The Metamorphosis of Community Information Service in Rural Areas

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Abstract

Community news and information services continue to slide into a state of disruptive decline as social media platforms transform the way citizens consume news. National organizations, such as the Pew Research Center, offer valuable empirical data and are often first to identify macro-trends. However, unique circumstances faced by community news and information service providers in rural areas do not always mirror the national trends. The purpose of this study is to explore attitudes and strategies among rural area media providers as they grapple with dwindling public support for news and information delivered via local television, radio, and newspapers.

Keywords: Rural, Radio, Television, Newspapers, Exposure, Engagement, Digital, Strategy

1. Introduction

Innovation and alterations can create disruption in any field. Community journalism, news, and information is not immune. Providers of community journalism, primarily newspapers, have understood the current round of disruption for years, some for decades. Among other factors, the migration of "news" reporting and analysis to Internet platforms have stricken a blow to business models based on what digital media analyst Clay Shirky calls "Gutenberg Economics" (Shirky, 2010). During the height of the Gutenberg era, users were attracted by entertaining content such as sports, gossip, gardening tips, human interest stories, provocative political commentary, and comics. Revenues from commercial, nonprofit, and private advertisers interested in gaining attention from these users, combined with subscription fees, paid for responsible journalism on issues less entertaining, yet crucial to the mission of informing democracy. These topics often included international affairs, public health, education, politics, public sector, and private sector corruption. Although supremely effective at delivering information to masses of potential customers, the Gutenberg model provided no clear means on the partof advertisers to determine what aspect of their mass-media marketing efforts led to which customers walking through their doors.

Failure of the Gutenberg model to provide granular analysis of client marketing strategies in rural areas pushed media practitioners to explore digital options. The World Wide Web became the venue, exposure analytics and targeted ads the tools. With the advent of targeted ads on websites directly tracing sales via click-through, and the migration of classified ads to Craigslist and other similar sites, it is clear the Gutenberg model has become unsustainable. The shift appears irreversible, with researchers estimating the cost to practitioners at $5 billion within the first decade of the 21st century (Seamans & Zhu, 2013).

As the end of the second decade of the 21st century approaches, the trend to adopt online tools and strategies continue. Data in the 2016 Pew report show digital newspaper ad revenue falling in real terms as well as terms relative to their competition. Shaken and uncertain from the previously mentioned disruption of targeted web ads and loss of classified ads to Craigslist, Gutenberg practitioners attempting to transition to digital delivery systems were facing a significant encroachment from social media which usurped more than 76% of all digital advertising growth. According to Pew, five companies accounted for 65% of all digital advertising. Among the five, two leaders (Facebook and Google) were behind more than 76% of all digital ad growth (Pew Research, 2016). Increased online activity coupled with increases in digital ad revenues produces a reaction for three major news outlets; television, radio, and newspapers.

1.1 Trends in Television

With pressure easing in the two years prior to 2015, Pew Research shows a gradual downturn in local television viewership. "Local TV newscasts saw their viewership drop not only in all three key timeslots, but also during some nontraditional timeslots, an area of growth in past years." The study noted TV stations generating less revenue in 2015 than the year before, but also noted the decline was, "around what might be expected in a non-election year." Although the question of local TV's future in a digital era has not gone away, the industry remains strategically focused on its original viewing platform, where TV's core audience is still mostly found (Pew Research, 2016). Nationally, according to Pew, total online revenues for local TV increased 12% in 2015 (a total of $900 million). By 2020 these figures are expected to grow substantially to about $1.6 billion, "…they still account for a tiny portion of the total ad revenues an estimate of just 5 percent in 2015, and this share is not expected to grow much over the next five years" (Pew Research, 2016).

1.2 Trends in Radio News

According to Pew, national consumption of audio content, including radio news/talk, music, sports, and other programming, continues to increase. "Advances in consumer technologies allow increasing numbers of Americans to listen to radio on a variety of newer platforms, while at the same time, terrestrial radio continues to reach the overwhelming majority of the public." Financially, radio revenues continue to trend at cross currents, with regular "spot" advertisements in decline and digital revenue on the rise. For all the gains in digital, however, spot advertising still accounts for three-quarters of all radio revenue. Digital station promotional advertising on websites amounts to less than 10% (Pew Research, 2016).

1.3 Trends in Newspapers

For newspapers nationally, 2015 might as well have been another recession year according to the 2016 Pew study. "Weekday circulation fell 7% and Sunday circulation fell 4%, both showing their greatest declines since 2010." Simultaneously, advertising revenue experienced its greatest drop since 2009, falling nearly 8 percent from 2014 to 2015. A fourth of national newspaper ad revenue currently comes from digital, but not because of *growth* in digital… after all, digital ad revenue fell 2 percent in 2015 (Pew Research, 2016). ...non-digital advertising revenue fell more, dropping 10% in 2015. In 2014, the latest year for which data were available, newsroom employment also declined 10%, more than in any other year since 2009. The newspaper workforce has shrunk by about 20,000 positions, or 39%, in the last 20 years. And three newspaper companies – E.W. Scripps, Journal Communications, and Gannett – are now one, reflecting a trend toward consolidation in the industry. Nevertheless, most of the newspaper websites studied here experienced growth in traffic, and mobile traffic in particular. Overall, however, the industry continues to shrink, with Editor & Publisher's "DataBook" listing 126 fewer daily papers in 2014 than in 2004 (Pew Research, 2016). Weekday national circulation experienced a decline not seen since the immediate aftermath of the recession in 2008. Average weekday circulation fell the most since 2010. This drop is attributed to print circulation, which declined by 9 percent, while digital circulation increased by 2 percent. At the same time, Sunday circulation fell 4 percent, following a 3 percent decrease in 2014. According to Pew, the fall in Sunday circulation (like that of weekly) was due to a decline in print circulation, which fell 5 percent, while digital rose 4 percent. For both weekday and Sunday circulation, this fall represents a continuation of the trend that began in 2014. After 2009, circulation seemed to be cutting its losses, even showing a small increase in 2013. However, after a decline of 3 percent in both weekday and Sunday in 2014, circulation fell even more rapidly in 2015 (Pew Research, 2016).

2. Research Methodology

Identifying macro-trends is a valuable service provided by larger national research centers but it should be noted they may not tell the whole story for community news providers in rural areas, where distances between population centers can be vast. Communities in Southwest Kansas, from Wichita west and south of Interstate 70 provided participants for this study. Most of the participating communities are roughly three hours or more from first-class urban centers such as Kansas City, Denver, Oklahoma City, and Omaha. Although forces affecting larger media enterprises, such as the now defunct Rocky Mountain News or the revamped Washington Post, also apply to rural community enterprises, the close knit nature of rural communities provide a unique street-level manifestation of events.

This qualitative, phenomenological study aims to explore rural perspectives utilizing objectivist grounded theory. Five media buyers, eight providers, and two professionals with extensive experience in both roles were interviewed. The participants were chosen due to their role in the community. Some were identified by referrals using a "snowball" sampling method. The participants quoted herein represent major media outlets serving *Southwest Kansas*. Participants from the "buyers" group served as check against potential bias in the media-providers group, and not quoted in the results. Participants were chosen for experience extending before and beyond mainstreaming of the Internet and social media platforms. Open-ended questions used in the hour-long semi-structured interview are as follows:

➢ How has financial support for "local" original (explanatory, accountability, and/or investigative) journalism shifted since the mainstreaming of the Internet in general, "social media" in particular?

➢ How has local client (commercial and/or non-profit) ad buy and/or marketing campaign patterns changed since the mainstreaming of the Internet in general, social media in particular?

➢ How have these shifts affected editorial strategy over the years?

➢ How have marketing strategies shifted since the mainstreaming of the Internet in general, social media in particular?

➢ How have local ad buy and/or marketing campaign patterns changed since the mainstreaming of the Internet in general, social media in particular?

➢ How has your personal reliance on local news sources changed since the mainstreaming of the Internet, social media in particular?

During the coding process, a priori knowledge and assumptions were tabled. The analytic goal was to attain participants' accounts with an open mind. The resulting 924 passages from interview transcripts were sorted by themes and relationships between the true state of affairs and the research propositions.

3. Results and Discussion

924 passages from interview transcripts were reduced to 64 codes sorted by attitudinal and behavioral common threads resulting in six overarching themes; 1.) Social media and user engagement, 2.) Risk-tolerant attitudes, 3.) Experimental strategies, 4.) Risk-averse attitudes, 5.) Conservative strategies, and 6.) A dearth of availability to the kind of data capture and analysis tools readily available to larger players during, what the results suggest to be, a metamorphosis of news and information service in rural areas. As shown in Figure 1 below, a relationship emerged among the themes. All participants discussed how social media is transforming the delivery of community news and information. At the same time, they grappled with which strategies to deploy, understanding that the adoption of strategies utilized needed to focus on *user engagement* rather than exposure alone. Those who expressed risk-tolerant attitudes deployed experimental strategies while those who expressed risk-averse attitudes deployed conservative strategies. The deployment of mixed adoption strategies contributed to the final theme. Participants struggled with strategies primarily due to a lack of tools that could be employed to predict user engagement and, in turn, address the dwindling support for community news and information service in the rural areas studied.

3.1 Social Media and User Engagement

The first theme, social media and user engagement, illustrates the participants shared understanding regarding the future of community information creation and dissemination. It seems apparent that the current dominance of social media has spawned a movement from physical information resources to digital information services.

Earl Watt at the Liberal Leader and Times says, "It's sad to say, but I think perhaps one of these days these things (paper) will be obsolete pretty much. You'll be getting your news this way (digital)." Watt believes people in his community will get news "computer-based." That paper delivery will, "…be like antiques almost." This migration from digital to paper is not solely reserved for paper news, television has taken note as well.

Social media, and its inherent ability to engage users, has also altered the operations of broadcast news. Engagement with the viewing audience, which also produces content, is essential. According to Michael Schwanke, news anchor and managing editor of a regional television news team covering Western Kansas (KWCH), key goals for news reporting before the Internet included exclusivity and speed to market. Schwanke says, "It used be when you got a big story you would guard that, protect it, hold it close to your chest." Now interactivity, context, engagement with viewers, and a sense that the news team is looking out for users are key factors for holding on to loyal viewers. Schwanke concluded, "People don't want to see just the talking head anchors giving them the evening news anymore. They want someone they can interact with, (someone) they feel is on their side."

Another disruptive attribute of social media is that it enables any individual with a Smartphone to create and distribute information to a potentially large audience. Users not only engage by viewing and commenting on news, they also contribute their own news. Casey McAvoy, former rural area TV news reporter, mentions radical changes he believes TV news organizations will experience once their competitors start gathering video with equipment most non-professionals can afford, "Will we need these $5,000-$10,000-$20,000 cameras anymore? You've got your cell phone, go report a news story yourself."

Given the level of engagement social media affords, participants acknowledge they can no longer risk refraining from social interaction in the digital realm. Ignoring users on social media can lead to damning consequences, namely losing consumers. While representatives from television stations interact with digital consumers, the station creates opportunities to shape the dialog and create a positive environment for not only initial consumers, but also others who join the conversation. If consumers never receive answers from stations, it's highly possible that Internet trolls will commandeer the conversation. Viewers and users no longer just want to be told the story, but want to interact with those presenting the story. If they do not receive thistreatment, it is likely they will go elsewhere.

3.2 Risk-tolerant Attitudes

The second theme, risk-tolerant attitudes, captures the perspectives of those in the study who tend to view periodic failure as part of the process. Managing Editor, Anchor, and Investigative Reporter for the region's top broadcast TV news operation (KWCH), Michael Schwanke understands digital offerings are key to reaching the increasingly important "Millennial" demographic. Schwanke and the KWCH team view efforts for finding the right mix of digital offerings more resembling a messy, periodically brilliant science fair than a carefully crafted, buttoned down strategy and rigid programming formula typical of Gutenberg operations. Shawn Hilferty, digital editor for KWCH encourages, "...changing the culture in our newsroom to one of, 'Hey, listen. If you fail it's not a big deal.'" Hilferty coaches his team to take the occasional misfires in stride, and learn from them as part of the process. Schwanke and Hilferty learn from mistakes, but do not let the missteps dampen their team's entrepreneurial spirit. Schwanke and Hilferty know they have to master the digital realm before Boomers start tuning out for good. "For journalism," says Schwanke, "It's finding that balance. How do we get people to still watch our on-air product, (and) integrate that with the online product?" Schwanke recognizes the need for his team to grow digital, but at the same time acknowledges, "...our bread and butter is TV."

Regarding what needs to be done for these news operations to survive, willingness to risk "being wrong," learning from mistakes, and keeping what works for the next iteration is essential. However, this is difficult for long-time veterans steeped in Gutenberg Economics, and that fact continues to hamper progress. The new breed understandscosts of being wrong in the digital world are far different than that of being wrong in the Gutenberg world (similar to the difference in advertising costs between Gutenberg and digital platforms). Dena Satler, editor and publisher of the *Garden City Telegram*, a news enterprise established in 1906, put it this way: Once you take a few risks, and they fail and life goes on, you realize this might actually be the way you need to do business. "I think that's part of the problem in our business is we have a lot of news people still that have that attitude: 'I can't be wrong.'"

Earl Watt, publisher at the *Liberal Leader and Times,* agrees with the need to take risks and has begun the process of building a video channel for the news and information on which his community has come to rely. According to Watt, "We're the *Leader and Times*, but we're (also) the *L&T Network*…" Watt says the video service works very much like other things you can find on the net; "We have all the capability to deliver our news this direction." Occasionally his team's experiments work beyond expectations.

Like the time the, "...student section decided to dress up as angels and priests…" Watt described having a couple hundred students in an eight-second video, "…one of them was like Moses down front and he dropped his staff and the students parted like the Red Sea." This video quickly racked up 5,000 likes. As the *Leader and Times* team ventures into the digital realm, they learn that they have to, "...make the monetization tie." Watt recounts a risk/fail scenario (a sports commentary series) where they had 64 sponsors and did not mention one of them in the video. "This won't happen again," Watt says. Going forward the *L&T Network* will find a way to give all sponsors their due.

3.3 Experimental Strategies

The third identified theme, experimental strategies, has six sub-themes as well as a relationship with the second theme in that the risk-tolerant participants deployed experimental strategies. They utilize iterative methods for trying different ideas, understanding some may fly and many will fail but regard the risk of failure as a necessary part of the process. They also share an understanding that failure in the digital world is often not as catastrophic as in the Gutenberg world. This understanding encourages them to try new things, keep what works, discard what fails, and then try again. The digital team at *Eagle Communications* has a fearless "try it" mentality for new ideas. According to Matt Moody, Eagle's Digital Media Director, "…we're trying with literally everything that we do. That's where we've seen success." Eagle's digital team is empowered to, "…try it, and if that doesn't work we'll kill it." According to Moody and Director of Operations, Kevin Wagner, this entrepreneurial spirit is, "…the nice thing about doing things in the digital world." Experimental strategies seem to center around social community engagement. This insight is based on the premise that engagement is the key in social media news dissemination. Community news and information service providers cannot simply post and then ignore the resulting conversations. To do so is to kill the flow of the conversation and abandon any potential for orchestrating the message. Participants assert that if they do not engage the community, their competition will.

Along with focusing on social engagement, community news and information service providers are also experimenting with customized advertising. Web analytics and social media advertising partners can be leveraged for "casting small nets" that deliver the right customers to the right advertisers. The TV, radio, and digital news teams at KWCH and Eagle Communications are at least a couple steps ahead of most of their direct competitors when it comes to linking social media with their news products. Through their conversations with advertisers, local officials, private citizens, and financial institutions, they know that at some point, "…credit card companies are going to sell … data. Not your personal information, but the data of what you buy." This information will be available to advertisers, and more and more targeted ads will be seen by individuals based on that data. This type of micro targeting has already begun, and media providers that learn to adapt quickly have better odds of survival. Many pursuing experimental strategies are attempting to do so while finding a workable balance between their bread butter operations and the digital future. How can community information service providers bring along reluctant clients during this transition? *Eagle Communications'*, Digital Media Director, Moody explains the move to digital in Eagle's various local markets, "…we're still growing in that number (digital). We started at zero and so it comes down to a per-rep basis. In that sense there's no if ands or buts about it…the trend lines massive on the digital side." However, advertising clients must be brought along slowly. Many of these clients have been buying straight radio spot ads for decades. They are beginning to understand how to leverage Internet, but lag far behind in their understanding of social media, a critical factor for media enterprises wishing to increase their appeal to millennials. Moody observes, "You can still drive down this street right here and see signs, 'like us on Facebook.'" Although Facebook "likes" are one measure of user engagement, Moody believes they do not correlate with actual sales.

While undertaking the challenge of leading clients into the digital market, participants are also suggesting prioritizing business development over traditional methods of generating revenue during the era of Gutenberg Economics. For example, "Rocking M Media" manages a stable of "Community Radio" stations with a "business development" mission for the clients as opposed to being a vehicle for generating advertising revenue for the

station. Chris Miller, Rocking M's President says, "We look at our radio stations as very large megaphones to do other things." Miller says Rocking M is not in the radio business, so they don't field teams of "spot ad" sales associates. Instead, what they do is employ people to provide marketing consulting services to local businesses. According to Miller, the, "people that work for us are called 'Business Development Executives.'" They are citizens in the communities their stations serve. Rocking M's Business Development Executives carry radio airtime in a, "quiver of tools…" offered to help local businesses get the word out.

Rocking M's Business Development Executives also have social media, websites, and video drones for their clients' Facebook pages. They profess to have all of these "…potential tools to grow someone else's business." Rocking M is also looking into the development of customized mobile apps. For example, on certain Android phones, users can listen to local FM stations. Rocking M is relying on I Phones to follow suit soon, and this would extend their terrestrial radio "public service" function to a nearly ubiquitous mobile market. Finally, experimental strategies often provide a unique local-flavored product that is impossible to experience elsewhere. With the digital market becoming such an integral part of modern news, many outlets look to either direct their consumer base towards digital properties or tie their digital properties in with legacy media. Regarding local investigative journalism, Chris Miller, President of Rocking M Media believes his radio stations can drive listeners to the web, where they can read in-depth. "That's probably where we're looking at, where I can see things."

Many of the previously mentioned experimental strategies are just that; experimental. These strategies involve attempting something new, with little guidance, and hoping for a successful outcome. This experimental process contributes to discovering beneficial strategies for many. However, only half of this study's participants engaged in these experimental strategies. The other half shared contrasting attitudes and strategies.

3.4 Risks-Adverse Attitudes

The fourth theme, risk-averse attitudes, clarifies the mindsets of those who desire to stick with the Gutenberg formula despite revenue losses. Revenue loss reports from Pew are no less true in rural areas, and newspapers in Western Kansas are feeling the pressure. *Garden City Telegram* publisher, Dena Satler, understands the impact and says, "It's a big struggle right now because we're all streamlining and tightening our operations…" Where once the Telegram could afford field reporters in the state capital, now she regards the *Topeka Capital Journal* as, "...an extension of my newsroom, and there's more of that going on in our industry right now…" Earle Watt, publisher of the *Liberal Leader and Times* says his enterprise is, "…diversifying how we distribute the information." Watt believes diversification is, "...the key to moving forward…you have to be where the eyeballs are." Pat Lowery, editor of the *Hays Daily News* cites a massive gap separating the cost of digital vs. print advertising. When asked whether internet advertising is worth 10 cents to the dollar compared to the print buy, he always says, "You're dreaming if you think it's going to be 10 cents…get a nickel, you're doing good." Although these newspaper professionals recognize the challenges, some are optimistic about print's place in the future of news dissemination. Larry Dreiling of the *High Plains Journal,* a specialty publication primarily serving people in the farming and ranching communities believes there will be a place on farmhouse coffee tables for his publication for at least another generation. "The rural audience still wants something they can hold in their hand. That's why I truly believe that every county, no matter how small, will have some sort of weekly newspaper."

Roger Bluhm, current news director at the *Dodge City Daily Globe* still believes in the importance of the 4th estate, but understands the need for two-way communication with the community. He has spoken with, "…every service group in this area." His team attends, "…early morning meetings and afternoon meetings and nighttime meetings, and we try to cover the entire city and county, school board, and everything else that we can." Bluhm says, "The whole concept is just to be out there and let people know that we care." Mr. Bluhm says he has, "…written probably 8 columns in my year and a half here that have all said the same thing. Don't assume we know what's going on, tell us. Don't assume we know of an event that's happening, let us know." However, Bluhm is no stranger to Millennial attitudes toward newspapers. In fact his, "…daughter and son-in-law have probably never purchased a newspaper. They'll look at it online…for them to actually subscribe to newspapers is unheard of." Despite this knowledge, Bluhm remains undaunted. As well, he believes the paper version of the *Dodge City Daily Globe* can still be used to reach younger readers. Bluhm is confident that, "…if we can get kids a newspaper in education, we can teach them how a newspaper can be used, and then we can show them at that young age that many of the things in our paper are not going to be on Facebook…"

3.5 Conservative Strategies

The fifth theme, conservative strategies, has five sub-themes and ties with the fourth theme in that participant with risk-averse attitudes deploy much more conservative strategies. Risk-averse participants seek to avoid drastic retooling of business models until examples of sustained success emerge from other digital-first community news and information providers. Adopting this conservative approach gives the participants the hope of weathering the storm of shifting trends, and then doubling down on sustainable strategies when the storm has passed. To clarify, though, the risk-averse are not in denial about the disruption that is occurring. Larry Dreiling of the *High Plains Journal* believes his farm, ranch, and agriculture policy-focused publication will outlast its urban cousins.

He says the rural readership will hang on to the tangible product as long as people continue to have coffee tables and visits with family and friends. Regarding the future of print news, Mr. Dreiling says, "They're still going to want to be rural, and so, I can only say for myself on that but, I think, in larger cities, absolutely….I think that we're going to see newspapers, the big city daily newspaper die out."

Conservative strategies prioritize local information and news over national information and news. The ability to report and serve localized news to consumers gives regional news organizations an edge on their larger counterparts. Competition from the global giants, Google, Facebook et al. concerns the digital team at *Eagle Communications*, but Moody and Director of Operations Kevin Wagner are optimistic in their ability to leverage the one thing the giants cannot do, "local news." According to Moody, "…there are only so many niches that you can fill. The one thing that the big tech giants have not been able to do is provide local news." Interestingly, participants deploying more conservative strategies do not dismiss the significant role technology plays in any viable solution. Digital technology does not always have to be an enemy. Local news can utilize advanced technology to make the most of selected stories. With innovative, high technology comes the opportunity to create optimal local news coverage. Conservative strategies emphasize spending time building a relationship with the community while listening to the community voices. Participants acknowledged that when they listen to the various concerns and ideas of the citizens of a community, they are more likely to assemble stories that locals will be passionate about and will follow intently. Coupling listening to the community with addressing requests for specific stories will create a news atmosphere tailored specifically for an identified region.

Finally, conservative strategies for community news involve creating unique offerings of high quality to the serviced area through idiosyncrasy. Dena Satler of the Garden City Telegram, taking a somber look into the future and with an air of responsibility says, "…if we don't transition our content to surprise people and make them curious and want that next addition, however it's presented, I don't think we have much of a future." However, with this responsibility comes opportunity to break the confines of simply providing marketing services to advertisers. "I don't see us as just a marketing tool." It's all about something unique that the Telegram staff of journalists and photographers can do that nobody else can. Whether it's "...something that happened at City Hall, something that happened in the schools, a Flint water type of situation ... If we don't still have consumers looking forward to what we have because it's unique, then we've lost."

3.6 Dearth of Tools

The sixth, and final, theme, emerging from this research is the apparent dearth of tools available at this time to assist in adopting during the metamorphosis of community news and information services from Gutenberg Economics to what many refer to as the rise of the 5th estate. All participants expressed a sense of urgency and frustration while looking for available tools to adapt and finding few. Formerly reliable structures supporting community journalism are losing footing and there are no clear answers for those with lifetime investments in the profession. Out of necessity, primarily due to a perceived limited number of models and tools, each of the participants developed their own roadmap, resulting in the mix of both experimental and conservative strategies. Even though they have adopted specific strategies, they desire digital tools that will aid in preparing for the future and increasing user engagement.

4. Conclusions and Future Research

This research provides a close look at trends affecting local support for original, investigative and/or accountability journalism in areas around four key communities in Western Kansas. Nearly a decade after the 2008 recession, pressures facing newsrooms have intensified into what amounts to a wholesale reorganization of an enterprise built on a foundation of Gutenberg Economics.

The shift is fundamental, affecting even those unmindful of the long-arc verities and vicissitudes of the profession. This study suggests that media leaders in the four key Western Kansas communities understand the importance of this shift. Given the prominence of social media and its ability to engage users, participants with varying attitudes addressed the challenges with two divergent approaches; those who understand the value of trying new ways of engaging the public using experimental strategies, and those who continue to rely on the crucial role of the traditional 4th estate, remaining confident and utilizing more conservative strategies. The mixed approach to this problem highlights a need for digital tools capable of predicting user engagement and, therefore, increasing local support. While exploratory and informative, a noteworthy limitation of this study is the small number of media professionals interviewed. However, given the size of this media market, the sample size is close to, if not proportionally representative.

Areas for future research include investigating the viability of readily accessible tools and exploring the development of new tools. If *user engagement* is determined to be a better metric for measuring the effectiveness of news and information dissemination than the more common *exposure* metrics, the question to explore next is, what would be the characteristics and requirements of a predictive "engagement" model? There are several existing predictive models (Schoen Harald et al., 2013) to evaluate when addressing this question. Furthermore, prevalent research exists that does, indeed, investigate predictive models. The "Campbell-Mankiw" model is one such model measuring the predictive power of sentiment for changes in household spending (Carrol et al., 1994). However, it remains unclear what type of model is best suited for social media data.

Along with taking a closer look at existing models, future work could entail tools designed to aid purveyors of information in their choices of treatment, format, metaphorical framework, language use, and/or colloquialisms to perhaps more deeply engage particular segments of the any given local community. Fig. 1
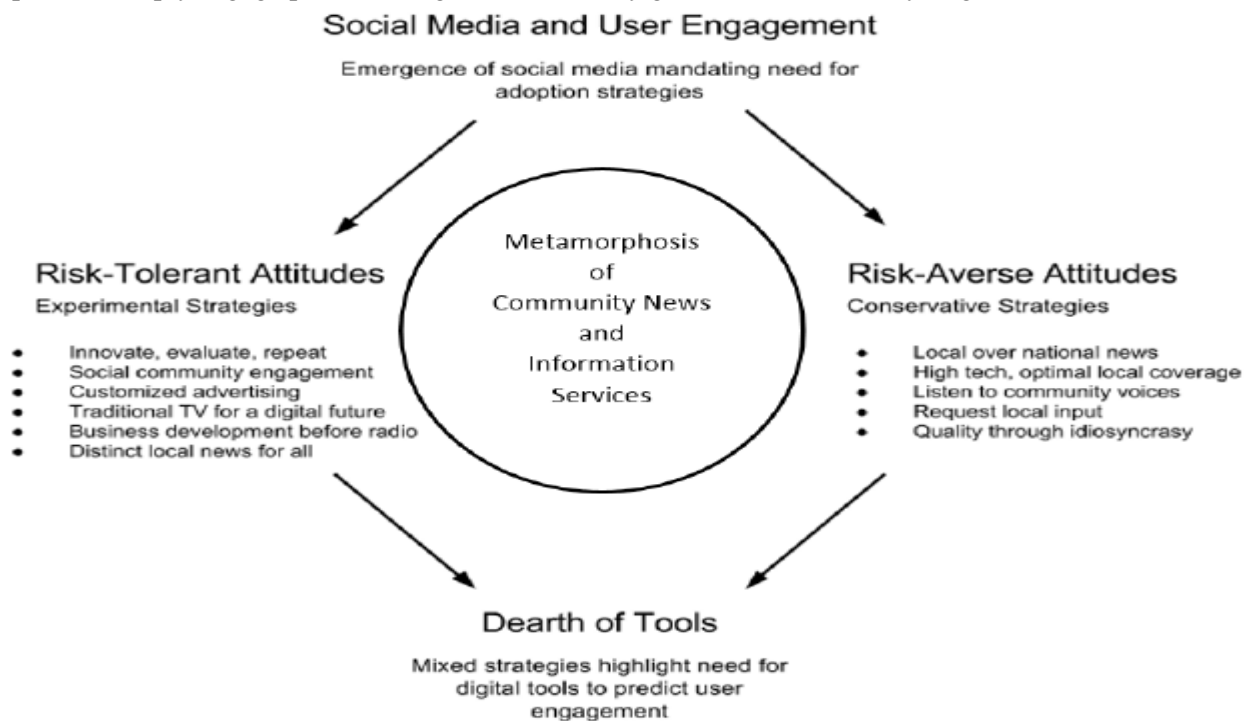
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