PRINT MEDIA IN THE DIGITAL AGE:
CREATING CONVERSATION AND COMMUNITY

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Abstract

With the rise of the Internet, print media has been forced to reinvent itself. Now, with the growing acceptance of social media networks such as Facebook, the industry must once again find relevance within the new technology. As social networks have become widely accepted within the general population, it behooves print publications to be involved in the same milieu as its readers. Becoming part of the social networking community as well as a publication’s geographic community may reap rewards as publications begin to participate in and foster conversations around topics of interest in the community. This thesis discusses the link between technology and community, looking at gatekeeper theory, social identification theory and two-way symmetrical communication in turn. It further examines this link by reporting on focus group research including both producers of print publications and their readers who also use social media, gauging their acceptance of social media and their willingness to further engage in conversations via the medium. By measuring both groups’ level of engagement with social media, the study’s findings suggest a willingness to further participate in social media as a way to disseminate and read news and community information, and to perhaps go a step further by engaging in conversations that may benefit the community at large.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Importance of the study

With the rise of the Internet, print media has been forced to consider reinventing itself. From online editions of traditional newspapers behind paywalls to tablet versions of our favorite magazines, the landscape for traditional print media is fast changing. Not only are new modes of delivery a consideration, but a new kind of relationship has developed, borne out of a true dialogue rather than the centralized, one-way communication of traditional mass media. Social media platforms, such as blogs, Facebook, and Twitter, have contributed to this new dialogue, serving as the facilitators of these conversations. How journalists and readers view their roles in this new medium are examined in relation to gatekeeper theory and social identification theory respectively. Furthermore, how this new method of communication serves to connect the two groups is considered, using Martin Buber’s notion of “I-Thou” and public relations’ two-way symmetrical communication theory. Within these conversations may be the germ for a new life for print media.

Statement of the Problem

As revenues drop from pre-Internet levels, print publications must look at ways to meet the demands of a changing, ever-increasingly interactive market. From a business perspective, it is important to address this question because print publications (newspapers and magazines) must work to stay relevant to their readers and advertisers or face extinction. The intersection of old and new media creates opportunities for publications to strengthen the bonds between information, culture and community. These elements should be reflexive – feeding on and reflecting the others.
This thesis aims to examine how local publications in one community are tackling the challenges this new kind of communication presents to print media. At the same time, it looks at the audience, or users’, response to publications’ social media efforts. A willingness to engage in this new media platform on both sides is the primary factor gauging print’s success in employing social media. Producers’ and Users’ attitudes around social media, use patterns, and where the two groups converge will be examined.

**Definition of Terms**

**Social Media** – An Internet-based form of communication that allows content creators to interact directly with their audience. It allows for a two-way conversation rather than the typical “push” method of mass media. Social media is a collection of different interfaces that accomplish this goal; common social media platforms include Facebook and Twitter.

**Producers** – Professional content creators: writers, editors, and publishers.

**Users** – Audience members reading local print publications (in the pulp or online version) who also actively participate in social media.

**Gatekeeping** – The role traditionally assigned to journalists that gives them the power to set agendas for the news being presented in their publication: What the public needs to know, not always what the public wants to know or for which it expresses concern.

**Organization of Remaining Chapters**

This study is organized into five chapters. Chapter Two sets the foundation for the research with a literature review that examines past work on gatekeeping, the link between community and technology, and social media’s role in business. Chapter Three outlines the scope and methodology of the focus group research conducted for this study. Chapter Four presents the results and analysis of the study. The final chapter presents the
study’s limitations, opportunities for further research, and conclusions drawn from the study.
CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Theoretical and Philosophical Basis

In providing a framework to answer these questions, communications and public relations theories are examined in this thesis. First, gatekeeper theory states that media “gatekeepers” regulate the flow of information, language, and knowledge (Witt, as cited in Jordan, 2007, p. 8). While some suggest users are becoming gatekeepers, other studies show those in the newsroom still very much in control of deeming what is newsworthy. Social identification theory (SIT) may also be drawn upon to understand the intersection of community and technology. SIT suggests individuals have a need to maintain a positive social identity, which is sustained through group membership. Mersey (2009) notes mass communication scholars have used the theory to explain people’s relationship with mass media in two ways: “media as a precursor to group membership … or … media as part of social identity management” (p. 107). Public relations’ model of two-way symmetrical communication is a commonly referenced framework within the field (Gower, 2006), and can be seen at work in the new medium of social networking.

As a philosophical framework for this thesis, the work of Martin Buber is examined for its dialogic perspective. Buber’s work I and Thou (1958), distinguishes between two kinds of communication, “I-It” and “I-Thou.” The former is an objectified sort of speech, arising from a form of “natural separation,” while the later is communication rich with relationship, arising from a “natural combination” (Buber, 1958, p. 24).

Buber characterizes the I-It, the object, as the “absence of relation and of present being” (p. 13). Conversely, the I-Thou is fully present in a mutual relation: “The aim of
relation is relation’s own being, that is, contact with the Thou … The more direct the contact with the Thou, the fuller is the sharing” (p. 63). As relates to communication, I-It may be seen as the one-way “push” style of traditional mass communication, while I-Thou is viewed more similarly to the two-way symmetrical communication model found in public relations theory.

Oren Soffer (2009) contrasts these two kinds of speech in relation to modern-day journalism and conflicting schools of thought within the discipline. The I-It variety of journalism developed in the 20th century as the objective, distanced reporting style where reporters remove themselves from the story. Soffer characterizes I-Thou journalism as movements such as civic or public journalism, where public discourse is encouraged, as well as digital journalism, where readers can comment on stories and post their own content in real time. Soffer credits online journalism for its “dialogic potential: its interactive technology has reshaped the relationship between journalists and their reader-commentators” (p. 488). This reshaping of journalism from an I-It to I-Thou relationship requires a paradigm shift, which may more easily take place in community publications.

Singer and Ashman (2009) use Buber’s I-Thou in their work on user-generated content and its ethical constructs within a British newspaper, examining the changing relationship between journalists and their audience. As they note, Buber believed that only through I-Thou speech can we truly achieve inclusion and understanding.

As the gap in understanding widens between journalists and their audience, this author advocates for the dialogic, community-based journalism as the model for successful journalism in the future. Social media offers the interactive technology to facilitate an I-Thou relationship.
Using focus group research to tap into one community’s views, this thesis attempts to get a reading on where both producers and users stand on the incorporation of social media into print media’s offerings. Beyond the level of acceptance of social media by both groups, it looks at how print media can use social media as another touch point for its audience as well as gauging community members’ willingness to further engage with print media. The opinions and habits of producers and users, taken together, begin to paint a picture of this new landscape that print media can use as publications venture toward more community conversations via social networks.

**The Literature**

In considering the role of social media as part of the changing landscape of how traditional print publications deliver their content, there are three main factors to consider: the underpinnings of communication theory, how community and technology play into this new conversation, and the bottom-line business perspective on how social media may be able to deliver revenue. Each will be examined in turn.

**A Review of Theory**

Chung and Nah (2009) note that traditional models of mass media communication are beginning to shift as interactivity becomes an attribute of communication in the digital age. For example, agenda setting is no longer solely in the hands of journalists. Some of the original work to understand agenda setting originated with McCombs and Shaw’s 1972 study of the 1968 presidential election coverage in the community of Chapel Hill, North Carolina. The study’s findings showed a strong correlation between the knowledge voters demonstrated on campaign issues in direct proportion to those issues deemed important (via coverage) by the media. The authors noted these findings
were different from past studies measuring perception of news value between the general public and professional journalists, which were typically much different between the two groups. Taken together, these findings are part of the foundation of agenda setting theory: Mass media sets the topics for society’s discussions. Today, user-generated content (UGC) shifts some of the content creation to those traditionally viewed as the audience, thereby altering the topics featured and discussed and eroding media’s agenda-setting role.

Some argue UGC has done little to change the way the newsroom relates to its readers: reporters and editors still act as gatekeepers who decide what is actually deemed newsworthy. Gatekeeper theory states that media “gatekeepers” regulate the flow of information, language, and knowledge (Witt, as cited in Jordan, 2007, p. 8). In a study conducted by Jordan (2007), results showed only 2.3% of UGC made its way into the print editions of the three newspapers sampled over the course of 2004 and 2005 (p. 17). Online content had a greater percentage of UGC.

While the Jordan study found UGC typically served as fodder for a story idea or source, rather than true citizen-based journalism, the author recognized a shift is beginning to take place in light of this Web-based content. From observations and interviews of staffers conducted at the South Carolina Bluffton Today, Jordan found reporters’ and editors’ decision-making process is influenced by UGC. (The Bluffton is noted for its commitment to citizen journalism, and features numerous citizen blogs as well as more traditional reader forums such as letters to the editor or online comment sections following each story.) UGC is used as a sounding board or window into the topics important to readers, yet staff members still retain the editorial role of determining
newsworthiness. Additional studies cited by Singer and Ashman (Domingo et al., Thurman, 2009, p. 5) similarly find journalistic culture remains unchanged and the gatekeeper role solidly in place.

Yet Witt proposes that public journalism is “morphing into the public’s journalism” (2004). He attributes this sea change to early social media in the form of the Web log, or “blog.” Bloggers, some trained journalists and others citizen journalists, were able to circumnavigate the gatekeepers at the news desk altogether. Witt cites the example of a citizen using her digital camera to take photos of United States soldiers’ caskets loaded onto an airplane for the return trip from Iraq. A few days later, one of those photos was printed on the Seattle Times’ front page. This opened the floodgates, with similar photos appearing in newspapers across the country as well as online. Witt also relates the story of Greeley (Colorado) Tribune editor Chris Cobler, who asked his reader “e-board” to weigh in on printing the Abu Ghraib prison abuse photos. The gatekeeper function was still in place in as much as Cobler made the final decision, but he took into account the responses of the nearly 30 readers who replied before making his decision. In all, Witt sees the public’s ability to raise issues and respond online making the gatekeeper role irrelevant.

Since the early days of social media, the platforms for participation have grown as well as their acceptance and use among the general public. More recent anecdotal evidence shows magazine editors are becoming increasingly comfortable with UGC supplied through social networks. According to Vocus Media Research, 52.7% of all “pitchable” magazines in the U.S. and Canada have a Twitter handle and 47% of all magazines have a Facebook page (2011). Katie Tamony, editor-in-chief of Sunset
magazine said her publication regularly poses questions to readers on Facebook with topics from favorite travel destinations to best weeknight meals. This feedback is used to create relevant content within the pages of the magazine. “So even if we don’t use their comments,” Tamony shares, “we’re still using their ideas in the magazine” (Sivek, 2010).

Social identification theory (SIT) may also be drawn upon to understand the intersection of community and technology. SIT suggests individuals have a need to maintain a positive social identity, which is sustained through group membership. Mersey (2009) notes mass communication scholars have used the theory to explain people’s relationship with mass media in two ways: “media as a precursor to group membership … or … media as part of social identity management” (p. 107). Mersey theorizes the two tactics are part of a cyclical relationship in which “local news consumption encourages community identification, and community identification encourages local news consumption” (p. 107). This concept is based on earlier research, especially that of Stamm, who concludes, “Local media benefit when the interdependence of individual and community is strong” (1988, p. 357).

Mersey takes SIT and Stamm’s concept of interdependence one step further in her 2010 research on newspapers and community in the age of new media. She posits identity and interdependence are the key constructs in the relationship between newspapers (and their online presence) and community members. Foremost, Mersey suggests journalism will have to learn how to work across channels, such as print, Web, and mobile, to serve different users with different depths of coverage. From that point, users will be looking for content that “defines and reinforces” their social identities (p. 532). She notes specialized media, such as magazines, have been doing an excellent job of delivering this
kind of content, outperforming newspapers. “Focused entities are more likely to understand and serve their readers or users regardless of the topic, be it food, fashion, or foreign affairs,” she writes (p. 532). Interdependence places and emphasis on a “back-and-forth flow between a community and its members,” Mersey continues (p. 533), including, it can be inferred, online communities as well.

Researchers must use caution when evaluating these reader/audience-based communities, especially with niche publications or online forums, as there is the probability of an echo-chamber effect. In other words, the audience may simply be consuming information that matches their definition of their social identity. In Wallsten’s 2005 work on the echo chamber effect between political blogs and mainstream media, he found some topics had a very strong correlation between blog posts and coverage in the mainstream media; other subjects had only a weak correlation. The lesson here may be the deeper the niche (or identity), the deeper the interdependence between producer and audience.

Similar to the idea of interdependence is the public relations model of two-way symmetrical communication. As mentioned previously, this form of two-way communication is a dominant paradigm within the field, and social networking demonstrates a practical application of the theory. As Gower notes, two-way communication (a “back-and-forth” flow) creates a “win-win” for both the organization and public’s self interests, and is a valuable part of the relationship building that has become a tenet of public relations practice. Vocus, a public relations firm, reports magazines using their social media as a two-way communication are getting more “likes” on Facebook than their counterparts who are only pushing out their message (Bredholt,
2011). While print journalists may hold themselves above the fray of “PR,” it is no less important for these members of the Fourth Estate to foster a positive relationship with the public. Social media gives journalists a “technological means to foster trust relationships on a personal level,” writes Feighery (2011, p. 172).

Further, social media creates an I-Thou way of communicating, the term coined by Martin Buber (Singer and Ashman 2009, p. 9). I-Thou signifies a more direct relationship on an individual level than an I-It relationship that connotes a distance between the subjects. “We’re no longer writing for people but having a conversation with them. The relationship is more balanced,” remarked one editor interviewed by Singer and Ashman (2009, p. 13). Gower observes that the two-way symmetrical model implies values of “collaboration, negotiation, and compromise” (1986, p. 9). This equalizing effect can set the stage for community building.
Community and Technology

The notion of community itself must first be defined. McMillan and Chavis define a sense of community as “a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group and a shared faith that members’ needs will be met through their commitment to be together” (1986, p. 9).

Social media provide both a structure and a process for building community. The intersection of community and technology – which has allowed social media to blossom – is where some of the most fascinating research has taken place. At the root of much of the study is the concept of interactivity, which is seen as a defining attribute of the Internet. Interactivity is what allows for the two-way dialogic communication that creates relationships, grows community, and, what publishers bank on, cements loyalty to the brand (the publication). One example of successful online community building for a media company comes from ABC News. In 2007 the network expanded the community section on its website. During the next three months, unique visits to the site increased by 13% and the number of comments jumped to 64,000 per month (Shields, as cited in Braun & Gillespie, 2011).

Chung and Nah (2009) note interactivity is defined in numerous ways depending on its use. They define “human interactivity,” sometimes called “user-to-user” interactivity, as “communication between two or more users that takes place through a communication channel” (p. 858). It is through this human interactivity that discussion develops. Rafaeli notes studies have found positive outcomes of interactivity to include “performance quality, satisfaction, motivation, sense of fun, cognition, and learning” (1988, p.123). Additional studies cited by Chung and Nah further demonstrate the
positive aspects of interactivity. They note Cho and Leckenby’s 1999 finding that higher levels or interactivity yield more positive advertising effects (p. 859). Berthon, Pitt, and Watson (also cited in Chung and Nah, 2009, p. 859) found interactivity positively impacts users’ attitudes, and therefore their likelihood to spend, converting website visitors into customers. For instance, Seventeen magazine gave Twitter followers a special yearly subscription rate of $5 by following a link from a tweet. The promotion netted the publication 170 paid subscriptions in 24 hours (Sivek, 2010).

Delving further into the notion of interactivity and user satisfaction, Chung and Nah conducted additional research into this relationship focusing on community newspaper websites. Their findings include the existence of a “robust relationship between the user of various interactive features and perceived satisfaction” (p. 866), yet there was less correlation between specific interactive features offered by a news site and perceived satisfaction among users. In fact, Chung and Nah found that community newspaper readers are not ready for nor do they need social media offered through online news sites. The authors hypothesize this may be due to the fact that smaller communities are more closely knit and individuals in those communities are less invested in online community. These findings run contrary to those by Teo et al. (as cited in Chung and Nah, 2009, p. 867), which confirmed interactive features on news sites equaled greater user satisfaction.

Similarly at odds with the notion that an online presence is creating greater loyalty among users is Mersey’s 2009 study comparing sense of community between the print version of the Arizona Republic newspaper and its companion website, azcentral.com. The findings show readers of the print publication have a greater sense of
community than the readers of the online edition. One probable reason, the author suggests, is that the older, well-established print edition has a developed a history of readership. The study shows that traditional print publications may retain value with their readership (though this likely has much to do with continued quality of the publication). The question then becomes, how can a successful publication continue to leverage that good will, and subsequent revenue, no matter the format.

These findings are not mutually exclusive to the idea Internet use can enhance community participation. One study found those connected to the Internet to be 1.4 times more likely to be a member of a community organization (Matei & Ball-Rokeach as cited in Dutta-Bergman, 2006, p. 100). A 2011 study by the Pew Research Center’s Project for Excellence in Journalism found that 41% of the adults surveyed are what they termed as “local news participators,” meaning they said yes to at least one of a number of statements regarding their participation in sharing or creating local news. The survey also found that newspapers and their companion websites are where a majority of adults go for local news in 11 of 16 categories, including taxes, schools, and politics.

Dutta-Bergman (2006) explores the idea of social shaping of technology, arguing the Internet indirectly contributes to community belonging as it builds on other social interactions, rather than competing with or replacing other social interaction. Social shaping works in concert with channel complementarity theory, which states individuals gravitate to certain communication channels due to underlying motives. For instance, those who are already “plugged in” to the community also are often connected to the community via the Internet. In this way the Internet is a resource that reinforces outside interests and “enhances quality of participation” (Dutta-Bergman, 2006, p. 108). Social
shaping and channel complementarity lend credence to the concept that community can span both virtual and real-world settings, and is in fact enhanced by the combination of the two. This bodes well for print publications looking to engage the community on a virtual level to yield real-world results. An example of comes from the pages of *ReadyMade* magazine. The print publication already had a strong community of do-it-yourselfers and “nesting-friendly” readers, who submit about 60% of the magazine’s content. Therefore, it was not a stretch for this community to bring their participation online. Participation “runs in our readers’ blood,” notes *ReadyMade’s* editor (2006).

Challenges are inherent in managing social media platforms as part of a media business. The sheer human resource that must be devoted to managing these communities creates expanded job descriptions or even entirely new positions. As with the ABC News example, Braun and Gillespie point out adding social media features to their websites has created “feedback in droves” (2011, p. 387). Yet that feedback isn’t always positive, or even constructive. As interactivity becomes a must for news sites, Braun and Gillespie find that “some form of comment moderation is both deeply necessary and unavoidably messy” (p. 389). Yet that messy stew of comment is also what makes the stew so rich. As Will Femia, former MSNBC online communities manager, observed, “Especially community requires your participation and your awareness. … There’s an engagement that’s necessary, I think, in order for that to be a productive relationship” (Braun & Gillespie, 2011, p. 389). When that community relationship is fostered in the media setting, it can lead to results that benefit the bottom line.
The Bottom Line

“Online communities provide a prime opportunity for organizations to get to know their customers more intimately and keep their finger on the pulse of their needs and behaviors” (p. 97), write Bulmer and DiMauro (2009), both research fellows for the Society of New Communications as well executives in the business world. Not only their research, but also their business acumen, gives them the awareness of how social media can connect customers with companies and drive consumption of goods and services in an unprecedented way. This unique quality is what makes the rise of social media so important to business, including the media business.

Print publications – and by extension their online versions – must find ways to remain relevant as audiences shift their media consumption to include online sources. As noted above, research has shown interactivity positively affects user attitudes, including in the realm of advertising as well as conversions of website visitors into product consumers. As advertising revenues shrink, finding ways to capture the all-important unique page view and therefore proof of audience readership, publications must find ways to engage audiences online. Many have found that social media platforms can serve that purpose. In some cases, the online portal has even been the entree to the print publication, as noted by Rudy Taylor, publisher of Taylor Newspapers of Southeast Kansas, in a 2009 interview:

The more connected we stay, the more aware we will be of what’s making our community, county, state and nation function. In addition, we use Facebook to tease late-breaking news, podcasts and videos that we place on our Web site. That has led to many new readers of our pulp product. A
new subscriber told me recently that she didn’t even know the newspaper existed until she saw those teasers on Facebook. That led her to our Web site, and eventually to our printed newspaper. (Anderson & DeVault, p. 7)

Taylor continues by noting his staff members are acting as “good citizens of social media” and the communities they serve while leveraging the information those online encounters provide to sell their newspaper products. Joy Mayer, an editor at the Columbia Missourian and associate professor at the Missouri School of Journalism, takes this responsibility one step further, creating a budget line for community engagement: “Editors ought to require that story pitches and budget lines include an engagement component, reflecting community conversation, collaboration and outreach” (2011, p. 14).

A Web-to-print model for engaging readers and selling the print product is one way print media can begin to get creative around social media. Larry Kramer, journalist-turned-new-media-entrepreneur, offers some ideas of his own. Writing for the American Journalism Review (2010), Kramer says he doesn’t believe any one business model will be the magic bullet for the media, rather a patchwork of solutions that make sense for the content being delivered and the audience seeking delivery. He envisions a new kind of multimedia newsroom – multiple platforms supporting multiple revenue streams all focused around the specific content they cover. News organizations must shift their thinking to capture these new ideas in order to “survive and thrive” (p. 46).

One such example taps into the notion of community. It is local publications’ very nature as local that is their biggest selling point. In the same way, local advertising can serve users, and publishers can create the tools that help advertisers engage with local consumers (Kramer, 2010). While readers still want to know where editorial content ends
and advertising begins, such bundles may be well received by time-starved readers. For instance, readers could use their smartphone to access a publication’s mobile app, read restaurant reviews and access discounts to local dining establishments all through one platform. A link to Facebook or Foursquare, a geo-social networking platform, can alert readers’ friends to the same deal on the publication’s website. Later, readers can create user-generated content by adding their own review of the restaurant to the website. This kind of loyalty translates into page views and therefore more advertising dollars.

In applying best practices to building a social media program, print publications may be able to take a cue from Fortune 500 companies that are successfully using social media to benefit their bottom line – from which publications with either a broad reach or a more local flavor may benefit. Culnan, McHugh, and Zubillaga (2010) identify three elements of effective social media implementation and provide guidelines for executing a social media program based on case studies highlighting WalMart, Hewlett-Packard, and Coca-Cola.

Culnan et al. report 56% of companies are using social media to communicate directly with customers, while only about one-third say they find measureable value in the exercise (p. 243). The authors define common social media platforms as social networking sites, such as Facebook or LinkedIn; microblogging sites, such as Twitter; video sharing sites, such as YouTube or Vimeo; blogs, and client-hosted forums. These platforms create online customer communities known as virtual customer environments (VCE) (p. 244). It is within these VCEs that customers can co-create content and begin to develop a relationship with the company. These relationships may give users a feeling of being a “company insider” and are likely to foster a sense of loyalty to products. The key
to these positive outcomes is first developing a critical mass of participants to create a true community, giving users an opportunity to engage with the organization, and developing a process by which the company benefits from the user-generated content.

Community building is a two-part endeavor. First, the VCE must reach a critical mass of participants who indentify with the community and stay involved in it. The researchers identified 1,000 fans as the number for critical mass on Facebook (Culnan et al., 2009, p. 248). Once critical mass is established, the company must provide a steady stream of compelling content to engage community members, such as access to the firm’s executives or “celebrities” and recognizing the contributions made by users. As with any community, a mutually agreed-upon structure is necessary for the smooth functioning of the group. To this end companies can develop formal conduct and content policies as well as follow the norms of each social media platform.

While the companies highlighted in this study provide a product(s) to their consumers, these same practices and considerations should prove useful to media outlets that deliver less tangible products – news, information, and entertainment.

**Rationale & Research Question**

A body of research has discussed the changing role of print media, specifically news, in the digital age, especially in regard to its relationship with readers. Concurrently, the discussion of community building from both news and computer-mediated communication standpoints has continued to be fertile ground for research. This thesis proposes to find the intersection between the gatekeepers and the community, a place where, it is proposed, a profitable outcome will result in monetary rewards for print publications and a stronger community for the population at large.
Taken together, the underlying theories, the intersection of community and technology, and the integration of social media into an organization, create the foundation for further study into how print publications can create community, engender loyalty, and, ultimately, benefit their bottom line.

The purpose of this qualitative focus group study is to gain insight into the question of how print media can leverage the community bond created through social media to maintain and/or grow its readership base. This study takes a dual perspective in that both Producer and User attitudes are studied. This “meeting of the minds” provides a unique look at how each group can benefit from the trends in social media. The next section describes the scope of the study as well as a discussion of the focus group methodology used to gathering the findings.
CHAPTER 3: SCOPE & METHODOLOGY

Scope

The purpose of this qualitative focus group study is to gain insight into how social media is used to create conversations and foster community between print media and those in their audience. The focus groups are split into two categories, “Producers” and “Users.” The Producers are the staff members associated with the print publications using social media to engage readers, such as a reporter or editor. Users are their readers/audience.

A focus group was chosen as the method for this study as it can best elicit the kind of information being sought. As Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008) suggest, focus groups are ideal for gathering the “attitudes, needs, experiences, perceptions, beliefs, priorities, or choices of a group” (p. 177). Understanding the attitudes and perceptions from the professional group members’ standpoint aid in understanding their receptivity to adopting social media as a tool for engaging with readers. Looking at the User members’ behavior as members of a group provides a barometer of how successful a publication’s social media initiative will be. Furthermore, the dynamics of a focus group dovetails neatly into the concept of community, as focus groups are essentially a community gathering.

Sample. Members of the Producer group, totaling 11, include representatives from local newspapers and magazines in Whatcom County, located in northwestern Washington state. Users group members are drawn from a pool of Facebook users recruited through their Facebook affiliation (“likes”) with local publications The
Bellingham Herald and Bellingham Alive magazine, as well as the study author’s own social network. The group was comprised of nine participants.

The study was conducted in Bellingham, Wash. The city of 81,000 (U.S. Census, 2010) is home to Western Washington University. Along with a well-educated population (33% of population 25+ with at least a bachelor’s degree, U.S. Census, 2000), the town is also characterized as a tech-savvy outpost of the booming technology region to the south in the Seattle metropolitan area. A Pew Research Center study found 69% of Americans using social networking sites have at least some college education (Hampton Sessions-Goulet, Rainie, & Purcell, 2011, p. 12). Of the participants in this study all but one had at least a bachelor’s degree.

**Methodology**

A primary goal of this study is to offer an understanding of both Producers’ and Users’ attitudes and habits around social media, as well as understanding how social media does or does not contribute to a sense of community. For these reasons, focus group discussion questions centered around theories of gatekeeping, social identification, and community, while much of the analysis looks to symmetrical communication as a framework for assessing the success of social media initiatives.

In trying to arrive at the answer to how print media can engage with their community via social media while maintaining readership, sub-questions were crafted to drill down into participants’ attitudes. Four objectives are divided between two the specific focus groups of Producers and Users:
Producers

1. Using the framework of gatekeeper theory, understand print media’s motivation for using social media in building and maintaining community (i.e., reader loyalty). To what degree does gatekeeping still function in this communication mode?

2. Can media remove itself from the traditional gatekeeping role and not only engage in two-way communication, but become a voice of the community?

Users

1. Using social identification theory, understand readers’ use of publication-driven social media as part of their community identity. Specifically, do readers find connecting with a publication in this way creates an in-group for them to belong to?

2. Gauge readers’ receptivity to using print-media-sponsored social media platforms as a community hub and predict willingness to further connect with the publication on other platforms (such as print, online versions).

From these questions, initial focus group questions (Appendix A) were crafted to establish a baseline of media and social media use; while subsequent questions help to identify congruencies in Producer/User values, community engagement, and willingness of the groups to connect via social media. The point at which these groups intersect produces the strongest probability of successful social media program implementation for publications. Data analysis of the focus group questions includes coding to measure
level of engagement as well as congruencies between Producer and User ideas. The level of engagement measure is a simple 1-5 scale; rankings include focus-group member self-reporting and researcher categorization based on observation. Coding was conducted solely by the researcher, immediately following each focus group, and then reviewed and adjusted as needed after transcribing the focus group discussions. For additional detail into the coding, see Appendix B.

To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, participants in the Producer group are identified only by their job title and general publication description (i.e., daily newspaper, outdoor magazine). User group participants are identified by their occupation and gender. All participants completed an intake form with their name, age, gender, job title/occupation and highest level of education completed as well as indicating whether they are active within a community organization (Appendix C). This last piece of information provides an additional layer of understanding around the correlation of active virtual community members as active real-world community members, as proposed in the Dutta-Bergman study (2006). Participants signed a consent form stating the group discussion was to be voice recorded as well as assuring the participants anonymity (Appendix D). Each session lasted approximately 60-90 minutes.

**Assessing the method**

Choosing focus group research for this study lends an “on the ground” validity to results by going directly to the parties who disseminate and use local news/community information. As Daymon and Holloway (2011) suggest, focus groups allow for a range of voices while being interactive, which lets participants expand and refine their own perceptions as they listen to others. Focus groups also give researchers the opportunity to
see how the group arrives at decisions and why they think or feel they way they do (Daymon & Holloway, 2011). In this study, understanding the “why” is important to understanding the motivation for both Producers and Users to participate in social media.

The dynamic of the group will affect the discussion, and therefore the results. For example, “pre-constituted” groups (Daymon & Holloway, 2011, p.245), comprised of individuals from an existing group, likely will “warm up” quickly, but some group members may be more hesitant to speak up if their views differ from those of their peers. In “researcher-constituted” groups the researcher has greater control over the sample, but it may take longer for group members to feel comfortable with each other. The Producer group in this study may be considered a pre-constituted group as the participants are all in the same industry (or recently departed from it). The User group is a researcher-constituted group, chosen based on factors chosen by the researcher: individuals who are readers of local publications as well as members of a social media network.

Other factors may also affect how group members respond. Some are as simple as the location of the meeting or size of the room, which can affect comfort level, both physical and psychological. A single dominating group member can also sway or curb discussion. A lack of educational homogeneity (Daymon & Holloway, 2011, p. 256), equality in education level, may affect participants’ response if they do not feel as they are on par with other group members. This was not an issue in the focus groups conducted for this study as most participants were of a similar educational background. Group size can affect an interviewer’s ability to effectively hear all voices in the group: The larger the group, the more difficult it can be to make sure each member participates and is heard.
The study’s focus groups provide a snapshot in real time that can help media professionals gauge the success of their social media initiatives by relating this case study to their own markets. As each community is different, the study has its limits. Results should be considered more of a topographic map than a roadmap to more successful online interactions. The study, conducted in a relatively small market, also is limited in its sample of media professionals – it is a small pool to draw from. Despite its limitations, other studies on smaller/mid-sized communities have provided sound data and rich discussion for communications scholars.
CHAPTER 4: THE STUDY

Introduction

The focus groups netted robust discussion around the topics presented. Producers were eager to share the challenges in charting a course for social media within print’s framework. Users willingly shared their habits and preferences around their daily experiences gathering news and information. After examining each group’s discussion in turn, analysis of the comments finds commonalities between the groups. These commonalities are a starting point for further engagement between the two groups.

Data Analysis

Professional Group. The professionals participating in the print media group (11 total) consisted of reporters, editors, and one publisher. Six of the participants work/worked for the local daily newspaper, the *Bellingham Herald*. Three others work for magazines, ranging in focus from business, to lifestyle to the university alumni publication, and two participants worked for other community newspapers. Five of the professionals within the last 12 months have left the publication field for jobs in related fields such as community relations or marketing. Due to the small community from which the sample was drawn, it was determined that these professionals were still close enough to their past publication experience to share insights from that work. This was borne out in that these participants were some of the most lively discussion participants.

The group was predominantly male (three women participated), and the core age group was those aged 30-49, totaling seven, with two members each in the 20-29 and 50+ age groups. Seven of the 11 participants are members of a community organization.
Gatekeeping. One of the most robust discussions within the group surrounded gatekeeping. By virtue of their journalistic training, which encompassed all but one in the group, participants found gatekeeping a natural part of their job duties. Social media has brought changes to when and how they exercise those duties, but not to their view that gatekeeping is an integral part of their profession.

The “when” and “how” of gatekeeping have changed as the pace of news has sped to a constant stream of information available at all hours through cable television news and the Internet, noted one participant. This requires print media, especially their online component, to stay current as well. No more waiting for the morning paper to report the news. This often manifests itself in the loss of one level of gatekeeping as a reporter may post a story or tip on a blog without an editor’s review, as two of the most prolific bloggers in the group noted. “You have to utilize sound news judgment to tell the story that’s most succinct and most important. I don’t think social media necessarily changes that mode of journalism, but it does allow us to expand online,” said one reporter/blogger. Subsequent, more researched reports, reviewed by an editor, often appear in print. The immediacy with which information appears online, especially via social media outlets such as Facebook and Twitter, is also changing the nature of gatekeeping. As one former opinion-page editor turned journalism professor noted, social media puts pressure on journalistic ideals because the general public’s standard for vetting information is not the same. “When people go to Facebook and find out more information than in the newspaper, people start to question that.” Sometimes, the social networks may have information not being reported in the newspaper, such as information regarding a minor or a suicide. (It is standard practice to not report the names of minors, and the Bellingham
daily has a policy not to report the names of suicide victims.) While the information may be readily available in online communities, newspapers chose not to report information that may be widely known, and then suffer when seen as uninformed. When newspaper policy doesn’t limit reporting, journalists must still use their judgment to decide whether or not something posted on social media is worthy of repeating or requires further vetting first. “We are still a gatekeeper, and maintaining that integrity has become a conundrum,” remarked one journalist. The journalism professor noted the changes being seen in the industry today lead to questions industry professionals must ask themselves. “I think there is at least a conversation about what journalistic standards are, what people expect them to be, and what they might be in the future.”

Group members noted that social media is really just another reporting tool, often a valuable tool, but such content is a starting point, not the final word. One business reporter/editor noted he gets more questions posed about his beat via social media than via email or telephone. The answers to these questions often become blog posts, and if enough interest is generated, sometimes becomes a full-fledged article in the print edition. The same editor related one instance where he was able to use a local union chapter’s Facebook page in reporting an impending strike. Union organizers were posting details on their page prior to speaking with management. The reporter used these posts to gather comment from management, who were not yet aware of the union’s decision to settle instead of strike. Other reporters noted social media serves as a “third place” or “listening post” for understanding what is important to readers. From there, further investigation on a timely topic may lead to a story. In general, those editors and reporters most diligently posting to a blog or social network found the most value in social media.
They note, only by maintaining regular communication and offering new content to readers do they reap the rewards of social media. The daily’s former politics reporter summed it up like this: “I knew that the way to make the blog successful was content. You need to feed it and make it active, and have that active community.”

**Finding the Social Media Niche.** Print professionals also realize there is a business purpose to their online offerings, from their website, to blogs, to a presence on social networks such as Facebook and Twitter. Their core business, the print product and its online companion, and the accompanying advertising that sponsors the publication, require a steady stream of readers. To that end, social media in all its forms is another way to expand a publication’s “brand” (as one participant put it), not only by driving readers back to the print or online version but in creating a conversation with its audience. In essence, the question is finding social media’s niche within a publication. As one long-time journalist said, it is necessary for each publication to define how it looks at its social media. “Is it a marketing tool for your publication, is it an extension of your news reporting? Once you define that, it narrows the problems.”

One example of successful engagement between publication and the public comes from the former political reporter at the local daily newspaper. His politics blog had a robust community of commenters from across the political spectrum. Through the blog, with the facilitation of the reporter/moderator, the blog group raised money for a local charity (with the newspaper serving as the collection point for the funds), and on another occasion, the group attended a local minor league baseball game. The reporter believes these events were successful because the blog group members considered themselves a kind of community – readers creating a social identity around the publications’ blog.
This kind of engagement can still be a stretch for traditional news organizations as they try to maintain journalistic standards. Some group members expressed their own hesitancy to take risks. “I don’t have time to sit and think,” said one copy editor referring to the quickened pace of news as well as his growing workload as the newsroom is downsized. Another said he would hesitate to introduce a controversial topic for further discussion via social media as he thought it would create too much of a stir. He would rather “play it safe.” Others reported their employers unwilling to break down the wall between publication and public. One such example came from an employee of the daily newspaper who also serves in the community as a volunteer firefighter. His requests to write about his appearances at community events in his role as firefighter was nixed by management. As he explained:

They were very hesitant to do anything at all. I’m not sure if the higher ups don’t want to publicize that that line is there and can be blurred. But I look at is as helping the community. … In a small town it helps readers see journalists are people.

**User group.** The User group consisted of nine participants, three women and six men, with a nearly even split in ages, three in each the 40-49 and 60+ age groups, two in the 50-59 age group and one in the 30-39 group. Participants were all professionals or retired professionals, many with experience (past or current) in writing or public relations. These experiences may contribute to group members’ interest in participating in the focus group discussion. Others have backgrounds such as business, aviation and personal coaching. Two-thirds of the group are members of a community organization.
**Ranking news sources.** The group was asked to name daily news sources, and then rank the order in which they rely on these sources. Sources ranged from national news websites to National Public Radio, to local publications (in print and online), to social networks such as Facebook and Twitter. From the list the group created three categories of most-often visited news/information sources as:

A) Social Media

B) Major online news sources (CNN.com, Huffington Post)

C) Local print/online news

It is worth noting that cable/broadcast news was not mentioned without prompting, and then only one group member stated she occasionally tuned in to watch a morning news program. As such, television news did not factor into the above list. When ranking these three categories, the younger group members ranked them as A, B, C. The majority of older group members (ages 50+) did not list social media as their first stopping point for news, ranking choice B or C as their first stop and social media as their final stop. The younger readers pointed out by visiting social media first, they also have access to their local and national news sources via those outlets’ social media feeds. One woman explained why she goes to Facebook first for her information, “Because it has my news sources on there, too. I see the earthquakes; I see the weather; I see what happened next door … it all showed up on Facebook. Literally from within my block to across the world.”

**Defining Community.** Group members spanning the age groups noted they use their social networks for keeping connected with community news and information. One woman noted she has a particular Facebook friend whom she turns to as a source of
community information, synthesizing, distilling, and distributing information about what is happening in the community. “She filters it in a way that I know is to my liking,” (essentially acting as a gatekeeper.) Another group member said she uses social media to track what is going on with local businesses, and another member said he often finds out about local breaking news, such as fires or traffic jams, from his Facebook feed.

Many group members mentioned an additional way in which they use social media to connect: Communicating with like-minded individuals in special interest groups, essentially reinforcing their social identity. This communication spanned the age groups, and raised the question, “How do you define community, by interest or geography?” The majority of the group, again across age groups, defined their community first by interest and second by geography. One participant noted his Jaguar enthusiast friends from around the world comprise 80% of his Facebook contacts. “Technology has shortened all those distances,” one woman said.

Of the participants who follow news via social media, they all agreed that if a topic or issue sparks their interest they will click the provided link to learn more, which bodes well for publications seeking hits on their website. A majority also noted they would be likely to turn to the print media to read an article providing greater detail and vetting on a story they may have read about first on their social network. Observed one group member, “A reason I like Facebook is because it is an easy way to push someone toward the whole story.”

**Readers’ Choice: Print vs. Online.** Readers report they have connected to the social media feeds of local publications because they were already reading the publication either in print or online, and their choice of print or online typically relates to
how they use the publication: for information or entertainment. While all participants said they read news online, more than half the group said they more often read hobby or special interest publications in print. As one group member expressed, she finds an emotional connection to the print magazines she most enjoys, and seeks out that kind of emotional engagement in print. Other group members noted the experience of the visuals and even the feel and smell of the paper to be experiences they look forward to in reading their print publications. “National Geographic is just not the same online,” said one man. “[The print version] is truly a sensual and unique experience.” As one participant noted, information, such as charts, graphs, or breakouts, can be better displayed and digested by readers when presented in print. Many agreed they would rather read longer-format articles in print.

Participants did note times when online reading is more appealing. Most said they turn to online publications for their daily dose of news and information. One participant noted he prefers the online version of a favorite niche news publication specifically for the comments generated online. “I engage by contributing to the comments,” he said. Such comment creates a robust conversation – and likely its own form of community. (An interesting side note, another participant proclaimed he did not find the commenters on the local daily newspaper’s website in any way representative of his community, and therefore chooses not to participate in that forum.) One woman noted she especially appreciates print publications that do a good job of connecting digitally as well, whether by using a page in the publication to drive traffic to the website or via weekly emails with original content. These communications tend to keep her further engaged in both the print
and online editions, she said, naming *Sunset* and *Real Simple* magazines as two national publications that do this well.

**Furthering Engagement.** Participants generally agreed they would entertain the idea of taking their engagement with a local print publication further by becoming more involved with an online discussion or face-to-face event sponsored by the publication. Group members already feel that by participating in social media they are interacting with their community. The caveat for all was, even if they had a genuine interest in the publication, they would need further interest in the topic at hand. More than one group member said a well-presented article could be an ideal starting point for further conversation. “People want to contribute,” noted one man. “This is an intellectual community and people want to engage in those conversations.” Another participant noted she would be very interested in face-to-face networking opportunities that would benefit her career. “If a publication can do that for me, that’s a great service to me,” she said. Again, a commonality of interest is the jumping off point for further engagement.

**Results**

In analyzing the interviews of both the producers and consumers of local news and information, commonalities begin to arise. The first being simply that both groups resoundingly agreed that there is value for them in social media. While media professionals view social media as a tool that aids their job, users seem to see social media as becoming part of the fabric of their daily activities.

Professionals realize, since most of them also use social media in their personal lives, the depth to which social media can permeate one’s life: From job searches to keeping up with family to community interests, there is likely a useful social media
application. As more people use some facet of social media, it behooves content producers to stay active in the same milieu as readers. One newspaperman said it would be “flat out irresponsible” to ignore social media because it has become so entrenched people’s lives. As another participant from the professional group observed, Facebook has greater potential than just regurgitating headlines, as is typically the way most newspapers use it now (linking back to their website):

Bigger media and smarter media are already beyond that because it’s really not just a way to drive people to the website. There’s business reasons to drive people to the website, to get the full stories, to get all the content, because that’s where your advertisers are, but I think your Facebook page has a chance to be a little bit more than that.

For the readers’ part, they are open to engaging more deeply with print publications via social media, but taken on their own terms of interest. It is no different than their social media interactions with a community group or local business. As the business consultant in the group noted, he is more likely to engage with a number of his favorite local venues that offer a good product and keep him abreast of current happenings via social media. It is the not just the product (publications’ content) or the social media (the conversation) that spurs action but the combination of the two. This formula should work whether selling newspapers or a pint of beer at the local pub.

As the publisher of a regional lifestyle magazine in the professional group noted, she finds her readers positively respond to her posts regarding community events she and magazine staffers will be attending. This relates to the way readers seek to engage with their interests – as a source for community events and entertainment, magazine readers
are perhaps more inclined to seek out connection with a local publication at an event such as a festival where entertainment is the primary focus. The publisher also reported excellent response from her Facebook users when emailing a readership survey. A full 50% of respondents to the survey were “fans” of the magazine on Facebook. She sees both these results as part of the benefit of the regular conversation (two-way communication) she has with readers via the magazine’s Facebook page. “It’s the conversation with the audience, whoever that audience may be,” that she believes is vitally important.

One aspect where interests did not intersect is in the discussion around gatekeeping. While the topic was more specifically addressed in the Producer group, the User group did not spend much time discussing whether news in all its forms via social media was more desirable than what they find via professional news outlets. While readers will seek out more information from news sources after reading something on social media, they do not always view the print publication’s version as the “full” story. Some readers voiced an inherent skepticism in what they read from any source. Two group members stated they do not think print media always does a thorough job of vetting and may have its own slant or agenda in reporting. One businessman commented that political agendas are present in both print media and social media.

**Discussion**

This study’s findings had much in common with previous research. For instance, the professional focus group echoed the previous research on gatekeeping, which found journalists are still acting as gatekeepers. Journalists view user-generated content from social media as a starting place for stories, but they still shape those stories themselves.
Within the newsroom itself, the typical reporter-editor hierarchy is being circumnavigated by beat reporters posting to blogs, although posts receive further review before making their way into print. These findings demonstrate both the strong foundation of journalistic ideals as well as the field’s ability to stretch and grow into delivering their product in the way readers want it delivered. The changes may well be induced by individuals who force the more staid institution to eventually change. More than one group member stated they ventured into the blogging or social media world without first consulting management – an “it’s better to ask for forgiveness than for permission” attitude. The rules, noted these journalists, came later.

Social identity theory is at work in both the user and professional groups. Primarily, SIT can be indentified as reinforcing the identity of users as community members, no matter how they define community – geographically, or more often as part of an interest group. In the politics blog example above, a community was built around the blog’s forum and transcended the virtual world to real-world activities. Social media’s reach to professionals is similarly causing many of them to expand and manage their identity in the virtual community of social networks.

Past research in community and technology, as illustrated in the literature review, identified interactivity as a key to loyalty. This concept was reaffirmed by both Producer and User focus groups. The professionals using social media most often were the ones who found the greatest “loyalty” through comments to blog posts, tips and questions posted to Facebook, and participation in activities outside the virtual forum. The readers indicated a willingness to connect on a deeper level with publications if those publications keyed in to their interests on a particular subject.
The *I-Thou* relationship discussed by Singer & Ashman (2009) is still a work in progress, especially in the newspaper industry. This study found the most reluctance to step into the social media milieu from those at the daily newspaper. Most of this hesitancy, such as reluctance to promote a reporter’s other work in a visible community role, seemed to be on the part of upper management, although self-policing by these content producers was also apparent. This likely has dual causality in journalism’s core tenets and the corporate structure of most newspapers.

**A Place at the Table for Social Media.** As the veteran newspaperman of the focus group stated, print publications have always been in the content business. Social media allows publications a new outlet for their content, but resolving how and what that content looks like will take further discovery. Culnan et al., described the Virtual Customer Environment (VCE) where users feel they have access to the players within a company and are supplied a steady stream of content. Publications must determine how, within the parameters of their industry, such a VCE can work to their benefit. This requires considerations from policies built around expectations of discourse to the basic human resource question of who will provide, post and mediate the content. Taking this line of thought a step further, publications must determine the kind of content they provide. Will it be over and above that found in its pages or online? Other kinds of businesses have found it is when they reach past their typical boundaries in providing content, such as a manufacturer listing the pros and cons of a product, their users appreciate the information and the company’s transparency in shedding light on what might be perceived as a “negative.” Imagine such a discussion around an issue featured in an article published by a local newspaper. In debating on a deeper level the accuracy of a statement or the “why”
of an issue, a publication’s reporters and editors may be viewed as more thoughtful than previously perceived by readers. Frank discussions about the news and reporting the news lifts the veil around journalism and helps readers better understand the process.

Drawing from this group of readers, it seems engagement in print publications’ social media efforts hinges on the readers’ interest in the publications’ product. If readers want to keep up with news, events, or information covered by that publication from the outset, the likelihood of them following the publication on social media and engaging further from there is considerably greater. Yet, asking readers to make a commitment greater than to “like” or “follow” will require publications to understand their readers’ interests. This is the true value of social media – these avenues allow for an ongoing conversation with readers to gauge exactly what those interests are. This takes some of the guesswork out of how publications can further engage readers.

The Kansas newspapers case study cited in the literature review (Anderson & DeVault, 2009) noted the newspaper’s social media efforts actually spurred those users to become subscribers of the newspaper. The members of the User group in this study did not indicate they would do the same. Instead, it seems that their familiarity with the print product is more likely to encourage the connection with social media. More specifically, it seems that the type of print publication influenced how readers interacted with it. Magazine readers seemed to gravitate toward the print product first, and then branched into digital versions and/or social media secondarily. The majority of newspaper readers in this group generally are reading the news online then gravitating toward social media. For many readers, they rarely come into contact with the print version of the newspaper, and only a minority subscribes to the print version.
The reach of social media coupled with print has yet to be fully explored by the industry. While the traditional bastion of journalism has considered itself above the fray of the business of running a publication, it may be that understanding the economic benefits of social media, as outlined in the third section of the literature review, will allow publications to revisit how and why they use social media. As one former editor spoke to in the focus group, social media’s full potential for print publications is yet to be tapped. Employing many of the strategies used by other types of businesses finding success with social media may help print media devise strategies for having meaningful conversations that create loyal customers, finally finding a permanent place at the table for social media.
CHAPTER 5: SUMMARIES & CONCLUSIONS

Limitations and Further Study

A primary limitation in this particular study was the size of the sample. As mentioned previously, the pool of professionals to draw from was limited by sheer number and further narrowed by those willing to participate in the focus group. Another limitation was the greater number of newspaper producers versus magazine producers. The nature of a daily newspaper is different from that of a monthly magazine, and therefore the content they each deliver via social media will differ as well. The comfort level with engaging in a two-way communication with their audiences also seems to differ. Additionally, as became clear from the User group, how users interact with newspapers versus magazines differs. Hearing from a larger number of magazine industry professionals may provide a different kind of insight into the publication-reader relationship.

One of the most apparent themes for further research is journalists’ view on the changing landscape of their field in light of the prevalence of social media. The issues of gatekeeping and ethics in a Facebook world sparked conversation and generated concern. Journalists in this study clearly saw need to address the changes being brought about by social media. Similarly, this discussion only scratched the surface of how users view the media’s practice of gatekeeping and their view of media’s role in reporting the news in general.

Based on the division between newspaper and magazines as presented by the responses from group members, further study into how readers relate to – and would be willing to further interact with – each kind of publication would give each a more clear
picture of how to best leverage and grow reader loyalty. How newspaper and magazines continue to carve out a niche in the community may use the same kind of tools but require a different approach.

**Conclusion**

The primary finding in this study is that social media is a recognized and accepted medium for communicating between publications and their readers. This creates a starting point for further utilizing social media’s reach in print’s quest to attract and maintain loyal readers.

For Producers, the role of gatekeeper is not crumbling, but the industry will be forced to evolve and/or educate readers to understand the function of the gatekeeping role. Fortunately, the social media platform provides an opportune space for such education. It will also require publications, and the industry as a whole, to decide the depth to which each wants to participate in social media. Practical considerations include the simple cost of the human resource of an individual or group to monitor and moderate social media.

Users are already using social media in their social identity management, which includes choosing the media they wish to connect with on a social platform. Which publications they connect with and to what degree they do so is tied to how Users view the content – as news or entertainment. This, too, should serve as a marker for print publications seeking to better connect with their readers online.

As noted in the findings, both groups see a value in social media and are actively using it to varying degrees in their work and in their daily lives. Such participation gives credence to the value in two-way symmetrical communication and the idea that dialogic “I-Thou” communication is rich in relation, which audience members seek. Building
relationships and building community will be paramount for print publications moving forward.

Those Producers who take the initiative to actively participate in the medium and take steps to engage readers on a deeper level will reap the rewards, but it will take a true two-way conversation to know how best to engage readers. Readers are willing to engage: They’ve already accepted social media as part of their social fabric and an extension of their communities. It is up to print media to start the conversations that get the community talking – and reading.
References


Appendix A

Focus Group Questions

Questions posed to both focus groups are as follows:

Professional Group

To what degree do you see yourself in a gatekeeper role?

How does that role differ when interacting online?

In what ways are social networking sites valuable to your work? Do you feel they help you “take the pulse” of the community?

How do you currently use social media in your work?

Brainstorming session – What kinds of interactions with readers through social media would be beneficial?

User Group

Rank the sources you rely on for information and news. How frequently do you go to these sources?

In what ways is social media valuable in gathering news and/or community information?

How do you define community involvement?

To what degree do you feel a sense of community in your interactions on Facebook or other social networking sites?

To what degree are you inclined to stay engaged with a publication’s print product if you’re also involved in its social networking platform?

Brainstorming session – In what ways would you be willing/want to interact with a local publication?
### Appendix B

Focus group coding

#### PROFESSIONAL GROUP

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<th>Participation</th>
<th>Level of engagement, low to high (1-5)</th>
<th>Comments</th>
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#### Community involvement

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|  | Current use of soc. media |
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#### Publication/public interaction

|  | Beneficial interactions |
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Additional comments
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<th>Participation</th>
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<td></td>
<td>Frequency</td>
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<td>Beneficial interactions</td>
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Additional comments
Appendix C

Professional focus group intake form

Name (to be kept confidential):

Your age (circle one): 20-29  30-39  40-49  50-59  60 & older

Gender: M  F

Highest level of education (circle one):

High School/GED  Bachelor’s  Post-bac  Graduate  PhD

Occupation:

Are you active within a community organization? Y  N

User focus group intake form

Name (to be kept confidential):

Your age (circle one): 20-29  30-39  40-49  50-59  60 & older

Gender: M  F

Highest level of education (circle one):

High School/GED  Bachelor’s  Post-bac  Graduate  PhD

Occupation:

Are you active within a community organization? Y  N
Appendix D

Consent to participate

You have been asked to participate in a focus group for Hilary Parker, a master’s student at Gonzaga University. The purpose of this focus group is to gain insight into how people use both print and social media, and where the two may intersect. The information learned in this focus group will be used in the completion of Ms. Parker’s master’s thesis. You can choose whether or not to participate in the focus group and stop at any time. Although the focus group will be tape recorded, your responses will remain anonymous and no names will be mentioned in the report.

Focus group questions have no right or wrong answers. The goal is to hear many different viewpoints from as many different people as possible. Please be honest in your responses, even if you are not in agreement with others in the group. In respect for each other, it is requested only one individual speak at a time and that all responses remain confidential.

I understand this information and agree to participate fully under the conditions stated above.

Signed & Dated