

8. What advice would you give the weekly newspaper leaders on how to reach readers like you?

9. Have you or a close friend or family member been in the weekly newspaper? What was the situation? How did it make you feel?

(Non-subscribers)

1. How often do you come across news and information from the weekly publication? This could mean buying a single copy of the paper, or seeing content in digital spaces?

2. Have you ever considered subscribing to the weekly newspaper?

3. Is there anything that is preventing you from subscribing to the weekly newspaper?

    a. For instance, is cost a concern?

    b. Is it the editorial position?

    c. Does the weekly newspaper not “speak” to you, or “reach” you?

    d. Do you feel it’s just not needed?

4. Where do you feel that you are getting news and information that might be in the weekly newspaper?

5. Who do you imagine is the typical subscriber of the weekly newspaper? How, if at all, do you feel they are different from you?