For Denver (and Dad)
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Abstract of Dissertation Presented to the Graduate School of the University of Florida in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

A CONTESTED COMMODITY: WHAT THE ROCKY MOUNTAIN NEWS’ CLOSURE MEANT TO DENVER

By

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August 2016

Chair: Ronald Rodgers
Co-Chair: Michael Leslie
Major: Mass Communication

Hundreds of America’s daily newspapers closed in the 100 years before Denver’s Rocky Mountain News shuttered in 2009. But the February 27, 2009 closure of “the Rocky,” as locals affectionately called it, was a special case given its enormity, history, and the paper’s symbolism as a media poster child for the newspaper industry’s broader existential struggles between 2006 and 2011. With a weekday circulation of 212,000 in America’s 17th largest media market, the Rocky was the biggest, oldest U.S. daily to close since the Houston Post and the Dallas Times Herald respectively shut down in 1991. For 150 years, between 1859 and 2009, the Rocky was the longest continuously run business in Denver, and the second oldest business in the state, and it predated both. Locally, the paper lobbied tirelessly to help Denver become what it so desperately aspired to be – a socioeconomic and political capitol, a cultural center, and a western transportation hub. Nationally, the Rocky was renowned for its 115-year fight with the Denver Post, which many news outlets considered America’s last great newspaper war. Today, all of that history makes for a rich case study that’s designed to answer a seldom-asked question. How, if at all, are a community’s members and its leaders affected when their paper closes? To answer that question, this study turned to in-depth interviews with the Denver area’s community leaders and
mixed methods surveys of the region’s residents. This research details the Rocky’s roles in the community, evaluates whether locals were emotionally tied to the paper, assesses how readers used and felt about it, and gauges its replaceability. At heart, this study asks whether the Rocky fit legal and economic scholar Margaret Jane Radin’s framework for “contested commodification.” To Radin, contested commodities are goods and services that society feels conflicted about selling and pricing given their immeasurable extra-market worth in making us human and helping us flourish. Did Denver area residents view the Rocky like perfume or a tennis racket, or did they believe the paper was something beyond an ordinary product because it made special, irreplaceable contributions to their lives and their community? This study provides the answer.
CHAPTER 1
WHY STUDY NEWSPAPER CLOSURES AND THE ROCKY?

Big, wet snowflakes soaked the sod roofs of the log huts and the tops of the nearby tipis in the two tiny towns that would become the city of Denver. On and off, they fluttered throughout that late April day in 1859. The Auraria-Denver settlement lay at the Kansas territory’s western edge, along the far reaches of the arid Great Plains, at the upslope of the Rocky Mountains.1 New York Tribune correspondent Albert Richardson described the shantytown as “a most forlorn and desolate-looking metropolis” along the banks of the Cherry Creek. When Richardson and the legendary Tribune editor Horace Greeley arrived that June to investigate the gold news zooming east, their coach was greeted by men “attired in slouched hats, tattered woolen shirts, buckskin pantaloons and moccasins; … (with) knives and revolvers suspended from their belts.”2 The Denver-Auraria residents hailed “from every quarter of the Union,” Richardson wrote. They were “Mexicans, Indians, half-breeds, trappers, speculators, gamblers, desperados, broken-down politicians and honest men.”3 Arapaho and Cheyenne dwelt among the whites, across the rugged high plains, where soon-to-be-broken treaties had marked the region as the Indians’ eternal hunting preserve. Prospectors, and those who prospered serving them, congregated at “Uncle” Dick Wooten’s general store-saloon-gaming hall-meeting place (the only sturdy structure with a wooden roof and a window).

Out front, “oxen bawled or slept stoically in the middle of the roadway, still yoked to covered wagons, whose owners were off somewhere inquiring the way to the gold.”4 The Rocky Mountain News was born on the night of April 22, 1859, christened in the slushy water leaking from the saloon’s attic, with an April 23 masthead. Though the names of the first issue’s printers have been lost to time, William Newton Byers, the Rocky’s novice editor-publisher, had plenty of help. At least two of his partners, the experienced printer-editors Thomas Gibson and John L.
Daily, were present that historic evening, and differing accounts have placed 12 other potential participants in the room. Perhaps the newspaper’s printers fretted about the bullets that occasionally pierced the floorboards from the rowdies in the bar below. (Later, they’d reinforce the floor). But that night they just cranked the sturdy old Washington handpress they’d hauled 500 miles west by oxcart. Just two months later, the Rocky Mountain News would help steer the course of Colorado’s history. That’s when the newspaper guided Greeley, the leading Republican editor of the time, Richardson and their companion Henry Villard to the region’s precious metal strikes. In so doing, the paper fueled western emigration by publishing their confirmation and sharing it with the papers that reprinted it across the country. Thereafter, the Rocky was woven into Denver’s fabric for 150 years.

Locally, “the Rocky,” as Denverites affectionately called it, lobbied tirelessly to help the city become what it so desperately aspired to be – a socioeconomic and political capitol, a cultural center, and a western transportation hub. Nationally, the Rocky was renowned for its 115-year fight with the Denver Post, which many news outlets considered America’s last great newspaper war. Today, all of that history, and the paper’s symbolism as a media poster child for the newspaper industry’s broader existential struggles between 2006 and 2011, make for a rich case study that’s designed to answer a seldom-asked question. How, if at all, are a community’s members and its leaders affected when their paper closes? To answer that question, this study turned to in-depth interviews with 41 of the Denver area’s community leaders and a mixed methods survey of 223 ordinary Coloradans. This research details the roles the Rocky played in their community, evaluates whether its members were emotionally tied to the paper, identifies the paper’s practical uses and how they felt reading it, and gauges its replaceability. At heart, this research asks whether the Rocky fit legal scholar Margaret Jane Radin’s framework for
“contested commodification.” To Radin, contested commodities are goods and services that society feels conflicted about selling and pricing given their immeasurable extra-market worth in making us human and helping us flourish. Did Denver area residents view the Rocky like perfume or a tennis racket, or did they believe that the paper made special, irreplaceable contributions to their lives and their community?

The study that follows seeks to provide the answer, starting with this chapter, which offers a roadmap of what’s to come and builds the case for the Rocky’s historical significance and research worthiness. Chapter 1 also summarizes the history of newspaper closures in recent years, and underscores the Rocky’s size and age. This chapter concludes by detailing the roles of both the paper and its first publisher in establishing early Denver, including its efforts to unify a disparate local white population around removing Indians from the region. Chapter 2 begins by chronicling the early, colorful history of Denver’s great journalistic war between the Post and the Rocky to show how and why their bitter battle became famous. Then, the chapter moves on to cover the Rocky’s resurgence from the 1940s to the ’80s, the Post’s downswing, and the reasons why the two papers thought Denver was such an appealing battleground. Chapter 3 delves into the Rocky’s strategic mistakes throughout the 1990s, which set the stage for the paper to merge its with its old nemesis, the Post in 2001. Then, the chapter details the Joint Operating Agreement between the two, which lasted from 2001 to 2009 and combined the papers’ business operations, while keeping their newsrooms separate. Chapter 4 recounts the histories of the founders of MediaNews, which owned the Post during the Rocky’s last 22 years, and the E.W. Scripps Co., which bought the Rocky in 1926 and eventually closed it. The stories of the newspapers’ past owners offer part of the explanation for why the Post outlasted the Rocky and battled for 115 years. The chapter ends by documenting how the Rocky’s fate was sealed by
Scripps’ strategic shift, which began in the ’90s, away from newspapers and toward investing in the company’s cable, broadcast TV, and Internet properties.

In the end, Scripps made a deliberate decision to close the Rocky, rather than either selling or saving it, as opposed to an exigent, unavoidable choice. Chapters 5 zooms out from the Rocky to begin examining the socio-cultural and technological factors that contributed to the newspaper industry’s downfall, while starting the process of explaining the newspaper industry’s role in its own downfall. Chapter 6 pivots toward more fully addressing what chain newspapers did to abet their catastrophic years between 2006 and 2011.9 For the 25 years leading up to the industry’s collapse over that short recent span, large corporate newspaper chains propped up profits by raising prices on ads and subscriptions, while shedding staff and cutting news. But such practices were unsustainable. Chapter 6 also explains the twentieth century’s newspaper chain-building boom, before concluding the discussion, begun in the prior chapters, regarding the inability of those chains to adapt to the Digital Age. Chapter 7 begins by reviewing the duties that Americans have come to expect newspapers to fulfill in service to society. And that review sets the stage for this study’s examination of what Coloradans say that newspapers actually do. This chapter proceeds by breaking down the economic theory that underlies this study – whether the Rocky Mountain News was a contested commodity (i.e. if it had some extra market worth beyond simply being a newspaper). Once this study’s theory has been explicated, the chapter covers the literature surrounding whether the opening or closing of a newspaper affects a community. Then, the chapter ends by reviewing the scholarship about how the mere presence of a newspaper, not just a paper’s entry or exit from a market, affects a community. Chapter 8 commences by recounting the false vision that a slew of citizen journalists and different news outlets would rise up to replace newspapers.
The chapter proceeds by delving into the scholarly work on news ecosystems or which news outlets create and spread the news. Even today, newspapers are still the best staffed, most prolific, most influential, and least replaceable of all news generators. Then, Chapter 8 ends by showcasing the findings of a recent Pew Research Center study describing Denver’s current news ecosystem. Chapter 9 covers this study’s methodology. It kicks off with an explanation of the challenges of quantifying newspaper effects, and then the chapter outlines the scholarly methods used in the remainder of this study. Chapters 10 and 11 offer up the results of this study’s interviews with 41 community leaders in the Denver area. Chapter 12 showcases the results from this research project’s online survey of 223 ordinary Coloradans. Finally, Chapter 13 presents a summary of this study’s conclusions and a discussion of its findings, before listing some of this research project’s limitations and suggesting some areas for future studies. For now, however, another question looms. Why pick the *Rocky* for such a study? The answer lies in the story of the newspaper itself, including its relationship with its home state, its renowned war with the *Denver Post*, and the sheer size of its closure. Maybe, William Byers was racked with a Golden Yellow Fever dream when the ambitious 28-year-old boasted of the historical mark his fledgling newspaper would impress upon what would become the Colorado territory.

But Byers was not a trained printer, a newspaperman, or a natural wordsmith (as a self-educated man his “literary style was undistinguished and his grammar and spelling were eccentric” at best).¹⁰ So, it’s hard to believe he truly knew the *Rocky* would succeed when he and his party rolled their wagons out of Omaha, and he jettisoned a profitable job as the city’s first surveyor.¹¹ “We know, however, to believe that a large population will settle here at once and prosper,” Byers wrote in the *Rocky’s* inaugural April 23, 1859 issue. And, he added:

We believe that this will be a reading and intelligent population. Believing this we have, at great trouble, brought a printing press and all necessary fixtures over 500
miles, at an inclement season, and over roads freezing at night and thawing by day. We have done this because we wished to collect and send forth reliable information, because we wished to mould (sic) and organize the new population, and because we have thought it would pay.12

As historian Barbara Cloud pointed out, the odds were long that any frontier newspaper, let alone the Rocky, would survive for a century and a half in an age when most western publications lasted a few years before folding under mismanagement or rolling their wagons to some other mineral discovery.13

The Rocky persisted. Denver “was a wild city once, a frontier of the Western imagination full of brawling, dueling, nakedly self-interested fortune-seekers and empire-builders,” the New York Times wrote, “and the Rocky Mountain News carried their torch.”14 Byers himself certainly believed in the power of his paper. “The character of this important region will depend much upon the influence brought to bear upon its early settlement,” he wrote in the Rocky’s first edition, “and no influence is as powerful to dissuade from disorder, or assist to organize with dignity and order as a free press.”15 Colorado’s coruscating mountain veins had first seized Byers’ imagination just as California’s gold strikes enchanted the ’49ers nearly 10 years earlier. Before he even left Omaha, Byers published a popular guidebook about seeking gold in the west. Then, he conjured the Rocky, preprinted its front and back covers, and headed west to find his own fortune with funding from his family, his partners, and the cash one of them filched from an Omaha horse thief’s corpse.16

**Why Study the Rocky?**

All that I saw, and part of which I was,

–Aeneas to Dido, Virgil’s The Aeneid17

_Rocky Mountain News_ political columnist Lynn Bartels hoisted a box of tissues and declared, “This is for everybody” as her newsroom colleagues sobbed.18 For once, they weren’t
making the news. They were the news. The paper’s owner, E.W. Scripps Co. was shuttering the tabloid the next morning, February 27, 2009, just 55 days shy of the Rocky’s 150th birthday. Nearby, other journalists watched as their building’s chief engineer cut a wall and sweated for 20 minutes as he banged open a time capsule assembled by the paper’s staff in 1985. Rocky reporter James Meadow wrote that it was moment when, “The present met the past on a day when there was suddenly no future.” The aluminum box dated to the Rocky’s editorial and financial peak from 1970 to 1990 – a period when industry observers often predicted that the rival Denver Post would fall first in a bitter battle that had lasted for 115 years. Its inscription, scrawled atop its lid in a laundry pen, read, “To be opened in April 2059 on RMN’s 200th anniversary.” In 1991, the Rocky’s publisher, Larry Strutton, had proclaimed that Denver’s daily newspaper war was finally over when the paper attained a seemingly insurmountable 126,000 daily circulation lead over the Denver Post. Then, as if on cue, the Rocky’s circulation began declining.

Just five years later in 1996, the Rocky had stopped circulating outside of Denver and ceded its weekday circulation lead to the Denver Post by nearly 28,000 copies (353,786 versus 326,189). By the spring of 2000, Scripps Co. was making a very different sort of public declaration, the Rocky had lost $123 million since 1990. The company’s leaders contended the only way for the paper to survive was to merge its business operations with those of the Post. The federal government signed off on the two papers intertwining their business and administrative sides, provided they maintained separate newsrooms, via a 2001 joint operating. But just eight years later, the Rocky was no more. And on that surreal late February 2009 day, as teary eyed staff members gathered their belongings, a small contingent watched with disappointment as a pathetic little pile of contents were unloaded from the paper’s 28-year-old time capsule. There was the set of November 1985 photos from when the paper’s new addition
was opened up on at its former 400 West Colfax Avenue headquarters; a proclamation from
then-Mayor Federico Peña declaring November 20 of that year as “RMN Headquarters Day”; an
unmarked videocassette labeled “Dec. 85”; a copy of the paper’s 125th anniversary edition from
1984; a paper carrier’s bag; a program from the October 12, 1985 University of Colorado vs.
University of Missouri football game; various Rocky-branded chachkies (t-shirts, caps, a mug, a
pen, coasters, golf balls); anthologies from columnist Gene Amole and cartoonist Ed Stein; and
the January 28, 1986 Challenger shuttle disaster edition of paper. Surely, those mid-’80s Rocky
reporters would have been more imaginative about filling their little time capsule if they’d
known that their future colleagues would be opening it as the paper faced its own disastrous end.
(Strengthen transition).

This section begins to illustrate what actually made the Rocky historic and significant –
starting with its influence on the formation of Denver and Colorado. Hundreds of American
newspapers closed in the 100 years before the Rocky last hit the streets in 2009. But the Rocky
was a special case given its size, history, and the symbolism of its closure. In its heyday, the
Rocky (founded in 1859) ranked alongside Santa Fe’s New Mexican (1849) and Salt Lake City’s
Deseret News (1850) as three of the oldest continuously published newspapers in the American
West.24 With a weekday circulation of 212,000 in America’s 17th largest media market, the
Rocky was the biggest, oldest U.S. daily to close since the Houston Post and the Dallas Times
Herald in 1991.25 That fact deserves a little more reflection. Sure, many big newspapers closed
since World War II. As often, they were the victims of technological changes such as when
papers failed to adapt to the emergence of computerized typesetting systems in the ’50s and ’60s
and, much later, the Internet’s explosion. And plenty of afternoon papers shut down throughout
’60s, ’70s, and ’80s as morning papers won out. But nowadays? Since the ’90s? Newspapers the
size of the *Rocky* don’t just close. At its height in March of 2000, the paper’s mammoth circulation totals had even reached roughly 450,000 on weekdays and 550,000 on Sundays.26

Fortunately, no U.S. city of more than 100,000 has lost its only daily newspaper, though Ann Arbor, Michigan’s paper came close in 2009.27 But, particularly since 2012, the Newhouse family’s Advance Publications has led the charge among the newspaper chains that have halted printing several days a week in favor of periodically updating their Web content. Notable examples include Alabama’s *Birmingham News* (which hits news stands on Sundays, Wednesdays, and Fridays) and two smaller state newspapers; the aforementioned *Ann Arbor News* (which only publishes a print edition on Thursdays and Sundays); the *Times-Picayune* in New Orleans (which appears in print on Wednesdays, Fridays, and Sundays); and the *Patriot-News* of Harrisburg, PA (which comes out on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Sundays).28 Others big papers have continued printing seven days a week, while scaling back home delivery to select days, including three more Advance-owned news outlets – Cleveland’s *Plain Dealer* in April 2013 (Wednesday, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday); Portland’s *Oregonian* in June 2013 (Wednesdays, Fridays, and Sundays plus a “bonus” Saturday edition); and Syracuse’s *Post-Standard* in August 2012 (Tuesday, Thursday and Sunday). And in the Motor City, the Digital First Media-owned *Detroit News*, which since 2010 has only printed Monday through Saturday editions, only delivers on Thursday and Friday (with a special Sunday section crammed into the *Detroit Free Press*).29 Although newspapers have been withdrawing from American cities for years, papers have been closed at a record rate in recent decades. In all, nearly one in four of America’s dailies shut down in the 35 years between 1979 and 2014 – a time when the total fell 23.7% to 1,331 daily papers from a total of 1,745.30 That’s a net loss of 414 daily publications. Plus, the gross number for all U.S. newspaper closures – daily, non-daily, and online-only –
stood at 876 between 2009 and 2013 alone. Two-newspaper towns are an even more endangered species. Back in 1910, 58% of American cities had more than one daily paper (even if they were commonly owned) compared with 20% in 1930, just 2% in 1971, and mere 1% by 2000. Now, that total is barely a fraction of 1%. As of 2015, just 18 U.S. cities had two distinct daily papers, according to this study’s tally, which includes free papers, specialty papers (e.g. legal, business, and Spanish-language), online-only publications, and those that compete despite sharing an owner. Pure competition among major dailies is even more rare. Just six large American cities – New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, Boston, Washington D.C., and Pittsburgh – are home to independently owned and operated, professionally produced, competing general interest daily newspapers. Denver was one of those cities until 2009, and it stood out from the start. For 150 years, from 1859 to 2009, the Rocky Mountain News was the longest continuously run business in Denver, and the second oldest business in the state, and it predated both its home city and Colorado. The arrival of the Rocky, and its short-lived rival the Cherry Creek Pioneer, brought a “sheen of sophistication” to the fledgling settlements of Auraria and Denver.

To the residents of the two tiny villages that would become Denver, the newspapers were symbols of civilization and culture that indicated the formation of bona fide white settlements with affairs worthy of documentation. “The blueprint for building a long-lasting community in America – the way (mining) camps became towns and towns became cities – was established early,” wrote Michael Madigan, the Rocky’s modern historian, in the paper’s last edition. “Start with a mercantile. Form a church. Add a newspaper.” Motley, and mostly male, the locals of the time knew that well, and they were exuberant. They splashed across Cherry Creek to deliver much of the news that filled the Rocky’s first edition, as Byers, and perhaps a half-dozen helpers, rushed to publish the April 23, 1859 paper on that cold, wet night of the 22nd. A dozen unofficial
timekeepers checked the progress of the Rocky (in Auraria) and the Cherry Creek Pioneer (in Denver), and took bets on which would print first. The Pioneer would lose the battle to become Colorado’s first newspaper by just 20 minutes. And its gold bug-bitten owner, Jack Merrick, sold out to the Rocky for $25 in flour and bacon after just one issue.\textsuperscript{36} Byers, on the other hand, had a sense of history. In the upper right corner of the first front-page, he printed a note in thick, block letters: “This is the first sheet ever printed in Pike’s Peak Country, at 10 p.m. April 22nd, 1859.”\textsuperscript{37}

Though the declaration was, technically, true, the Rocky hadn’t a waged a fair fight to print the first copy of his inaugural 500-paper run. Despite printing in a six-column format across four huge 16-by-33-inch pages, the Rocky could beat the three-column Pioneer because Byers and company had a head start. Nearly two months earlier, before they’d even left Omaha, they’d preset the type in the printing plates for their front and back pages. Their cover contained a mix of national and international news including, among other odds and ends, including a nearly three-year-old story about the opening of Japan to American trade (borrowed from the American Messenger); a piece informing the landlocked local miners that Cape Horn was to be avoided (should they suddenly decide to become mariners); information about New York City’s arrests doubling to 60,865 (Irish immigrants were clearly blame for everything); speculation about what the world would be like without a Sabbath (to be pondered in a roughneck region with no churches); and an English moral preaching against tobacco use. And once the Rocky arrived, excited locals from both sides of the creek visited the paper’s office to deliver the rest of the news necessary to fill each of its two inner pages.\textsuperscript{38} Only the Rocky’s front page, which contained a blank space in its masthead for its date and publication location, was left to be filled.
In a bid to remain Switzerland in the rivalry between Auraria and Denver, the *Rocky’s* first masthead declared that the paper was published in “Cherry Creek, K.T.” (the South Platte River tributary dividing the two settlements).\(^3^9\) Though the *Pioneer* evaporated in a day, the *Rocky* would endure to help Denver become what it so desperately aspired to be – a socioeconomic and political capitol, a cultural center, a western transportation hub, and a financial clearinghouse for Colorado.\(^4^0\) By the end the nineteenth century, the *Rocky’s* circulation had exceeded 25,000, even as Denver’s 106,700 residents chose between six dailies, 27 weeklies, and 22 monthly newspapers. And that was just in 1890.\(^4^1\) In all, at least 45 daily and weekly (CQ) newspapers opened and closed in Denver during the *Rocky’s* lifespan. But only the *Rocky* could savor the distinction of covering every day of its hometown’s existence.\(^4^2\) That the *Post* and the *Rocky* would outlast all their competitors was no small feat. Back when Denver still boasted four dueling dailies in 1901, historian Jerome Smiley claimed the city’s newspapers were the equal of any in the West. “There is no division of human activity in Denver in which more enterprise, greater energy, (and) higher ability, are employed than in the production of our newspapers,” Smiley wrote. “Political zeal in heated campaigns sometimes leads to perhaps undue manifestations of vigor but, after the Colorado custom that probably is an outgrowth of the altitude, of the climate, or the environment, our newspapers are fearfully and wonderfully in earnest in whatever they undertake to do.”\(^4^3\) That the *Rocky* would survive for so long reflects its distinct reputation as a feisty, scrappy, edgy, nonconformist publication.\(^4^4\)

Throughout the paper’s nearly 150-year run fending off competitors, “there was something about *Rocky* that seemed, somehow, different,” reporter Kevin Vaughan wrote in the lead story of the paper’s final edition. “For many of its readers, it was like a member of the family. Trusted and enjoyed most of the time, more like the obnoxious uncle at Thanksgiving
now and then.”45 As the Rocky closed, even the Denver Post acknowledged it would do well to be a bit more like its competitor. “Even as we struggle with this economic downturn and an ever-changing business model, it’s our hope the Denver Post not only will continue to echo as the voice of the Rocky Mountain empire, but also that we might take on some of the better characteristics of our one-time rival: the Rocky’s scrappiness, their edge, their personality, their humor,” wrote the Post’s Pete Chronis, who spent a combined 39 years at both papers. The Rocky “reflected the spirit of the people that it serves – fiercely independent, outspoken, active, but also caring and compassionate,” Tillie Fong, the paper’s former night general assignment reporter, told Columbia Journalism Review. “I feel the Rocky’s closing as a death – not as an institution but as a part of my life, a part of ME, that has died.”46 To M.E. Sprengelmeyer, the paper’s Washington correspondent, the Rocky always “had a little more bulldog in it than terrier. It’s a place where you could pitch the wacky stuff.”47 It would take till November 5, 1928 for the Post and the Rocky ton whittle down Denver to two daily papers. Thereafter, for 82 years and 3 months until the Rocky closed, they served as stylistic and editorial counterweights.

The Post may have owned the Denver newspaper personality contest in its early carnivalesque days from the 1890s from through the 1930s, but by the ’40s, it had become important and serious in tone. If the Post was Denver’s “head,” than the Rocky was its “heart,” focus group members told the papers’ marketing researchers. The Rocky was a “reliable and loyal” protector like a “German shepherd,” while the Post was a “wise, intelligent, owl,” and an “authoritative” teacher. The Post was “a big sleek Lincoln, but not a Mercedes,” while the Rocky was a “good looking but regular Ford.” The Post was “respected,” “comprehensive,” and interested in Denver’s “business” and “culture.” The Rocky was “happy to be a concise, tight package, with a human-interest agenda” and an “everyman readership profile.” With big,
informational pages full of national and world news, the Post was a smart, “aspirational” brand, both for its upwardly mobile readers and as a publication modeled on the “New York Times.” The Post was a “voice of authority” – a paper for the betterment of the “establishment.” The Rocky was “intelligent but consciously not intellectual,” “compact,” convenient, “colorful,” “open-minded, uncomplicated, direct, and fun-loving.” It was a “hard-driving, investigative,” and it looked out for the working class.48 “It’s a paper that makes more distinctive decisions and has more personality,” wrote Dave Kopel who, as one of the Rocky’s two rotating media critics, served as the conservative yin to Jason Salzman’s liberal yang.49

It was the type of paper to declare Denver a “‘Hick’ town” after then-mayor (now governor) John Hickenlooper won a June 3, 2003 runoff election to lead Denver. “El-Yea!” the Rocky’s Super Bowl Sunday Extra! edition bellowed on January 25, 1998, after Broncos quarterback John Elway won his first championship. In their final issue, the Rocky’s staff reminisced about their long line of quirky headlines and award-winning headline writers “To familiar? Too cute? Too risky? We went with it,” they wrote. Ironically, the two Denver papers’ names should’ve been transposed given their different coverage priorities. The Denver Post was always most concerned with news throughout the city and the state, while the Rocky Mountain News was most interested in Denver. Yes, both papers covered big stories across Colorado, and they circulated in nearby states, including Kansas, Nebraska, New Mexico, South Dakota and Wyoming. But, “The Rocky was local, local, local,” recalled Madigan, the paper’s modern historian. “Its mission was to own Denver news. The Post could have the story in Ignacio or Peetz” in Colorado’s corners.50 As for their audiences, the Rocky’s readership did include a slightly higher proportion of blue collar readers than that of the Post, but both papers actually had fairly similar reader demographics.
They made similar story choices, and they shared mission of providing serious general interest news. Where they diverged again was editorially. The Rocky was Denver’s more conservative voice – a reputation solidified by the 1990 hiring of Vincent Carroll, who served as the Rocky’s opinion page editor until the paper’s 2009 demise. (Carroll now leads the Post’s editorial page). Denver’s dailies took distinct approaches to presenting the news, given their personalities and their formats. While the broadsheet Post mixed several news stories on its front-page, the Rocky’s book-like tabloid cover always boasted a top news story and a lead sports piece anchored by giant colorful photos. The Rocky in particular loved to pick a particular news story as a cause célèbre to pummel for days. But while the paper’s cover treatment and the saturation coverage could occasionally be over-the-top, it was more often warranted and weighty. In short, the Rocky was a tabloid. But it was the rare, serious tabloid – more along the lines of Long Island’s Newsday than the New York Post. The online archives for Investigative Reporters & Editors, a journalism society devoted in-depth reporting, contain 32 major investigative series produced by the Rocky from 1982 to 2006. And the IRE’s list of the Rocky’s public service journalism was hardly inclusive. Over that 25-year-span, readers could turn to the paper for journalism about the incompetence and corruption in city departments, and at the local airport; child abuse in daycare centers; the dysfunction of the immigration system; high school dropouts; domestic violence deaths; regional airline safety; local racism and discrimination against local blacks in housing and schools; alcohol abuse among college students; a lack of regulatory safety inspections of local medical equipment; and illegal sports betting. Of course, that’s just what’s in the IRE’s archives, which hardly include all of the Rocky’s public interest reporting.
Becoming a *Rocky* staff member didn’t mean merely getting a job. It was transformation through enculturation – a process of learning and lacing the paper’s seven core attributes into every facet of its writing and design. Its leaders called it a culture of “Rockyness,” which they spelled out in a chart, given to every new hire, that read something like a Zagat guide. Within the first 10 pages of the *Rocky*, readers were to get the impression that paper was “straightforward” and genuine. Design wise, that meant “short, bold headlines,” unambiguous openings, “big, high-impact photos,” “clear, uncluttered” design, and a collection of well-packaged agate. Stories were to be written concisely, without “flowers or flourishes,” in an “in-your-face” style that “pull(ed) no punches,” while expressing without impressing. The paper, its leaders said, should maintain an edge – “to the point and pointed.” *Rocky* reporters were instructed to create “a sense of place” by imbuing the idea that the paper was of the community and for it. They strove “own ‘big stories,’” to fill the paper with energy, and to make it a humble, genuine, likable representative of – and friend to – the people.

Fully understanding the *Rocky’s* significance begins with grasping the newspaper’s role in the beginnings of its home city and state. Historian Hubert Bancroft has described the paper as a “cornerstone” of Colorado’s genesis. “No other single agency,” Smiley declared of the *Rocky*, “did so much to hearten the people, to uphold the right and to lead the way through the many difficulties that beset the paths of those who founded Colorado and its queen city.” Frontier newspapers like the *Rocky*, “literarily puffed communities into existence,” Colorado state historian William Convery noted. After more than 54,000 issues, Convery added, the *Rocky* is “a reminder of how one newspaper reflected and in turn shaped our hopes, fears and aspirations, our triumphs and tragedies.” Or as the paper’s first historian, Robert Perkin, put it, “The News is more than just the oldest settler at the junction of Cherry Creek and the Platte. It has been
committed. It helped create city and state.” In its earliest days, however, the Rocky was committed to the welfare of some at the expense of many others. The paper depicted indigenous peoples as irredeemable savages, who deserved to die to make way for white progress.

**Rhetoric of Extermination**

Half-dressed Indian women and children screamed, rushing from their lodges, as a U.S. cavalry regiment rumbled toward their encampment in the cold, yellow-grey dawn of November 29, 1864. Hundreds of Cheyenne gathered around the white peace flag that Chief Black Kettle had quickly hoisted near the Star and Stripes that was already fluttering overhead. Shots whizzed from the approaching Union soldiers. Chief White Antelope shouted for the troops to stop firing as he raced from his tipi toward the Third Colorado Cavalrymen. In late September, their commander Colonel John Chivington, Major Ned Wynkoop, and Colorado Territorial Governor John Evans had met with several chiefs at Camp Weld in Denver after they requested peace talks. That day, Evans and Chivington promised them safety if they submitted to military authorities and camped near Fort Lyon until Major General Samuel Curtis, head of the Department of Kansas, could consider their request. The Indians complied, first sleeping in the shadow of the U.S. garrison, then following orders to move northeast to Sand Creek, where they erected 120 lodges on the white, sandy ground of the dry, frozen streambed. Most of the 600 or so were Cheyenne, while others were Arapaho. Probably, two-thirds were women and children.

Yet, there was no need for them to wait for word from Curtis. Chivington, who viewed Indian extermination “as noble and necessary to win the West,” already knew his commander wasn’t ready to negotiate. The same September day that he and Evans had met with the chiefs, they concealed the telegram they had just received from Curtis. “I want no peace until the Indians suffer more,” he wrote. “No peace must be made without my direction.” And Chivington envisioned his own memorable way of doing the afflicting. Two months later, he marched his
800-man detail to Sand Creek, labeled the camp a “hostile” threat, and ordered its slaughter. Those there watched White Antelope, 75, silver-haired and sanguine, as he raised his palms and advanced toward the Union horsemen. “Stop, stop, stop,” he cried. Howitzers thumped. Most ran. Grape shot tore through the few who fought. But the old chief stood his ground, crossed his arms, and began his death chant. “Nothing lives long, except the Earth and the mountains,” those running heard him say. Struck, White Antelope pitched forward, mortally wounded.

A gold peace medal, bestowed by Abraham Lincoln during an 1863 summit with various chiefs in Washington, D.C., dangled from his neck. He, and more than 150 others, died that day. Many were scalped by the Colorado troops, who mutilated genitalia, claimed body parts as mementos, shot women and children as they plunged to their knees begging for mercy, and took target practice with a toddler. The Rocky Mountain News gleefully covered it all. And today, no study of how the paper affected Colorado is complete without recounting its role in the Sand Creek Massacre, one of the bloodiest, most horrific, unprovoked white assaults against Indians in American history. The paper’s coverage, before and after the tragedy, kindled a campaign to violently remove Indians so whites could claim their land across the High Plains. Before recounting the Rocky’s reportage and its reasons, its necessary to contextualize and clarify its principal cause. Neither actual attacks on Denver nor simple racism led the paper to depict Indians as enemies in a war for the very existence of white civilization. When gold discoveries induced Byers and the other ’59ers to roll their wagons west, across the treeless prairies, present-day Colorado wasn’t a treacherous, uncharted territory, full of furious Indians.

Disputes between the two sides were small and isolated in the 1850s, and the area was well known and well trodden by both. Three major white migrations – the Oregon pioneers, California’s ’49ers, and Utah’s Mormons – had already journeyed through the region years
before the Pike’s Peakers. And they followed a long line of pale-faced interlopers, including Coronado’s conquistadores in the 1540s, English gentlemen hunters, diarists, explorers, fur trappers, mountain men, and U.S. soldiers. Friendly Indians found and fed starving westbound travelers along trails in the 1850s. And Arapaho and Ute camps were familiar sites around the fledgling white settlements of Denver and Cherry Creek, where the Indians tranquilly traded rather than ransacking the defenseless outposts. In the five years before the Sand Creek Massacre, the Rocky published no accounts of unruly individual Indians inside the tiny towns, let alone actual examples of marauding bands assaulting them. Byers, too, was not just an ignorant ruffian bent on Indian killing. Historian Robert Perkin vividly paints him as a perspicacious publisher – a sharp, self-made, self-taught striver, and a trail-knowing, Indian-wise outdoorsman, who camped and consorted with tribes for years as he climbed, mined, tilled, and explored the region.

Thus, for all Byers’ paranoia of an impending Indian war before the Sand Creek slaughter, he knew Colorado’s existential threat came at least as much from titles and treaties as bows and bullets. Exterminating Indians meant extinguishing their land claims, and the Rocky’s coverage cloaked Coloradans with just causes to kill the tribes by depicting them as irredeemably dangerous and defiant. The trouble for Colorado’s earliest inhabitants, who numbered 25,000 by 1861, was that they actually were squatting on Indian land. Although the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 facilitated western white migration, Section 19 also reaffirmed that, barring treaties, Indians controlled and owned what would become Colorado. Plus, the 1851 Treaty of Fort Laramie had granted the Arapaho, the Cheyenne, and other tribes much of the land from north to south, between the Platte and the Arkansas rivers, and from east to west, between the Rockies
and the Kansas border. The Indians had agreed to allow roads and travelers in the 44-million-acre area, while the feds promised provisions and prevented white settlements.

In the years that followed, all the hostile Indian acts, from raiding to killing, which led to the Rocky’s inflammatory broadsides, could be traced to the document that ostensibly undid that 1851 treaty. That was the 1861 Treaty of Fort Wise. If lobbying to create Denver and Colorado was one of the biggest ways that the Rocky affected its coverage area, then decontextualizing the Indian violence surrounding their formation was among the most significant acts in the paper’s history. The Rocky did just that by completely divorcing its depictions of the local Indian population from the reality of the second treaty. (To link the two would have been to acknowledge the illegality of the white conquest of Colorado and the Indians’ legitimate grievances about their treatment). In January 1861, as Kansas became a state and Colorado hovered just a month away from becoming its own territory, the U.S. government desperately sought to clear title to at least the South Platte valley. The infamous Fort Wise agreement was the result. Ostensibly – or based on how Evans and his organ, the Rocky, portrayed the treaty – the Cheyenne and the Arapaho had ceded most of the land the federal government had guaranteed in the Treaty of Fort Laramie. In exchange, for giving up 90% of their 44 million acre allotment across Colorado, the tribes consented to move to 4 million acres in the southeast portion of the territory.

In reality, the deal signed by the Southern Cheyenne and Arapaho leaders Black Kettle, White Antelope, Little Raven, and Left Hand included neither the Northern Cheyenne, including the famous Cheyenne Dog Soldiers, nor the Arapaho. “These bands,” historian Elliott West wrote, “dominated the South Platte valley and continued to claim all this country, the gateway to the gold fields and the center of white occupation. The (federal) commissioner of Indian Affairs
soon admitted it was still theirs.” Even the treaty’s signatories explicitly claimed that they only represented their bands. (But the historian Ari Kelman cites the Fort Wise agreement as yet another example of the federal government using incompetent or corrupt translators to intentionally blur what the Indians had agreed to).\(^{67}\) Meanwhile, Colorado became a federal territory. In other words, the federal government simultaneously recognized the occupation rights of both the whites \textit{and} the Indians who didn’t sign the treaty. “It would puzzle a Philadelphia lawyer to tell whether the Utes, Arapahoes, or Uncle Sam owns the ground on which the improvements of Colorado are made,” the editor of the Black Hawk’s \textit{Daily Mining Journal} mused at the time.\(^{68}\)

As West put it, “At most, then, \textit{some} of the more peacefully inclined bands of \textit{part} of the Cheyennes and Arapahoes (and no Comanches or Kiowas) agreed to open \textit{some} of the central plains to white settlement – although no one was sure which part (emphasis in original).”\(^{69}\) And whatever some of the Indians did concede was contingent upon white authorities providing 15 years of annuities, building homes, shops, and a sawmill, and providing supplies and training to form an agrarian settlement.\(^{70}\) When the \textit{Rocky} reported about Indians subsequently raiding and clashing with settlers, the incidents became symbols of their racially immutable inability to uphold treaties, not of the government’s shortcomings. But over just three years, the 1861 deal disintegrated as the federal government failed to proffer enough money, provisions and training for the Indians to become farmers, while whites were allowed to cultivate prime reservation land. Facing mostly fallow fields and scarce big game in the summers before the Sand Creek Massacre, even the treaty’s signers wandered off the reservation to survive with the more militant bands. But what the Indians considered a natural survival response, the government and the \textit{Rocky} depicted as betrayal.\(^{71}\)
Droughts in 1861 and 1863 only made matters worse for Colorado’s Indians, and both the reservation and roaming factions continued doing what they’d done for the previous 15 years – they stole from whites.\textsuperscript{72} With ranchers and military posts occupying prime spots for water, hunting, and foraging, exasperated middle country bands had no qualms stealing from those living on the land that the Fort Wise Treaty didn’t actually cover. It was against this backdrop that Evans and the \textit{Rocky} depicted every Indian “depredation” as a violation of the treaty, which they liberally applied to all the region’s tribes.\textsuperscript{73} And the violations became a pretext for two actions by the governor that the \textit{Rocky} wholeheartedly endorsed and continuously covered. First, Evans – who “became increasingly unhinged about the threat the Native people posed to white Coloradans”\textsuperscript{74} – convinced the federal government to let him organize a regiment to fight Indians. He did so by peppering General Curtis and Secretary of War Edwin Stanton with panicky missives that the natives were imminently threatening to destroy the territory (as in April 1864 when he warned Stanton of a phantom “alliance among the various tribes of Indians on the plains for purposes of war on the settlements”).\textsuperscript{75}

As a result, by August, Evans was permitted to muster the Colorado Third, the restless, vengeful, volunteer cavalry regiment that Chivington marched to Sand Creek, so it could see action before its 100-day term expired. Second, around the same time, Evans infamously issued the second of two decrees (in June and August) for local whites to slay Indians they deemed to be “hostile” – a directive so vague it constituted an open kill orders.\textsuperscript{76} Ironically, in its first four years, the \textit{Rocky} had advocated for peaceful and harmonious relations with the region’s native population. Coloradans were outnumbered. And the distant generals to whom they fruitlessly appealed for soldiers were understandably more concerned with Confederate threats to the Union than the bands of starving Indians sporadically raiding remote white settlements. Byers,
meanwhile, wanted to market the area, not frighten away prospective settlers by portraying it as perilous, and he worried about the “negative effect” that bad publicity would have on the region.77 During the paper’s first four years, Denver’s population stood at a fluid tally of just 1,000 residents when Byers first arrived in 1859, and even by 1861 just 3,500 people were living there (out of 25,329 in the whole territory).78

Thus, the Rocky touted Colorado as a place where whites could live in concert with the Indians, not a wilderness of barbarous savages.79 As Byers wrote in an 1861 editorial:

> It is sincerely to be hoped that our citizens … will be guided by that prudence and discretion which promotes friendly and peaceful relations. … In all our dealings with these untutored barbarians, we should be governed by the greatest caution – avoiding in all cases a disposition to overreach and deceive them. They are naturally, and not without reason, suspicious of their white brethren. They feel that their rights have been invaded, their hunting grounds taken possession of, and their possessions appropriated without adequate remuneration. It should be the aim of every good citizen to conciliate the Indians, and show them by a peaceful policy, that we are not committed to an aggressive and tyrannous (sic) course. … Rash and intemperate and ill-directed attack(s) on Indians would involve us in difficulties and dangers, from which it might be impossible to extricate ourselves. We must not forget that the whites are in a measure responsible for the commission of Indian outrages …

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The Rocky was similarly reasonable and moderate in 1862 when it editorialized that the government providing “sufficient means to buy corn and wheat to feed the Indians” was the best means to avoid an “outbreak” of violence. A year earlier, the paper had even blamed whites for stimulating Indian thefts by trading alcohol with them.81 But by early 1863, the Rocky had shifted toward portraying the Indians as violent savages, who had to be exterminated in the name of American progress.

A few things changed. First and foremost, the white population was increasing as mining claims grew. Denver was up to 5,000 permanent residents by 1864. “All the mining strikes in the West were an unmitigated disaster” for American Indians, historians Robert Hine and John Faragher concluded. “The Colorado gold rush of 1859 led directly to the massacre of Black
Kettle’s band of Cheyenne at Sand Creek.”\(^8\) Although it took four years for the *Rocky* to full-throatedly voice its rhetoric of Indian extermination, the paper always spoke the language of imperialism. In a salutatory editorial column, penned for the paper’s April 23, 1859 first issue, Byers predicted the “wild Indian” would recede amid the arrival of whites:

> With our hat in our hand and our best bow we this week make our first appearance upon the stage in this capacity of Editor. We make our debut in the far west, where the snowy mountains look down upon us in the hottest summer day as well as in the winters (sic) cold; here where a few months ago the wild beasts and wilder Indians held undisturbed possession – were now surges the advancing wave of Anglo Saxon enterprise and civilization, where soon we fondly hope will be erected a great and powerful state, another empire in the sisterhood of empires. Our course is marked out; we will adhere to it with stedfast (sic) and fixed determination, to speak, write and publish the truth and nothing but the truth, let it work us weal or woe. Fondly looking forward to a long and pleasant acquaintance with our readers, hoping well to act our part, we send forth to the world the first number of the *Rocky Mountain News*.\(^8\)

Elsewhere in that first issue, Byers declared that:

> (T)he wandering savages, often an object of fear to the pilgrim travelers, are themselves, in the twinkling of an eye, trembling before the coming wave of countless emigration. The poor Indian, heretofore quietly displaced by treaty, is now pushed rudely on by the resistless rush of Yankee enterprise; and ere the year shall close, the Indians of Kansas and Nebraska will have closed by a leap, almost the last space between them and their mournful destiny.\(^8\)

Even the *Rocky’s* 1861 editorial calling for “prudence and discretion” was based on the idea that whites knew better than to misbehave because “the tribes by which we are surrounded are our inferiors physically, morally, mentally.”\(^8\) But Byers and Evans’ beliefs that white Coloradans were destined to conquer the land didn’t preclude them from worrying about the legality of their occupation until then, according to Perkin and historian Jerome Smiley.\(^8\)

Colorado’s ’59ers spent years using their guns as land titles, and that was still true even in Denver before, “and for some time after,” a May 28, 1864 congressional land grant, according to Smiley.\(^8\) The white taking of Colorado didn’t just violate the aforementioned Kansas-Nebraska Act. It breached the Indian Intercourse Acts, the six federal laws passed between 1790
and 1834, which affirmed the inalienability of Indian land titles and created the federal treaty process for their acquisition. Although, as mentioned, Evans and the Rocky believed the Fort Wise Treaty applied to the non-signatory Indians, the governor also sought to negotiate a separate agreement to ensure they too relinquished their land titles. Not surprisingly, it was after Evans failed to secure just such a treaty in the fall of 1863 that he began besieging federal officials with appeals for troops in Colorado. Historian David Svaldi has drawn parallels between the roots of the Rocky’s rhetoric of extermination and the themes in Francis Parkman’s “Conspiracy of Pontiac,” a nineteenth century history of Anglo-Franco-Indian conflict in North America, which asserted:

Indian cultures are doomed. Indians cannot/will not accept White values (civilization). All Indians are, by nature, hostile, savage and treacherous. Indians are Irrationally (sic) violent. White violence is a rational reaction to Indian “depredations.” Indian tribes conspire and plot against Whites.

Typical was the Rocky’s outraged March 24, 1863 newspaper story – with the headline “Exterminate Them” – about how the Indians were leaving the reservation to plunder despite receiving federal annuities. “They are,” the Rocky opined, “a dissolute, vagabondish, brutal and ungrateful race, and ought to be wiped from the face of the earth.”

That description marked the beginning of the Rocky’s turn toward belligerent Indian coverage. The Fort Wise Treaty was failing, and white encroachments, food shortages, and disease outbreaks were impelling increasingly desperate Indians to raid more. And Evans, who was a year into his term during 1863, was persistently and profoundly paranoid of local Indians attacks. And with the newspaper’s help, the governor was able to successfully “assemble unrelated violent episodes into a jigsaw puzzle depicting a coordinated threat” from Indians across the plains. From the spring of 1864 till the Sand Creek Massacre that November, the Rocky identified every act of Indian aggression as part of a larger, existential “Indian War.”
Indeed, with no one in the territory legally authorized to declare war on the region’s Indians, “Byers’ declaration could have served as a formal declaration of war,” Svaldi wrote. It didn’t seem to matter that most of the violent acts the Rocky attributed to local Indians didn’t occur anywhere near the Mile High City. To the Rocky, Perkin wrote, “Any killing, no matter how distant, was a ‘massacre,’ and it represented an immediate threat to Denver’s continued existence.” As Janet Lecompte put it in her historical account of the days leading up to the massacre, an Indian war only existed “in Kansas, Nebraska, and the columns of the Rocky Mountain News.”

For weeks, “the jittery populace was fed a steady diet of attacks and atrocities by its leading newspaper,” Lecompte added, despite the fact that most of the incidents occurred more 450 miles east of Denver. Much of the rest of the supposed Indian deviltry the Rocky reported near Denver was “pure fabrication,” according to the rival Daily Mining Journal. That’s not to say that Indians weren’t attacking whites in the Colorado Territory during the spring and the summer of 1864. They were. Although there were no big battles, the intermittent raiding periodically chocked supply lines to Denver and made provisions scarce (opportunistic businessmen drove up the price of flour to 32 cents per pound or $4.65 today). But, as mentioned, Indian raids began as small, isolated acts driven by starvation, desperation, and exasperation with all the white treaty breaking. And they didn’t escalate until, with the Rocky’s vociferous goading, and violence on the part of locals, and the area’s troops, provoked the Cheyenne to go on the warpath. As will be discussed shortly, “friendly” Indians only became “hostile” following Evans’ aforementioned orders for whites kill the former but avoid the latter (e.g. around the same time, Fort Larned’s troops indiscriminately fired on the Kiowa as they approached to offer help tracking down actual Indian enemies).
That April, Lieutenant Clark Dunn, who was investigating Indian horse thefts with his troops, had sparked a shootout when he dimwittedly tried to disarm a friendly brave as they shook hands. Then, in May, Lieutenant George Eayre ordered his men to shoot the friendly Cheyenne Chief Lean Bear at close range as he peacefully rode his horse up to them alone. The chief had been trying to calm the troops, who had grown antsy when they encountered his Indian group during the whites’ search for stolen cattle. (After Lean Bear toppled from his mount, his horrified, enraged band looked on as the cavalrmen trotted next to his body and continued firing into his corpse). Yet, the *Rocky* justified all the white acts of provocation as justifiable retaliation for Indian depredations. And throughout summer of 1864, the paper ramped up its sensational coverage, which culminated with its stories about the deaths of Nathan Hungate and his family at Isaac Van Wormer’s ranch. A band of Northern Arapaho had murdered and mutilated the ranch manager to retaliate against his employer. But the *Rocky* blamed the Cheyenne, while repeatedly claiming that a vast savage confederation was amassing to kill all the territory’s whites.

The *Rocky’s* Hungate stories gave Evans just the grounds he needed for the first of his aforementioned orders for whites to kill any Indians that seemed “hostile.” In the aftermath of the paper’s stories and editorials about the slain Hungates, Denver’s “men and women pushed through the streets literally crazed with fear,” Kelman wrote, while armed gangs patrolled the city to ward off a siege that never came. According to Perkin, Denver “jumped at every shadow, indulged itself frequently in high moments of wild alarm, and shocked itself into delicious terrors with unverified reports of bloody outrages – some of them as far away as Minnesota and Nevada.” The stage was set for Chivington’s surprise slaughter, who cried out for his men to remember the Hungates as he ordered them to charge. “Before Sand Creek,”
Perkin wrote, “Denver was clamoring in almost one voice for extermination of the Indians, good or bad, and Chivington knew he had the city behind him.”\textsuperscript{108} After Sand Creek, “Chivington obviously was confident he could make it all seem to be a fiercely fought and glorious victory,” Perkin added. “The hysterical town of Denver, whipped up by the dispatches and editorials in the \textit{News}, would support him in anything he did so long as Indians were killed. He could count on that.”\textsuperscript{109}

As Chivington’s men returned to Denver, the \textit{Rocky} reveled in their grisly gift giving. “Cheyenne scalps are getting as thick here now as toads in Egypt. Every body (sic) has got one, and is anxious to get another to send east.” Those “trophies,” the \textit{Rocky} reported, would be used as props in two local theaters productions, including a reenactment of the battle.\textsuperscript{110} Even as strong eyewitness evidence emerged to the contradict the battle story, the \textit{Rocky} maintained that, “It was unquestioned and undenied that the site of the Sand Creek battle was the rendezvous of the thieving and marauding bands of savages who roamed over this country last summer and fall.”\textsuperscript{111} Byers believed the Indians had it coming:

How long, O God should we have endured and suffered in silence? Day by day the murderous tomahawk and rifle were thinning our sparse settlement; night after night the flames of burning homestead and moving trains of goods, light up the eastern horizon, or gleamed along the Platte and Arkansas. But they tell us it was wrong to strike a blow in return. The first punishment given to the enemy – not half or quarter equaling their own barbarity – is called a “massacre.”\textsuperscript{112}

And he boasted that, “In no single battle in North America have so many Indians been slain … All acquitted themselves well and Colorado soldiers have again covered themselves with glory.”\textsuperscript{113} As part of the federal inquiry, launched in 1865, to investigate the incident, U.S. Senator James Doolittle visited Sand Creek, where he wrote of picking up the bullet-perforated “skulls of infants whose \textit{milk teeth} had not been shed.”\textsuperscript{114}
Yet, the Rocky’s loyalty to Evans and Chivington even persisted long after a congressional investigation revealed the colonel’s treachery and Evans resigned partly for condoning it, but also so that he could run for a U.S. Senate seat. (Both would go unpunished, and Chivington escaped any potential military justice by giving up his commission). Sixteen years later, in 1880, the paper was still justifying the deaths as part of a battle in a wider Indian war. Ironically, Byers, Chivington, and Evans made an Indian war a self-fulfilling prophecy as violence raged for four years on the Colorado plains after Sand Creek. Ultimately, in the years proceeding the Sand Creek Massacre, newspaper’s coverage of violence hadn’t actually been due to a legitimate threat of Indians seeking to kill all whites. Besides eliminating Indian land claims, the Rocky’s news stories had other objectives. Svaldi has argued that one of the paper’s main goals was to unify the local white population, which had been more self-interested than civically engaged, to fight a common enemy and form a state. 

Although the Rocky’s audience “disagreed on a number of other issues,” Svaldi wrote, they “could be united in fear by ‘Indian scalping stories.’” Indeed, by a narrow margin, Colorado voters actually ratified a state constitution in 1865, and Evans was elected as U.S. senator. But President Andrew Johnson vetoed the enabling act because he believed Colorado had too few people for statehood.

The Rocky’s Indian coverage, leading up to and after Sand Creek, also was driven by the personal desires of Chivington, Evans, and Byers for power, prestige and wealth. The first was an eager to represent the territory as a congressman. The second hoped to become a senator if Colorado attained statehood. And third was an aspirational member of the elite, who stood to gain considerable clout and added business if the territory joined the union and his associates became more potent. All three stood to profit from their partnerships in various mining and railroad ventures, if Indians could be removed from the territory. Evans, a wealthy physician
who’d grown wealthy from Illinois real estate and rail road investments, stood to become even richer if he could convince the Union Pacific that Denver’s Indian population wouldn’t threaten a new line. Regardless of whether they dwelt in a state or a territory, the financial stakes were high for those aspiring to make their fortunes living in and running Colorado. As gold and silver poured out of the region, one young prospector wrote that the territory represented its new arrivals’ desires for “influence and power in our middle age, and ease and comfort in our decline.”

**Cheerleader, Booster, Product Evangelist**

Colorado was a place where, in early 1859, a humble Georgia native like John Gregory (“dubbed poor white trash” by his contemporaries) could climb a high ridge near Clear Creek and stumble upon one of the richest gold lodes on Earth. But the territory also could be a profoundly cruel area where families lost fortunes and starved to death traveling to and fro along the region’s wagon trails. Byers, was especially “eager to increase the credibility of the paper dubbed the Rocky Mountain liar” by eastern newspapers, which cautioned against believing the golden tales of frontier publications. Then again, why wouldn’t people doubt the stories coming out of Colorado? It seems fantastical to think that, upon his auriferous discovery, Gregory really shouted, “By God, now my wife can be a lady! My children will be schooled!” One rumor drifting eastward had it that gold shavings could be gathered by the path notched in the side of a Colorado mountain if one merely slid a wooden and stone boat downhill. Few realized that it usually took a gold mine’s worth of resources to make a gold mine. “Mining exemplified the relentless search of westerners for capital and the extent to which they often squandered the capital they did obtain,” wrote historian Richard White.

Many of those promoting Colorado’s mines “found that it was far more profitable to mine investors than to mine ore.” Statistics reinforce the point. Between 1890 and 1953, Colorado’s
Cripple Creek District alone would produce $461 million in gold, but that total equated to just $50,000 more than all of the investor stock capitalizing the area’s mining companies in 1895. In Colorado’s early days, the water wheel of investment that would send all that capital rushing westward would turn on whether Greeley corroborated the Rocky’s reports. And the newspaper knew it. Determined to set Greeley’s muttonchops aquiver at the sight of gold in June of 1859, Byers had whisked the editor, Richardson, and Villard – then a Cincinnati Commercial reporter, but destined to become a railroad baron – to Gregory’s Gulch. When Greeley and his companions co-wrote a report that nearly all of Colorado’s claims were paying operations, the Rocky rushed to print the June 11 extra edition and sent to east for wide re-publication. The rest was history. As historian Elliott West wrote, “The three journalists soberly cautioned against another ‘infatuation’ and reminded readers of the need for hard work and patience, but in the mood of the day this was like telling a circus crowd to exit slowly from a burning tent.”

When the Rocky’s confirmation of gold was picked up by papers far and wide, “tens of thousands of men from the area east and south of Missouri flocked to Colorado in 1859,” though certainly not all stayed when their fortunes didn’t pan out. In contrast to the sensational stories coming out of California 10 years earlier, the Rocky strove to accurately cover Colorado’s gold rush. Byers and his staff personally investigated each Midas-touched account they received, and each verified report sent the Denver-Auraria population soaring. It was a promise the Rocky made in its very first issue, when Byers wrote, “The News will publish no mining reports, or rich discoveries upon mere rumor, but only upon the best authenticated accounts of known correspondents, or the personal knowledge of the proprietors, so that its reports may be fully relied upon.” The Rocky also was careful not to call Colorado the new Eldorado, instead the paper told new arrivals they should expect to farm or labor industriously.
because hitting it big was improbable. After he moved to Colorado, Byers did just that. He farmed and never ceased laboring – all without ever getting rich – though he did live comfortably and achieve the renown he had so desperately sought by the time he died at 72 in 1903. As a descendant of two generations of frontier farmers, Byers especially “lent himself and his newspaper, to every movement aimed at the development Colorado agriculture.” To convert Colorado into a land of plenty, he dug ditches, planted the region’s first sugar beets, fruit trees, and grapevines, experimented with watermelons, and founded the area’s first agricultural and forestry associations.

Later, he also respectively served as president of the Denver Chamber of Commerce and the Colorado Historical Society, and he played key roles in their beginnings. He founded the state’s humane society, organized the city’s tram system, held various posts with local railroad companies, dabbled in mining, very briefly opened a bank, and pioneered investment in the region’s oil wells. He also helped create, directly and indirectly, five Colorado towns, including Greeley, Denver, Longmont, Meeker, and Hot Sulphur Springs, along with the University of Denver, and the city’s first library. Byers was, as the western author Wallace Stegner put it, “a pioneer, an opener, a pass-crosser of a pure American breed, one for whom an untrodden peak was a rebuke and a shame to an energetic people.” As the Rocky survived and thrived over the years, it painted itself as the essence of Denver, the region’s champion, and its authority on all things local. Byers helped organize the effort to get the Denver Pacific railroad line, and personally scouted a route to connect the city with the lines that were fast redrawning the West. And when the railroads coolly hesitated to connect Denver to the transcontinental system to dupe the prideful little city into funding it, the Rocky “spared no adjectives” in successfully promoting the Denver Pacific bond issue in January 1868.
Ever the Republican stalwart, Byers also steered Colorado away from Southern influences by supporting Union Party nominee Hiram Bennet’s two-to-one victory over Democrat Beverley Williams in the territory’s 1861 Congressional representative election.\textsuperscript{141} It was the \textit{Rocky} that carried news of the Civil War and the death of Lincoln to the territory. And it was the \textit{Rocky} that dug for and proudly displayed even the smallest nuggets of interest about its citizens and visitors in its “Personals” column. Those tidbits ranged from the potentially important to the trivial. One 1876 news brief announced the arrival of two men visiting Denver to be considered to head the state’s Republican party. The same issue declared, “Mr. Chapin, of Grand Central Hotel has a pet tobacco worm. It’s a perfect beauty.”\textsuperscript{142} Of course, the \textit{Rocky} was just as quick to cover big news, from its wall-to-wall coverage for the great silver collapse of 1893 to the “commissioner of news” the paper dispatched to Panama to cover the country’s war for independence. The \textit{Rocky}’s sketch artist, for that matter, was the first to figuratively transport readers to the streets of San Francisco when the city burned in 1906, as his giant, detailed street map covered the paper’s entire front page.

Ultimately, the paper would pass through a number of hands after Byers sold it in May 1878. Kemp Cooper and his associates, who co-owned the \textit{Denver Republican}, were the first non-Byers-connected businessman to own it – albeit for an eye blink. Robert Perkin, the \textit{Rocky}’s first historian, suspects the sale was actually orchestrated to save Byers the embarrassment of dealing the paper to a prominent Democrat. Indeed, just two months later, Cooper and company sold the \textit{Rocky} to William Loveland, a railroad entrepreneur and Colorado’s leading Democrat, who promptly switched the paper’s political allegiance.\textsuperscript{143} Loveland’s run lasted until March 1886, when he sold the \textit{Rocky} to his partner, John Arkins (who had first bought a substantial stake in 1880) and his associates, Maurice and James Burnell.\textsuperscript{144} As will be discussed,
Colorado’s former U.S. Senator, Thomas Patterson, joined as a co-owner in August 1890, before buying them out in 1895, and ultimately selling the paper to its last non-chain owner. That was John Shaffer, who operated the paper from 1913 until Scripps purchased it in 1926. With all those years and owners, a few core characteristics of the Rocky remained the same. And all of those traits – the paper’s locally focused coverage, its claim to be the people’s paper, its efforts to reshape the community it covered for the better – began with Byers.

With the full strength of its promotional muscle, the Rocky of the nineteenth century aimed to place Denver squarely within the western expanse that journalist Albert Richardson deemed America’s “path to empire.” “Byers,” historian and author Carol Turner noted, “devoted many inches of editorial column space extolling the virtues of life at the foot of the Rockies and pooh-poohing naysayers,” including “go-backs” who came with wild expectations and “returned home blaming the territory and the scoundrels who promised it would make them rich.” The indefatigable editor-publisher “was a booster, a cheerleader, what today might be called a ‘product evangelist.’” As Perkin put it, “There was almost nothing in the affairs of his city which he had not influenced in some way at some time.” Byers envisioned creating the Colorado conjured by historian Elliott West – a place where “enormous herds of fat cattle would graze in the shelter of the Front Range. Cleanly plowed fields of corn and wheat would soon border the full length of plains rivers, with neat towns along the way, spaced in a civilized rhythm.” In the Rocky’s first edition, Byers promised:

Special attention will be paid to ascertaining the result of reliable surveys for roads through the mountains and particularly for the main central track of a Pacific Railroad. In a word, all that will be useful to the stranger in forming correct estimate of the mining region and its prospects: either for mining, farming or trading, will be faithfully communicated in the Rocky Mountain News.
But, as this chapter’s recounting of the Rocky’s treatment of indigenous peoples has shown, there’s another side to the paper’s critical roles in the formation of Denver and Colorado. The Rocky didn’t merely picture Colorado as a “civilized” white space, with no room for savage Indians. Its coverage facilitated and condoned the Sand Creek Massacre. The Rocky was Colorado territory’s first agent of imperialism, and to solely celebrate the paper is to celebrate that imperialism and to whitewash history. Any discussion of the paper’s history must also recount both where the Rocky trod and whom it trod upon.

Notes


2 Perkin, First Hundred Years, 52.

3 Ibid.

4 Perkin, First Hundred Years, 53, 29.

5 Ibid. 9-56.


10 Perkin, First Hundred Years, 33.

11 See: Perkin, First Hundred Years, 138, regarding Byers’ early life.

12 Rocky Mountain News, April 23, 1859.

13 Regarding the transience of mining town newspapers, see: Barbara Cloud, The Coming of the Frontier Press: How the West was Really Won (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2008), 20-21.


15 Rocky Mountain News, April 23, 1859.

16 Perkin, First Hundred Years, 57.

17 This epigraph came from: http://www.bartleby.com/13/2.html


24 Perkin, First Hundred Years, 10.

25 Of America’s more than 8,400 newspapers (including nearly 1,400 dailies and approximately 7,000 non-dailies), the Rocky Mountain News was likely the 30th oldest newspaper in America when it closed in 2009. And it was the biggest major metro daily paper to close since The Houston Post and The Dallas Times Herald respectively shut down in 1991. Technically, the Baltimore Examiner had a higher daily weekday circulation (256,000) than the Rocky (212,000). But the Examiner was a free, ad-supported entity, and it was less than three years old when it folded in 2009. In Boston, the closure of Phoenix, an alternative weekly with circulation of 253,000 copies, also was larger than the Rocky. But that Boston paper wasn’t a daily publication, and it had largely migrated to the Internet by the time it failed. This study’s calculations regarding whether the Rocky was the biggest paper to fail in the last 30 years were based on two lists. First, see Wikipedia’s list of defunct newspapers at: “List of defunct newspapers of the United States,” Wikipedia, last modified July 20, 2015, http://tinyurl.com/ne7um89. Second, see the newspaper closure list from newspaperlayoffs.com, which appears in: Steven Waldman and the Working Group on Information Needs of Communities. Information Needs of Communities: The Changing Media Landscape in a Broadband Age (Washington, DC: Federal Communications Commission, 2011), 41. For information about the Phoenix, see: Morgan Rousseau, “Boston Phoenix, WFNX.com closing immediately,” Metro, March 14, 2013, http://tinyurl.com/pfag7jl. For the circulation total for the Houston Post, see the helpful online encyclopedia from the Texas State Historical Association: Diana Kleiner, “Houston Post,” Handbook of Texas Online, accessed September 15, 2014, uploaded June 15, 2010, http://tinyurl.com/p5rd27q. For information about the Examiner’s circulation, see: Tricia Bishop and Liz Kay, “Examiner Closing,” Baltimore Sun, January 30, 2009, http://tinyurl.com/pg64e8x. For circulation information for the Times Herald, see: Alex Jones, “Last Day for Dallas Times Herald,” New York Times, December 9, 1991, http://tinyurl.com/nha5zw8.

26 Email from the Alliance for Audited Media. Circulation numbers derived from January 2001 audit reports for the Denver Post and the Rocky Mountain News (which contain the prior year’s circulation figures) for each paper. See also: Michael Madigan, “Rocky’s Long Run, Within a whisper of 150 years,” Rocky Mountain News, final ed., 8-11.


28 Editor & Publisher, Newspaper Databook, 94th ed. (Irvine, CA: Duncan McIntosh Co., 2015).


31 The years between 2009 and 2013 are the most recent for which newspaper closure data is available. The tallies were calculated with data from the annual state of journalism analyses conducted by Vocus, a company that used to create software for public relations and marketing. In 2014, Vocus merged with the Swedish firm, Cision AB, and new company (Cision Inc.) dropped the name Vocus. See: Katrina Mendolera, State of the Media Report 2014: Navigating Traditional Media Through Social Media and Other Digital Practices (2014), Vocus, 1-13; Katrina Mendolera, State of the Media Report 2013: The Social Media Transformation (2013), Vocus, 1-10; Katrina Mendolera, State of the Media Report 2012: Evolving and Emerging (2012), Vocus, 1-18; Katrina Mendolera, State


33 See: Editor & Publisher, Newspaper Databook, 94th ed. (Irvine, CA: Duncan McIntosh Co., 2015), ix. Typically, most studies simply quote the Editor & Publisher Databook’s list of “multinewspaper cities,” when citing the number of U.S. municipalities with more than one daily paper. As of 2015, the annual Databook (formerly the “Yearbook”) counts 49 cities as having more than one daily newspaper. But there are a several reasons why Editor & Publisher’s list doesn’t quite provide a true picture of the number of American towns with multiple dailies. This study’s tally omits papers that fell under three main categories, which Editor & Publisher includes in its count. First, Editor & Publisher counts towns as having more than one daily paper even when the newspapers are simply differently zoned editions of the same paper. In such cases, the two newspapers are only superficially different in that their mastheads carry different names, but they generally contain nearly the same content. Second, Editor & Publisher labels towns as having more than one daily newspaper when they’re both headquartered in the same municipality. But, as often, such papers don’t compete from either a business or an editorial standpoint. They simply share a parent company, and one of the dailies actually covers a different nearby city. Third, Editor & Publisher’s list includes multiple cities (e.g. Ames, IA, Boulder, Co, Columbus, MO, and Gainesville, FL) with student-run publications. Many college publications are, indeed, daily newspapers, but they generally don’t publish year-round because their production schedules are subject to academic calendar years. Although such papers produce local news coverage that equals or surpasses that of professional daily newspapers, some papers often focus almost entirely on covering their college campuses. So, they don’t directly compete to cover all the same stories as other local daily papers. Plus, Editor & Publisher’s list of multi-paper towns inexplicably omitted a number of cities with daily college newspapers. Editor & Publisher’s unexplained decision to exclude some college papers, while counting others toward its tally of cities with more than daily paper, offered the final reason – for the sake consistency – that this study omitted all college publications. Like Editor & Publisher, this study’s count of multi-daily-newspaper towns does, however, include free, specialty (legal/business), and online-only publications. Plus, this study’s total includes dailies that still compete editorially despite sharing one or more owners, such as those operating under Joint Operating Agreements (e.g. in York, PA) or those with the same parent company (e.g. the Daily News and the Inquirer in Philadelphia). A few additional caveats are in order for this study’s list. It should be noted that this study chose to omit several cities that almost have two or more daily newspapers. To begin with, Madison, WI and Las Vegas, NV were left out. In those cities, The Wisconsin State Journal and the Las Vegas Review-Journal respectively publish special editions of newspapers that compete against them (i.e. the Capital Times and the Las Vegas Sun) for two or more days per week. Yet, the Capital Times and Las Vegas Sun are inserts within their respective rivals’ newspapers. So, the content of the Capital Times and the Sun focuses less on general interest news and more on analysis, opinion pieces, features and entertainment-related fare. Unlike Editor & Publisher, this study also does not count St. Louis among its list of cities with more than one daily publication. Editor & Publisher’s considers St. Louis to be a multi-daily-newspaper town on the basis of the Missouri Lawyers Weekly, which is an online-only publication. Additionally, three other cities are worth mentioning for almost making this study’s list of two-newspaper towns. In Minnesota, the Minneapolis Star Tribune and the St. Paul Pioneer Press compete, while The Dallas Morning News and the Fort Worth Star-Telegram fight each in the Longhorn State’s Metroplex area. But despite covering similar areas, neither city can quite be characterized as having two newspapers because the papers aren’t based in the same municipality. In the same vein, in Florida, the Tampa Bay Times (formerly the St. Petersburg Times) and the Tampa Bay Tribune also compete, but the former is actually located in St. Petersburg. Based on the aforementioned criteria, this study counts the following cities as having more than one daily newspaper (listed in the alphabetical order of their home states): Los Angeles, CA (La Opinion, Los Angeles Times, Los Angeles Daily News); San Francisco, CA (San Francisco Chronicle, The Examiner); Washington, D.C. (Washington Express, Washington Post, Washington Times); Atlanta, GA (Atlanta Journal-Constitution, Fulton County Daily Report); Chicago, IL (Chicago Sun-Times, Chicago Tribune, Southtown Star, The Herald News); Crawfordsville, IN (Journal Review, The Paper of Montgomery County); Fort Wayne, IN (The Journal Gazette, The News-Sentinel); Boston, MA (Boston Herald, Boston Globe, Metro Boston); Baltimore, MD (The Baltimore Sun, The Daily Record); Detroit, MI (Detroit Free Press, The Detroit News); Trenton, NJ (The Times, The Trentonian); Albuquerque, NM


36 Perkin, First Hundred Years, 27-41.

37 Kevin Vaughan, “Rocky kept swinging until the very end,” Rocky Mountain News, February 27, 2009, final ed., 5.

38 For a vivid, detailed account of the Rocky’s first printing, see: Perkin, First Hundred Years, 32-37. For the specific anecdotes about the Rocky’s preprinting and the paper’s battle to beat the Cheery Creek Pioneer as the first newspaper published in the Pike’s Peak gold regions of the Rocky Mountains, see pages 35, 36, 42, 43.

39 See Note 36.


41 Perkin, First Hundred Years, 396. See also: Michael Madigan, “Rocky’s Long Run, Within a whisper of 150 years,” Rocky Mountain News, final ed., 8-11.

42 Michael Madigan, Heroes, Villains, Dames & Disasters: 150 Years of Front-Page Stories from the Rocky Mountain News (Arvada, CO: MadIdeas, 2009), viii. The Rocky Mountain News survived a great deal of fierce, early competition to last nearly 150 years. The Rocky’s ability to outlast all those newspapers, and the outsized role it played in Colorado’s early history as a result, is part of the reason why the Rocky is a historically significant newspaper that’s worthy of study. A non-inclusive list of some of Denver’s early paid daily newspapers, includes: the Rocky Mountain News (1859 to 2009), the Cherry Creek Pioneer (1859), the Daily Mountaineer (1860 to 1861), the Daily Herald and Rocky Mountain Advertiser (1860-1861), Denver Express (1906 to 1926), the Denver Republican (1887 to 1913), and the Denver Times (1872 to 1926). Other notable early Denver newspapers, include the Denver Tribune (1871 to 1884), which published a weekly for a time (and which was called the Denver Tribune-
Republic from 1884 to 1887). And the weekly Rocky Mountain Herald published from 1860 to 1861, before briefly switching names to the Colorado Republican and Rocky Mountain Herald (1861 to 1862) and ultimately morphing into the tri-weekly (and occasional daily) Commonwealth and Republican (1862-1864). After the Denver’s Great Flood of 1864 destroyed the Rocky’s offices, Byers temporarily printed in the Commonwealth and Republican’s offices and bought out the operation to restart the Rocky. The Rocky’s early historian, Robert Perkin, also provides a wonderful list of many of Denver’s other early, short-lived daily and weekly newspapers. Although he doesn’t include their death years, none of them were long for this world. Those short-lived Denver newspapers include: the Daily Colorado Tribune, 1867; the weekly Colorado Tribune, 1867; the Colorado Democrat, 1868; the Daily Denver Times, 1872; the weekly Times, 1873, the Colorado Journal, 1872; Western Miner and Engineer, 1872; the weekly Colorado Journal, 1872; the Rocky Mountain Leader, 1872; Colorado Real Estate and Mining Review, 1873; Colorado Courier, 1873; Denver Mirror, 1873; the Daily Programme, 1873; the Colorado Agriculturist and Stock Journal, 1873; the Commercial Advertiser, 1873; the Colorado Farmer, 1873; the Denver Commercial, 1873; the Denver Daily World, 1873; the Denver Mining Journal, 1874; the Journal of Commerce, 1874; the daily Colorado Democrat, 1874; Daily Colorado Transcript, 1875; Daily Colorado Sentinel, 1875; the weekly Colorado Sentinel, 1875; biweekly Colorado Mining Review, 1875; and the Daily Democrat, 1876. Perkin, First Hundred Years, 130-133, 311-312. For more information on Rocky’s use of the Commonwealth and Republican’s offices, see: Ibid. 218-223. Now, after all those newspapers opened and closed, the Denver Post is the lone survivor. Today’s Denver Post dates to 1895, though an unsuccessful weekly version was founded in 1892. It should be noted that the Denver Daily News published for 10 years in the Mile High City, but it was a free, and it closed in 2011. And the aforementioned list of Denver’s dailies doesn’t include free publications. For more on the early history of Denver’s newspapers, see: Perkin, First Hundred Years; and Smiley, History of Denver. For an invaluable resource about the history of American newspapers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, see: National Endowment for the Humanities and U.S. Library of Congress, “Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers,” Library of Congress Website, http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/. “Chronicling America” allows users to either search America’s historic newspaper pages between 1836 and 1922 or to go through a U.S. Newspaper Directory to learn about American newspapers published from 1690 to the present. The website also offers the publishing years for many early American newspapers, including the nearly all the years referenced herein for Denver’s early newspapers (with the exception of those on Perkin’s list).


45 Kevin Vaughan, “Rocky kept swinging until the very end,” Rocky Mountain News, February 27, 2009, final ed., 5.


Like M.E. Sprengelmeyer, the Rocky Mountain News’ Washington correspondent, University of Denver law professor Dave Kopel also called it the “scrappier” of Denver’s two newspapers. See: Dave Kopel, “We’ll lose more than a paper,” davekopel.com, blog post, February 27, 2009, http://www.davekopel.com/Media/RMN/2009/well-lose-more-than-a-paper.htm.

Madigan, “Rocky’s Long Run, Within a whisper of 150 years.”

Once again, this information is derived from an internal research report entitled “Brand Identity Analysis, Denver Post Retreat, July 25, 2003,” which was emailed to the author by Matt Baldwin, former director of research at the Rocky Mountain News, and the current president of ShoeString Research Services. According to the internal report, the Denver papers’ differences were “mainly driven by the psychographic elements” of the readers themselves and the newspapers’ formats “rather than primarily by (any dissimilarities in their) editorial content.” Translation, the papers were not alike, but they were more similar than readers thought. And readers’ personal attributes (e.g. their attitudes and lifestyles), and their reactions to the newspapers’ presentations and formats (i.e. tabloid versus broadsheet), had a bigger influence on their perceptions of the papers than the content within them.


See the searchable online archives, which contain more than 26,000 investigative stories, held by the IRE journalism society: Story Library, Investigative Reporters & Editors, accessed October 15, 2015, https://www.ire.org/resource-center/stories/.

Ibid. 652.

Madigan, Heroes, Villains, Dames, viii.


See Note 39.


See Note 39.
61 Perkin, First Hundred Years, 59, 90, 168. See also: Note 23.

62 Ibid. 159.


65 As Governor Evans told the Rocky Mountain News on June 13, 1863, the Fort Wise Treaty “extinguished the title to all the country between the North Fork of the Platte and the Arkansas rivers, from the junction of the former with the South Platte and the Cimarron Crossing of the latter to the summit of the Snowy Range; or if it did not no land whatever was ceded by that treaty.” In other words, according to historian David Svaldi, “In essence, this was all the land east of the Rockies to the Kansas border.” See: David Svaldi, Sand Creek and the Rhetoric of Extermination (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1989), 155.


67 Kelman, A Misplaced Massacre.


69 West, Contested Plains, 281-290.

70 Ibid.

71 Ibid.

72 Ibid.

73 Svaldi, Sand Creek and the Rhetoric of Extermination.

74 Kelman, A Misplaced Massacre, 145.


77 Rocky Mountain News, September 6, 1861.

78 “Colorado,” The Almanac and Annual Record for the Year 1864, George Childs, ed. (San Francisco: A. Roman & Co., 1864), 445, accessible at: http://tinyurl.com/o8kgv4a; Perkin, First Hundred Years, 54, 127, 159.

79 Rocky Mountain News, August 27, 1860; Ibid. September 11, 1860. For descriptions of “good Indians,” see the April 23, 26, and June 14, 1861 editions of the paper.

80 Ibid. April 23, 1861.

81 Ibid. March 26, 1862.

82 Hine and Faragher, The American West, 251.

83 Rocky Mountain News, April 23, 1859.

55
84 Ibid.

85 Rocky Mountain News, April 23, 1861.

86 Jerome Smiley, History of Denver: With outlines of the earlier history of the Rocky Mountain country, (Denver, CO: Denver Times, 1901); Perkin, First Hundred Years.

87 Smiley, History of Denver, 205.

88 Svaldi, Sand Creek and the Rhetoric of Extermination, 154, 155.

89 Ibid.

90 Svaldi, Sand Creek and the Rhetoric of Extermination, 57.

91 Rocky Mountain News, March 24, 1863.


93 Kelman, A Misplaced Massacre, 148. See also: Svaldi, Sand Creek and the Rhetoric of Extermination, 166.

94 Ibid. 148-149, 158.

95 Ibid. 193.

96 Perkin, First Hundred Years, 258.

97 Daily Mining Journal, August 22, 1864, 3; Svaldi, Sand Creek and the Rhetoric of Extermination, 166.

98 Based on flour costing $32 per 100 pounds in Denver in 1864 or 32 cents per pound (i.e. $4.65 today compared with an average modern price of 53 cents per pound. See: Perkin, First Hundred Years, 266.


100 Hoig, Sand Creek Massacre, 36-40.

101 Kelman, A Misplaced Massacre, 147, Svaldi, Sand Creek and the Rhetoric of Extermination, 159.


103 Svaldi, Sand Creek and the Rhetoric of Extermination.

104 West, Contested Plains, 190; Perkin, First Hundred Years, 264-265. See also: Kelman, Misplaced Massacre, 147-148, 216; Svaldi, Sand Creek and the Rhetoric of Extermination, 160.

105 Kelman, A Misplaced Massacre, 148.

106 Kelman, A Misplaced Massacre: Struggling over the Memory of Sand Creek, 148.

107 Perkin, First Hundred Years, 258.

108 Perkin, First Hundred Years, 274.

109 Perkin, First Hundred Years, 274.


Ibid. 156.

Chivington and Evans originally solidified their bond with Byers when they respectively saved his life and his career after he lost his fourth headquarters and his family farm to Denver area’s great flood of May 19-20, 1864. Evans is likely to have quietly recapitalized Byers after the raging waters collapsed the Rocky’s offices and deposited the newspaper’s 3,000-pound printing press a half-mile away at the bottom of Cherry Creek. It was Byers’ Solomon-like act of diplomacy a few years before the flood that put the Rocky in harm’s way to begin with. Denver and Auraria residents had vied for local supremacy for three years before they merged and took the name Denver in late 1861. But, in the spring of the prior year, Byers sought to avoid alienating either side by building his office on stilts atop the boundary line between the two towns. That line was the seemingly sanguine Cherry Creek, though the local indigenous population had warned the area’s new residents that it was bound to overflow. Without Evans’ financial help following flood of 1864, Byers may not have been able to start the Rocky anew, while Chivington and his men rescued Byers and his family when they were stranded on their farm along the Platte River. Faced with the raging river that was feeding Cherry Creek as it destroyed much of early Denver, Byers steeled himself for the worst. Just before Chivington arrived, the Rocky’s editor “wrote a note stating that his wife and babies were clinging to treetops, sealed it in a bottle, and cast it adrift.” See: Perkin, *First Hundred Years*, 22, 256, 257. See also: Svaldi, *Sand Creek and the Rhetoric of Extermination*, 133; Reilly, *The Frontier Newspapers*, 22.

Perkin, *First Hundred Years*, 257, 267.

Northwestern University, *Report of the John Evans Study Committee*, May 2014, 18, 19, 21, 22, http://tinyurl.com/npzjow. See also: Jerome Smiley, *History of Denver: With outlines of the earlier history of the Rocky Mountain country*, (Denver, CO: Denver Times, 1901), 379, 380, 581, 582, 583. West, *Contested Plains*, 311; Perkin, *First Hundred Years*, 256. Evans’ role in the Sand Creek Massacre has made him a controversial figure in recent years as Northwestern University and the University of Denver, both of which Evans helped found, have in engaged considerable soul searching on the topic. To mark the Sand Creek Massacre, both universities published reports faulting Evans for creating the volatile Colorado conditions that led to the Sand Creek Massacre. See: Northwestern University, *Report of the John Evans Study Committee*. See also: Patricia Calhoun, “Sand Creek Massacre: John Evans founded DU, but left a legacy of shame,” *Westword*, November 11, 2014, http://www.westword.com/news/sand-creek-massacre-john-evans-founded-du-but-he-left-a-legacy-of-shame-6054709. As the University of Denver’s committee wrote, “While not of the same character, Evans’s culpability is comparable in degree to that of Colonel John Chivington, the military commander who personally planned and carried out the massacre, Evan’s actions and influence, more than those of any other political official in Colorado Territory, created the conditions in which the massacre was highly likely.”


Perkin, *First Hundred Years*, 109, 110.

123 Perkin, *First Hundred Years*, 109, 110.

124 Ibid. 13.

125 This is a paraphrased version of an old Mexican proverb about extracting silver, “It takes a silver mine to make a silver mine.” See: White, *It’s Your Misfortune*, 260.

126 Ibid.


128 Ibid.


130 White, *It’s Your Misfortune*, 192.

131 Perkin, *First Hundred Years*.


133 *Rocky Mountain News*, April 23, 1859.

134 Perkin, *First Hundred Years*.

135 Ibid. 332.

136 Ibid. 44.

137 Ibid. 44, 331.

138 Ibid. 219, 220, 313, 329.


140 Ibid. 304-305.


143 Perkin, *First Hundred Years*, 337. For information on Kemp Cooper’s ownership of the *Denver Republican*, see: Jerome Smiley, *History of Denver: With outlines of the earlier history of the Rocky Mountain country*, (Denver, CO: Denver Times, 1901), 670.

144 Perkin, *First Hundred Years*, 337-354, 379, 380. See also: Fowler, *Timberline*, 76.

145 Ibid. For more on the respective ownership reigns of Thomas Patterson and John Shaffer, see: 381-399, 427-464.

146 Byers didn’t always succeed in his endeavors to promote Denver. Following the paper’s closure, the *New York Times* comically recounted its colorful history: “In many ways, *Rocky* stories and Denver stories are synonymous, partly because the paper’s unabashed mission, especially in its early days, was to help Denver grow and prosper,
sometimes even at the expense of the facts. The first owner and publisher, William Byers, who founded the paper on the second floor of a saloon, decided early on, for example, that Eastern moneyed investors would want Denver to have good steamboat access – a profoundly unrealistic prospect here on the High Plains. So he simply invented it. Shipping news, complete with the made-up names of arriving and departing vessels, heading out on the South Platte River, bound east with made-up loads of freight, became a fictional staple.” West, *Contested Plains*, 182; Perkin, *First Hundred Years*. See also: Kirk Johnson, “The Rocky Says Goodbye, Taking a Part of Its City’s Past With It,” *New York Times*, February 28, 2009, A11.


148 Perkin, *First Hundred Years*, 332.


150 *Rocky Mountain News*, April 23, 1859.
CHAPTER 2
THE LAST GREAT NEWSPAPER WAR’S EARLY YEARS

The Denver Post’s 1989 prank was small, but the resulting morale boost was big. The Rocky Mountain News had recently outbid the Post by $63,000 to nab the syndicated rights to Garfield, the Post’s most popular comic. To rub it in, the Rocky erected two 12-foot-tall cloth and wire likenesses of Garfield, and his canine companion, Odie, atop the newspaper’s headquarters. The ’80s were dark days at the Post, and not just because of the Garfield coup at the Rocky, which once boasted the “Greatest Comic Section in America” – with 40 full-color cartoons, spread across 20 pages.1 The Rocky had been on a roll since the early ’70s, when the “feisty” tabloid began surging past the Post in popularity and profitability.2 Post reporter Pat O’Driscoll knew that he alone couldn’t raise his paper’s subscriber and ad counts, but he did hatch a scheme to lift the spirits of his forlorn fellow Posties, on a cold morning just before Christmas of 1989.3 Wearing workmen’s coveralls and toting a toolbox and a ladder, O’Driscoll and Post reporter Jim Carrier bluffed their way into the Rocky’s Colfax Avenue offices and onto the newspaper’s roof. O’Driscoll’s wife, artist Paula Pence, and Post reporter Jennifer Gavin trailed close behind, carrying a hand-made eight- by four-foot replica of the Denver Post wrapped in butcher paper and adorned with a red ribbon.

The merry pranksters left their enormous, fake Denver Post inside Odie’s mouth, and the sight drew laughs from co-workers and passersby for the rest of the morning.4 O’Driscoll’s Garfield prank was playful compared with the real rumbles (from a press club brawl to a street corner confrontation) and the figurative fights (in boardrooms), throughout the long and legendary conflict between the Rocky and the Post. The Rocky may have dominated Denver during its first 34 years. But as this chapter begins to illustrate, the paper’s last 115 years tell the tale of a newspaper war that’s rarely been rivaled in American history – one that was just as
hotly contested in 1899 as 1989 and 2009. The story of that war, which this chapter recounts in its early, colorful days, is part of what makes the Rocky worth studying. That competition, which many would eventually be dubbed “America’s last great newspaper war,” made Denver’s newspapers well-known across the country. What follows, throughout this chapter, is an explanation of how the Post became Denver’s dominate news provider, the Rocky’s resurrection between the 1940s and the ’80s, and why they fought so hard over Denver.

The Origins of the Fight

Denver’s newspaper conflict truly caught fire on June 22, 1894 after Frederick Gilmer Bonfils, a Kansas City lottery manipulator, and Harry Heye Tammen, a museum-curio shop conniver, formed an unlikely partnership to help resurrect the Denver Evening Post. A group of Grover Cleveland-supporting Democrats had founded the first Post on August 8, 1892 to counter the Rocky’s Populist Party trumpeting, but Colorado was firmly for silver and the Post died in its crib just before its first birthday. Less than a year later, in June of 1894, another group of businessmen resurrected the still-Democratic Post. But with the nation in the throes of a financial crisis and four papers, the Rocky, the Times, the Express and the Republican, all competing for Denver’s advertising sparse dollars, Post president Stephen Keene, and its principle owner, Charles Hughes, went looking for a buyer. They found their man in Tammen, who then ran his little museum/shop full of Wild West and Indian-themed curiosities in Denver’s Windsor Hotel. But he would later turn it into a thriving seller and supplier of “genuine” Indian artifacts (made in places like Brooklyn) that sold across America.

Despite no newspaper experience, it was Tammen, who picked the struggling Post after imagining he could profit from a provocative newspaper read by those as exploitable as his souvenir shop customers. And it was Tammen who, despite not knowing Bonfils, scouted, found, and recruited his financier, after admiring the profitable sham lottery tickets the Kansas gambler
Bonfils put up $12,500 to buy the Post, and the partners hatched a simple, winning strategy. In one early meeting, Tammen lectured the staff that a newspaper should be like a “vaudeville show … (with) every sort of act – laughs, tears, wonder, thrills, melodrama, tragedy, comedy, love and hate.”

Bonfils, too, was characteristically colorful about the lurid local coverage the Post aspired to produce, or, as he was fond of saying, “A dogfight in a Denver street is more important than a war in Europe.” Hyperlocal coverage suited the city just fine in the late 1800s. “Denver was a proud, even vainglorious little city” that “pleased herself with her own brand of superior insularity,” wrote the Rocky’s historian, Robert Perkins. It prided itself on its pioneering Western role in streetcars, telephones, and electric lighting. As the March 24, 1880 edition of the Rocky noted, “Denver is like Paris in this respect, that its own affairs interest its people more than distant events do. We have a little world of our own.”

The Post’s owners catered to the city’s sense of self-importance. And it didn’t take long for them to make their paper, in the words of Time magazine’s first issue in 1923, “a blackmailing, blackguarding, nauseous sheet, which stinks to high heaven and is the shame of newspapermen the world over.”

Post biographer Bill Hosokawa described the sensational scandalmonger more politely (perhaps because the Post published its long-time employee’s 1976 history of paper). As Hosokawa wrote, “Even on a dull day, the big type and red ink suggested startling news developments that only the Post knew about.” The Rocky’s historian, Robert Perkin, put it another way, “Everyone damned the Post – and nearly everyone subscribed” to see what it would do next. In that distant age before TV, radio, the Internet, and the National Enquirer, who wouldn’t pick up a newspaper with giant, eight-column screamers like “Jealous Gun-Gal Plugs Her Lover Low,” and “Does it hurt to be born?” To promote subscription sales and mock the
legislature, the *Post’s* reporters once opened a barrel of monkeys inside the Colorado Statehouse. They promptly scaled the dome, unscrewed light bulbs and defecated on the perplexed onlookers five stories below. By 1901, Bon and Tam, as the community nicknamed the paper’s founders, operated from their home base above 16th Street. Their assistant was visible in the rich, red-walled waiting room between their joint-offices, which their enemies dubbed the “Bucket of Blood” for the ferocity of the duo’s attacks.

There, the *Post* persecuted public officials, and strong-armed businesses into buying ads lest the paper attack them with lengthy exposés. When a local department store declined to advertise with the *Post*, one of the paper’s retaliatory investigative pieces actually inspired Colorado’s first child labor laws, after the paper highlighted the plight of “little girls, poorly dressed with pale faces employed in sweatshops” making apparel. Bon and Tam dropped “Evening” from the *Post’s* name in 1901, and dubbed their broadsheet “The Paper with a Heart and Soul” and a “Big Brother” to every common man and woman. With its “parade of human flies and lady wrestlers,” the *Post* needed just six years (by 1901) to gain a weekday circulation lead that the *Rocky* wouldn’t wrest back until 1980. Between the years when Bon and Tam purchased the *Post* in 1895 and 1907, the *Post* grew to a weekday circulation of 83,000 from an overstated figure of 6,000. The *Rocky*, on the other hand, nearly closed. Its daily circulation rose from 26,286 in 1900 to 100,000 in 1928, but it plummeted to 33,421 in 1934, and wouldn’t surpass 100,000 again until 1948. By then, the *Post’s* circulation stood at 224,220.

That’s not to say the *Rocky* wasn’t serving the public and producing some topflight writing during some of its darker business years in the first four decades. It would take a drastic measure – the switch to a tabloid format in 1942 – to raise the *Rocky* from the business nadir it reached during World War II. Although the paper began as a broadsheet, it would switch formats
and publish as a tabloid for the last 67 years of Denver’s 115-year-long newspaper war. That made it the rare tabloid printed outside of a major northeastern city like New York or a big industrial center like Chicago. Perhaps even stranger, the *Rocky* wasn’t a sensationalist rag.\(^{20}\) The *Rocky*’s format conversion in the early ’40s was a testament to the *Post*’s success. As will be discussed, that decision by the Cincinnati-based Scripps Co., which bought the *Rocky* in 1926, would pull the paper back from the brink of death and transform it into a modern news outlet. But it would take nearly all of the first half of the twentieth century for the *Post* to fully reform itself into a respectable newspaper. Its flamboyance only began to abate with the deaths of Tammen (1924) and Bonfils (1933). The *Post*’s carnival finally closed when new editor Palmer Hoyt took over in 1946.

It was Hoyt who coined the newspaper’s enduring slogan – “The Voice of the Rocky Mountain Empire.”\(^{21}\) The enormity of the enmity between the *Rocky* and the *Post* was also unique because the two papers didn’t directly compete on the same publication schedule until September of 1981. That’s when the *Post* began circulating in the morning, while phasing out its afternoon edition – the last of which was published in June of 1982.\(^{22}\) Until then, the *Rocky* blanketed breakfast tables, and the *Post* owned the afternoons, not counting each paper’s extra editions for breaking news and a bitter two-year battle when the *Post* attempted to publish in the mornings (from 1926 to 1928). During that two-year period, they went to ludicrous lengths to win the hearts and minds of Coloradans. When writer Albert Camus said, “At any street corner, the feeling of absurdity can strike any man in the face,” he could have easily been standing in downtown Denver at various points in the city’s newspaper war. Beginning in the late 1890s, Bon and Tam began selling cut-rate coal to spite Denver’s monopoly coal purveyors for their high prices and their lack of advertising.
When the *Post* claimed its subscriptions came with “A Full Ton – and an Extra Lump,” the *Rocky* delighted in dubbing the mercurial Bonfils and the rotund Tammen “Nut” and “Lump,” while squealing that they shorted their coal loads. The *Rocky*, meanwhile, gave away $500 life insurance policies to subscribers. At few points were the two newspapers’ promotions more bizarre than when the *Denver Post* unsuccessfully attempted to publish a morning edition from 1926 to 1928. Both papers staged elaborate celebrations for every little advertising and circulation victory at the time:

Signal bombs rocked the downtown district. Brass bands paraded. An airplane swooped over the city at perilously low altitudes so that none should miss the benefits of periodic shrieks from an outsized siren mounted beneath the wing and capable of drowning the engine.

The marketing madness escalated as each paper published “illustrated serial novels of flaming youth, limerick contests, comic strips, and screaming headlines.” And it eventually included a money-hemorrhaging gasoline war in which each publication gave away four gallons of gas with the purchase of a single 25-cent classified ad. The *Post*, which appropriately owned a circus as a side business from 1903 to 1929, sometimes housed a caged lion, a baby elephant and other performers in its lobby to sell ads. At times, their figurative fights became flesh and blood skirmishes.

On the morning of December 26, 1907, Bonfils gave what he called “a well-merited thrashing” to Thomas Patterson, the *Rocky’s* editor, publisher, and owner at the time. As mentioned, Patterson was a former U.S. Senator, who helped the territory attain statehood, and took over the *Rocky* after gradually buying a majority share in paper between 1890 and 1895. But even after his political brawls in Washington, it’s hard to imagine he was prepared for Bonfils’ response after accusing the *Post* of blackmailing advertisers. Patterson’s assault came in the form of an editorial column alongside a cartoon of Bonfils dressed as Captain Kidd.
Post owner’s attack came in literal form. Around 9 a.m. Bonfils, 46 and pink with rage, snuck up behind Patterson, 67, and genteel in his thick glasses, as the punctually walked his usual route to the Rocky’s offices. “Good morning,” came a voice from behind.

Then, before the senator could finish turning his head to see him, Bonfils cold-cocked him so hard he bloodied his nose and broke his dental plate. Patterson later told a court trying Bonfils for assault that he’d kept up the attack, screaming obscenities, and raining punches on Patterson, even after he hit the ground.31 (Bonfils would be warned to not to strike the senator and fined $50 plus his legal costs).32 In 1913, the venerable old senator sold the Rocky, and its sister the Denver Times, to John Shaffer, a Chicago-based financier of railroads and various industries, a patron of the arts, and the Chicago Post’s former owner and publisher. But Shaffer turned out to be better at collecting art and living comfortably on a Colorado ranch, where he entertained the likes of Teddy Roosevelt, than beating Bonfils.33 Weary from the unprofitable conflict, and despairing that his son died too young to inherit the Rocky, Shaffer became the paper’s last non-chain owner when he sold out to Scripps in 1926.34

In February 1933, an emotionally drained Bonfils died at age 72, while bitterly embroiled in the libel lawsuit he’d launched against the Rocky after it delightedly detailed a Democratic politician’s vitriolic speech about him.35 But while the two Denver newspapers’ owners changed over the years, the ferocity of their fight never waned. More than 60 years after Bonfils pummeled Patterson, fisticuffs were still breaking out “when bad-boy genius Rocky Mountain News editor Michael Howard decked Denver Post editor-to-be Chuck Green in the Denver Press Club.”36 Denver was, as so many news reports once described it, home to America’s last great newspaper war, and it was a hotly contested, anachronistic affair.37 Long after phone book-size editions and extras were extinct elsewhere, the Mile High City’s newspapers were still printing
preposterously big issues, while street vendors regularly hawked fat extras well into the Digital Age. To work for the Post or the Rocky throughout their 115-year fight was to enter a rancorous Spy vs. Spy clash – regardless of the decade.

In the 1940s, the Rocky milked Post informants for inside information, while the Post bugged the hotel where Scripps’ corporate leaders met to discuss their Denver operations. Fifty years later, when the Rocky changed its classified advertising telephone number, the Post snatched it from the phone company. And both papers were known to check if they’d been scooped by sending undercover employees to each other’s loading docks in the wee hours to spout bogus stories to appropriate early copies of the paper. The shared goal, as American Journalism Review recounted, was to “sweet-talk a circulation guy into turning over an advance copy under the pretext of screening the help wanted ads.” To fight that war from the Rocky newsroom was to live with a daily rush through your body, a never-ending pressure on your chest, a sometimes nasty world where the paper knew it was fighting for its life,” recalled Jon Talton, the Rocky’s former business editor. “Every morning, I picked up the two papers on my doorstep in fear of what the Post had done to me. The Post’s editor did the same. There was no time for (the) Gannett foolishness” of journalism driven primarily by profits. So, beloved was the Rocky, so loyal were its soldiers in their existential journalistic war with the Post, that not one but two of its former leaders asked to be interred in the Rocky’s offices.

The first was Lee Casey, a star reporter, a popular long-time columnist, a former associate editor, and an interim top editor. Casey began at the Rocky’s sister afternoon paper, the Times, in 1915 before moving to the morning side, and spent all but two years between 1915 and 1951 working for the company. But he was known for more than just his longevity. He set the Rocky’s modern template for writing with “a power and direct simplicity that stemmed from a
clear sense of right wrong.” It was a style that evident whether he was “turning out hard-hitting – and courageously against the grain of the times – columns defending the rights of Japanese-American citizens during World War II, or a 13-year-old Wyoming boy railroaded by the justice system.” Two years after his death, shortly after the Rocky erected a new headquarters, Casey’s ashes were interred in the marblework and commemorated with a small bronze plaque of the paper’s 400 West Colfax Avenue offices. The Rocky’s mini-mausoleum also included Bill Hailey, a former business manager, who went the way of all flesh in 1965. Hailey had guided the paper from 1941 to 1957 and helped save it by hatching the idea to convert it to a tabloid. Only the paper’s plans to move led to their disinterment. Both men’s families moved their remains to a west Denver cemetery in November 2003, six months before the Post and the Rocky bought the 101 West Colfax Avenue lot where they erected a new joint headquarters in 2006.43

**Denver’s Newspapers Battle After World War II**

When two-time Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter Lou Kilzer first encountered Michael Howard in the late ’70s, the new Rocky reporter assumed the editor was a drunken vagrant, who’d wandered into paper’s headquarters. Howard was incapacitated on the bathroom floor from the alcohol and cocaine addictions he endured for years, the latter of which cost him $6,000-a-week at the time (or roughly $19,500 per week in 2014 dollars).44 Little did Kilzer know he was gingerly stepping around Denver’s shining star of journalism at the time – a man who, as American Journalism Review put it, was “largely responsible for taking the Rocky out of a decades-long slump and turning it into a kick-ass newspaper.”45 AJR offers just one of many accounts of the hard-charging editor’s role in the Rocky’s resurgence. Ultimately, it was the Post’s complacency, in the ’70s and the two decades preceding it, that set the stage for Howard’s success. But after becoming editor at just 32 in 1974, Howard’s reinvigoration of the paper is still nothing short of remarkable. This section delves deeper into the history of Denver’s
newspaper war, while recounting the Rocky’s post-World War II resurgence and the Post’s downswing, and explaining why they fought so hard for the Mile High City’s readers. As the grandson of Roy W. Howard, the eponymous partner in the Scripps-Howard chain (the E.W. Scripps Company’s name from 1922 until the ’80s), Michael Howard brought more than just his brilliant mind to bear. His name carried weight. But the events that led the Denver Post to falter during Howard’s brilliant, if brief, time running the Rocky were actually decades in the making.

The seeds for the Post’s struggles, which grew in 1970s, were arguably planted in the six years following Bonfils’ death in 1933. The losses of Bon and Tam (who’d died nine years earlier in 1924) led to legal squabbles over the paper’s ownership that would last until the end of the ’30s. Eventually, the courts split the Post’s ownership several ways. Slices respectively went to a trust representing Tammen’s widow; Bon’s daughters, Mae and Helen (the latter of whom assumed control of the paper); and to Bon and Tam’s namesake charitable foundations, which were endowed with the Post’s stock. When all the legal dust settled, the newspaper began a 40-year period of “profitable hibernation” that stretched from the early ’40s through the ’70s. The thirty years from 1950 to 1980 were a time when the Post raked in the dollars from “advertising-crammed pages piled into afternoon and Sunday editions thicker than most telephone directories.” But they were also a time of “bulky blandness” for the paper. Throughout the ’60s and early ’70s in particular, morale sank, equipment became outmoded, and profits decreased, as the Post spent considerable time and treasure in court fending off S.I. Newhouse’s attempts to swallow the paper. All the while, the paper gave every other spare penny of its profits to Bon and Tam’s wealthy heirs, and the foundations endowed with the newspaper’s stock. As Post historian Lawrence Martin described that era, the paper “spiritually dwelt upon a plateau of rest, though physically it continued to look much the same as always.” As the Post very gradually
sank in the four decades following World War II, the *Rocky* steadily rebounded and overtook its rival in daily and Sunday circulation in the early ’80s.52

Yet, the *Post* completely owned the first 40 years of the two papers’ twentieth century contest. So bad was the *Rocky*’s performance during the Great Depression that Scripps-Howard lost $500,000 (more $8 million in today’s money) keeping the paper afloat during the 1930s.53 Only Jack R. Howard, the 29-year-old son of the chain’s president Roy Howard, saved the *Rocky* from closing in the spring of 1940, when the paper was still hemorrhaging money and serving a mere 40,209 readers.54 Eager for the personal challenge, the corporate chieftain’s young son convinced the company to let him take over and attempt to resuscitate the *Rocky*. Twelve years later, he was so successful that Scripps’ handed him its entire newspaper division. His success in Denver came as advertisers embraced the formatting and editorial changes instituted throughout the ’40s. Inspired by business manager Bill Hailey, Howard and new editor Jack Foster ditched the broadsheet format and transformed the paper to tabloid on April 13, 1942. The idea was to make the *Rocky* a “modern-tempo newspaper,” to give it an “accelerated form” via a “a simpler, more direct, briefer, and livelier presentation.”55 What it was, it worked. Small advertisers’ appreciated how their ads stood out more on the tabloid’s shrunken pages, and full-page ads were more cost-effective because businesses had to purchase fewer inches to fill them. And readers loved the new content. Within five months of the special, new edition, the paper’s circulation had shot up to 50,000 from 48,000, and by 1950 it stood at 133,000.56

Jack wasn’t the only Foster whose November 1940 arrival helped resurrect the *Rocky*. On the same spring 1942 day that the *Rocky* debuted its five-column tabloid format, readers were treated to a new advice column covertly penned by his wife Frances “Frankie” Foster, under the nom de plume “Mrs. Molly Mayfield.” (The pair had met years ago when Jack hired Frankie to
be the fashion editor for the *New York World-Telegram*). Frankie’s “Dear Mrs. Mayfield” column was Jack’s invention, and her true identity remained classified before eventually becoming an open secret. It didn’t take long for her to become sensation. By 1960, she was syndicated in 45 newspapers across the U.S. and Canada. And she tartly dispatched advice until she and her husband retired in 1970. Her pioneering practice of counseling the lovelorn set the standard for Ann Landers, Dear Abby, and scores of other relationship consultants.

“Husbands read her to see what new devilry she was cooking up,” recalled the *Rocky’s* historian, Robert Perkin. “Housewives and mothers found that she gave sensible, down-to-earth advice interestingly.”

Considered titillating for the times, Mrs. Mayfield would be tame by today’s standards. There was the time she endorsed a Denver house wife’s revenge plot to mix itching powder into a sexy, sheer nightgown when she discovered her husband’s secret gift for a mistress. There was the cocker spaniel Mrs. Mayfield had delivered to a North Denver girl, at the request of a soldier in the South Pacific, as a reminder to patiently await when Johnny would come marching home.

The frustrated wife that sought more of her husband’s affection, the miffed mother that watched her husband dote on their daughter’s beautiful, young fifth grade teacher, the 15-year-old girl who wanted to date a 21-year-old soldier, Mrs. Mayfield advised them all. But Molly was no mere entertainer. She campaigned for countless causes – “obtained pianos for churches, wheel chairs for invalids, pool tables for USOs,” and “almost single-handedly reorganized the sanitation services” in Denver “when the city became lax in garbage collection.”

The 1940s rendered the *Rocky* relevant reading for home news and a window to world affairs. Dispatches by Scripps’ legendary roving World War II correspondent, Ernie Pyle, who depicted London
“ringed and stabbed by fire” from German bombs, did for print what Edward R. Murrow did for radio journalism. Both vividly delivered the horror of battle to American homes.⁵⁹

Throughout the early ’40s, the fedora-wearing Foster and company continued adding compelling components, including more feature stories, a full radio schedule, and an overhauled typography design. All the while, the Rocky’s reporters dogged double-dealers from their home office, burnishing their journalistic reputations as the “Wildcats of Welton Street” – so-named for the Rocky’s home base at 1720 Welton Street, where the paper resided from the summer of 1901 till the paper moved to 400 West Colfax Avenue in June 1952.⁶⁰ In good and bad business times, the Rocky’s reporters remained essential editorial counterweights to their rivals over at the Post’s 1544 Champa Street headquarters (which the Post first occupied in 1907).⁶¹ In World War II, for example, the Post’s writers followed the lead of their editor and president, William Shepherd, in banging the drums of bigotry against the Japanese Americans sent to Colorado’s internment camps. While Shepherd kept a large cutout of a Japanese man with a monkey face on his desk and his writers “rabidly” railed against the “Japs,” the more tolerant Rocky observed that “we do not try to punish Americans of German ancestry.”⁶² Over on Welton Street, the net effect of all the changes at the newspaper was a relatively swift and near total reversal its fortunes. Between 1940 and 1952 alone, Rocky’s circulation skyrocketed 270% (to 144,646), while its advertising lineage rose 343% to 16.78 million column inches from 3.78 million and staff grew from 125 to 350 over the same span.⁶³

The Rocky thrived financially and editorially in the 35-year-period following World War II (it would take till 2000 before the paper again declared itself in financial trouble). And with a 1961 investigative series that led to the conviction of 43 Denver cops associated with a burglary ring, Al “Nak” Nakkula did his part to make West Colfax Avenue as known a home of tenacious
reporting as Welton Street. (America’s most prestigious police reporting prize is still named for him). The Post, meanwhile, would cede its journalistic dominance over Denver as it entered a gradual period of decline that lasted until the late ’80s. Sure, the cash cow paper would produce substantial profits and many pieces of topflight journalism, over that span. But the need to adequately nourish it with reinvestment was often lost on its prodigal proprietors, who regularly diverted the paper’s profits for the benefit of themselves and their pet charitable and humanitarian causes. After Bonfils’ 1933 death, a series of foundations and family owners milked the Post’s revenues until the Times Mirror chain purchased the paper and ended local ownership in 1980. At various points from 1933 until then, the Post was owned by some combination of Tammen’s widow, Agnes; her relatives; the Denver Children’s Hospital (which held Post stock from 1924 to 1960 after Harry Tammen bequeathed half his shares); Bon’s daughters, May and Helen; and two other foundations, representing Bon and Helen, after each died.

Following the death of her dear “papa” Bon, “Miss Helen,” as Post employees called her, became a towering figure in the paper’s management following until her own passing in 1972. It was Miss Helen, who initiated a multi-million-dollar legal battle, from 1960 to 1973, to prevent S.I. Newhouse from taking over the Post after newspaper baron bought out May’s stock in 1960. By the time of lawsuit’s end in ’73, the Post was left with an ownership structure that was particularly bizarre for one of the largest newspapers in America. An employee stock trust owned 8%, and the aforementioned foundations in the names of Helen Bonfils and her late father, owned the other 92%. The Post’s ownership structure was much the same in 1980 when Times Mirror bought it except the paper’s publisher and president, Donald Seawell, owned nearly 2%. And under the leadership of Seawell, a former lawyer who shared a love of the arts
with Miss Helen, much of the Post’s revenues was funneled to charitable causes. In particular, instead of keeping the paper up and investing in its future, the Post donated much of its proceeds toward building and supporting the Denver Center for the Performing Arts.65 As the late Gene Amole, a legendary Rocky columnist told an interviewer in 1993, the ’70s and ’80s were “a disaster” for the Post. “All the money was siphoned off and put into the DCPA.” One of Amole’s journalist friends was even harsher in his assessment of the Post’s financial support of the Denver Center for the Performing Arts. “There lies a giant concrete mausoleum into which was buried a great newspaper,” he remarked.66 While Seawell and the Post spent the early ’70s partnering with the city to build and fund the DCPA, Michael Howard took on the establishment—waging a successful campaign against Denver hosting the 1976 Olympics.67

In 1972, the Post took the Chamber of Commerce’s position that taxpayers should approve the funding to bolster the city’s Olympic bid because it would be a boon to Colorado. The Rocky countered by sending its staff to Squaw Valley, California, where they wrote about the adverse consequences and unfulfilled promises of the 1960 Olympics.68 During Howard’s run, the Rocky closed the competitive gap and burnished the paper’s reputation as a feisty, scrappy, edgy, nonconformist.69 “If you look at Colorado journalism in the 1960s and 1970s, you have a real cliché,” the late University of Colorado journalism professor Sue O’Brien told American Journalism Review. “You have this scruffy, scrappy morning tabloid (while) the Post was an afternoon broadsheet that owned every columnist and cartoonist of quality. It was fat and complacent and the voice of the establishment.”70

One Rocky reporter once recalled his job interviewer asking him if he’d ever been in a fistfight. The hirer in question was no less than the paper’s second in command, E. Ben Blackburn, who became managing editor in 1980. The reporter, Joe Weber, got the job despite
having only been in a few tussles. As for the 1970s, Howard’s editorship burnished the Rocky’s reputation as an exciting destination paper. “Most of us then … aspired to work for the Rocky some day,” the late Denver Post columnist Ed Quillen recalled of his University of North Colorado classmates. “The afternoon Post seemed like the stodgy, establishment paper, while the morning Rocky was feisty and energetic.” One reporter from the time remembered the Rocky of the 1970s redoubling its efforts to hired the best and the brightest reporters, many of whom held graduate degrees, “to dig up dirt, badger Denver’s cowboy-booted establishment and raise journalistic hell.” The Rocky was on a roll like its resurgent post-World War II years under Foster. And it began publishing columnists like Amole, whose tenure at Rocky columnist began with a superb 1977 hiring decision by Howard.

Although Amole was a newspaper novice, who had only worked in radio and TV, he would go on to spend 25 years as one of Denver’s most beloved figures – an earnest, plainspoken writer, who elicited a rainbow of reader emotions. Even while terminally ill, Amole continued cranking out columns chronicling his life and his impending death. The city of Denver even named a street after him following his 2003 death. When Michael Howard began as a Rocky reporter in 1965, the paper’s weekday circulation stood at 133,000 compared with 252,005 at the Post. When he took over the Rocky in 1974, its circulation still trailed the Post by 90,000 papers per day. By September 30, 1980, the Rocky’s weekday circulation (272,297) finally surpassed the Post’s total (266,408), though the latter retained its Sunday lead (351,752 to 291,481), relinquished in 1983, and won it back by the decade’s end. “We just had a lot of spark,” Howard reminisced. “I think of the impossible being done, in the sense of the history of the Rocky is the history of a paper that had no future.” But the Rocky’s 1980 rise coincided with Howard’s fall, as Scripps management ousted due to his well-documented drug abuse.
problems. The *Post* reveled in “papering the town with articles” about Howard’s drug problems
and his close ties with Denver cops, including the narcotics detective, who moonlighted as the
editor’s bodyguard. But the *Rocky* cleaned its rival’s clock for much of the ’70s and ’80s.

Many media analysts were “flabbergasted” when Times Mirror spent $95 million in 1980 to buy
the *Post*, or twice what some thought it was worth, and they believed that only this deal spared it
from death. Even the *Los Angeles Times*, Times Mirror’s flagship paper, quoted a Denver source
confessing the *Post* was afflicted with “bad morale, a lousy union contract, an antiquated plant,
shrinking circulation, and terrible profits.”

Although the *Post* earned $2.5 million on sales of roughly $94 million in 1979, the paper
had made just $23,000 in the first nine months of 1980 when Times Mirror added Denver’s
western link to its growing chain. But the *Post’s* performance was dismal for most of the ’80s,
and Times Mirror fled Denver after less than seven years. Between the company’s late 1980
purchase of the paper and its 1987 sale, daily circulation fell nearly 13% (to 227,105), as the
paper accumulated pretax losses of roughly $6 million in 1986 (or $13 million in today’s
dollars). Times Mirror dealt with three big problems of its own making beginning with a
negative public reaction from the company’s overly abrupt move to switch the *Post* to a morning
format. Then, production problems ensued at the paper’s new printing plant. And some readers
abandoned the paper because they didn’t like all its editorial changes – from adding stories for
young professionals to emphasizing investigations, and covering more national and international
news. “I don’t think Times Mirror ever got its arms around Denver,” former *Post* executive
editor Neil Westergaard told an interviewer in the ’90s. The company “change something, and
then they’d wait to see it reflected in the numbers,” but circulation continued falling.
Ironically, even as readers fled the *Post*, the paper won the 1986 Pulitzer Prize for Public Service for revealing that America’s kidnapping statistics were inflated. To tout the achievement, the *Post* promptly rented a billboard that stood across from the third-floor window of editor Ralph Looney’s office in the paper’s building at 400 West Colfax Ave. Over at the *Rocky*, meanwhile, the winning formula for the ’80s included a heavy dose of vanilla. That meant assigning “up to five reporters to cover the Broncos,” which were always the lead story on Mondays, and loads of “comics, features and columns.” By 1987, newspaper industry watchers were again predicting the *Post* would have closed had Dean Singleton, his partner Richard Scudder, and their company, MediaNews, not come to the rescue by agreeing to pay $95 million for the paper. (Media General Co. facilitated the deal by putting up $25 million for a 40% stake in the *Post*). Times Mirror, which lost $15 million in its last year of operating the *Post*, was so eager to dump the paper that it threw in a one-year-old, $77 million, 42-acre production plant for free. The company dropped the final cherry on top of the transaction in 1992, when it wrote off $65 million of the $95 million that MediaNews couldn’t afford to pay just five years after the sale.

It’s no wonder that Times Mirror fled Denver. Singleton wasted no time driving the *Post* back into profitability. Immediately after MediaNews’ 1987 purchase of the paper, he modernized the *Post*’s delivery and billing systems, persuaded 157 employees to take buyouts, rolled back wages for another 750 workers, reemphasized local news, and made “6 a.m. delivery” a battle cry. Equally as important, Singleton brought in an old hand – former *Daily News* editor Gil Spencer, who still used a typewriter in the ’90s – and left him to stabilize the newsroom. He offered just three words of instruction: “Calm it down.” The *Post* went from bleeding millions under Times Mirror’s ownership, from late 1980 to the end of ’87, to earning
profits of $39 million between 1989 and 1993. Thus, Denver’s great newspaper war proved cyclical. Broadly speaking, the Post ruled Denver from 1900 until World War II. The Rocky crept back into relevance in the ’50s and ’60s, before surging past the Post in the ’70s, and the ’80s. Westergaard, who became the Denver Business Journal’s editor after his stint running the Post, once likened the city’s newspapers to prize fighters with blind spots on the opposite sides of their heads.

As Westergaard, who went on to become the Denver Business Journal’s editor, commented in the ’90s, the Rocky and Post “keep slugging each other, and when one gains the upper hand, the other doesn’t respond in kind, because he can’t see it.” Indeed, both papers survived some dicey moments throughout the twentieth century before staging its turnaround. It nearly closed at least three times in its history, including before Scripps acquired the struggling paper in 1926, when the Post opted not to buy and close the paper in the 1930s, and when Scripps nearly shut it down in the early ’40s. The Post also could’ve closed three times, including twice in the ’80s, but Times Mirror saved the paper as it faltered under local ownership in 1980, and MediaNews acquired and preserved it in 1987. Both papers traded heavy blows in the ’90s until they formed an alliance in 2001, and MediaNews and Scripps finally negotiated for the Rocky to give up the ghost in 2009.

The Prize

Why spend so much time and treasure on a newspaper war in Denver in 1980s? Beyond the prestige of winning the much-publicized century-old fight, the real prizes to be had were always the potential advertising revenue from Colorado’s expanding economy and the prospect of circulation dollars from the state’s rapidly increasing population. The Post and the Rocky offered ways for advertisers to tap Coloradans’ spending power, and there was an awful lot of it. “The stakes for the two owners, like Colorado’s economic potential, were growing

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exponentially,” former *Rocky* editor Michael Madigan wrote of the time. “The boom in tourism, construction, industry, energy and space exploration, and a promising new source of revenue – ‘high tech’ – made domination of the advertising and circulation markets critical at almost any cost.” The two papers were sparring over the 17th largest media market in the country; along with the ad dollars from the biggest city within a 600-mile radius; the attention of 1.1 million households (filled with 2.8 million people); and the potential ad revenues from the Denver Metro Area’s 115,752 businesses. Today, the Denver Metro Area alone accounts for 1% of America’s gross domestic product. And Colorado’s retail sales trade is estimated at $90.5 billion, up 27% compared with an inflation-adjusted $71.05 billion in 1998, while Colorado’s workers earned a whopping $240.3 billion dollars in 2012.

Between 2000 and 2009, Colorado was the seventh-fastest-growing state in the Union while the Denver Metro Area (home to the majority of the state’s population) led the way. By 2010, Colorado’s population had surpassed the respective totals of 50 different U.N. countries, including Ireland, New Zealand, Norway, and Singapore. To the *Rocky* and the *Post*, “every front porch (was) a beachhead to be fought for,” the *Los Angeles Times* wrote in 1999. Those porches were full of growing families and new arrivals from other states and foreign countries, all of whom made Denver the 21st largest metro area in the nation. Half of the Centennial State’s population increases since 2000 have come from births exceeding deaths, while the majority of Colorado’s residents have moved from other states. On average, those new residents earn more than most Americans (40% bring home $75,000 or more per year, while 29% earn less than $35,000 compared with 35% nationally) and are better educated (36% have completed a college degree versus 26% nationally). They skew slightly younger than the rest of America. And they man a diverse, powerful economy based on tourism – the Mile High City averages 300 days
of sun per year – leisure and hospitality, information technology, oil and gas extraction, mining, logging, agriculture, health and financial services, the aerospace industry, the biosciences, military spending, and national laboratories.¹⁰²

In recent years, the U.S. government, the state of Colorado, the University of Colorado, and Denver Public schools have actually grown to account for four of the region’s top five employers. And digital startups and tech companies have found the city especially appealing (it’s home to MapQuest, Photobucket, Datalogix and others).¹⁰³ All of it – all the growth, the industries, the vast sums of money changing hands – sustained the rivalry between the Rocky and the Post for so many years. “Today,” the Rocky declared as far back as its 75th anniversary edition in 1934, “Denver’s fights are economic, its adventures financial and political. There is no frontier … Science, engineering and commerce offer fields for conquest. Today’s adventure-seeker needs … dollars rather than cartridge(s), and he fights his battles in a laboratory or an office.”¹⁰⁴ Of course for all the state’s boon times in recent decades, Coloradans, like their newspapers, have experienced their share of downturns, too. Between the Rocky’s resurgence in the 1970s and its 2009 closure, the state experienced four population booms (in 1972 and 1973, from ’78 to ’83, and ’91 and 2001, and one just before the most recent recession) not to mention a number of down years. Gas, gold, silver, coal, molybdenum, oil, oil shale, military expenditures, and real estate speculation have also spurred Colorado’s booms and busts at various points.¹⁰⁵ Legalized marijuana sales, which voters authorized in 2012, are driving the latest boom.¹⁰⁶ But even after counting down years, the state’s growth spurts have sent its population soaring by 142% – from 2.21 million in 1970 to 5.35 million at the end of 2014 – with a 50% gain since 1990 alone.¹⁰⁷
 Such population increases have continued, and even accelerated, in more recent years. Colorado was the fourth-fastest growing state in 2014. Why, then, with so many people to be served, and so much money to be had, did the Rocky close in 2009, especially after amassing such a comfortable circulation lead over a 20-year period? What happened can be divided into three categories, which will be discussed a little later. First, throughout the ’90s, the paper made several ill-conceived decisions that weakened it. Second, Scripps made voluntary decisions – not circumscribed, exigent choices – to enter a joint operating agreement with the Post in 2001 that put the Rocky on a path to its 2009 closure. Third, the Rocky wasn’t the only paper struggling. In some ways, the paper’s closure is, as much of the media portrayed it at the time, emblematic of the newspaper industry’s struggles writ large in the first decade of the 2000s. That topic will be saved for later discussion. While it’s impossible to measure the extent to which each category contributed to the Rocky’s demise, every effort will now be made to pinpoint, contextualize, and chronologize the factors behind the closure.

Notes

1 Michael Madigan, Heroes, Villains, Dames & Disasters: 150 Years of Front-Page Stories from the Rocky Mountain News (Arvada, CO: MadIdeas, 2009), 71.

2 “Feisty” has always been one of the common adjectives used to describe the Rocky. For two of many examples over the years, see the column, which appeared in the Rocky’s final edition, by Michael Howard, the paper’s legendary former editor from 1974 to 1980: Michael Howard, “Fun Place to Hang Out,” Rocky Mountain News, February 27, 2009. And see: Alan Prendergast, “Peace Comes to Denver,” Columbia Journalism Review, July/August 2000. 16-19.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.


8 Hosokawa, *Thunder in the Rockies*.

9 Three slightly different iterations of this quote have been published. This one comes from the first history of the *Post*, Gene Fowler’s 1933 book *Timberline*. Hosokawa’s version of the quote is, “A dogfight on Sixteenth Street is a better story than a war in Timbuktu” (p. 22-23). And Perkin, the Rocky Mountain News’ biographer, quotes Bonfils as saying, “a dog fight on Champa Street is more important than a war in Europe.” It’s worth noting that Perkin and Hosokawa rely very heavily on Fowler’s book as a credible source, hence this study deferred to Fowler’s version. Additionally, given that Bonfils owned and operated the *Post* from 1894 to 1933 year, it’s possible he used different iterations over the years.

10 Perkin, *First Hundred Years*, 350.


12 Ibid. 24.

13 Perkin, *First Hundred Years*, 406.


17 Hosokawa, *Thunder in the Rockies*, 26; Fowler, *Timberline*, 76. According to Fowler, Bonfils and Tammen also operated on the premises that “(a)lmost anyone in authority ‘was unsuited to the people.’ Nearly all governors ‘were bad for the state and unfit for office.’”

18 Fowler, *Timberline*, 79; Perkin, *First Hundred Years*, 403. According to Fowler, Tammen once said, “Half the town is good, and half is bad. The good will read the *Post* to congratulate themselves on being so holy; the bad ones to see what we’ve found out about them.”


23 Perkin, *First Hundred Years*, 414; Cox, “Paper Boasts Colorful Past.”

24 Perkin, *First Hundred Years*, 485.


26 Perkin, *First Hundred Years*, 510-511. The *Post* dropped out after the *Rocky* began giving away five gallons of gas per classified ad purchased. The *Rocky* hired a brass band to taunt the *Post* about winning the gasoline war.
27 Hosokawa, *Thunder in the Rockies*, 37; Perkin, *First Hundred Years*, 486; Cox, “Paper Boasts Colorful Past.” The *Post* owned the Sells-Floto Circus, which the paper bought at a foreclosure sale in 1903. The American Circus Company, which would go on to become part of Ringling Brothers, eventually bought the *Post’s* circus. For more on the *Post’s* history of circus ownership, see: Vickie Makings, “Circus animals, big-top attractions varied wildly in early Denver shows,” *Denver Post*, September 27, 2012, http://tinyurl.com/psxq26q. For information about the *Rocky’s* life insurance policy promotion, see: Madigan, *Heroes, Villains, Dames*. For the story of the flagpole sitter from the 1920s, see Perkin, *First Hundred Years*, 486.


29 Thomas Patterson bought one-third of the Rocky in 1890, and he purchased another third to become the majority owner in 1892. In 1895, Patterson bought the remainder of the paper from the son and wife of Col. John Arkin, a partner in the paper, after he died. See: Perkin, *First Hundred Years*, 380, 383, 385.


32 Ibid. 204.


34 Perkin, *First Hundred Years*, 466-467.


36 Keene-Osborn, “The Denver Post vs. Rocky Mountain News.”


39 Perkin, *First Hundred Years*, 485-486.

40 Ibid.
41 Shepard, “Showdown in the Rockies,” 28-34.


46 Tammen’s trust funded the Denver Children’s hospital, while Bonfils’ many charitable interests promoted arts and culture, and enhanced health and well-being of Denver residents. See: Hosokawa, Thunder in the Rockies, 174-178, 183. Remarkably, Bon and Tam’s enduring partnership was always based on a simple handshake, which the two men honored to the very end. As Tammen died, he insisted that his wife follow their original agreement, which called for control of the paper to be left to Bonfils. See: Sherry Keene-Osborn, “The Denver Post vs. Rocky Mountain News: The Hundred Years’ War,” Colorado Business Magazine, August 1992, 12. For more on their unique business arrangement, see: Hosokawa, Thunder in the Rockies; Perkin, First Hundred Years, 401.


50 For example, in the first 12 full years of Post publisher and president William Shepherd’s leadership (from 1934 to 1945 year), the Post showed a net profit of $18.4 million, yet all but $302,000 was distributed as dividends. See: Hosokawa, Thunder in the Rockies, 183, 186, 188. Shepherd became president, editor, and publisher on February 1933. See also: Vaughan, “Two Rocky Mountain Newspapers in Race.”

51 Perkin, First Hundred Years.

52 Shepard, “Showdown in the Rockies,” 28-34.


56 Madigan, “Rocky’s Long Run, Within a whisper of 150 years.”

58 See Note 55.

59 Madigan, Heroes, Villains, Dames & Disasters, 74.

60 For references to the “Wildcats of Welton Street,” see: Perkin, First Hundred Years, 543-546, 589; Potter, “All the News That’s Fit to be Killed.” For detailed background information about when the Rocky built and moved into its respective headquarters at Welton Street and, later, Colfax Avenue, see: Perkin, First Hundred Years, 405, 584-588.

61 For the date when the Post moved to Champa Street, see: Perkin, First Hundred Years, 407.


63 Perkin, First Hundred Years, 587, 589, Hosokawa, Thunder in the Rockies, 424.


65 For statistics about the Post’s ownership in 1973 and 1980, see: Hill and Schlender, “Times Mirror to Buy Denver Post”; Hosokawa, Thunder in the Rockies, 382-384, 410-411. The Denver Performing Arts Center was the pet project of Helen Bonfils, and long-time Post publisher and president Donald Seawell. Following the death of F.G. Bonfils, “Miss Helen,” as her employees called her, relished her appearances on the newspaper’s Society pages. And she spent that period, until her 1972 death, lavishing charities with gifts and entering the social circles she could never quite crack in her youth given her father’s eccentricities and the Post’s flamboyance. At the time of the Post’s 1980 sale to Times Mirror, the foundations founded by F.G. and Helen Bonfils owned 90% of the company’s shares. Seawell owned 1.2%, and an employee stock trust held 8.8%. For information about Helen Bonfils and how the Post detrimentally directed much of its profits to its owners and their pet causes, see: Sherry Keene-Osborn, “The Denver Post vs. Rocky Mountain News: The Hundred Years’ War,” Colorado Business Magazine, August 1992, 12; Alan Prendergast, “All the News that Fits,” Westword, April 10, 1997, http://www.westword.com/1997-04-10/news/all-the-news-that-fits/; Hill and Schlender, “Times Mirror to Buy Denver Post”; Vaughan, “Two Rocky Mountain Newspapers in Race to Be First on the Peak.” For an especially rich source of even more of the same information, plus an excellent blow-by-blow history of the legal battles between the Post and S.I. Newhouse, see: Hosokawa, Thunder in the Rockies, 189, 207, 329, 408, 409, 410, 411.


69 Potter, “All the News That’s Fit to be Killed.” See also: Michael Howard, “Fun Place to Hang Out,” Rocky Mountain News, February 27, 2009. Following the paper’s closure, Tillie Fong, the paper’s former night general assignment reporter, told Columbia Journalism Review, “I feel the Rocky’s closing as a death – not as an institution but as a part of my life, a part of ME, that has died. I always felt that the Rocky was this feisty little paper that reflects the spirit of the people that it serves – fiercely independent, outspoken, active, but also caring and compassionate.” See: Rocky Mountain News staff, “Rocky Mountain Bye: Rocky Mountain News Staffers Share their Thoughts on the Paper’s Closing,” Columbia Journalism Review, February 27, 2009, http://tinyurl.com/pysedbl. The Denver Post also toasted the Rocky after it closed when it wrote: “Even as we struggle with this economic downturn and an ever-changing business model, it’s our hope the Denver Post not only
will continue to echo as the voice of the Rocky Mountain empire, but also that we might take on some of the better characteristics of our one-time rival: the Rocky’s scrappiness, their edge, their personality, their humor.” See: Pete Chronis, “Saying Goodbye to the Rocky,” Denver Post, March 8, 2009, http://tinyurl.com/p44jz47.


75 Potter, “All the News That’s Fit to be Killed.”; Shepard, “Showdown in the Rockies.”; Hosokawa, Thunder in the Rockies, 424.

76 Circulation numbers come from the September 30, 1980 audit reports from the Alliance for Audited Media (then-called the Audit Bureau of Circulation) for the Denver Post and the Rocky Mountain News. See also: Madigan, “Rocky’s Long Run, Within a whisper of 150 years.”


78 Prendergast, “All the News that Fits.” Tales of Rocky Mountain News editor Michael Howard’s debauchery are legendary. For example, in a 1992 piece for Colorado Business Magazine, Sherry Keene-Osborn wrote that Howard “began relying heavily on alcohol and drugs to fuel his 24-hour-a-day drive to make the paper excel. Eventually his drug and alcohol problems began seeping into his work and out into the community. Tales of his gun-toting in public and scenes in bars became all too familiar.” See: Sherry Keene-Osborn, “The Denver Post vs. Rocky Mountain News: The Hundred Years’ War,” Colorado Business Magazine, August 1992, 12. The Denver Post turned the full heat of its investigative flames on Howard after his career nosedived in 1980. And all the attention led to a Colorado Senate Judiciary Committee investigation of Howard’s close ties to Denver police. According to a June 1982 Associated Press story about the state committee’s hearings, Howard testified that his “addiction to cocaine and alcohol became common knowledge at his newspaper and elsewhere in Denver by mid-1977.” Howard, the AP reported, backed up the testimony of the late Denver Police Chief Art Dill, who stated that the police weren’t aware of his cocaine use until his final year at the newspaper in 1980. A Denver narcotics detective, who served as Howard’s bodyguard, chose not to arrest the editor after confiscating a small baggie of his cocaine during that same year. See: Anonymous, “Ex-Editor Reports on his Addiction,” Associated Press. In New York Times, June 10, 1982, http://tinyurl.com/hmtroxs. See also: Alicia Caldwell, “Subpoenas can be beautiful things,” January 13, 2014, Denver Post, http://tinyurl.com/ob4g4ca.


81 See Note 76.


83 Prendergast, “All the News that Fits.”


85 Ibid.

86 Scott Sherman, “The Evolution of Dean Singleton,” *Columbia Journalism Review*, March/April 2003, 32-41; Shepard, “Showdown in the Rockies.”; Fabrikant, “Texan is Buying His 29th Daily.”; Rosenstiel, “Times Mirror Agrees to Sell Denver Post.”; Vaughan, “Two Rocky Mountain Newspapers in Race; Carmody, “Sale of Denver Post for $95 million Set.” Fabrikant, of the *New York Times*, and Rosenstiel, of the *Los Angeles Times*, offer conflicting numbers for the cost and size of the printing plant. Rosenstiel describes it as a “$56-million, 45-acre” facility, while Fabrikant describes it as $77-million, 42-acre plant. Fabrikant’s figures were chosen because they were closer to the numbers quoted in other articles about Singleton buying the *Post*.

87 See Note 82.


89 Tony Case, “Dead heat in Denver,” *Editor & Publisher*, October 21, 1995, 9. As mentioned, it’s difficult to ascertain the Denver Post’s exact earnings because the paper was privately held, and Singleton did not separately share information his individual newspapers’ earnings. But in 1995, Case reported the following about Affiliated Newspapers Investments, Inc. (the MediaNews’ holding company for the Post): “Singleton’s Affiliated Newspapers Investments Inc., parent of the Post, is privately held and doesn’t put out revenue figures. But according to documents filed with the Securities and Exchange Commission, the company had operating profits of $34.9 million between 1989 and 1993 and $20 million for 1993 alone.” Similarly, in the early 1990s, in a Rocky Mountain News employee newsletter, newspaper publisher Larry Strutton quoted the same “$34.9 million” figure. See: Stuart Steers, “News Exec Seeks Pay Freeze Parity,” *Denver Business Journal*, July 8, 1994, 1. For other references to Times Mirror losing millions of dollars, see: Prendergast, “All the News that Fits.”; Geraldine Fabrikant, “Texan is Buying His 29th Daily, the Denver Post,” *New York Times*, September 15, 1987, East Coast ed./Late ed., A1; Deidre Carmody, “Sale of Denver Post for $95 million Set,” *New York Times*, October 23, 1980, A23.

90 Prendergast, “All the News that Fits.”


93 Madigan, “Rocky’s Long Run, Within a whisper of 150 years.”


98 Julie Cart, “Denver Dailies Thrive in Rare Newspaper War; Circulation is up in nation’s Most Prominent Print Journalism Rivalry,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 21, 1999, 5.


100 Amy Mitchell, Jesse Holcomb, Dana Page, “Local news in a Digital Age,” Pew Research Center, March 5, 2015, 12, 13, accessible at: http://tinyurl.com/pgw4z5z. Note that the Pew Research Center shortened its name (from the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press) in early 2014. All Pew Research Center citations after 2014 – such as this one – will carry the newer name, while older citations will use the longer original name. The only exceptions will be Pew studies that were conducted by a different division within the organization (e.g. Pew Internet & American Life Project). Those citations will carry their respective Pew division’s name. Additionally, in October 2013, the Pew Research Center’s Project for Excellence in Journalism shortened its name to the Pew Research Center’s Journalism Project. Thus, any citations from before October 2013 also will carry that Pew division’s older, longer name. See: PEJ Renamed Pew Research Center’s Journalism Project, *Pew Research Center*, October 3, 2013, http://tinyurl.com/qaaawz8.

101 See Note 94.


103 Mitchell, Holcomb, Page, “Local news in a Digital Age.”


105 Even after counting Colorado’s down years, the state’s growth spurts have sent its population soaring by 142% – from 2.21 million in 1970 to 5.35 million at the end of 2014 – with a 50% gain coming since 1990 alone. See: “2010 State Demography Office Meeting Report,” *Colorado State Demography Office*, 2010, 1-20,


107 See Note 100.
CHAPTER 3
DENVER’S NEWSPAPER WAR: THE 1990s AND THE 2000s

How camest thou in this pickle?

—William Shakespeare
_The Tempest_¹

If the 1990s began with a bang for the _Rocky_, the decade concluded with a whimper. The _Rocky_ had grown to become the 24th biggest newspaper in the country by 1990, and a year later the tabloid’s weekday circulation hit its all-time high (374,000). The newspaper’s biggest weekday lead over the _Post_ had come two years earlier in 1989, when the _Rocky_ sold 126,464 more copies per day than its broadsheet rival. That same year, the _Rocky_ overtook the _Post’s_ Sunday circulation lead, too.² Then, the paper’s 1990s missteps began. This chapter begins the process of exploring those strategic mistakes, which led the _Rocky_ to merge with the _Post_ in 2001. Then, the chapter details the Joint Operating Agreement between the two, which combined their business operations, while retaining separate, competitive newsrooms between 2001 and 2009. The _Rocky’s_ first gaffe came in the form of its new $150 million printing plant in June of 1992.³ Larry Strutton, the _Rocky’s_ publisher at the time, marked the occasion with a column promising the Denver Nuggets’ late game scores would appear in a spiffy, new 6 a.m. edition. He was wrong. “Part of the problem was that we couldn’t get the paper printed on time,” Strutton recalled in a 1995 interview. “When it was printed on time, the quality was horrible. So the ad sales staff wasn’t able to sell ads. They spent all their time apologizing for the quality.”⁴

_Editor & Publisher_ described 1992 as a time when “technical problems reportedly dogged the new plant for months, interrupting delivery to subscribers. Some customers were said to have received the morning paper in mid-afternoon.”⁵ Next came a new editorial approach and the March 1993 premiere of the _Rocky’s_ full-color, sectionalized redesign, which coincided with editor Jay Ambrose’s reign from ’89 to ’95. Instead of a single-section tabloid, the _Rocky_
switched to pullouts for sports, features, news and classifieds. Some of the paper’s readers complained that “the newly sectionalized tabloid was unwieldy and confusing,” Editor & Publisher wrote at the time. It was “odd enough,” the magazine wrote, to find a daily tabloid in the western U.S., one of their reporters commented in 1995, but “a tabloid with breakaway sections is really unheard of.” One of the more visceral reactions to the Rocky’s redesign – particularly its much-hyped, stand-alone tabloid sections – came from Alan Prendergast of the alternative weekly Westword. On reading the Rocky in the 1990s, Prendergast, a native Coloradan, who spent decades writing and teaching journalism in the Denver area, wrote:

It’s a struggle sometimes to locate these liftouts within liftouts. The mania for sectionalization – which contributed to its printing plant woes and may have cost the newspaper thousands of subscribers in the past few years—has all but destroyed one of the tabloid’s traditional advantages, the ability to leaf through it like a book. These days it’s like peeling an onion; the whole mess unravels the closer you get to the core.

This redesign wasn’t the only change. The paper made new editorial moves, too.

Ambrose ordered the staff to produce more infographics and visual elements, shorter stories with fewer jumps, briefs, localized versions of national stories, feel-good pieces, and features, including a new science section. The goal of such changes, as one Denver media observer commented at the time, was for the Rocky “to start looking like USA Today, a quick read with a lot of color and charts and a nice looking product.” Neil Westergaard, the Post’s executive editor at the time, mocked the Rocky as readers rebelled against its new format and its production and delivery issues. The Post, he claimed, was grabbing the Rocky’s readers by “just doing good journalism, (and) getting stories in the newspaper that are relevant to people,” not by “being arrogant” or by “jacking people around with different formats and approaches.” The early ’90s also saw the Rocky switch its billing and delivery systems to adult drivers and mail-in
payments, after using children as carriers and collectors. The circulation effects were monumental.

The *Rocky* immediately shed up to 40,000 non-paying subscribers (or as much as 11% of the paper’s total weekday circulation at the time). The *Post*, which had beaten the *Rocky* to modernizing and centralizing its delivery and billing systems in 1988, just kept rolling. By April 1995, it had snatched back the Sunday circulation lead that the *Rocky* had claimed just six years earlier, and the *Post* celebrated again on October 20, 1996. The broadsheet had surpassed the *Rocky* in weekday circulation for the first time since 1980. What facilitated that red-letter day may have been the *Rocky*’s most questionable decision of the ’90s. The *Post* surged into first place, following the *Rocky*’s January 1996 decision to voluntarily surrender the daily circulation lead it had spent nearly 80 years chasing, from the first time the *Post* topped the *Rocky* (24,213 to 24,134 in February 1901) until the *Rocky* reclaimed the lead in October 1980. Scripps dubbed its plan “Front Range Plus.” Officially, “the Front Range” is a western mountain chain, but Coloradans colloquially refer to their state’s well-populated middle by the same name.

The 50- to 75-mile-wide region stretches from the edge of the Continental Divide (in the west) to the urban corridor along Interstate 25 (in the east), and it encompasses the Fort Collins, Greeley, Denver, and Colorado Springs metro areas (from north to south along the highway). Scripps’ strategic move was simple – serve only that region (i.e. Denver, its suburbs, the touristy ski territories, the six-county metro area, and seven contiguous counties). In early ’96, the *Rocky* announced it would stop newsstand and subscription sales to its backcountry readers because sending the newspapers cost more than they spent for it. A subscriber outside the paper’s 13-county core circulation area in and around Denver might pay as little as $4.75 a month for an annual subscription thanks to various discounts. But the *Rocky* spent $35 a week to deliver the
paper outside the Denver Metro Area. Scripps executives reasoned that readers beyond its core market were too far-flung to be of interest to Denver advertisers anyway.¹⁷

**Front Range Plus**

It took just one day, March 1, 1996, for the *Rocky* to jettison 34,663 weekday readers (10% of its circulation at the time) and 29,411 Sunday readers (7%) for its Front Range Plus strategy.¹⁸ And the paper pledged to use the $17 million in annual savings to attract more of the Denver area readers regarded as the most essential to its advertisers.¹⁹ Suddenly, the *Rocky’s* trucks stopped rolling in 50 of Colorado’s 63 counties (number 64 was added in 2001) and the states of Kansas, Nebraska, New Mexico, South Dakota and Wyoming. Front Range Plus called for the *Rocky* to focus on 13 counties. The Denver Metro Area of Adams, Arapahoe, Boulder, Denver, Douglas and Jefferson counties constituted the paper’s core six counties. The “plus” part of the paper’s strategy came from its presence in seven other counties, including along the I-70 corridor in Clear Creek, Gilpin, Summit and Eagle, and in the well populated counties of Elbert, Larimer and Weld.²⁰ To underscore the new “metro strategy,” Scripps even reached back into its history to change the newspaper’s name to the *Denver Rocky Mountain News* in October 1998, and it reduced news coverage outside the Denver area. (Very briefly, in the late 1930s, the “Denver” appeared in the masthead beside the paper’s traditional name, while the modern paper went by the name *Denver Rocky Mountain News* from October 1998 to January 2001).²¹

Gone were the days when the *Rocky* boasted of bureaus in Aspen, Fort Collins and Boulder. Instead, two roving reporters and one southern Colorado correspondent crisscrossed the state in search of stories that might be deemed interesting to Denver readers.²² The *Post* went the opposite route – spending $1 million to hire 13 journalists and open 11 news bureaus. A page was added to the *Post’s* daily “Denver and West” section, and the broadsheet’s weekend edition began housing more state news. All the while, a marketing war raged. In 1997 alone, the *Rocky*
spent $2.3 million on local TV ads, while the Post paid $1.6 million. The Rocky depicted its decisions as a retrenchment into its Denver stronghold. The Post countered that the Rocky was in retreat. The Rocky responded that its weekday circulation was the highest where it mattered most – a 13-county area with 70% of Colorado’s population and 69% the state’s retail spending.

“What’s in those other 49 counties?” Linda Sease, the Rocky’s spokeswoman, asked at the time. “A lot of beautiful country, but not a lot of people.” The Rocky’s advertising agency representative had her back. “We’re where the action is,” Pocky Marranzino said of the newspaper’s new Denver emphasis. Prendergast, the media critic, recalled the Rocky saturating the market with “ads implying that the Western Slope was mainly inhabited by cattle, blithely explaining to metro readers, ‘If you live here, you get it.’” The Post punched back. “It’s a rare company that can shrink itself to success,” said Tim Matthews, the top account executive for the Post’s advertising agency at the time. Their general manager, Kirk MacDonald, was just as blunt, “If you’re not serving the whole state, you’re not doing your job.” The Rocky’s name change was fair game, too. “If things are going well, do you change the name of your newspaper? Probably not,” Post publisher Ryan McKibben told Editor & Publisher. To be clear, the Rocky wasn’t doing anything particularly novel vis-à-vis the rest of its industry.

Newspapers have long placed profits above public service by eliminating the issues sent to less affluent, sparsely populated, or distant circulation districts. They’re costly to serve, and readers are only as valuable as their appeal to advertisers. But as critics of the Rocky’s strategy pointed out, Colorado is different. Unlike Florida, Texas, and California, which have multiple retail trade areas, no other metro area is even remotely as large as Denver. And the rest of the state is mostly wide swathes of open land, tiny towns, and high-speed highways. Even back in 1996, the roughly 1.5 million people in those less-populated counties outside the Denver Metro
Area accounted for $1.7 billion of the state’s roughly $24.7 billion retail market.\textsuperscript{31} The Rocky’s decision to focus on Denver also stands out for its timing, and the sheer size of the newspaper’s circulation and coverage cuts. As mentioned, the newspaper had been steadily losing subscribers since 1991, following a five-year comedy of errors ranging from a pricey, problematic printing plant’s introduction, to a new editorial approach, and a recent redesign.

Again, the Rocky had already shed tens of thousands of subscribers while upgrading its billing and delivery systems.\textsuperscript{32} And the newspaper’s costly 1995 decision to cut its national advertising rates had hurt its finances.\textsuperscript{33} The Post, in comparison, continued circulating across the state, while increasing its statewide coverage, to show its “commitment to being a ‘complete newspaper for Colorado,’” as their publisher liked to say.\textsuperscript{34} In other words, John Morton was right. The newspaper industry analyst foresaw the problems behind the Rocky’s Front Range Plus cost-cutting strategy. “The most serious one concerns momentum,” Morton wrote in American Journalism Review when the company first unveiled the strategy. “The Post has it, and the News does not.”\textsuperscript{35} The first five years of the ’90s support Morton’s point. The Post’s weekday circulation climbed 34.5% to 334,400 in 1996 compared with 248,493 in 1991, while its Sunday tally shot up 12% to 462,000 from 413,343. Over the same span, the Rocky’s weekday circulation fell 15% to 317,000 in 1996 versus 374,000 in 1991, while its Sunday total dipped 6% to 462,000 from 413,343.\textsuperscript{36}

That momentum wasn’t confined to total circulation. Even in the Rocky’s Denver stronghold, from the beginning of 1991 to early 1996, the paper’s circulation only rose 1% on weekdays and 15% on Sundays (compared with 39% and 20% for the Post).\textsuperscript{37} As Morton wrote at the time, “This trend has an enormous psychological impact on a market – its readers, its advertisers and, importantly, on the morale of newspaper employees. It even affects advertisers
who draw all of their customers from the core market.” Morton was echoing the media economics principle that businesses deciding where to spend their limited advertising dollars will gravitate to the publication most widely viewed as a region’s newspaper of record. As often, that’s the bigger, more widely circulated paper. That’s the premise behind the late Swedish journalism professor Lars Furhoff’s circulation spiral theory (a.k.a. the downward spiral principle). Furhoff’s theory holds that a point of no return exists at which a smaller newspaper can no longer wage a comeback against a bigger rival once it’s won too much market share. Traditionally, in newspaper economics, a “larger readership attracts more advertising, which in turn attracts more readers, which in turn will attract more advertisers.”

Yet, in a two-newspaper market, the smaller of the two competing papers can become trapped in the opposite cycle. As readership decreases, it loses advertising, which “again aggravates the problems of selling advertising space, so that finally the smaller newspaper will have to close down.” Even a 60 to 40% circulation split can signal that a smaller publication might fail, according to past criteria used by the federal government to approve joint operating agreements. By early 1997, the Rocky realized it was in a pickle when its Front Range Plus strategy left the Post with a 54% Denver market share. Long-time Rocky journalist and editor Michael Madigan watched the sweat stain the business attire in the board rooms back then. “There was mounting concern among execs at the Rocky that, because of its smaller tabloid size, it was netting fewer advertising dollars than the broadsheet Post,” Madigan recalled. “The big bosses even allowed themselves – for about 10 seconds – to toy with the idea of reverting to Byers’ spread-both-arms wide (broadsheet) format.” (In 2000, when Rocky applied for federal approval to merge its business operations with the Post, Scripp’s executives would tell government regulators that 1997 marked the year the Rocky had been entered a downward spiral
toward closure). So, in ’97 – just one year after declining to use subscribers across Colorado as loss leaders to attract advertisers – the *Rocky* decided to do just that to reclaim the overall circulation lead. Scripps’ moves to raise circulation figures ranged from deeply discounting subscription prices to acquiring another local newspaper and lumping together its circulation with the *Rocky*’s tally in its marketing materials for advertisers.

That other daily paper was the Boulder *Daily Camera* for which Scripps traded its dailies in Monterey and San Luis Obispo, California to Knight-Ridder in August 1997. That year, the *Rocky* also began reducing its Monday through Friday subscription rate to a penny per day or $3.12 per year (for up to two years) – a promotion the *Post* partly matched for six weeks despite calling it a “desperate” measure. Denver’s newsstand prices were already among the lowest in the nation, with readers picking up the *Rocky* and the *Post*’s weekday issues for 25 cents a piece and either of their fat Sunday editions for 50 cents. The *Rocky* also quietly crept back into the Colorado countryside, first in 1998 by letting independent, wildcat distributors truck newsstand copies across the region and even into other states. Then, officially, the paper began circulating in another half dozen counties as the 2000s began, including Garfield, Grand and Pitkin (west of Denver), Park and El Paso (to the south), and Morgan (to the east). But even after Front Range Plus, the *Rocky*, which was always strongest in and around Denver, remained so. In 1999, for example, 90% of the *Rocky*’s copies circulated in Denver’s six-county metro, while 10% went to the rest of the state, compared with a 76/24% split for the *Post*.

The onslaught of promotions and the accompanying price war made the *Post* and the *Rocky* the fastest-growing papers in America in the late ’90s, with the *Rocky* tops in the nation from September 1998 until 2000. The *Rocky* even managed to reclaim its weekday circulation lead by the end of the decade. Between 1997 and the papers’ January 2001 truce, the *Rocky*’s
average weekday circulation had climbed nearly 35% to 419,800 from 311,700, while the Post had rocketed 22% to 419,700 from 343,500. The Post also preserved its Sunday lead over the same span, while upping its circulation 24% (to 585,800 from 470,800) compared with a 26% gain for the Rocky (to 522,700 from 415,400). The Los Angeles Times captured the spirit of their competition in 1999. “While circulation at newspapers around the country generally has remained static, the Denver papers, with the help of various promotions, are selling like Pokémon trading cards,” reporter Julie Cart wrote. In 1999, the Post had experienced 10 straight years of circulation gains to the Rocky’s two years of increases.

Indeed, by the late ’90s and early 2000s, the Rocky and the Post claimed the highest penetration and readership rates in America. In 2002, for example, an astounding 51.4% of the Denver Metro Area’s adults said they read either the Rocky or the Post “yesterday.” Translation, out of a pool of 1.79 million people, 920,332 read one or both of Denver’s newspapers on any given day. On any given day, nearly 35% of Denver’s adults (625,000) said they’d picked up the Rocky “yesterday,” versus about 27% (485,233) for the Post. At their absolute peaks during their war in March 2000, the two newspapers’ weekday circulation totals respectively stood at 451,283 for the Rocky, compared with 427,688 for the Post. And the two papers reached their pre-merger Sunday heights – the Post took over all publishing on Sundays after they combined – in January 2001, when the Rocky served 522,656 versus 585,823 at the Post. That means, on weekdays, they were printing 879,000 or .42 newspapers for every man, woman, and child among the Denver Metro Area’s 2.1 million inhabitants at the time.

At those levels, supply of newspapers didn’t always match the demand. The two newspapers’ joint decision to cut circulation after merging in February 2001 underscores just how inflated their circulation figures had been thanks to price cuts and gimmicks. The Rocky
shed 141,832 weekday copies between its March 2000 apex and 2002, when its circulation dipped to 309,451 issues. Over the same span, the Post halted production of 121,489 issues to settle at a weekday total of 306,199.54 Denver was so over-saturated with newspapers in 2000 that residents complained of unwanted copies piling up around the city. Boulder residents did the same until local environmental officials finally ordered the pair to stop distributing their free and cut-rate copies to University of Colorado students.55 The complaints were not without a hint of irony for the Rocky. Just a few years earlier, the paper had sought to appear environmentally conscious by touting a marketing campaign to plant a tree for each new and renewed subscription.56

**Buying Hearts and Minds**

The Rocky and the Post may have fought branding battles just as hard as their editorial war. But, while the Rocky relished its reputation as a defender of Denver’s ordinary denizens, it also strenuously and self-consciously campaigned not to be pigeonholed as a “blue-collar” newspaper.57 In a September 2000 report recommending federal approval for a merger between Denver’s dailies, Assistant U.S. Attorney General Joel Klein even cited the Rocky’s image management efforts as a formidable business challenge:

> Both of the newspapers have done studies of readers’ preferences and advertiser perceptions. As a general matter, readers prefer the News’ tabloid style, and most advertisers prefer the Post’s upscale image and larger pages. Even though many attempts have been made to alter its image, the News is still viewed by many readers and advertisers as a newspaper appealing to lower income “blue collar” readers.58

So, did the perception match reality? Was the Rocky really more “blue collar”? How different were the two newspapers, in general, and in terms of terms of their audiences? Demographical data from the two Denver newspapers offers a more nuanced picture. Both served similar
readerships, though a few very notable differences stand out based on the two newspapers’ internal records about their readers.

Take the year 2002, for example. Even then, a year after the papers merged their business operations, their reader profiles varied. Give or take between one and four percentage points (i.e. a common margin of error in most surveys), the two newspapers were virtually identical in their metro Denver market shares of men and women; those in different age brackets; those earning from $25,000 to $50,000 and between $50,000 and $75,000; widowed, divorced, separated, and single adults; homeowners; and parents. There readerships did, however, vary in a few notable education and income-related categories. On any given weekday, 41% of all metro Denver adults with a bachelor’s degree or higher read the Post compared with 28% for the Rocky. Eighty-percent of all Denver area adults with some college education – from taking one community college class to earning the most advanced degrees – read the Post versus 72% at the Rocky. Among all those earning $75,000 or more, the Post commanded a 42% market share as opposed to 36% at the Rocky.

The Rocky served 19% of the region’s blue-collar workers and 55% of those employed in white-collar jobs (as per federal classifications) compared with respective blue- and white-collar percentages of 9 and 62 at the Post. Ironically, although the Post served a greater proportion of the Denver Metro Area’s white-collar workers, the Rocky reached a larger total number of them (341,135 versus 301,060) because its circulation was so heavily concentrated around Denver. But to the Rocky’s great chagrin, advertisers often misunderstood or disregarded the paper’s claims that it served more white-collar readers than the Post. Quoting and promoting such statistics required the Rocky to walk the fine line between relishing its reputation as a handy helper for working Coloradans and not appearing lowbrow. The paper took it as progress when a
1996 focus group compared it with to an SUV instead of identifying it with a pickup truck two years earlier. Not so many years after that, the *Rocky* launched a marketing campaign to brand itself as “power tool” for the people – a message it plastered on the side of Hummer that was driven around Denver for a time.\(^62\)

Former *Rocky* reporter Nancy Mitchell recalled the era in a 2009 Salon column in which she mused about “sitting in an auditorium of equally confused journalists who wanted nothing more than to get back to the newsroom” as they listened to a presentation about how a focus group had likened the paper to a dependable Ford. “Great,” she thought, “so are we an Escort or an Explorer?” Most of the journalists, she added, “ignored all the marketing efforts that were meant to save the paper.” And if they did embrace a “‘brand,’ it was embodied in the instructions that were once posted in our managing editor’s office … Get the news. Tell the truth. Don’t be dull.”\(^63\) At times, marketing research crept into editorial strategies. Ever determined to give the people what they wanted, the *Rocky* tasked its team with studying “why women subscribe to women’s magazines.”\(^64\) The result in 1997 was a new Sunday section, dubbed Home Front, “chockfull of remodeling and interior design tips and begging for ads from developers and home-furnishings stores.”\(^65\)

The *Rocky’s* weekend entertainment pages swelled, too. Writing in the alternative weekly *Westword*, Prendergast, the Denver media critic, labeled the *Rocky’s* efforts “evidence of (Scripps’) belief that building readership in the metro area will depend on perky, service-oriented features as much as news.” Typical of the time was a spring 1997 issue of Homefront that included “a smirky feature about a Boulder threesome’s unusual partner-swapping bookended between Dear Abby and Dr. Laura.”\(^66\) For those mid-’90s readers more interested in real business than funny business, the *Rocky* also unveiled a new, dedicated business section, which it
dubbed “Wall Street West” and touted as “The Original Laptop” (without a hint of irony about the newspaper industry’s inability to adapt in the Digital Age). The Rocky’s columnists were always one of its biggest draws, and the last thirty years of the twentieth century were no exception. There was the aforementioned Amole, who enchanted readers from 1977 until his 2002 death at 78, and three others whose lives also ended too soon. One was John Coit, who left an immediate impression after the Vietnam vet roared into Denver in August 1983.

His star grew, as he covered everything from motorcycle gangs to astrologers, professional wrestlers, and religious leaders, for two-and-half years before his suddenly died from a heart attack. Coit once stayed up all night on Christmas Eve of 1985 to finish reading the 2,133 letters he had received, so he could write a column full of his readers’ favorite holiday memories. The “stories of love,” “loss,” and “enduring human compassion” that Coit retold from the letters were characteristic of both his other columns and his final days. Just two weeks later, on January 11, 1986, he was dead at age 38. But Coit died full-hearted. One hundred of his friends and colleagues had just gathered to watch him wed Susan O’Malley, one of the Rocky’s retail advertising executives, on New Year’s Eve in the lobby of the newspaper’s new building. After two broken marriages and a lifetime of bad habits, he’d finally found peace in his love with O’Malley and contentment with his column. “Life is short, and it hurts,” Coit wrote in a column about the wedding. “Love is the only drug that works.” Love was what poured out of the Rocky’s readers 10 years later, when life proved short for another 30-something-year-old Denver columnist. Greg Lopez’s end came at age 35, following a high-speed hit-and-run highway crash on a gray St. Patrick’s Day in 1996, just five years into his career at the Rocky.

The New York Times lauded the late Lopez for “capturing everyday life in a way that tugged at a reader’s emotion, whether it dealt with gang violence, a backyard squirrel or the
homeless,” in a news industry full of steely knifed stories and jaded journalists. “Greg Lopez went for the heart in a newspaper business that often goes for the jugular,” his fellow Rocky columnist, Gary Massaro, wrote after Lopez died. Common was the column Lopez wrote on July 27, 1994 (“At the corner of violence and desperation”) in which he poignantly packed vignettes of gang shootings at the intersection of Denver’s Twentieth Sixth and Arapahoe Streets. Clad in his omnipresent uniform of jeans, cowboy boots, and a Hawaiian shirt (he owned 96 of them), Lopez “wandered about with an ear for the unusual story and a ready handout for the less fortunate.” (He once gave his coat to a homeless Detroit man). In a September 1994 column about the death of his stillborn baby daughter, Lopez described “finding a tiny rosebud on a withered branch in his backyard.” After his friends and family offered solace, he wrote, “Almost all of them said there was nothing they could say. Some had gone on to say there must be a reason these things happen. You can choose to believe that or not, but you can’t choose when you will believe it and when you won’t.”

Lopez’s death turned into a double tragedy, when his killer soon committed suicide. That man, Spicer Breeden, was the 36-year-old scion of a wealthy Denver dynasty. (His maternal great-grandfather, Charles Boettcher, had amassed Rocky Mountain riches borne of “railroads, ranches, mines, meatpacking plants, cement factories, sugar mills, a life insurance company and the region’s most powerful investment house”). Weaving through Interstate 25 traffic at 110 MPH in a rare, dark gray $56,000 BMW 540i Sport model, Breeden had twice hit Lopez’s black Toyota 4Runner, fishtailing the SUV, and snapping off its right front wheel before it rolled repeatedly. Two days later, as TV camera crews loomed and police closed in, Breeden barricaded himself in basement. There, took his own life and fatally shot his beloved Chow dog, Gambo, who stood nearby bleeding from a neck wound as his owner lay dead in the bathroom.
Breeden spent his final moments snorting coke, guzzling rum, and scribbling a short suicide note that disinherited his family and (unsuccessfully) blamed his friend and car passenger, the German artist Jorg “Peter” Schmitz, for driving the BMW. (A jury would later deadlock in a trial of Schmitz, as Lopez’s wife clutched their infant daughter and wept from the front row).  

Lopez, Amole, and Coit were all cut from the same cloth as Penny Parker, another former Rocky columnist, who died too soon. In their Denver condo in early 2016, Greg Henry, Parker’s husband, found his wife dead (of unknown causes) at age 62. By all accounts, all four columnists connected with their readers, emanated compassion, radiated a love of journalism, dug up quirky stories, and championed the little people, and sought to unite the community. For her part, Parker was also a case study in the rivalry between the Post and Rocky. She began at the Post as a features reporter in 1993 before quickly shifting to the business news department, where she covered retail, restaurants, marketing, and tourism. When the Rocky snatched her away in 1999, Parker fought fiercely with the Post’s staff, continually breaking news and capturing readers with a gossipy news column. She even changed the license plate on her BMW convertible to “Tell me 1st,” – a jab at the “Tell me” plate on rival Post columnist Bill Husted’s car. Later, when the Rocky folded in 2009, Parker would return to the Post, where she continued as a columnist until 2012, when the paper laid her off along with Mike Littwin, another big-name former Rocky columnist, and other newsroom veterans. “Parker,” the Post recalled, “loved people and journalism, and used the influence of (the) columns she wrote for the Rocky Mountain News and the Denver Post to make the big city seem a little smaller, and feel like a place where people cared about each other and celebrated success.”

Of course, Parker wasn’t the only columnist the Rocky poached from the Post. Both papers had a long tradition of stealing each other’s writers and reporters, including from each
others sports sections. In 1981, the Post filched the Rocky’s star sports columnist, Woody Paige, with a then-exorbitant offer of $75,000 a year ($200,000 today), or what some daily newspapers might spend to hire four or five entry-level reporters today.76 For many readers, the Rocky’s sports section – from columnists to news coverage – was the paper’s top attraction. In one early 2000s survey, the Rocky asked its readers to rate their favorite parts of the paper. More people (11.4%) picked the sports section first than any other part of the paper.77 And the paper’s sports coverage ranked between two- and four-times more popular than each of the Rocky’s other sections. Not surprisingly, the rivalry between the papers’ sports sections mirrored the intensity on the news side, recalled Michael Madigan, who began on the sports staff in 1972 before working his way up to a managing editor position.

In 1982, I was covering the University of Colorado when it hired new football coach, Bill McCartney. One day McCartney was wailing on me for a story I had scooped the Post on about his team that he didn’t like. The football coach said he didn’t understand the scrutiny his program was under. “I look at the Post,” I explained to him, “like you look at Nebraska.” McCartney looked like he’d experienced an epiphany. “Ohhhh,” he said smiling. “Now I get it.”78

Both Mile High papers spent small fortunes to win sports fans. After Major League Baseball finally came to Denver with the Colorado Rockies franchise in 1993, the Rocky spent $8.5 million for a 7.3% stake in the team, while declaring itself the team’s “official newspaper.” The Post shot back with an ad campaign declaring itself as the official newspaper of the Rockies’ fans.79

The two papers’ fights over the Denver Broncos were no less ferocious, with the Rocky following its unofficial rule of putting the team on its cover after every football game “unless war or pestilence broke out.”80 When the Broncos made back-to-back Super Bowls in 1998 and 1999, both papers dropped megabucks to fly enough copies to the games’ host cities of San Diego and Miami to inundate hotels and peddle extras on the street. The Rocky’s January 26,
1998 issue alone was 140 pages, with 48 reserved for “Super News.” Often, Denver’s newspaper war led to coverage that teetered between excessive and exceptional, especially for big news – which was not lacking in the Rocky’s final years. Denver’s dailies decapitated a small forest to report on the city’s papal visit (1994); the 23rd G8 Summit hosted by the city, the Oklahoma City bombing trial in Denver’s federal court (1997); the Broncos’ two Super Bowl wins (1998 and 1999); the Columbine School shootings (1999); and two monstrous Colorado wildfires (in 1994 and 2002). And even in the 1990s, the old-fangled newspapers didn’t hesitate to dispatch street vendors to hawk extra editions for a number of big stories, including the O.J. Simpson trial’s verdict (2000).

All the while, the Rocky’s staff filled awards cases. For five consecutive years, through the end of the ‘90s, the paper collected more first place editorial awards from the Associated Press of Colorado and the Colorado Press Association than all other newspaper in the state combined. Ironically, the Rocky had some of its best years editorially, under editor and business chief John Temple’s rein, when the paper was careening toward to closure in its final decade. All four of the Rocky’s Pulitzer Prizes came in the 2000s, including the paper’s first two, in 2000 and 2003, for breaking news photos of the Columbine shootings and the Hayman Fire (the largest wildfire in Colorado history). The Rocky’s third and fourth Pulitzers arrived in 2006 for the feature writing and the photos in the paper’s “Final Salute” series about the military’s casualty notification process. A year later, Kevin Vaughan crafted a 33-part serial narrative – about the decades-long fallout from Colorado’s worst traffic accident (a 1961 school bus/train collision that killed 20 children) – that would become a Pulitzer finalist. And his 2008 series, “The Crevasse,” became a decorated book about a mountain climber’s struggle to survive after his friend died during their ascent of Mt. Rainer. For a year leading up to the presidential caucuses
in November 2008, the Rocky went so far as to send its Washington correspondent, M.E. Sprengelmeyer, to live in Iowa.85

That same year, Laura Frank’s six-month investigation, “Deadly Denial,” uncovered how the federal government was still depriving compensation and health benefits to the sick former workers of the Rocky Flats weapons plant.86 The July 21, 2008 cover of the first issue of the Rocky’s special three-day report was black with a simple note in a large white sans-serif font:

Tens of thousands of America’s former nuclear bomb builders are sick, dying or already dead because of their exposure to radiation and other poisons. You knew that. After decades of stonewalling, the government started a compensation program in 2000. You knew that. After four years of bungling, Congress reformed the program demanding that it be “compassionate, fair and timely.” Perhaps, you knew that. But what you may not know is that today only one in four claimants has been compensated and millions more of your taxpayer dollars have been wasted creating hurdles instead of help. For many of the nation’s cold warriors, the government’s game is “deadly denial.”

In the Rocky’s last the 10 years, its reporters also produced “Early Exit,” an extensive five-part investigation in 2005, which spotlighted the embarrassingly large number of students dropping out of Denver’s public high schools.87

Yet, just as Denver’s newspapers could drive each other to great heights, they could also follow each other to news lows. As Prendergast wrote in the late ’90s:

Competition also has its price. Strained resources. Leaner staffs. (The Denver dailies operate with newsrooms of barely 200 employees; some comparable dailies in monopoly markets have staffs of 300 to 400.) An obsession with cost-cutting, marketing and circulation-boosting schemes in order to deliver the kind of double-digit profit margins that today’s media moguls demand. That means Big Stories—even Big Stories about non-stories.88

The two papers were equally quick to breathlessly barrage the public with articles about 6-year-old beauty queen JonBenét Ramsey’s murder (1996), and the opening of a suburban Denver shopping mall a year later. After the Park Meadows Mall debuted, “It was like the door to the next world had opened,” Steve Campbell, the Rocky’s former state editor, told Prendergast. “The
level of coverage far exceeded the newsworthiness of a mall opening in town; it was clearly being used to court advertisers.”89 Regardless, the Rocky remained popular and relevant.

Although the paper had its fair share of strategic gaffes in the ’90s, it seemed to be regaining its mojo toward the decade’s close. Any given month might bring a new press release about the Rocky’s breakneck circulation growth, or some journalistic honor, and in 2000 the paper even managed to reclaim the weekday circulation lead from the Post. Scripps, meanwhile, continued to publicly state that the Rocky was thriving right up until the moment that suddenly the company said it wasn’t. In May 2000, the advertising industry trade magazine Brandweek published a feature story with the headline, “Rocky Mountain High,” and the subhead, “The newspaper war is alive and well in Denver, where the Denver Post and the Rocky Mountain News are slugging it out for readers and advertisers.”90 But, the same month Brandweek ran its glowing piece, Scripps’ executives were preparing to make a very different sort of announcement.

The Truce: The Joint Operating Agreement

John Ensslin will never forget the Rocky Mountain News staff’s incredulity the May 11, 2000 day the paper declared itself a financial failure, and announced plans to enter a joint operating agreement with the Post. “We all thought it was going the other way,” and the Post was so feeble it couldn’t survive, recalled the long-time Rocky reporter, who worked at the paper from 1994 to 2009. To Ensslin, a past president of the Society of Professional Journalists, “There were those perplexing things we were doing like changing our name and involuntarily giving up circulation,” with the Front Range Plus strategy. “But there was no sense of decline going on.”91 The timing was of the failure notice was ironic. If all the sheet cakes appearing in the newsroom were any indication, the paper had overcome its wretched first seven years of the ’90s to surge ahead of the Post again. The Rocky had won more editorial awards in the decade’s last four years
than any other Colorado newspaper, including its first Pulitzer (the aforementioned breaking news photography prize following the Columbine School shootings), and it was still locked in a virtual tie for Denver’s newspaper circulation lead.

In 1999, the Rocky also led the nation in classified advertisements (with 7.2 million). That same year, the paper sold more total advertising inches than any other newspaper in the country, while holding an overall advertising lineage lead of 4.04 million inches to the Post’s 3.84 million. Plus, it ran 66% of all its Denver ads in color, again, more than any other newspaper in the country. “In terms of readership, the paper had never been stronger,” wrote former Rocky reporter and editor Michael Madigan. “It had never been more useful.” How, then, did Scripps come to reach its big merger announcement in the spring of 2000? And why didn’t the merger save the Rocky? This chapter begins the task of answering those questions. When Scripps called its press conference at the time, it primarily blamed the tabloid’s cut-rate advertising and circulation offers throughout the ’90s for its struggles. And the company asserted that a JOA with the Post was the only way to save the Rocky, which Scripps claimed had lost $123 million between 1990 and 1999. Under the terms of the federal Newspaper Preservation Act, the Rocky and the Post were applying for federal permission to merge their business functions, while retaining separate, competing newsrooms.

Their proposed 50-year agreement called for Scripps and MediaNews to create and co-own a new holding company (the “Denver News Agency”) to combine their non-editorial operations, including advertising, circulation, production and distribution. The so-called DNA would hold both the Post and the Rocky’s assets and be the best chance, both newspapers’ executives said, to preserve two editorial voices in Denver. Profits were to be split 50-50, and the papers were to be married until 2051. In the meantime, each paper would name two directors to
co-manage the agency’s four-member board, plus a CEO, which would periodically rotate between representatives of MediaNews and Scripps. Saturday and Sunday editions would be printed as broadsheets with a joint masthead – a consequence of the two papers having to share production resources. The Rocky would publish a “Weekend Rocky Mountain News” in a broadsheet format on Saturdays, with higher print run than weekdays, and the types of big enterprise pieces typically reserved for Sundays editions. And the Post would take over Sunday issues.

Plus, the DNA would keep both papers the same circulation size to avoid one paper assuming the same junior status that had wrung the death knell for the smaller newspapers in other JOAs. The Rocky, meanwhile, would assume the official label of “failing,” as per the Newspaper Preservation Act’s requirement that one paper identify as such to qualify for a JOA. And Scripps would pay $60 million for its 50% stake in the DNA. To add insult to injury, the Post owner, Dean Singleton, boasted that his paper had banked $192 million in pretax profits during the ’90s. Considering all that, the Rocky certainly made a convincing pitch that it was failing in the spring of 2000. Why else would U.S. Attorney General Janet Reno promptly approve its merger with the Post in January of 2001? The reality, however, is that no federal attorney general has ever nixed a JOA despite eight opportunities, including two cases (Seattle and Detroit) in which Justice Department lawyers recommended quashing the deals. Another nearly two-dozen JOAs (i.e. those that were grandfathered into legality by the federal law) were allowed to stand. Generally, JOAs are gimme putts, though occasionally they have little kicks from the judges and attorneys general.

Enacted in 1970 to legally immunize newspapers’ anti-competitive JOAs in 20 cities, the NPA created a federal process allowing more newspapers to partner for financial survival – lest
they close amid the corporatization, consolidation, and public financialization that swept the industry after World War II. As the story goes, President Nixon actually signed the law after the Hearst Company’s chief sent a letter, signed by six other newspaper executives, reminding the president of their past election support and gently warning that they’d remember whether he supported the law when he pursued reelection.\(^96\) What the corporate chieftains sought were oligopolistic powers, and the NPA created an application for the U.S. Attorney General to approve them. The act – which still exists though only Denver (2009) and Detroit (1989) newspapers have used it in recent years – offers anti-trust exemption for papers to combine administrative and production functions, share costs, fix prices, pool profits, and allocate markets.\(^97\) Getting the attorney general’s approval for a JOA hinges on two main requirements – newsrooms must remain separate and competitive and, as mentioned, just one of the newspapers must be considered “failing.”\(^98\)

That second requirement is what caught the Rocky’s newsroom off guard back in 2000 because, as will be discussed, their newspaper actually was profitable from a cash flow standpoint. Was the Rocky literally “failing” due to its war with the Post in 2000? Unfortunately, there’s no easy explanation. Much of the financial information for the two newspaper companies, both of which no longer exist, was simply never made public. Although the Rocky’s former parent, Scripps – which twice spun off its newspaper holdings into new companies in 2008 and 2015 – was all one publicly traded firm at the time, and it reported all its newspapers’ results in one unit. As for the Post’s owner, MediaNews, it too has departed this temporal realm, at least as Singleton’s baby. In 2010, the private equity firm Alden Global Capital led the consortium of lenders that wiped out $765 million of MediaNews’ mammoth $930 million debt load in exchange for 89% of the company’s stock. Since then, MediaNews has twice joined its
operations with the former Journal Register Co. First, they combined in 2011 as co-owned sister companies that retained their names under a holding company called 21st Century Media. Then, they merged completely in 2013, and assumed the name Digital First.99

Once the crown jewel of Singleton’s empire, private equity firms have reduced the once-proud Post to one among a motley lot of 76 daily and 160 weekly publications across 18 states. And in September 2014, Alden Global Capital began soliciting offers for the sell entirety of those Digital First assets. But after unsuccessfully negotiating with another venture capital firm, Apollo Global Management, Alden switched to a piecemeal strategy of selling off the geographically contiguous clusters of newspapers that Singleton had worked so hard to assemble.100 (Gannett took the first bite out of MediaNews’ corpse in June 2015 when it announced it would buy the El Paso Times in Texas, six papers in New Mexico, and four in Pennsylvania).101 Yet, even in their heyday, MediaNews was never open about the Post’s finances. Like Scripps, Singleton, MediaNews’ CEO, and Scudder, the company’s chairman, also declined to break out the earnings for individual newspapers in their closely held firm. When they did discuss the company’s overall performance, they highlighted its operating income (i.e. earnings before interest, taxes, depreciation and amortization), which painted a rosier picture of a firm with debt that eventually swelled to nine times its earnings.

**Justifying the JOA**

Scripps successfully convinced federal regulators to sign off on the Rocky’s merger with the Post by arguing that Denver’s newspapers were “locked in a death struggle, dueling feverishly with aggressive circulation, advertising and news strategies. The consequences of these steps on the News’ circulation revenues and costs have been dramatically negative.”102 But over the 10-year period before the feds approved the Denver papers’ JOA in early 2001, the Rocky’s operating revenue had actually increased by $67 million, while its advertising income
was up $76 million. Of the $123 million the Rocky declared that it lost during the ’90s, the paper’s actual cash losses only amounted to $2 million. Most of the remainder consisted of two categories of noncash expenses. One was the depreciation and amortization of the Rocky’s equipment and facilities, including its printing plant. The other amounted to the internal corporate costs that Scripps’ Cincinnati headquarters logged for managing the paper (e.g. accounting, providing Internet and phone services, and staffing Scripps’ Washington Bureau).

By the end of the ’90s, the Denver newspapers’ market shares had returned to a state of parity (i.e. a 53/47 split in favor of the Post for advertising and a roughly 50/50 split for overall circulation). And even in a Justice Department document that recommended permitting Denver’s JOA, the federal government conceded that the Rocky was in no danger of imminently failing (though this has never been a criterion for a JOA’s approval). So, why would the feds OK the agreement? First, the government bought Scripps’ contention that it would have to continue subsidizing the Rocky without a JOA because of the low advertising and subscription rates necessary to maintain its stalemate with the Post. Second, the feds believed the Rocky’s assertion it would lose money in the future, and eventually have to close, if it didn’t merge. Third, the government accepted Scripps’ argument that noncash expenses – estimates of the cost of wear and tear on Rocky’s facilities and the chain’s administrative costs of managing the paper – endangered its future as much as actual losses.

Even Scripps recognized the need to sell the government on the depreciation and amortization charges, which made up 98.5% of the losses Scripps declared in its JOA filing:

Depreciation, while not a cash expense, must be taken into consideration because an enterprise that cannot generate enough cash from operations to cover depreciation is not recovering its investment in plant and equipment as they wear out, and cannot afford to fund replacement plant and equipment.
Indeed, there’s a reason Wall Street investors often look to operating cash flows to gauge the financial health of corporations. A company factoring in expenses based on its own estimates and judgments can easily make itself appear more or less profitable.\textsuperscript{108} For the same reason, it’s hard to judge how the \textit{Rocky} calculated its losses to argue that it was headed toward failure. The accrual accounting practices and the incremental analysis used to justify the merger occurred behind closed doors at the Scripps’ Cincinnati headquarters. Lacking that evidence, business professors Shuo Chen and William Shughart, who studied Denver’s JOA, did not conclude that the \textit{Rocky’s} non-cash expenses were inflated.

They did, however, warn that such practices were common among newspapers seeking JOAs, or as two business professors put it, “Creative accounting helps make one of the newspapers look less profitable than otherwise and provides the evidentiary basis for JOA approval.”\textsuperscript{109} Under the NPA, they added, “newspapers are able to artificially create the accounting losses necessary to secure the Attorney General’s blessing by shifting profits to a corporate parent.”\textsuperscript{110} As for the \textit{Rocky}, it didn’t meet their model’s criteria for approval. If Scripps really thought the paper was on its last legs, Chen and Shughart asked, why would it just hand MediaNews $60 million just to enter a JOA? Plus, they pointed out that newspapers owners in past JOAs didn’t agree to split their profits 50-50 – as the \textit{Rocky} and the \textit{Post} did – unless “both papers think their survival prospects to be roughly equally.”\textsuperscript{111} Both \textit{Editor & Publisher} and Chen and Shughart compared the Denver newspapers’ merger to the last NPA-sanctioned JOA before it. That 1989 tie-up between Detroit’s newspapers was one of the most controversial newspaper combinations of all time. In regards to Denver and Detroit, Chen and Shughart wrote, “Both joint newspaper arrangements were approved despite weak or nonexistent evidence that one of the dailies would have failed without the Attorney General’s intervention.”\textsuperscript{112}
The public storm in the Motor City began back in 1986, when Gannett struck a deal to buy the *Detroit News*. At the time, the descendants of E.W. Scripps’ older half-brother James, who founded the paper in 1873, still owned it. (They came from a different branch of the Scripps family than those who owned the *Rocky Mountain News*). Gannett assured the public it would continue to compete with Knight-Ridder’s *Detroit Free Press*. Instead, the two chains applied for a JOA almost immediately after the sale closed. At the time, the *Detroit News* held slight leads in circulation and advertising, though they were decreasing. Yet, the *Free Press* deemed itself the “failing” paper despite its rising circulation and advertising revenues. Like Chen and Shughart, a June 2000 *Editor & Publisher* story also likened Denver’s JOA application to Detroit’s arrangement. Each Detroit paper had suffered major losses leading up to the JOA application, according to the magazine. “But most were based on cut-rate circulation deals and other competitive promotions that were aimed only at gaining circulation to beat the competitor,” not due to the papers failing.\(^{113}\) Spurred by newspaper unions and led by Ralph Nader, a coalition of readers and advertisers challenged both the failing designation and U.S. Attorney General’s Edwin Meese’s August 1988 approval of the JOA. But a lower court’s ruling permitting the deal was upheld by default due to a 4-4 Supreme Court stalemate. Twenty years later, even the *Rocky’s* JOA application acknowledged similarities between the Denver and Detroit JOAs.

As Scripps told the feds, both Denver and Detroit’s newspapers had “sustained heavy losses for a number of years without the ability to improve their relative competitive standing or profitability by unilateral action.”\(^{114}\) Chen and Shughart’s scholarly analysis of whether the *Rocky* and *Post* fit criteria for a JOA assailed both deals. Denver and Detroit, they wrote, represent “JOAs that, under the guise of preserving the participating newspapers’ reportorial and editorial independence, are in fact nothing more than self-serving attempts to secure safe harbors
for collusion.” Administrative Law Judge Morton Needleman reached the same conclusion about Detroit’s JOA in his scathing, nonbinding recommendation that Meese nix the deal. The *Detroit News*, he opined, wasn’t dominating the *Free Press*, it wasn’t in a circulation spiral, and there was no proof to show that one might develop. Needleman also believed that the papers had deeply discounted their products to lose the money necessary to bolster their bid to merge:

>(L)osses incurred by the *Free Press* and *News* are attributable to their strategies of seeking market dominance and future profitability at the cost, along with the expectation, that failure to achieve these goals would result in favorable consideration of a JOA application.

NBA fans have a name for the scenario Needleman described. They call it “tanking,” and it’s neither trying to lose nor cheating. It’s when an organization tries to win each day with less regard for ineffectual decisions because they might benefit from them.

Obviously, NBA teams play to win, but they also know their sport’s draft lottery is weighted to give losing teams a better chance of selecting the best available prospects come June. In pro basketball, tanking might come in several forms, including trading stars to shed contracts for cheaper, promising prospects; starting rookies or benchwarmers to assess and improve their abilities; or giving a losing coach more chances to turn around a team instead of more firing him sooner. In Denver, perhaps the *Rocky* lowered its cost to win its 1990s circulation battles with the *Post*, while betting that any losses might make federal approval more likely for a profitable, long-term JOA truce for their bloody war. Just look at the *Rocky’s* pricing strategies in the late ’90s. All told, the paper’s efforts to become Denver’s circulation leader caused revenues to slide 45.6% to $18.48 million in 1999 from $34 million 1993. More than 42% of that drop off occurred from 1996 to 1999 – the years in which the papers ceaselessly upped the ante on their circulation promotions.
Those pricing battles began with each paper offering $13-a-year seven-day subscriptions in 1993. They escalated until the Rocky sold a six-day-a-week subscription for $3.12 a year in 1997, when the paper was priced as low as $1.56 for a one-year deal in certain advertiser-coveted zip codes. And subscription prices reached their nadir in 2000 (i.e. the year before the Denver JOA), when the tabloid advertised year-round seven-day delivery for just $5 (or $6.87 by today’s prices). As *Editor & Publisher* wrote at the time, “The Rocky Mountain News claims it became a money-loser because it tried to hard to win its war with the Denver Post.” The Rocky’s losses from circulation pricing strategies were exacerbated by a costly 1995 decision to slash its national ad rates too deeply, according to Scripps’ JOA application. At the late ’90s height of the rivalry, the Rocky gave away 102 free days of newspapers to subscribers compared to 98 free days from the Post. Those strolling Denver’s streets were likely to find street hawkers offering 19 different delivery options at nearly every busy intersection.

Regardless of whether the Rocky’s cut-rate circulation strategies were dually motivated by the paper’s desire to improve its case for a future JOA, a bigger question is worth asking. Have JOAs ever been necessary to preserve two-newspaper towns? Media economists John Busterna and Robert Picard, who wrote a history of newspaper JOAs, made the case that the NPA was never needed because competing newspapers have always had various legal means to share costs and efficiencies without obtaining an anti-trust exemption. At its best, according to Poynter Institute media analyst Rick Edmonds, the NPA act has been a flop and a well-meaning government overreach. Between 1933 and 2000, 22 newspapers entered JOAs. As of 2015, just six remain in Charleston, Detroit, Las Vegas, Pittsburgh, Salt Lake City, and York, Pennsylvania. And, as mentioned, just 18 U.S. cities have two daily newspapers, according to
this study’s tally, while a mere six major cities are home to competitive, independently owned and operated newspapers that compete.

According to Edmonds, “The (newspaper) industry lobbied hard for the Newspaper Preservation Act, back in 1970. It will go down, though, as a modest monument to unintended consequences and ineffectual government intervention.” At the NPA’s worst, according to Busterna and Picard, the act’s critics think newspapers designed it to milk profits from dying properties under the guise of preserving multiple editorial voices. From the get-go, even in Tucson, where a 1960s legal challenge led to the NPA’s creation, many accused the papers of casting an illusion to attain a merger. “Many commentators,” Busterna and Picard wrote, “have argued that Congress’ rhetoric notwithstanding, the real intent of the legislation was to protect the cartel profits of the few newspaper companies that had portions of their joint operations placed in jeopardy by the Tucson litigation.”

Both a Little Flaky

On paper, the Rocky and Post were giving themselves away so they could ask advertisers for more money based on claiming the greatest share of Denver Metro Area residents, including those who spent the most in local stores. In reality, only a JOA could prevent advertisers from resisting ad rate increases because the mere presence of two newspapers gave advertisers all the leverage they needed to keep rates low. Case in point, despite all the Rocky’s circulation gains in the late ’90s, the paper actually saw its ad rates go down from $41.94 per column inch in 1996 to $39.13 in 1999. The “competitive rates and creative packages” were so good, a Denver-based advertising agency’s executive told the Denver Business Journal, that “I have to admit we pit the papers against each other, and it’s really great for advertisers.”

Based on the theory upon which the Rocky and the Post were operating, the newspaper with the highest circulation, and the best desirable demographics, should have been able to raise
ad rates. But the ability of Denver advertisers to leverage the two papers was just one of two reasons why they couldn’t charge more as they grew. The other was that advertisers didn’t trust their circulation claims. That was the U.S. Justice Department’s determination when its staff members interviewed the two Denver dailies’ 30 biggest advertisers for the papers’ JOA application. The businesses’ representatives said they wouldn’t pay higher ad rates because the papers were so good at discrediting each other’s assertions.129 Even after the JOA, the advertisers’ remained wary. “How many eyeballs are really seeing my ads in the paper?” Denver auto dealer Dealin’ Doug Moreland rhetorically asked the Denver Business Journal in 2004. “The (Post and the Rocky’s circulation) numbers are all different, depending on how you interpret them,” he added. “It depends on who’s talking. Figures lie and liars figure.”130

Denver’s dailies excelled at spinning their circulation numbers because they actually were tough to compare. That was largely because the two papers exploited the rules set by Audit Bureau of Circulations (the national newspaper circulation tracking firm now known as the Alliance for Audited Media). At the time, the publications were allowed to draw different boundaries for the areas in which their circulation totals were measured. So, for example, each publication could assert it was the Denver Metro Area’s biggest newspaper depending on how it drew its borders. On at least one occasion, the ABC took the rare step of publicly rebuking them for their circulation claims.131 For a time, in the ’90s a Rocky marketer carried around a pecan pie box with a riddle printed on top asking what the Denver Post’s circulation figures and a piecrust have in common. Those opening the box found a slice missing and the punch line, “They’re both a little flaky,” written on the pan.132

Setting aside the veracity of the two papers’ circulation counts, it’s undeniable that they stood to gain considerably by raising their ad prices if they threw down their swords. As Russ
Wright, the advertising director at the Broomfield-based American Furniture Warehouse, told the *Denver Business Journal* in 2000, “It’s an all-out war. And I’ll tell you, the advertisers are the ones who are winning.” But American Furniture Warehouse no longer considered itself victorious after Attorney General Janet Reno approved the Denver JOA in January 2001. Company owner Jack Jabs roared over the newspapers’ new rates, which rose between 200 and 400% for many advertisers (with some rate hikes as high as 1000%). In the spring of 2001, Jabs recruited dozens of advertisers to protest the new prices. Together, they formed Coloradoans (sic) Against Newspaper Monopolies, which unsuccessfully sued to block the JOA and restore the newspapers’ original ad rates.

Besides increasing their ad prices, Denver’s dailies also irked local businesses by strongly disincentivizing those who didn’t want to simultaneously advertise in the *Rocky* and the *Post* (running an ad in just one publication cost 90% of the rate for both). All the new policies and promotions were part of the two papers’ efforts to increase what had been the lowest newspaper advertising rates in America. Before the JOA, Denver advertisers paid between 20 and 25% below the average ad rates of a similarly sized market. In 2000, a Sunday ad in the *Denver Post* cost $380 per black and white inch (and $397 in the *Rocky*), while a similar ad in Detroit’s JOA market at the time cost $604. Those who sought quarter-page ads in both Denver papers might have paid $8,300 before the deal, but three years later the price had risen to $18,400. Typical of the time was the Denver liquor storeowner who groused about ad space that had cost him $600,000 in 2000 suddenly being worth $1.5 million in 2001. Readers didn’t have it much better. In 2000, a seven-day-a-week subscriber of the *Rocky* could get the paper for $5 per year, while some *Post* subscribers paid even less.
After the JOA’s approval in 2001, those rates rocketed to an introductory price of $66 for the first year of renewal for either paper and $128 for a second year, as their prices kept creeping up. Just two years later, $70 was the best a subscriber could do for seven-day service of the Post or the Rocky, while those paying the full freight for a 48-week subscription were forking over $143. Thanks to all those circulation and advertising increases, the JOA appeared to work for its first five years, as the papers split their profits 50-50, and achieved a number of goals. The Rocky won all four of its Pulitzer Prizes from 2000 to the paper’s 2009 closure. The Post hired its current editor, Gregory Moore (in 2002), redesigned the paper for the first time since 1985 (in 2004), and bought out Media General (in 2005), which had been part owner since helping MediaNews purchase it in 1987. Together, the papers launched their citizen journalism website YourHub.com in 2006, aggregating contributions from readers in dozens of communities, reverse publishing some of them, and syndicating the software for other newspapers. And they secured a staggering $130 million in long-term debt. Nearly $90 million went toward building an eleven-story headquarters on the corner of Broadway and Colfax Avenue, which sat at the power nexus between Denver’s city and county buildings and the state Capitol. Construction began in 2004. A year later, most of the borrowed money paid for new presses, which flipped easily between the broadsheet and the tabloid formats to spit out 75,000 papers per hour. By August 2006, the papers were opening their shiny new offices – tricked out with state-of-art newsgathering gizmos and big TVs. The Rocky lived on the fifth floor. The sixth story housed the Post. The papers’ holding company, the Denver News Agency (DNA), occupied floors seven through 10, while the Post’s parent, MediaNews Group, filled the 11th floor. Yet, just as the new building was opening in the late summer of 2006, the papers were reaching an ominous turning point.
Revenues were no longer covering the operating costs of the DNA, which the JOA explicitly created to fund and run the business operations of both papers. With the papers failing to pay for their own operations, their parent companies, Scripps and MediaNews, were forced to subsidize the DNA. That year, the Rocky would lose $5 million. The Post never divulged whether it lost money in 2006. But it undoubtedly bled several million dollars for at least part of the period in which the DNA failed to cover its costs between 2006 and 2008. The DNA’s financial failures, which coincided with the wider newspaper industry’s downturn, only worsened after 2006, as the Rocky logged a staggering $16 million in annual losses in its final year of operation in 2008. In the end, the two papers’ employees would spend just 16 months together in their gleaming offices. They dined at their deli, quaffed at a little pub, and sipped Starbucks on their ground floor; ate in their cafeteria; struck poses in their yoga studio; sweated at their gym; and gazed at the city’s center from two sixth-floor balconies.

And all the while, trouble brewed outside their comfy confines. Seventeen hours, and 1,000 miles away in Cincinnati, Scripps’ executives spent 2007 and 2008 evaluating whether they even wanted to remain in the newspaper business at all, let alone in Denver, as the industry’s advertising evaporated. From 1928 to 1981, the Rocky had a monopoly on the morning publication schedule. Its weekday circulation had grown from a sapling to a redwood (36,464 in the beginning of the 1930s, 129,585 in 1950, 272,296 in 1980, to an apex of 451,283 by 2000). It had dominated Denver in the ’70s and ’80s, yet the Post was the paper that was still standing in 2009. After the Rocky’s death, Bob Diddlebock reminisced in disgust about the papers final decades in a Time magazine column entitled “Who Really Killed the Rocky Mountain News?” To the former Rocky reporter-turned media-analyst, Scripps had “fumbled away a prime market to a competitor they should have killed off two decades ago,” while
“refusing or declining … to administer a kill shot to the Post, such as buying it before Singleton did.”

Notes

1 This epigraph is drawn from William Shakespeare, *The Tempest, with introduction, and notes explanatory and critical*, Henry Hudson, ed. (Boston: Ginn & Company, 1888), 146. “In a Pickle,” Gary Martin, ed., *Phrases.org Phrase Finder*, accessed August 4, 2015, http://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/in-a-pickle.html. Shakespeare was one of the first to use the phrase “in a pickle” (i.e. “an allusion to being as disoriented and mixed up as the stewed vegetables that made up pickles”). Its early use appeared in *The Tempest* (written in 1610). The etymology website, Phrases.org, lists the following bit of dialog from the play: ALONSO: And Trinculo is reeling ripe. Where should they find this grand liquor that hath gilded 'em? How camest thou in this pickle? TRINCULO: I have been in such a pickle since I saw you last that, I fear me, will never out of my bones. I shall not fear fly-blowing.


6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.


10 Quote from: Pocky Marranzino, co-president of Karsh & Hagan Advertising. In: Keene-Osborn, “Denver Post vs. Rocky Mountain News.” Pocky’s father, the late Pocky Marranzino Sr., was a Colorado newspaper legend. He joined the Rocky Mountain News not long after World War II and wrote an award-winning, six-day-a-column. He also served as the president of the Denver Press Club and the Denver Newspaper Guild, and he entered the Denver Press Club’s Hall of Fame in 2013. See: Denver Press Club, “Garrett Ray to enter DPC Hall of Fame,” *International Society of Weekly Newspaper Editors*, 39, no. 6 (September 2013): 19.


12 Case, “Dead heat in Denver.”


14 Raabe, “Singleton to retire”; Chronis, “Fortunes Reversed in a Decade”; Smith, “Post readership rise marred by departures.”


17 See Note 15.

18 Email from the Alliance for Audited Media, including official audited circulation reports for the *Rocky Mountain News*. The figures quoted herein are based on a comparison of the *Rocky’s* December 31, 1995 circulation totals (i.e. just before Front Range Plus) of 335,567 on weekdays and 445,265 on Sundays versus 302,904 and 415,854 in September 1997 (after Front Range Plus was fully implemented).

19 Most news articles estimated that the *Rocky’s* Front Range Plus strategy would result in losing somewhere in the order of 6 to 7% of its weekday circulation and about the same amount of Sunday readers. But those articles were relying on projections by the *Rocky* itself. This study calculated that the Front Range Plus strategy caused the *Rocky* to lose nearly 10% of its readership on weekdays (and 11% on Sundays). Those calculations are based on the circulation loss figures within the federal application the paper submitted to merge with the *Post* in 2000. The statement that the Rocky saved $17 million as a result of Front Range Plus also appeared in the same federal document. See: Klein, *Report of the Assistant Attorney General In Charge of the Antitrust Division*, 20. Additional circulation for this study’s calculations came from an April 17, 1996 from the *Christian Science Monitor*. See: Lloyd, “Denver’s Dueling Dailies.”

20 See Note 15.
Over its history, the Rocky Mountain News went through a few name changes. For a brief period after a large flood destroyed the paper’s offices in 1864, it was known as the Weekly Rocky Mountain News because it was switched to a weekly format, while it was printed out of a competitor’s offices. During the 1870s, the paper called itself the Daily Rocky Mountain News. Very briefly, in the late 1930s, the “Denver” appeared in the masthead beside the paper’s traditional name, the Rocky Mountain News. See: Michael Madigan, Heroes, Villains, Dames & Disasters: 150 Years of Front-Page Stories from the Rocky Mountain News (Arvada, CO: Maddoex, 2009), 8-24, 73. As mentioned, the paper was again referred to as the Denver Rocky Mountain News from late 1998 until early 2001. See: Mark Fitzgerald, “Name Game in Denver,” Editor & Publisher, October 31, 1998, 131, no. 44, 31. But Scripps dropped “Denver” for good after the paper entered its Joint Operating Agreement with the Denver Post. See: “Rocky Mountain News changes executives, name as JOA takes effect,” Associated Press. In: Billings Gazette, January 22, 2001, http://tinyurl.com/pht4nye.

Prendergast, “All the News that Fits”; Mark Fitzgerald, “Name Game in Denver,” Editor & Publisher, October 31, 1998, 131, no. 44, 31.

Dori Perrucci, “Gunning for a Rocky Mountain High,” MediaWeek, March 9, 1998, 24; Steers, “Post, News put ‘spin’ on new circulation data.” In February 1997, the Post hired extra staff to establish bureaus in a number of Colorado communities, including Colorado Springs/Pueblo, Durango, Fort Collins, Grand Junction and Summit County. At the time, the Post already was drawing news from MediaNews-owned papers in Julesburg, Sterling, Brush, Fort Morgan, Akron, Burlington and Lamar. See: Chronis, “Fortunes Reversed in a Decade.”


Prendergast, “All the News that Fits.”


Prendergast, “All the News that Fits.”


Fitzgerald, “Name Game in Denver.”

Peterson, “2 Newspapers Battle for Hearts”; Prendergast, “All the News that Fits”; Morton “Trying Harder to Become Number 2.”


The Rocky encountered trouble during the first half of the ’90s when –more than ever – it could have used its subscribers as a loss leader. Perhaps, the paper would have been better off carrying the non-paying subscribers (or at least offering them a deal to receive bargain-basement copies), given that the Rocky would practically give the newspaper away just a year after the Front Range Plus. Newspapers have long used circulation as a loss leader to attract advertisers. (In the early ’90s, advertising accounted for 80% of the revenues at a typical, major metro daily such as the Rocky. Today, it’s 70% or less depending on the paper). Had the Rocky immediately decided to use its circulation as a loss leader rather than dropping subscribers as part of Front Range Plus, the paper could have counted its free circulation toward its overall tally. It would take until 2000 for the Alliance for Audited Media (formerly the Audit Bureau of Circulations) to begin forcing newspapers to be more transparent about reporting their shares of free and deeply discounted copies. See: Rick Edmonds, “Today’s circulation numbers bring new baseline for measuring newspaper growth or decline,” Poynter.org, May 3, 2011, http://tinyurl.com/zpm8u2q; Michael Lavery, “An Overview of the Recent U.S. Newspaper Rule Changes,” Editor & Publisher, November, 23, 2010, http://www.editorandpublisher.com/PrintArticle/An-Overview-of-the-Recent-U-S-Newspaper-Rule-Changes; Felicity Barringer, “Panel Set to Change Newspaper Circulation Accounting,” November 20, 2000, New York Times, http://www.nytimes.com/2000/11/20/business/panel-set-to-change-newspaper-circulation-accounting.html; Jennifer Sabo, “ABC Overhauls Some Key Rules on Counting Circ,” Editor & Publisher, March 18, 2008, http://www.editorandpublisher.com/Article/ABC-Overhauls-Some-Key-Rules-on-Counting-Circ.


Morton, “Trying Harder to be Number 2.”

Prendergast, “All the News that Fits.”

Klein, *Report of the Assistant Attorney General In Charge of the Antitrust Division*.

Prendergast, “All the News that Fits.”


Morton, “Trying Harder to be Number 2.”

Ibid.


See: Klein, *Report of the Assistant Attorney General In Charge of the Antitrust Division*. In late December 1996, the *Post’s* combined total average Sunday and weekday circulation averaged 803,917 (345,567 on weekdays and 458,350) compared with 733,930 for the *Rocky* (322,261 on weekdays and 411,669 on Sundays). In total, the two papers circulated a stunning average of 1,537,847 copies per week.


This information is derived from an email message to the author from Matt Baldwin, the former director of research at the Rocky Mountain News, and the current president of ShoeString Research Services. Baldwin provided a June 2000 internal research report entitled “The 6-County Denver/Boulder Market.”

Klein, Report of the Assistant Attorney General In Charge of the Antitrust Division, 6. See also: Alan Prendergast, “Peace Comes to Denver,” Columbia Journalism Review, July/August 2000, 16-19; Cart, “Denver Dailies Thrive in Rare Newspaper War; Circulation is up in nation’s Most Prominent Print Journalism Rivalry,” Los Angeles Times, December 21, 1999, 5.


See Note 51.


Ibid. 18.

Ibid.

Personal phone conversation between the author and Linda Sease, the Rocky’s former spokeswoman and the paper’s top marketing executive (July 1, 2015).


Brodesser, “Mountainous War Presses Onward.”

Prendergast, “All the News that Fits.”

Ibid.


Personal conversation, in June 27, 2015, with former Rocky researcher director Matt Baldwin.

Madigan, “Rocky’s Long Run, Within a whisper of 150 years,” 8-11.


Madigan, Heroes, Villains, Dames & Disasters. 31-32, 42, 89, 115.


88 Prendergast, “All the News that Fits.”

89 Ibid.


91 Personal phone conversation between the author and former Rocky reporter John Ensslin (September 5, 2015).


94 Madigan, “Rocky’s Long Run, Within a whisper of 150 years,” 8-11.


98 Ibid.


101 Harden, “11 former MediaNews Group newspapers.”

102 Klein, *Report of the Assistant Attorney General In Charge of the Antitrust Division*.

103 Ibid.


106 Ibid. 30.


109 Ibid.

110 Ibid.

111 Ibid.

112 Ibid. 46.

113 Ibid. 48

114 Ibid.

115 Ibid.


117 Morton Needelman, “Recommended decision of Morton Needelman, Administrative law judge, Docket 44-03-24-08, December 29, 1987 (Detroit Joint Operating Agreement Application).


119 Ibid.

120 Ibid. 39.

121 Strupp, “Denver JOA Book Reads Well.”


124 Ibid.


126 Ibid.


129 Klein, Report of the Assistant Attorney General, 21. Also, for example one of many examples of the Rocky and the Post trying to discredit each other’s circulation claims, see: Iver Peterson, “2 Newspapers Battle for Hearts, Minds and All Those Ad Dollars,” New York Times, December 16, 1996, East Coast ed./Late ed., 1. As Peterson puts it, “The competition is so fierce that each paper regularly attacks the other’s circulation claims in its news columns, each reads victory over the other in the same set of circulation figures, and neither side will admit the possibility of defeat.”


The organization that audits U.S. newspaper circulation has called a double technical foul in the battle between The Denver Post and Rocky Mountain News, citing both newspapers for inaccuracies in stories written about the circulation figures. The stories marked a new level of stridency in the war, with each newspaper accusing its rival of circulation misdeeds and leaving some advertisers and business executives shrugging their shoulders about which side to believe. Previous stories by the two newspapers have focused on their own, rather than the competition’s, claims. In addition to chastising the newspapers over their stories, the Audit Bureau of Circulation also adopted a new rule on the reporting of “bonus issues,” a marketing tool that both Denver newspapers have used more often in recent years. Despite lag, Rocky hopeful in war for local circulation

132 Directly comparing the circulation for Denver’s newspapers used to be difficult because each publication used a different “Newspaper designated market” (i.e. they designated their own circulation areas). That reality allowed the papers to respectively tout strengths and downplay weaknesses. Thus, they could claim “victory” in their newspaper war every six months because their figures weren’t commensurable. The Rocky designated its newspaper market as the six-county Denver Metro Area that included Adams, Arapahoe, Boulder, Denver, Douglas and Jefferson counties. The Post’s NDM was the same six counties plus nine additional Front Range counties. See: Landwehr, “Papers continue their war.” See also: Amy Bryer, “Post-News circulation dwindling,” Denver Business Journal, May 21, 2004: A1.


Bryer, “Daily blues: Ad rates up.”


Even Dean Singleton admitted it. The Post might just as easily have been the Denver newspaper that succumbed in 2009. “It could have gone either way,” he said, as he stood beside Scripps executives at the December ’08 news conference announcing the Rocky’s closure.¹ It’s not that the Post wasn’t struggling, too. It’s just that MediaNews Group was privately held, it was generally obligated to share less financial information than the publicly held E.W. Scripps Co.² And like Scripps, MediaNews chose to disclose its entire newspaper unit’s operating results rather than separating out the performance of the individual papers in its chain. So, it’s harder to discern the performance of each paper outside of the aggregate, though dribs and drabs of information did periodically seep out about the individual papers’ finances. This chapter contrasts the differences between the owners of the Rocky and the Post to answer why Post survived. It recalls the histories of the founders of MediaNews, which owned the Post during the Rocky’s last 22 years, and the E.W. Scripps Co., which purchased the Rocky in 1926 and eventually closed it. This chapter wraps up by explaining how the paper was ultimately doomed, in part, by Scripps’ strategic shift, which began in the ’90s, toward investing in the company’s cable, broadcast TV, and Internet properties. As the Denver Business Journal pointed out in 2008, both the Post and the Rocky were “losing several million dollars a quarter after deducting newsgathering costs.”³

On February 27, 2009, the day of the Rocky’s closure, the Post felt obligated to publish a story in which Singleton reassured readers the Post wouldn’t close, too. Headlined, “Publisher: Post will survive,” it began:

The closure of the Rocky Mountain News could help the Denver Post financially, but it couldn’t solve all the Post’s problems. Like many newspapers across the nation, the Post is struggling under heavy debt, sharply reduced advertising revenue and shrinking circulation.”⁴
That was true except that the Post’s parent, MediaNews, bore a junk bond rating, so it was actually worse off than Scripps, which netted significantly higher comparable profits, while carrying an investment grade rating.5 Things were so bad at the Post that, just two months before the Rocky’s closure, Scripps chided MediaNews for violating their JOA by pushing the Denver News Agency toward running out of money. The reason? The Post had spent the better part of 2008 borrowing at least $13 million against the DNA’s future earnings just to make payroll.6 Unlike the four major newspaper companies that sought Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection in the two-and-a-half months before the Rocky closed, Scripps was comparatively healthy. It held just $61 million in long-term debt, and logged total operating revenues of $1 billion in the year leading up to the Rocky’s closure.7 The Post, by comparison, only survived by cutting its staff members’ pay by up to 13.4% for the worst hit, suspending 401(k) plan payments, hiking health insurance premiums, and laying off and buying out workers.8

Given the Post’s crippled state, various news outlets reported that the Rocky Mountain News staff members were frustrated that Scripps “did not hold on and try to outlast the Post.”9 Or as Denver’s alternative weekly, Westword, put it, “That the Rocky might have been the surviving paper if things had gone a bit differently will no doubt irritate those Rocky loyalists who’ve always thought Scripps blinked first.”10 So, why did the Rocky fail instead of the Post? Four categories of reasons will be covered in this chapter. The first set of reasons pertains to Singleton’s personality, his life’s ambitions, and his company’s greater willingness to sustain prolonged losses. The second group of factors concerns the E.W. Scripps Company’s desire to satisfy Wall Street, and the company’s strategic shift from newspapers and toward investing in broadcast TV, cable, and digital ventures. Then, in a third grouping, there were the business logistics of closing the Rocky. They include the paper’s smaller size, a contract provision in the
JOA that gave MediaNews the ability to thwart the *Rocky’s* sale, and the tax benefits Scripps could potentially realize from closing the paper. The fourth and final category of reasons relates to the wider newspaper industry’s struggles since World War II.

**Lean Dean Singleton**

The best way to understand the *Rocky’s* closure is to begin by discussing just whom the *Rocky* was partnering with when it teamed up with the *Post* in 2001. Today, it makes sense why Scripps was so tight-lipped in the months leading up to its JOA application announcement with MediaNews, a year earlier in 2000. As a publicly traded firm, Scripps undoubtedly wanted to avoid both Wall Street’s attention and the perception of sharing inside information with a competitor. Plus, news of the merger talks might have demoralized the *Rocky*’s staff.11 “Viewed from within the journalism community,” Denver’s 5280 magazine reflected years later, “Scripps meeting with MediaNews co-founder, vice chairman, and chief executive officer William Dean Singleton was akin to Scripps negotiating with the journalistic antichrist.”12 Based on appearances and life stories, Singleton probably wouldn’t be the first person that people would imagine as the Prince of Newspaper Darkness.

Born in 1951 as the son of a homemaker and an oilfield worker, Singleton is built like a tall, paunchy lumberjack – with big, piercing, gray-blue eyes, a handsome, boyish round face, a noticeable lisp, and a laconic drawl. Long before his business shirts were starched, and his suspenders became inseparable friends, Singleton and his five siblings grew up poor in a ramshackle house in a flyspeck of a town just west of Dallas. At age 8, he began selling mail order Christmas cards door to door, and, when he felt under-capitalized, successfully wrote a letter to the card company requesting a line of credit. At 14, he swept floors and sorted mail at his hometown newspaper, the *Graham News*, before the weekly hired him a year later to be a weekend sports reporter. By 24, Singleton, who never finished college, had managed to purchase
eight weekly newspapers, after a group of Texas businessmen recruited him to lead a group buying and resurrecting the *Fort Worth Press*. But he soon lost everything when the paper collapsed in 1975, and its irate staff pelted him with beer cans as he announced the closure.13

Singleton quickly landed on his feet, first with a Boston company that repossessed failing newspapers and ran them, at the bank’s behest, until new owners could buy them. Then, *Washington Star* owner Joe Allbritton hired the 25-year-old to buy and turnaround newspapers for the now-defunct Allbritton Communications. There, beginning with the *Trenton Times*, Singleton initially forged his lifelong reputation as a newsroom butcher, buying papers, chopping costs to reach profitability, endlessly emphasizing local news, and coldly selling or closing underperforming publications.14 At Allbritton, a 32-year-old Singleton also met his business soul mate, 70-year-old Richard Scudder, a newsprint manufacturing and recycling magnate, who ran the *Newark News* before his family shuttered the iconic paper.15 Remarkably, Singleton charmed Scudder on the phone, while dodging the latter’s efforts to collect a $400,000 debt for newsprint bought by the Allbritton-owned *Patterson (NJ) News* in 1983.16 Soon, Scudder was handing Singleton $3 million, including lending $200,000 to Singleton to buy a stake in the company they’d just formed, to purchase the *Gloucester (NJ) County Times*.17 That tale, not to mention his early Christmas card selling venture, portended Singleton’s ability to expertly solicit and use OPM (other people’s money) to back a number of complex newspaper deals.

Before MediaNews’ lenders devoured the overleveraged firm in 2010, Singleton spent 30 years wooing investors and creditors to build the second largest newspaper company in the country.18 (He even owned the *Graham News*). When Denver’s newspapers entered their JOA back in 2000, Singleton and Scudder, who died in 2012 at age 99, owned America’s seventh-largest newspaper chain, one place ahead of eighth-ranked Scripps. But it was life on a razor’s
edge for MediaNews, with a debt load that grew to nearly $1 billion before the bankrupt firm fell into its creditors’ arms in 2010. (As mentioned, that was nine times the company’s earnings). MediaNews was Exhibit A for a newspaper industry run amok as it borrowed massive sums to swallow smaller newspapers across the country. Between 2008 and 2013, no less than 11 major media companies went bankrupt to shed the debt largely amassed to fund their newspaper buying sprees. In 2006, for example, MediaNews netted just a 4% profit when other large newspaper companies still returned 20% or more. (Gannett famously delivered 18 straight years, from 1967 to 1985, with each quarterly profit greater than the one before and an average annual return of 21%). Singleton, however, was not merely a cost-conscious capitalist.

Beyond stretching his credit lines to assemble clusters of contiguous newspapers, he was, as the New York Times wrote, in equal measure “a news-obsessed newspaperman,” who heavily valued local journalistic content. In one breath, Singleton would proclaim that 20 to 40% of the newsroom staff at most family-owned papers was dead wood in need of chopping. In the next, Singleton, who was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in 1986, would invoke the word “legacy” to speak of journalism’s indispensability, while vowing to build the Post into a powerhouse to define his life before he was too weak to work. The late C. David Burgin got to know Singleton well after he repeatedly installed the editor to turn around struggling newspapers in various cities. “He saved newspapers, he saved jobs, he’s made money, he’s made papers viable,” Burgin once said. “He’s killed a few, but he’s tried. … If he’s got one eye on his legacy, he’s still got the other eye on the cash register.” The paradox of Singleton, the author and media executive Nicholas Coleridge wrote, was between his “cautious, cheeseparing” self, and his yearning to operate a paper of substance like the New York Times. The first part of Singleton was on display in moments such as when he told an American Journalism Review, “If I had my choice
between pleasing one banker or 1,000 journalists, I’d rather please the banker.”27 The latter side was evident when he bought the Post in 1987. Immediately, he called it MediaNews’ crown jewel, and crowed that it fulfilled his dream of owning and running a top-tier newspaper.28 It wasn’t just the Post’s size or its storied history that captivated Singleton. Denver was his last, best chance to make his mark in a big city.

He’d already failed three times at turning around newspapers in Fort Worth (the Press shuttered in 1975), Dallas (the Times Herald closed in 1991), and Houston (where a different Post died in 1995).29 Vowing Denver would be different, Singleton went so far as to move his family from Texas to the Mile High City in 1993, and MediaNews’ headquarters followed from Houston in ‘95.30 “When we bought the newspaper, we were 128,000 daily circulation behind the Rocky,” he told an interviewer when he retired from the Post’s management in 2013. “Everybody left us for dead. Nobody thought we had a chance of catching up.”31 But in the end, as Scripps’ CEO Richard Boehne told a Post reporter in 2009, his Cincinnati-based company simply didn’t want to win Colorado’s newspaper war as badly as Denver-based MediaNews. “That’s their hometown,” Boehne added.32 John Temple, who simultaneously served as the Rocky’s editor, president, and publisher for much of its final nine years, summarized management’s thinking behind the closure at a new media and technology conference a few months later. Echoing Singleton and Boehne, Temple told those gathered at the 2009 event in Montreal:

It could have just as easily been the Denver Post that folded. The main reason it was the Rocky that closed was that its owner had a very different view of the short-term future, say the next five years, for newspapers in metropolitan markets. They saw nothing but losses and risk in the future. Scripps is a public company. The Post is privately held and its owner has a great deal personally invested in the paper, not just financially but emotionally. He was ready to stay the course and try to make it work.33
It didn’t help matters that the *Rocky* was struggling just as the American economy was entering the worst downturn since the Great Depression. Denver, Temple added, simply couldn’t “support two papers of essentially the same size with essentially the same mission … (and) the economic collapse was the final blow.”

**An Unlikely Fight**

To those who know Scripps, the surprise was never that the company found two ways to stop competing with the *Denver Post* – first through a joint operating agreement that merged their business sides in 2001, then via the *Rocky’s* 2009 closure. The true shocker was that a company known for its frugality and disdain for competition fought the *Post* for so long. “Within the industry, Scripps-Howard’s willingness to finance the *Rocky Mountain News’s* expensive battle with the *Denver Post* has been regarded as an aberration,” the *New York Times* noted as far back as 1988. Scripps, the *Times* added, is “a party to more joint operating arrangements – seven – than any other newspaper company, illustrating the company’s desire to avoid competition when possible.” Indeed, two-paper combat was so anathema to Scripps that the company pioneered collusive joint operating agreements in the newspaper industry. E.W. himself secretly instructed all his papers to collude with their competitors on advertising prices, subscription rates, publication sizes, and delivery areas based on the demographics they planned to serve. All of the wheeling and dealing actually began at the end of the nineteenth century, before the company was even called Scripps-Howard.

In 1895, E.W., his business partner Colonel Milton McRae, and E.W.’s half-brother, George Scripps formed the Scripps-McRae League – a chain of papers owned by, or affiliated with, the three men. By 1900, “all of the Scripps dailies had some kind of ‘combination,’ the term used for these joint ventures,” according to Duane C.S. Stoltzfus, the author of *Freedom From Advertising: E.W. Scripps’s Chicago Experiment*. And McRae himself proudly
negotiated many of the company’s earliest arrangements. “The ‘combinations,’ formed by the Scripps newspapers with competitors moved the newspaper business closer to the mode of operation of other industries during the Gilded Age as they attempted to create an anti-competitive climate and formed trusts,” wrote Ed Adams, a mass communications historian and communications college dean at Brigham Young.39 One of the first such deals came in 1895, when the Scripps McRae-owned St. Louis Chronicle and Pulitzer’s Post-Dispatch collaborated to raise the rural subscription prices. That same year, McRae attempted to drive an upstart competitor out of business in Cleveland. When a fifth afternoon paper entered the market, the colonel proposed a local alliance, between the Cleveland Press and the city’s three other established afternoon papers, to fix advertising and subscription rates, and set maximum sizes for each publication. (A different deal determining ad and circulation prices actually ended up coming together in 1899).40

A business manager at the Scripps-McRae-owned Cincinnati Post, and Charles Taft, owner of the Cincinnati Times-Star and half brother to future U.S. President William Howard Taft, similarly sought to end their papers’ afternoon competition in 1897. Although it’s likely they only reached a covert pact to split the market’s circulation revenues, their trust talks set an important newspaper industry precedent. Scripps ended up replicating most of the Cincinnati trust proposal’s terms when it formed the newspaper industry’s first modern joint operating agreement on February 22, 1933 in Albuquerque, New Mexico.41 First struck between then-local owner Thomas Pepperday’s Albuquerque Journal and Scripps’ Albuquerque Tribune, the Depression-induced deal created a separate agency for the papers to share revenues, costs, and business management duties, while each publication maintained editorial independence. Seventy-seven years later, Scripps closed the Tribune in late February 2008. (In a bit of eerie
foreshadowing for what would happen a year later in Denver, the company briefly tried to sell the *Tribune*, before ending the JOA, and shuttering the paper). But it would take till the aforementioned Newspaper Preservation Act of 1970 for the federal government to actually codify and condone what Scripps had been doing in one form or another since the late 1800s.43 The NPA didn’t merely give newspapers an application process to merge with federally approved anti-trust waivers. The act also retroactively provided a legal shield to the 20 existing joint operating agreements – five of which belonged to Scripps – that existed at the time.44 If Scripps ran a newspaper in a two-publication town, it was almost certainly a JOA. In all, the company would strike seven joint operating agreements, more than any other newspaper firm, though Gannett would come the closest with six.45 Today, not one of Scripps’ former JOA papers is still around. Every one of them folded, including the *Rocky Mountain News* (2009); the *Cincinnati Post* and its twin *Kentucky Post*-branded edition (2007); the *Albuquerque Tribune* (2008); the *Birmingham Post-Herald* (2005); the *Evansville Press* (1998); the *Pittsburgh Press* (1992); the *Columbus Citizen-Journal* (1985). Scripps’ JOAs, and the demise of its papers, make sense when their again viewed through a historical lens.46 Dating back to E.W.’s days, the company developed a pattern of owning non-dominant newspapers – particularly afternoon and evening publications – in competitive urban markets. As Adams wrote:

> Although (E.W.) had great success in launching and procuring newspapers, the acquisitions and start-ups never fared as well as his first two ventures in Cleveland and Cincinnati. The remainder of his papers were mired in a subordinated market position. Scripps was never happy at playing a secondary role to Pulitzer, Hearst, Cowles, or Nelson; and he never considered himself as great as these men because they all had dominated Scripps newspapers in their respective markets while he was alive.47

Given all that history, the *Rocky* was an unusual newspaper for the Scripps company to own.

For the first 75 of the 83 years Scripps owned the paper before its 2009 closure (i.e. from 1926 until 2001) it competed freely with the *Post*. And it was just as out of character for Scripps’
leaders to divert revenues from elsewhere in the company to subsidize the *Rocky*’s long and costly fight. Not only was the *Rocky* “not always one of Scripps-Howard’s prize possessions,” as Colorado journalism professor Sue O’Brien put it lightly, it was also the chain’s “weakest sister” for many years, according to *Rocky* historian Robert Perkin.48 So, why would the company prop up it so it could go toe to toe with the *Post* for so long? The cachet of operating a big daily newspaper in a major American city was one reason Scripps treated the *Rocky* differently. As one Scripps executive explained in the late 1950s, “We feel the losses in Denver were more than paid off in other cities by the prestige won in making that fight” with the *Post*.49 Scripps owned just one larger paper than the *Rocky*, in the company’s entire newspaper-operating history from 1878, when E.W. Scripps founded his first publication in Cincinnati, to 2015, when the company spun off its newspaper holdings for good. That was the *New York Telegram*, a 200,000-circulation evening daily, which Scripps purchased in 1927.50 By 1951, the *Telegram* had reached a circulation of 541,485 (ninth largest in America) after Scripps purchased the *New York Sun* (1931) and the *New York World* (1950) and merged the three papers.

Yet, Scripps shuttered the paper in 1966, which by then carried the tongue-twisting moniker of the *New York World-Telegram and Sun*.51 That move made the *Rocky* the chain’s largest newspaper, and thus, by default, the company’s flagship print property. But Scripps’ outsized ambitions in Denver were even bigger than the *Rocky* itself. The company’s willingness to battle the *Post* also came in equal parts from the family’s pride about operating in a publication in a big western city and the Scripps corporation’s long historic attachment to winning Denver’s newspaper war. “Scripps family members and corporate directors had strong sentimental ties to their flagship paper, the 149-year-old *Rocky,*’’ the *Post* reported in an article about Scripps’ CEO Richard Boehne’s decision-making process to close the paper. “Preserve the
Rocky, the corporate thinking went, and perhaps the Denver Post can be bought out or persuaded to fold.” 52 Indeed, Scripps’ hundred-plus-year connection to Denver actually predated its 1926 purchase of the Rocky. No less than the legacy of company patriarch Edward Willis Scripps, who founded a newspaper there in 1906, was attached to the company’s fight to succeed in the Mile High City.

Lusty Scripps

If Dean Singleton was his humble family’s journalistic Cinderella, E.W. Scripps rose from his modest means to help establish the “First Family of American Journalism.”53 Born the thirteenth child of a failed London bookbinder-turned Illinois farmer, E.W. Scripps entered the world as “a sickly, red-haired, ‘squallin’ brat’” in 1854, and departed in 1926 as the forefather of American newspaper chains.54 Scripps’ grandfather William Armiger rose from a clerk to the publisher of the London Daily Sun, and bought the farm where his widower son, E.W.’s father James Moggs Scripps, brought his six children before he, and a new American wife, expanded the brood.55 E.W.’s cousins opened papers across Illinois, including the Chicago Tribune, and his older half-brother James founded the Detroit News, while giving E.W. his respective starts in the newsroom and in founding and buying newspapers.56 A 27-year-old E.W. began his career by establishing what would become the Cincinnati Post in 1881. A 72-year-old E.W. died aboard his luxury motor yacht off the coast of Liberia, an eccentric, reclusive, and self-professed “damned old crank,” who’d founded (33) and bought (14) more newspapers than anyone to that point.57

Progressive and pro-labor, E.W. “built the first horizontal combination of newspapers, wire service, and syndicate; (and) endowed his papers with a social conscience; dedicated them to the common man’s fight for social and economic justice… and made protest the spirit of Scripps newspapers.”58 E.W.’s empire began with his founding of the began his empire by 1881
founding of the Cincinnati Post At each coast-to-coast stop, Scripps founded affordable, austere, editorially and financially independent newspapers to cater to the common man in the late nineteenth century era, when newspapers were better known for party patronage, political advocacy, and service to elites. He was a different sort – a cranky individualist, whose distant control gave each newspaper great freedom (even as he wrote lengthy disquisitions about newspapering for his editors), and an unequivocal supporter of partitioning his advertising and editorial departments. But Scripps also embodied the profits-public service dichotomy within the newspaper industry. Yes, he helped usher in the modern era of neutral, fact-based reportage. But he served as the prototype for penny-pinching, corporate newspaper publishing – insisting his papers cut costs until they meet profit targets, squeezing salaries, and plowing extra earnings into growing his chain.59

In so doing, “Lusty Scripps,” as his Washington correspondent and biographer Gilson Gardner called him,60 “drank more whiskey, cavorted with more women and smoked more bad cigars than Hearst, Pulitzer and most of their contemporaries put together.”61 E.W. would spend his last four quiet years abroad his yacht, still capable, as he once boasted, of downing “enough whisky – without having my brain clouded – to keep four or five ordinary men drunk for a week,” while smoking a dozen cigars a day.62 In March 1926, E.W. was buried at sea. Eight months later in November 1926, his company – which had been renamed “Scripps-Howard” in 1921 for his partner, Roy Howard, and entrusted to E.W.’s son Robert to operate – would spend $750,000 to purchase the Rocky from John Shaffer.63 Yet, as mentioned, the Scripps family’s Colorado connection actually dates back to 1906.64 That year, E.W. founded the city’s sixth daily newspaper, the Denver Express. In its time, the Express was “a threadbare, pugnacious, and brave little six-day sheet that eked out a hand-to-mouth existence,” according to the Rocky’s
historian Perkin. And like so many other secondary Scripps’ papers, it fit the “underdog”
description to a T.

Unlike its rivals, the Post and the Rocky, the Express exposed and shamed the Klu Klux
Klan members running Colorado in the 1920s. And the Express accepted no bribe offers during
the Teapot Dome Scandal – a distinction neither the Rocky nor the Post could claim.\(^65\) As the
only newspaper not publicly connected to either the dirty deal or the corrupt politicians of the
time, the Express may have had a monopoly on journalistic virtue. But that was about all it could
boast. In all, the tiny paper spent 20 years scrappily tussling with Denver’s other papers. With a
weekday circulation of 14,533 in 1926, the Express took on the Denver Times (24,521) and the
Post (161,154) in the afternoons, while the Rocky (29,993) served the city’s morning readers.\(^66\)
The deal gave Scripps a bigger stake in Denver’s future growth and a source for more western
news for the company’s budding United Press wire service. And, as an afterthought, it led to the
creation of a short-lived evening paper.

With the Rocky’s 1926 purchase, the company also acquired its sister paper, the Denver
Times, which it immediately merged with the Express to form the Denver Evening News.\(^67\) Two
years later, on November 5, 1928, Denver’s two-paper war officially began when Scripps folded
the Evening News for \$250,000 from Bonfils, who promised to halt the unprofitable Denver
Morning Post experiment. The Morning Post would only last from 1926 to 1928.\(^68\) Scripps, on
the other hand, would spend 103 years lavishing money on newspapers in Denver. From the
moment it bought the Rocky, the company knew it would be costly to continue the crusade that
began when it entered the city in 1906. So bruising was the fight that the Rocky was unprofitable
despite earning \$2.5 million per year when Scripps bought it. Plus, \$450,000 of the \$750,000 the
company paid for the paper was just to assume the Rocky’s bond debts.\(^69\)
As Roy Howard predicted during the negotiations, “(this is) a rather high price to pay for the privilege of getting into a fight that is so certain to be very expensive, very long and drawn out, and probably never very profitable from a monetary standpoint.” In announcing the Rocky’s purchase, Scripps vowed to spend whatever it took, for however long it might take, to beat the Post, while touting its plans to merge the Times and Express to form the ill-fated Evening News. The Rocky’s November 23, 1926 opinion page carried the message:

In a newspaper sense, Denver is unique. For years, this great city, has been marked journalistically by one large and three comparatively small daily publications. The trend has been more and more toward a monopoly by the largest, the Denver Post, published by F.G. Bonfils … That trend has threatened Denver for some time with a newspaper dictatorship. … We believe a dictatorship of Denver’s newspaper field by the Denver Post would be nothing less than a blight, and we believe, furthermore, that because of recent developments the time is ripe for challenging that dictatorship. Hence the merger and the pledge that the resources of the Scripps-Howard organization are behind this move to correct what we consider a sinister journalistic situation … The Scripps-Howard organization is prepared to spend whatever is required. It knows the price and is ready to pay it. IT IS HERE TO STAY.71

They kept their word for 82 years and three months – especially considering this study’s estimate that the Rocky was probably unprofitable for 32 of those years.

Rounding to count full calendar years and speaking roughly, during Scripps’ ownership, the Rocky may have lost money over three time spans, including from 1926 to 1944 and between 2006 and 2008. Plus, the company estimated that the Rocky accumulated $121 million worth of non-cash expenses for its depreciation and amortization, which wiped out the value of all its earnings from 1990 to 1999. That means that the Rocky probably only earned a profit during two periods totaling 50 years with Scripps at the helm (i.e. between 1945 and 1989, and from 2001 to 2005). When the Rocky lost money, the company’s other newspapers subsidized Denver. In 1992, for example, 17 of the 19 publications in the company’s newspaper unit had operating margins of 24%. But that total actually dropped to 14% when Scripps added in the results for its
two largest newspapers at the time in Denver and Pittsburgh (the latter of which was in the midst of a crippling strike). But the expense of doing business in Denver would not be accommodated indefinitely.

**The Rocky’s Final Years**

“The only place you see a free market is in the speeches of politicians,”

–Dwayne Andreas, former CEO of Archer Daniels Midland Co.

Officially, Scripps spent at least the two years from 2007 to 2008 seriously considering whether to close the *Rocky*. But the chain of events that would lead to the paper’s death arguably began 17 years earlier. In 1992, a go-getting junior Scripps executive named Kenneth Lowe noticed an emerging national fad in his family’s fascination with homes and gardens. The result became Lowe’s pitch for Scripps’ board to fund Home & Garden TV, which he sold by drawing a house and explaining how each room could support its own TV show. His plan proved to be a forehead-smacking formula for entertainment success – elegant in its simplicity and adaptability – that transformed Scripps into a content-creating, cable channel-owning titan in the lucrative land of lifestyle programing. This chapter tells the tale of that transformation – which brought about the company’s strategic shift toward operating non-print media – its IPO, and the newspaper industry’s collapse led Scripps to close the *Rocky*. HGTV was, to use a term from the late computer scientist and psychologist J.C.R. Licklider, the essence of “narrowcasting.”

Several decades before cable gained popularity, Licklider envisioned that home audiences would someday pay for “a multiplicity of television networks aimed at serving the needs of smaller, specialized audiences” rather than “the mass-appeal, broadcast approach.”

HGTV quickly became the aspirational TV address that 100 million Americans wanted to visit on a regular basis, and Scripps spent years copying its cable keys to create similar networks. As for Lowe, he would go on to become a Scripps president and CEO twice once for
the original E.W. Scripps company and again when its cable channels were spun off into Scripps Networks Interactive). Between HGTV’s 1994 debut and the Rocky’s final year in 2009, Scripps added the Food Network (1997); Do it Yourself Network (1999); Fine Living Network in 2002 (since renamed the Cooking Channel); the Travel Channel, and Great American Country (both in 2009). From the 1920s until the late ’80s, Scripps was best known for its dynastic power struggles, its fiscal responsibility, and its conservative business approach. But like other publishing firms throughout the ’90s and 2000s, the company morphed into a diversified media conglomerate after World War II. By the time the Rocky applied for its JOA with the Post in 2000, Cincinnati’s metamorphosis was well under way. By the turn of the century, the company already owned 10 broadcast TV stations (six ABC, three NBC, and one independent) that reached one in ten American homes, while its cable and programming arms thrived.79 Scripps also invested to create widely visited online incarnations of each cable brand. And, in recent years, the company has bankrolled popular consumer-oriented shopping and home-buying websites such as Shopzilla and uSwitch, while partnering with the online real estate giant, Zillow.80

Scripps’ decision to go public in late ’80s, and its fat newspaper revenues, paved the way for it all.81 Not only did the company’s IPO provide the funding, it forced the firm to consider the market’s profit-making imperatives.82 Like a lot of big, newspaper companies, Scripps created a two-tier share system to ensure that the family retained control. But the company still changed. In the late ’80s and the early ’90s alone, according to the Wall Street Journal, “half of the Cincinnati company’s board seats turned over to younger, non-family members, and management set about improving profit margins by trimming jobs and paring operating costs across the board.”83 Little was sacred as Scripps entered the Instant Information Age. Even the
firm’s 60-year-old corporate name, Scripps-Howard, was gradually phased out, beginning in 1982, in favor of the moniker E.W. Scripps Co. As Scripps spent the ’90s selling, trading, and closing newspapers like a teenage boy cashing in his baseball cards for a car to pick up dates. As Scripps’ CEO Richard Boehne told Denver’s 5280 magazine regarding the company’s 2001 Denver JOA, “The strategy (at the time) was clear; we needed money for the television division.” By the mid-2000s, however, Scripps was ready to exit the newspaper business entirely as their values plunged. Shareholder reports tell the tale.

Between Scripps’ 1988 public listing and 2005, the last year newspaper advertising grew, the value of every $100 investment in Scripps’ Class A Common Shares increased to $387.12 or 3.3% more than a comparable media stock index. In early 1990, one share of Scripps Class A common (i.e. non-voting) stock sold for $21.63 compared with an April 16, 2004 peak of $108.56. By March 9, 2009, 11 days after the Rocky’s closure, Scripps’ newspapers had dragged the company’s share prices down to a 72-cent trough. The devaluation of newspaper companies stemmed from a massive shift in the industry’s main revenue source – advertising. As discussed, from 1950 to the 2000s, advertising revenues rose to $48.67 billion from $2.07 billion (to $67.65 billion from $20.49 billion in 2015 terms), as they came to account for 80% of most metro newspapers’ budgets. But between 2005 and 2013, the newspaper industry’s ad revenues fell from a peak of $49.27 billion in 2005 to a trough of $20.71 billion in 2013. Circulation revenues dropped too, though far less precipitously. They’d reached their height of $11.02 billion two years earlier in 2003 before dipping to their 2012 low of $10.44 billion (though they’ve since rebounded somewhat).

There was no room for sentimentality in the face of such losses. Scripps was moving out of the newspaper business. Scripps’ “long-term strategy is to reduce its holdings in large-market
newspapers and expand its ownership of larger-city television stations,” Boehne told investors on a 2008 conference call. The company, he added, was “very focused on limiting our exposure in newspapers to small and midsized markets.”90 In just the nine years before the Rocky’s 2009 demise, the company folded four newspapers, including the Birmingham Post-Herald (2005), the Cincinnati Post (2007), and the Albuquerque Tribune (2008), where, as mentioned, Scripps had pioneered the first modern newspaper JOA in 1933. The dispassionate closures of the Cincinnati Post and the Albuquerque Tribune – two of the chain’s most historically significant newspapers – foreshadowed the Rocky’s end. The Cincinnati Post was the first paper begun by the company’s founder, E.W. Scripps (in 1878), while Roy Howard co-opted Scripps’ present-day lighthouse logo (and its “Give light and the people will find their own way”) motto from Albuquerque in the 1920s.91

It’s well worth noting that Scripps neither won a war in a two-newspaper town where it had a JOA nor succeeded in ensuring the existence of more than one daily. None of the company’s seven JOAs exists today. Maximillian Potter, the former editor of Denver’s 5280 magazine, believes the Rocky’s JOA application was more “about buying time and wringing as much money as possible from the Rocky before the well ran dry” than saving the paper. As Potter wrote in 2009, “Preserving two editorial voices was what the Justice Department wanted to hear; failing-paper status was what it needed to hear (to approve the JOA); but people (and advertisers) wanted the niche markets from (television) shows about pretty houses and tasty food.”92 Potter’s explanation makes for a catchy, caustic quote, but Scripps did care about delivering a public service. It cared from a lot. Although E.W. Scripps created the blueprint for newspaper chains, he also fretted about the influence of businesses on journalism and opened an advertising-free newspaper in Chicago.93
From the very beginning, his company cared about Denver when it bought the *Rocky*, while declaring a monopoly by the *Post* “would be nothing less than a blight” on the city. Based on the terms of the JOA, an argument can even be made that the company cared about the *Rocky*, too. If Scripps didn’t care about the paper’s long-term future, why would it pay MediaNews $60 million to merge with the *Post*? And why would the two companies borrow $130 million to build a new headquarters and invest in new presses? The company’s 1988 public offering brought profits to the fore. And shareholders gradually became unwilling to tolerate losses at the *Rocky*, especially as they grew to $16 million in the paper’s final full year in 2008. MediaNews was disappointed in the *Rocky’s* performance, too, after its 2001 merger with the *Post*. The *Rocky* likely began losing money in 2006 or 2007, and talks between the *Post* and the *Rocky* swiftly followed as they discussed which paper to close.94 Though the companies were mum about their struggles for much of that time, the cat was out of the bag and pacing around the newspapers’ Colfax Avenue headquarters by late 2008.

The *Rocky* had been “a serious drain on performance of the *Denver Post* for years,” Singleton conceded at the time. The Denver “market produces enough profit for one newspaper, but not for two newspapers.”95 Two months later on the day the paper closed in February 2009, Boehne reiterated the same points about the cost prohibitive expense of producing two daily morning newspapers given the expense of publishing the *Rocky* and market’s available revenue.96 “We couldn’t find a way to make it work,” Boehne said. To save the two papers, “We would have had to cut both newsrooms (the *Post* and the *Rocky*) in half and then come to those who were left to ask for wage concessions and other cutbacks. … The math just doesn’t work.”97 Not only did Wall Street lower the company’s patience for Denver, it drove its move away from newspapers. After the *Rocky’s* closure, Scripps was left with slightly more than a dozen dailies
(the biggest of which were in Memphis, Knoxville, and California’s Ventura County). And none of the remaining publications came close to circulating at the large newspaper threshold of 100,000 copies per day. But in 2008 Scripps began a series of transactions that eventually led it to carve its media holdings into three different publicly traded companies, including two Cincinnati-based firms that still bear the Scripps name. Initially, in 2008, the Scripps media conglomerate split itself into two public firms. E.W. Scripps Co. retained control over newspapers and television stations, and Scripps Networks Interactive was tasked with running the company’s cable channels and websites.98

That deal foreshadowed the company’s July 2014 decision to merge its newspaper unit with that of Journal Communications.99 The two-part, all-stock transaction, which closed on April 1, 2015, melded the two companies’ broadcast assets under the E.W. Scripps Co. banner, while spinning off their newspaper holdings into a new firm dubbed Journal Media Group. As a result, E.W. Scripps Co. is now the fifth biggest broadcast company in America (with 34 TV stations and 34 radio stations). Scripps Networks Interactive oversees several cable TV channels and branded websites. And Journal Media Group, which is headquartered in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, operates 13 former Scripps’ dailies and 50 smaller papers once-owned by Journal Community Publishing Group.100 Wall Street supported the creation of diversified media conglomerates from the 1960s to the early 2000s. But as the profits from TV, cable, and other digital media surpassed those of newspapers, media conglomerates converted their newspaper units into separate companies to ensure they didn’t drag down earnings.101

Indeed, since the mid-2000s, a long line of firms have sought to maximize their value for shareholders by “putting their print properties on an ice floe to fend for themselves,” according to Joshua Benton of Harvard’s Niemen Journalism Lab.102 Already, Belo, News Corp, New York
Times Co., Media General, Tribune, Time Warner, and Washington Post Co., among others, have separated their flagging publishing units from their more profitable TV, cable, and digital assets. So, even as the Post also drowned in red ink after 2006, Scripps was not inclined to keep the Rocky afloat because powerful strategic tides had long been pulling the corporation away from its less profitable newspaper holdings. Ironically, Scripps would re-enter the Denver media market in 2011, but it was as a TV news station owner after it purchased the ABC affiliate KMGH-Channel 7. As the remainder of this chapter will show, the company’s strategic shift wasn’t the only thing that sank the Rocky. Scripps also was unlikely to have given the tabloid a last-minute reprieve because of potential tax benefits from closing the paper and because JOA’s terms empowered Singleton to steer the Rocky toward the guillotine.

**Scripps was Bound to Close the Rocky**

Those who wondered why the Rocky could not simply hold out long enough for the Post to die missed the point. The Rocky’s business decisions were fettered the moment it struck a joint operating agreement with the Post in 2001. Boehne publicly admitted as much when an interviewer asked him why Scripps couldn’t remain in Denver until the Post croaked first. “Because it’s not that simple,” he said at the time. “We are joined. On the business side of the newspapers you’re a scrambled egg, a 50-50 owned business. So wait the other out? That would read better in a novel than a Harvard Business case study.”

Boehne hewed closely to the corporate script on December 4, 2008, the day the company called a press conference to announce it would close the Rocky if it couldn’t find a buyer by January 16. The Rocky, he said, was a victim of the wider newspaper industry’s struggles, rising production costs, the economic recession, and tighter credit. But those reasons said nothing of Scripps’ own role in the paper’s closure. The decision to close the paper was just that – a choice.
Publicly, Scripps announced it would close the Rocky if a buyer couldn’t be found. Privately, according to Singleton, Scripps’ executives informed him on November 19, 2008 that it planned to close the Rocky “as soon as practical.” Boehne and other Scripps executives said “they would no longer help fund the Denver operation” and “they wanted out” of the business, according to the Rocky’s own reporting in its final edition. Their declarations were a long time coming. As mentioned, Scripps and MediaNews had already spent two years discussing consolidating the papers and closing either the Rocky or the Post, but the talks had gone nowhere. As Boehne told the Rocky in its final edition, for a while, “I’d be lying in bed at night, staring at the ceiling, thinking about Denver, at 3 a.m. or 4 a.m. every single night.” But Jason Salzman, one of the Rocky’s two media critics, believes Scripps’ made a bad-faith effort to save the newspaper by finding a buyer. He points to the company’s decision to shop the paper for just six weeks over the November/December 2008 holiday season. Salzman argued that Scripps’ plan was less about saving the paper than making a token sales attempt to dissuade federal regulators from using their power – imbued by approving the JOA – to have a say in the Rocky’s closure.

Ultimately, just one buyer, seriously considered purchasing the paper, but both he and Scripps concluded the deal made no sense given the paper’s projected future losses. That buyer was Austin, Texas-based private equity investor Brian Ferguson, an attorney and an accountant, who represented both the oil and gas exploration and production fund TXA Exploration and the investor group Midland Media Partners. Those estimated losses could’ve cost any new owner $25 million per year for the next five years, according to Scripps calculations around the time of the Rocky’s closure. And Ferguson faced other challenges. Scripps’ newspaper executive Mark Contreras told the Rocky’s reporters that Ferguson had “lots
of desire but no (newspaper) operating experience,” and he had “presented a plan, but he didn’t have the funding locked up.” Yet, it may not have mattered even if a purchaser had emerged with a viable plan to turn around the paper. In late January 2009, Singleton announced he would exercise his “first right of refusal clause” if a new buyer tried to join the JOA. Such a move would almost certainly have nixed any deal because the new owner of the *Rocky* would have been left without presses, and with no staff for the paper’s advertising, circulation, or business functions.

Although the Justice Department likely had the authority to stop Singleton from using his first-right-of-refusal clause, he still had wide latitude. As the *Wall Street Journal* reported in February 2009, Scripps was “handcuffed in its negotiations with prospective buyers” as MediaNews created a situation that made it “virtually impossible for anybody to put together a serious offer.” Ferguson himself alluded to the obstacles. “The complex nature of the joint operating agreement and the large number of constituencies involves prevented us from being able to adequately mitigate the risks involved in an acquisition,” he said in an interview for the paper’s final edition. Just as ominous for the *Rocky*’s future survival was the fact that the JOA’s terms granted the *Post* the exclusive right to publish on Sundays, when the average newspaper attracts the most ads and the highest readership. According to Singleton, Scripps and MediaNews decided it simply made more financial sense to close the *Rocky* than the *Post* given the former’s inability to print on the most profitable, popular day of the week.

No Sunday edition “made it difficult for the paper to succeed down the line,” former *Rocky* president Bob Burdick told Denver’s *5280* magazine. (Burdick himself wasn’t involved in the closure). Two other immediate factors played into the decision. One was the natural limitation of the *Rocky*’s format. As a tabloid, it was nearly half the size of the *Post* (126 square
inches to 70 square inches), meaning it could house far less moneymaking advertising.\textsuperscript{123} Singleton made the same point in a 2008 interview. “Go get a paper, and you’ll find 126 inches on a full-page ad in the \textit{Post}” compared with \textit{Rocky}. “It’s mathematics, simple as that.”\textsuperscript{124} Just before his paper’s closure, \textit{Rocky Mountain News} business reporter Dave Milstead made another discovery. Scripps had a “perverse incentive” to close the paper instead of selling it.\textsuperscript{125} If the company couldn’t find a buyer, it could declare that the paper was “wholly worthless,” and gain a 2009 tax benefit that Milstead estimated at $70 million.\textsuperscript{126} Thus, the \textit{Post}’s victory was not a survival-of-the-fittest triumph of a free market. As any freshman economics major knows, the “free market” is only as “free” as those setting the terms allow. Although both Scripps’ decisions to steer the paper toward closure, and the newspaper industry’s wider failings – as exacerbated by America’s Great Recession – killed the \textit{Rocky}, the lead story of the paper’s final edition omitted its parent’s part.

As Kevin Vaughan wrote, “the Denver Metro Area simply could not support two major newspapers in the midst of the current current economic recession.” That recession “came on top of tectonic shifts sweeping the news business, including, most recently, the phenomenon that has seen the Internet siphon off once-lucrative pieces of the business, such as classified advertising.”\textsuperscript{127} Writing for \textit{Columbia Journalism Review} on the day the \textit{Rocky} died, sports columnist Dave Krieger called that narrative into question:

\begin{quote}
Scripps is in the best financial shape of any newspaper company in America, save the Washington Post Co. Dean Singleton, who survives in Denver, is in far worse financial shape, in much deeper debt, but he fought for the market and Scripps didn’t. Scripps ... has learned it can make more money in niche cable television channels. It has every right to make that call. It’s a free country. But the question is whether everybody left in the journalism business is simply in it to make a buck. Certainly, for a while there, it was a really good buck. Gannett taught everyone how to make margins that were out of sight. But now that it’s a struggle, is there anybody left with the heart of a journalist?\textsuperscript{128}
\end{quote}
The paper’s bloody aftermath, however, was not debated. With the *Rocky’s* closure, Scripps laid off 228 newsroom employees who, literally, had the hearts of journalists. On February 27, 2009, they bid readers adieu with a 52-page commemorative section, wrapped around the *Rocky’s* final regular edition, and the giant headline “Goodbye Colorado.” Another headline, “Stop the presses,” was plastered on a section front inside the paper. More than 350,000 copies (an extra 140,000) hit the streets. As the *Rocky* reporter Kevin Vaughan wrote in lead story of the paper’s final edition, “Now, the paper passes from chronicler of a city, a state and region’s history into history itself.” The *Post* swiftly snapped up five of the *Rocky’s* columnists, one editorial page editor, and four of its top reporters.

Those at the financially battered *Post*, however, weren’t celebrating the defeat of the paper’s long-time foe. “Victory?” *Post* columnist William Porter wrote. The *Rocky’s* loss “feels akin to a boxer standing over an opponent while blood seeps from his own eardrums. Best to hold off on the crowing.” For Scripps executives, however, the *Rocky’s* end was a business win in the sense that the company was fulfilling its fiduciary duty to avoid more losses for shareholders. The attitudes of MediaNews and Scripps’ executives about the *Rocky’s* closure “reflect the very different outlooks these two companies have about the future of the newspaper business,” Milstead wrote. Even in early 2009, Singleton still saw the newspaper industry’s downturn as cyclical, and he convinced the *Post’s* employees to make staffing and wage concessions to recapitalize the paper in anticipation of its future success. Scripps, on the other hand, couldn’t flee Denver fast enough after its December 2008 announcement that the company planned to sell or close the paper. It made a number of concessions to Lean Dean, including taking no cash for the *Rocky* or its assets. To the suits in Cincinnati it was all a “fair trade” to shed a flailing publication in a newspaper industry with “no upside.”
The biggest reason that Singleton got the *Rocky* gratis had nothing to do with any wheeling and dealing on his part. Even if Scripps had wanted money for its 50% stake in the Denver News Agency, there wasn’t any to be had. The DNA, the holding company for the *Post* and the *Rocky’s* assets, was so weak in early 2009 that its banks had cut off its credit. But Scripps did benefit from at least one concession from Singleton – his willingness to assume the entirety of the $130 million in debt the two newspapers had borrowed. Some of the other favorable terms of the *Rocky’s* exit called for the *Post* to receive all its competitor’s coveted comics and puzzles, and the *Rocky’s* ownership stake in eight other eastern Colorado newspapers, including the *Boulder Daily Camera.* And the *Rocky’s* former subscribers immediately began receiving the *Post*. Not long after the *Rocky’s* closure, the *Post* boasted of holding onto 95% of its former rival’s home-delivery customers, and 70% of its single-copy newsstand readers. Today, however, it’s tough to say how many *Rocky* subscribers actually stayed with the *Post* because the paper only publicly disclosed its retention figures in the immediate aftermath of the *Rocky’s* demise.

Moreover, the *Post’s* circulation has yo-yoed in recent years. When the *Rocky* closed in February 2009, it officially had a weekday circulation of around 210,000, while the *Post* officially stood at about 207,000. (Its final-day circulation tally was actually closer to 10,000 copies more than the *Post’s* total if the latter’s discounted copies were subtracted from the mix). A month later, on March 31, the *Post’s* circulation had skyrocketed to 371,727, but by 2010 that total was already down to 337,369 and it reached 317,446 (its lowest total since 2003) in 2011. As of March 2014, the *Post’s* circulation had risen again to 397,091. Yet, the question remains as to how many of those readers used to subscribe to the *Rocky*. Though the *Post’s* Sunday circulation has also fluctuated, falling to 491,400 (from 526,234) immediately after the *Rocky’s*
closure, it’s held up much better than the Post’s weekday circulation. In March 2014, its Sunday tally stood at 614,311.138 The Post’s move to automatically send itself to it’s the Rocky’s readers didn’t stop some enterprising crooks preying on sad, sentimental former subscribers.

Two month’s after the last Rocky issues rolled off the presses, Colorado law enforcement officials warned the public about con artists, who were going from door to door to sell cash-only subscriptions to the “new Rocky Mountain News.”139 For a temporary stretch, the real RockyMountainNews.com, along with its digital archives full of infographics and photos, remained after the paper perished. Then, the original website disappeared, too. So jarringly complete was its dismantling that an October 14, 2015 Atlantic magazine article cited the case to illustrate the difficulty of digital preservation and the ephemerality of information on the Internet. The magazine focused on former Rocky reporter Kevin Vaughan’s 2008 series, “The Crossing.” Vaughan’s 34-part investigation tracked the ripples from one of the worst accidents in Colorado history – a 1961 collision of a high-speed passenger train and a school bus outside Greeley that killed 20 children. “If a sprawling Pulitzer Prize-nominated feature in one of the nation’s oldest newspapers can disappear from the web, anything can,” the Atlantic wrote.

Luckily, the Denver Public Library has at least worked to make simple electronic text versions of the Rocky’s stories accessible via a searchable database that goes back to 1989. But there are no real Rocky copies left to thwack front doors. On February 27, 2009, a storied 150-year-old institution vanished into Denver’s thin air.140

Notes


2 A fairly good picture of MediaNews finances can still be put together because the company’s debts were on the market, so it did have to disclose quite a lot about its finances. But the general principle still holds, and MediaNews was a private company (literally and figuratively). Scripps was publicly traded.


Nicholas Riccardi, “The Sun Sets on the Rocky Mountain News.”


Ibid.


See Note 13.


20 According to Bagdikian, “When all manufacturing return on stockholder equity averaged 15%, Gannet’s was 21%. Even to hard-boiled investors, the profit margin on some Gannett papers was astonishing – 30 to 50% a year.” See: Bagdikian, *New Media Monopoly*, 185.


24 Sherman, “The Evolution of Dean Singleton”; Moscou, “Moore on the Way”; Barringer, “Businessman vs. Newsman.” Singleton was often quoted making statements such as, “One of the proudest days of my life was buying the Denver Post,” he says. “It was The Denver Post. It was a thrill.” See: Graham, “The Dean.” In 2003, a *Columbia Journalism Review* reporter asked Singleton why, if the Rocky was in such dire straits, he didn’t just wait five or so years for it to fail rather than merging with it in 2001. Singleton told a reporter: “I have Multiple Sclerosis. I’ve beaten the system for seven years, but I don’t know that I’ll always beat the system. I don’t know at what point in time it will finally launch that big attack and throw me in the wheelchair or kill me. And I didn’t want to fight the battle for five more years.” See: Sherman, “Evolution of Dean Singleton.”


27 Shepard, “Showdown in the Rockies.”


29 It’s often been written in books and media accounts that Dean Singleton closed the *Fort Worth Press, Dallas Times Herald*, and the *Houston Post*. While not an inaccurate statement, it’s not strictly true. Singleton personally closed the Fort Worth newspaper in 1975. He sold each of the other two newspapers while they were failing. Singleton sold the Dallas Times Herald just before it failed in 1991. And he signed the death warrant of the Houston Post when he sold it (in 1995) to a buyer intent on closing it. Singleton sold a zombie Times Herald to John Buzzetta, a Dallas area businessman and newspaper owner. Buzzetta didn’t take long to resell it to the Dallas Morning News, which promptly closed it. Singleton sold the battered Houston Post to the Hearst Company, which immediately closed it. Despite Singleton’s public attempts to save the Houston Post, the paper’s writers revealed that he had secretly negotiated to sell the Post to its rival, the Houston Chronicle, so it could be closed. See: Tim Fleck and Michael Berryhill and Jim Simmon, “Post Mortem,” *Houston Press*, April 27, 1995,
Jim Schutze, a *Dallas Observer* columnist and a former editorial writer at the Times Herald, gives Singleton pass for the Times Herald’s closure because the paper was in such terrible shape when Singleton bought it from Times Mirror in 1986. Jim Schutze, “What Really Killed the Herald. If it wasn’t murder, was it suicide?” *D Magazine*, February 1992,

30 Raabe, “Singleton to retire;” Graham, “The Dean.”


34 Ibid.


36 Ibid.


38 Duane C.S. Stoltzfus, *Freedom from Advertising: E. W. Scripps’s Chicago Experiment* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 35. Stoltzfus points out that Scripps neither paid attention to anti-trust law nor paid the price for his company’s “shadowy arrangements” because the federal government never brought a case.


40 Ibid.

41 Ibid.


44 Busterna and Picard, *The Newspaper Preservation Act and its Application*.

45 Ibid. 7-9, 31.


Quote from Robert Perkin’s late 1950s interview with William Chandler, a former president of Scripps Ohio newspaper group. Chandler spent time assisting the Rocky Mountain News’ executives after Scripps bought the paper in 1926. See: Perkin, First Hundred Years, 523.


Raabe, “Die Cast on Rocky as Dems Gathered.”


Stoltzfus, Freedom from Advertising, 27; Knight, I Protest, 19; Trimble, The Astonishing Mr. Scripps, 3-13.

Perkin, First Hundred Years: An Informal History of Denver, 474.

This study’s tallies for E.W. Scripps (i.e. that he had founded 33 newspapers and purchased 14 more by the time of his March 1926 death) are based on the publications listed in Scripps’ corporate history. See: “Company History,” E.W. Scripps Co., corporate website, accessed August 5, 2015, http://www.scripps.com/company/history. E.W. Scripps himself actually owned fewer than 47 newspapers at the time of his death. Four had disappeared due to mergers (two in Denver, one in Memphis and one in Knoxville), and a handful had closed, including the Pueblo (Co.) Sun and an experimental ad-free paper in Chicago.

Knight, ed., I Protest, 19.

See Note 47.

Jack Casserly, *Scripps: The Divided Dynasty*, xiii.


Perkin, *First Hundred Years*, 466, 467.

The *Denver Express* was the thirteenth paper founded by E.W. Scripps, but it was his eighteenth overall because he had already bought five other publications. See: “Company History,” *E.W. Scripps Co.*, corporate website, accessed August 5, 2015, http://www.scripps.com/company/history.

Perkin, *First Hundred Years*, 424. In 1922, a *Denver Post* report uncovered information connecting the U.S. Interior Secretary Albert Fall with the illegal leasing of the Teapot Dome naval oil reserve in Wyoming to oil baron Harry Sinclair. But in exchange for $250,000 from Sinclair, plus a promise of more money, Bonfils suppressed the scandalous story. The *Rocky Mountain News* immediately jumped on the story that the *Post’s* owner was corrupt. Yet almost immediately after the Rocky’s story, John Shaffer, who owned the Rocky from 1913 until Scripps bought it in 1926, also was implicated for taking bribes to suppress news about corrupt Teapot Dome oil leases. It was uncovered that he had contacted the corrupt oilmen, solicited a payment, and received $92,500. Ibid. 456, 457.

Ibid. 468, 514. The *Denver Evening News*, which was formed following Scripps’ merger of the *Denver Times* and the *Denver Express*, began with a circulation of 24,521 in 1926 and closed in 1928 while serving 51,722.

Ibid. 472, 473.

Ibid. 515, 516, 517.

Ibid. 466, 468.

Ibid. 466, 467. For the other background information, see: Ibid. 466.

According to Robert Perkin, “Scripps-Howard poured $3,300,000 into Denver before a cent flowed in the opposite direction.” Unfortunately, Perkin doesn’t provide the years for those losses, but he offers clues, including advertising and circulation charts for the Rocky from 1932 to 1958. Second, at different points in his narrative, Perkin states that the Rocky lost $2.3 million on its war with the *Post* between 1926 and 1928, and an additional $400,000 between 1928 and 1942. Third, Perkin dates the paper’s turnaround point to 1943. Thus, the Rocky likely began turning a profit sometime between 1944 and 1946. See: *Perkin, First Hundred Years*, 522-523, 589. Then, the paper remained profitable until 1990, according to the Joint Operating Agreement paperwork that Scripps filed with the federal government in 2000. But as discussed in the body of this study, it’s reasonable to doubt Scripps’ claims that the Rocky lost $123 million in the 1990s because that figure was not based on operating cash flows. See: Joel Klein, *Report of the Assistant Attorney General In Charge of the Antitrust Division in the matter of an application by the E.W. Scripps Company and MediaNews Group, Inc. for Approval of a Joint Operating Arrangement Pursuant to the Newspaper Preservation Act*, September 8, 2000, Case No. 15 U.S.C. §§1801-1804, Public File No: 44-03-24-15, 1-46. Instead, the company’s $123 million of estimated losses came from Scripps’ estimates of such non-cash costs as depreciation, amortization, and the administrative expenses Scripps management calculated for the cost of running the paper from Cincinnati. As for the very early twenty-first century in which the Rocky lost money, recall that the Rocky’s JOA with the *Post* was only profitable from 2001 to 2006, according to the company’s public statements around the time of the paper’s2009 closure. See: Steve Raabe, “Rocky’s Last Run,” *Denver Post*, February 27, 2009, http://www.denverpost.com/ci_11796425; Mark Harden, “Singleton: Scripps planned to Close Rocky,” *Denver Business Journal*, December 5, 2008, http://tinyurl.com/ow8o9wg; Steve Raabe, “Rocky Mountain News for Sale. End May Come to Scripps’ Flagship Paper as Prospects for Buyer are Slim,” *Denver Post*, December 5, 2008, http://tinyurl.com/qgzpffm. See also: E.W. Scripps Company, “Rocky Mountain News to Close. Final Edition Will be Published February 27,” press release, February 26, 2009; Russell Adams, Shira Ovide and


83 Wadman, “Scripps, Striking Teamsters Face Off Over Cost-Cutting.”

85 Ibid.

86 Potter, “All the News That’s Fit to be Killed.”


88 Scripps’ share prices obtained through Yahoo Finance’s tool to look up past stock values. Prices were obtained beginning at March 26, 1990, which was the oldest available day for a historical stock price look up. Accessed March 6, 2015. See: http://finance.yahoo.com/q.

89 See the Newspaper Association of America’s estimates for advertising and circulation revenues from 1950 to 2012. The NAA revenue estimates included in this study represent the combined totals for the online and print versions of traditional advertising categories (i.e. retail, national, and classified advertising) from their 2005 high of $49.27 billion to their 2013 low of $20.71 billion. Beginning with the NAA’s 2012 annual report (for the newspaper industry’s 2011 revenue totals), the Association began collecting a more comprehensive list of newspaper companies’ advertising revenue sources. Besides counting the combined online and print revenues for retail, national and classified advertising in 2011 and 2012, the NAA began including advertising revenues from niche publications, direct marketing efforts, and other non-daily publications created to house advertising. Including the revenue from these other categories would not change the spirit of this study’s point that the newspaper industry has suffered monumental, business model-shattering declines in overall advertising revenue. But for the sake of thoroughness, they are as follows. In 2011, the newspaper industry’s advertising revenue total stood at $27.07 billion, with the inclusion of revenues from niche publications, direct marketing, and non-daily products. Using comparable figures, the industry earned $25.31 billion in 2012 and $23.57 billion in 2013, which is the most recent available data (as of March 2015). In addition to the newspaper industry’s two traditional revenue categories (advertising and circulation), the NAA added yet another revenue category, “New/Other Revenue,” in 2013. It serves as a catch-all for all the miscellaneous revenues earned by newspapers that don’t fit the traditional mold. The decision by some newspapers to enter the business of delivering goods and services (like FedEx or the United Parcel Service) is one of many examples that fit under the “New/Other Revenue” category. In 2013, the newspaper industry brought in $3.15 billion “New/Other” earnings. Additionally, total circulation revenues have rebounded slightly from $10.44 billion in 2012 to $10.87 billion as of 2013. See: “Trends & Numbers,” *Newspaper Association of America*, online archives for advertising, audience and circulation data, accessed March 6, 2015, http://www.naa.org/Trends-and-Numbers.aspx; “Business model evolving, circulation revenue rising,” *Newspaper Association of America*, April 18, 2014, accessed March 6, 2015, http://tinyurl.com/kljkoj7; “Newspaper Media Revenue 2013: Dollars Grow in Several Categories,” *Newspaper Association of America*, accessed March 6, 2015; http://www.naa.org/Trends-and-Numbers/Newspaper-Revenue.aspx.


91 In all, Scripps would strike seven joint operating agreements, more than any other newspaper company, though Gannett came closest with six. See for information on the joint operating agreements struck by Scripps and other

92 Potter, “All the News That’s Fit to be Killed.”


95 Harden, “Singleton: Scripps planned to Close Rocky”; Raabe, “Rocky Mountain News for Sale.”


Potter, “All the News That’s Fit to be Killed.”


Ibid.


Rebchook and Walsh, “Storm clouds started forming two years ago.”

Rebchook and Walsh, “Storm clouds started forming two years ago.” See also: Potter, “All the News That’s Fit to be Killed”; Harden, “Singleton: Scripps planned to Close Rocky”; Harden, “Singleton: Scripps planned to Close Rocky”; Raabe, “Die Cast on Rocky as Dems Gathered”; Raabe, “Rocky Mountain News for Sale.”

Rebchook and Walsh, “Storm clouds started forming two years ago.”

Salzman, “My rejected Rocky column.” Scripps CEO, Richard Boehne, also spoke of the Rocky Mountain News’ efforts to make sure the federal government was satisfied with the closure (i.e. so it wouldn’t intervene) at the paper’s final news conference. See: Michael Roberts, “Highlights from the Goodbye-to-the-Rocky Mountain News Press Conference,” Westword, February 26, 2009, http://tinyurl.com/yeey3jr.


116 Milstead and Paton, “Private-equity investor group explored buying newspaper.”


118 Former Rocky Mountain News media critic Jason Salzman dutifully reported that the “first right of refusal” contract provision in the Rocky and the Post’s joint operating agreement did not represent a true kill switch. That’s because the JOA gave the feds the right to oversee the Rocky’s closure. But Salzman conceded that the feds would likely have let Singleton nix any new JOA partner for several reasons, including trusting his discretion about appropriate partners, the initial regulatory decision allowing the clause, and the new Obama administration’s more pressing concerns. See: Jason Salzman, “Rocky article discusses role of Justice Department,” *Big Media.org*, blog post, published January 29, 2009, http://bigmedia.org/2009/01/; Jason Salzman, “A role for feds in saving the Rocky,” *Big Media.org*, blog post, published January 17, 2009, http://bigmedia.org/2009/01/.


120 Milstead and Paton, “Private-equity investor group explored buying newspaper.”


122 Potter, “All the News That’s Fit to be Killed.”

123 For the sentiments of Scripps executives regarding the detrimental nature of the Rocky’s page size, see: Roberts, “Highlights from the Goodbye-to-the-Rocky Mountain News Press Conference.” For sources citing the size of the Rocky’s page, see: Rebecca Landwehr, “Advertising rates should climb if Post, News get JOA approval,” *Denver Business Journal*, May 19, 2000, 1A; Sandy Graham, “The Dean,” *Colorado Business Magazine*, 21, no. 10, 18.

124 Dean Singleton’s original quote was actually, “Go get a paper, and you’ll find 126 inches on a full-page ad in the Post and 56 inches on a full-page ad in the Rocky – and the inch rate’s the same. It’s mathematics, simple as that.” His quote was altered for clarity because he was almost certainly exaggerating for rhetorical effect by comparing the full square-inch size of a Denver Post page with the “live space” square-inch size of a Rocky Mountain News page. “Live space” is the area that newspapers reserve for content on their pages (i.e. the space within a page’s margins, around its stories and headlines, and beneath the newspaper’s banner). See: Anonymous, “The Rocky Mountain News is Going Down,” *Westword*, December 11, 2008, http://www.westword.com/2008-12-11/news/the-rocky-mountain-news-is-going-down/. See the previous note for sources affirming that the Post’s page was 126-square-inches, while the Rocky’s page was 70-square-inches. As then-U.S. Assistant Attorney General Joel Klein wrote in his 2000 recommendation for the Attorney General to approve the joint operating agreement application between the Rocky and the Post, “It is one of the dilemmas of the News that, all other things being equal, with its smaller pages it makes less money per page of advertising than the Post, but has been nevertheless unwilling to change to broadsheet and risk losing a substantial portion of its readers.” See: Joel Klein, *Report of the Assistant Attorney General In Charge of the Antitrust Division in the matter of an application by the E.W. Scripps Company and MediaNews Group, Inc. for Approval of a Joint Operating Arrangement Pursuant to the Newspaper Preservation Act*, September 8, 2000, Case No. 15 U.S.C. §§1801-1804, Public File No: 44-03-24-15, 31.

125 Potter, “All the News That’s Fit to be Killed.” It should be noted that Milstead’s story, which he wrote 10 days before the Rocky closed, never actually ran in the paper. It was spiked because John Temple, the paper’s editor and a Scripps executive, disputed Milstead’s valuation of the Rocky Mountain News. Milstead used a 2001 figure, which valued the paper at $70 million, to estimate that Scripps could claim an equivalent tax write off if the company couldn’t sell the paper. Additionally, a Lehman Brothers analyst believed Milstead’s estimate was valid. According to *5280: The Denver Magazine*, Temple told Milstead that he needed to obtain a newer estimate for the value of the
paper to make any calculations about tax benefits. But Temple, who was simultaneously the paper’s editor, its publisher, and a Scripps executive, declined to provide any newer estimates to his business reporter.

126 Ibid.


129 Roberts, “Highlights from the Goodbye-to-the-Rocky Mountain News Press Conference.”


134 Ibid.

135 Ibid.


137 Aldo Svaldi, “Post pleased at the numbers The Denver Post retained 95% of the subscribers to the closed Rocky Mountain News in March,” *Denver Post*, April 28, 2009, B10. Additionally, a total of 14,000 readers that subscribed to both the *Post* and the *Rocky* received refunds for their *Rocky* subscriptions, while continuing to receive the *Post*.

138 Email from the Alliance for Audited Media. Circulation numbers derived from the *Post*’s March 31, 2010 circulation audit report (which contains the previous year’s figures too) and the March 31, 2014 report. See also: Michael Madigan, “Rocky’s Long Run, Within a whisper of 150 years,” *Rocky Mountain News*, final ed., 8-11.


CHAPTER 5
WHY AMERICANS STOPPED READING NEWSPAPERS

The timing of death, like the ending of a story, gives a changed meaning to what preceded it.

–Mary Catherine Bateson\(^1\)

Not even Byers himself – or at least Colorado history professor Thomas Noel donning a nineteenth century attire – could stop the Rocky from closing. Four weeks before the newspaper’s demise, Noel set forth, alongside 300 of the paper’s staff and supporters, marching the few blocks from the Denver Press Club to the Rocky’s offices. Clutching candles and placards with numbers to signify each of the Rocky’s 150 years, they quietly formed a line outside the 101 West Colfax Avenue headquarters of the Rocky and the Post. There, they stood sentinel in the sub-freezing night.\(^2\) Two months later, just after the Rocky closed, a Time magazine column captured what so many at the Rocky were undoubtedly thinking when they assembled on that cold January 2009 night. “Amid the staff’s weepy remembrances and the goodbyes in the Rocky’s final edition on Feb. 27, only sportswriter Dave Krieger let Scripps have it,” media analyst and former Rocky reporter Bob Diddlebock wrote, before quoting the aforementioned Krieger’s final column in the Rocky.\(^3\) “I still don’t get how a newspaper with 200,000 paying subscribers and hundreds of thousands more readers on the Web cannot make a go of it,” Krieger wrote. “‘Not our fault,’ the suits say. ‘(It’s the) business model’s fault.’ So who came up with the business model?”\(^4\)

This chapter zooms out from the Rocky to begin examining the socio-cultural and technological factors that contributed to the newspaper industry’s downfall, while providing an overview of the reasons behind the failure of the newspaper industry’s business model. Those reasons include the profit-driven decisions by corporate media leaders; their struggles to monetize online ads and news; the devaluation of journalism following its decoupling from
printed newspapers; a superabundance of competition in the information and attention economies; the flight of advertisers; and new technologies that ended newspapers’ control of information. This chapter expounds on those causes of the newspaper industry’s decline because they contributed to the downfall of the Rocky and other American papers. In the whodunit story behind the demise of newspapers in the 2000s, it’s easy to accuse the Internet or television. But sociologist James Beniger actually traced the beginning of the end of the industry’s dominance much further back in time. He believed newspapers reached the peak of popularity from which they’d gradually fall between 1910 and 1930, which overlapped with the Cox-Harding presidential election of 1920. It was a time when newspapers solidified into their present professional forms, and unloosed their final, influential hurrah as the two Ohio newspaper publishers squared off for America’s highest office.5

At the newspaper industry’s height within a 20-year span, “circulation held steady at an all-time high of 1.3 newspapers per household, up from .2 papers in 1850 and .9 in 1900.”6 Then, came terrestrial radio – the vanguard of many mass media forms that would begin fragmenting American audiences siphoning advertising revenue from newspapers. Per household newspaper circulation dipped just one-tenth of a paper, from 1.3 to 1.2, as radio blossomed between 1930 and World War II. But the technological displacement was just beginning. After the war, the same newspaper readership rate steadily sank to .37 newspapers per household by 2010.7 Phrased in slightly different terms, for every 100,000 Americans, fewer than 175 newspapers circulated in 2008 compared with nearly 363 back in 1950.8 Besides per capita newspaper consumption, the overall number of newspapers circulating in America has fallen nearly 30%, from a high of 63.34 million in 1984 to 44.42 million as of 2011.9 Some 4 million fewer people read a newspaper today than in 1945, despite the U.S. population increasing nearly 130% since
World War II. In one revealing 2011 survey, a plurality of Americans (39%) thought the closure of their local newspaper would have “no impact” on them.

How did we get here? How did so many Americans stop reading so many newspapers? The rapid rise of radio offers the very beginning of the explanation as to why newspapers began losing their hold on the public. As early as 1926, U.S. Senator Clarence Dill, D-Washington, boasted, “With only 6% of the world’s population, we have more than 80% of all the receiving sets on Earth and five times as many broadcast stations as the rest of the world combined.” By 1935, just 15 years after the debut of the first commercial broadcast radio station, 93% of households in large cities owned radio receivers versus 74% in small towns and 34% in America’s rural regions. Although newspapers were still the most widely available news source – roughly 2,000 daily papers reached one in three Americans that year – almost 600 AM stations had mushroomed around the country. From serials and soap operas to concert hours, advertisers flocked to fund and create engrossing radio fare. (Palmolive soap’s radio concerts featured the soloists “Oliver Palmer” and “Paul Oliver”). If Americans spent the twentieth century pulling radio through their doors for a big, deep smooch, only to confine it to their cars, they wed television and later adopted nearly three sets for every household.

By 1970, television was universal. And the average household watched for six hours a day, though more than half of the sets were black and white and only about six channels (including low-fi UHF and PBS stations) were typically available. Cable, which reached roughly 6% of homes, was primarily a means for remote areas to get service when they were out of range from over-the-air broadcast signals. Thirty-five years later, the average U.S. household contained 2.6 TV screens, its inhabitants watched eight hours of TV per day, and more than 85% could choose from roughly a 100 channels. Television news followed a similar trajectory. At the
Vietnam War’s peak in the late ’60s, 35 million people – more than one in six Americans at the time – tuned into the evening newscasts aired on ABC, CBS, and NBC. More people at the time viewed news on their living room screens than in a newspaper, and by 1972 two in three cited TV as their primary news source.

Television’s status as America’s favorite news medium has persisted for decades since then, though Millennial Generation members are now consuming far less TV news than the population as a whole. In 2012, just 29% of Americans said they read either an online or a print newspaper, “yesterday,” down from 54% in 2004 and the nearly 80% in the early ’70s. As for those who said they picked up a newspaper at least once during the week, that tally was a staggering 89% as recently as the late ’80s. By comparison, the total number of Americans, who said they watched some form of TV news yesterday, has held steady at around 55% in recent years (though just one in three people younger than 30 said they did so in 2012).

Here, however, an important caveat is in order. TV news watching is a compliment to, not a substitute for, newspaper reading. In fact, “Americans who watch the news on television are more likely to read the daily newspaper than are other Americans, not less likely,” according to sociologist Robert Putnam.

The same can be said regarding the news consumed on mobile devices and computer screens. The Pew Research Center found that new media consumption actually widens, deepens, and increases the use of traditional news sources such as newspapers. “Rather than replacing old technology the introduction of new devices and formats is creating a new kind of ‘multi-platform’ news consumer,” according to Pew, and those users simultaneously satisfy their journalistic desires with newspapers, televisions, tablet computers, and smartphones. The trouble for newspapers hasn’t been television viewing or the use of other new media per se, it’s
been what people are watching and doing with their devices. Those who spend the bulk of their
time using the TV mostly for entertainment purposes are actually far less likely to read papers,
according to Putnam. Unfortunately, just 7% of Americans watch TV mainly to be informed,
while 41% tune in purely for entertainment.

The rest seek information, and few platforms do “infotainment” better than TV. Putnam
associates the decline of newspapers with all manner of societal consequences. Newspaper
reading isn’t merely a form of media consumption, according to Putnam. It’s both a form of, and
a marker for, social participation and community connectedness:

Compared to demographically identical nonreaders, regular newspaper readers
belong to more organizations, participate more actively in clubs and civic
associations, attend local meetings more frequently, vote more regularly, volunteer
and work on community projects more often, and even visit with friends more
frequently and trust their neighbors more. Newspaper readers are machers and
schmoozers.

Thus, Bowling Alone is notable in part because it spotlighted the strong correlation between the
downswing of newspapers and falling societal levels of social capital, civic engagement, and
political engagement. In other words, all the same factors related to the loss of readers since
World War II are also correlated with nationwide declines in service to society, voting, and the
forming of strong social networks. “The decline of the daily newspaper also reflects that more
and more people are questioning the value of the basic institutional building blocks of our
society,” John Temple, who simultaneously served as the Rocky’s editor, president, and
publisher, told a media and technology conference after the paper’s closure.

In today’s era of societal and media fragmentation, Temple added, a single general
interest publication can’t easily connect with a huge audience. As for Putnam, he’s been very
careful to suggest what caused what. Did the loss of newspaper readers help spur the
aforementioned sociocultural trends (i.e. “media effects”)? Or did people with certain traits
choose to read (or not read) newspapers (i.e. “selection effects”)? Nonetheless, as will be discussed, the take away point is that they’re related. The other major factor related to the decline of newspaper readership is the cross-generational drop off between the Silent Generation, Baby Boomers, and Generation Xers because fewer young people care about community life and the news surrounding it. Forty years ago, young Americans kept up with the news at the same rate as their parents and grandparents. Today, by any metric, ever fewer young people are reading the newspaper, and those who do read it are spending less time looking at it. A whopping 74% of newspaper readers are age 45 or older, even though those older than 45 make up 39% of all Americans, according to estimates by newspaper industry analyst Alan Mutter.

By his projections, just 6% of newspaper readers are between the ages of 18 and 24, despite that age group accounting for 10% of U.S. population. And a mere 20% of the audience for newspapers is aged 25 to 44 years old, which constitutes 27% of all citizens. Unfortunately, *Bowling Alone’s* analysis didn’t yet include Millennials or those born from 1982 to the early 2000s). But communications scholar David T.Z. Mindich agrees with Putnam. “The 20-years-olds of today are not the first to abandon the news; it was their parents,” he wrote. “The decline in news consumption began in the 1960s as the first generation born with television was coming of age.” To lesser degrees, Putnam also links the post-World War II shift from newspapers to more of the same circumstances that have wreaked havoc on community life. They range from our increased “busyness,” to our “economic distress” (less time and money for newspapers), and “the pressures associated with two-career families” (fewer stay-at-home mothers reading the paper and clipping coupons).

“Suburbanization, commuting and sprawl” are the final pieces of Putnam’s puzzle. Increases in commute times have been correlated to people being less likely to pay attention to
and participate in their town’s affairs. It’s also worth noting that, before *Bowling Alone*, Putnam (and two co-authors) wrote the 1993 book *Making Democracy Work*, which showed that newspaper readership is a correlate for civic engagement – a building block of all the best-run regional governments in Italy. And as far back as the 1980s, Leo Bogart, who made an influential career of studying readership trends for the newspaper industry, reached many of Putnam’s *Bowling Alone* conclusions regarding dwindling newspaper readership in America. For example, Bogart blamed radio and TV for leeching newspaper circulation, and he cited city-to-suburb migration as factors in the fall off of newspaper readership. He also found commuters’ transience kept them from caring enough about their community to read a newspaper and from having enough time to do so even if they were so inclined.

### Regression to the Mean

Maybe, all those socio-culture and technological phenomena that Putnam and other researchers have mentioned aren’t killing newspapers; they’re just transporting them back to the future. That’s the verdict of Robert Picard, one of the founders of media economics. American newspapers didn’t serve everyone, nor did they expect to, during the 150 years before the Civil War. A given area’s readership varied by its “location, literacy, degree of economic development, and other social factors.” Between the early 1700s and the mid 1800s, newspapers circulated among 15 to 25% of the adults in the colonies and early United States. Then, came the newspaper industry’s humongous circulation increases, as “urbanization, the industrial revolution, wage earning, and literacy” gave Americans the free time and money to buy papers. And advertising, which rose from 66% of newspaper income in 1910 to 80% by 2000, made them affordable.

These days, according to Picard, newspapers are just returning to their status as specialty products. But because Americans are more literate and worldly, he thinks modern newspaper
readership will eventually bottom out at between 25 and 33% of all adults – not the 15% low in some parts of the colonies and the United States from 1700 to 1850. In Markus Prior’s rigorous, solidly researched 2005 book, *Post-Broadcast Democracy*, the Princeton political scientist showed how the steep per capita news consumption declines of recent decades are simply a return to the norm throughout most of American history. Prior found that it’s not at all odd that so few people consume the news today, but what struck him as remarkable was that so many Americans did so throughout much of the twentieth century. And his research has laid out a compelling explanation why. It begins with the fact that news consumption in general has always been disproportionately more popular among better-educated, higher-earning Americans, and the same goes for those most likely to participate in and know about politics. Yet, the growth and prevalence of broadcast television from the 1940s to the 1970s briefly ushered in a period of “unusually widespread news consumption,” and a larger, more ecumenical American electorate.

As broadcast TV took off following World War II, Americans embraced newscasts for the simplicity of their language and the irresistibility of their images. As a result, a much larger, wider array of people began consuming news, following politics, and voting. With few other entertainment options in those dark analog days, Americans couldn’t help but be informed even when they grabbed a newspaper or flicked on the TV for amusement rather than news. Prior determined that broadcast television’s most popular years, from the late ’40s until the mid ’70s, did more than just increase the quantity and diversity of well informed, politically active Americans. News consumption also helped decrease political polarization because well-informed, moderates became more likely to vote. But, as Prior contends, the popularity of the
news and its political ramifications were merely the result of Americans’ limited entertainment options.

The last 40 years have ushered in an irresistible wealth of entertainment options, including cable TV, the Internet, streaming and on-demand content services, mobile and cellular devices and irresistible video games. Despite the rich and varied news and information sources that are also available, most Americans opt for entertainment. “That news reaches fewer people today is thus not an irregularity,” Prior explained. “The anomaly that stands out is that so many Americans decided to watch the news in the 1960s and the 1970s, though nobody forced them, and they were happy to abandon the news as soon as alternatives became available.” Thus, Prior has deftly tied modern increases in media choice to a gradual return to the pre-TV days when news consumption and political participation were more common among partisans and elites. Prior’s point is bolstered by the steep generational drop-offs in Americans’ news consumption across platforms. Today, those “younger than 30 spend just 45 minutes with the news on any given day … (compared) with 68 minutes for people in their 30s, 74 minutes for people in their 40s, and more than 80 minutes for those people 50 and older.”

Of course, some young people today want nothing to do with the general interest news regardless what type of media outlet produces it. In 2012, more than one in four Americans (29%) between the ages of 18 and 24 identified themselves as “newsless,” compared to one in five (19%) of those aged 25 to 39, and more than one in six (17%) overall. On any given day, those aged 18 to 24 average spend roughly 50% less time consuming the news across all platforms (45 minutes) than a typical adult American (67 minutes). Revealing is the 2004 tale of six focus groups of 18- to 34-year-olds, who told the Washington Post they wouldn’t read the paper even if they had a free subscription because they “didn’t like the idea of old newspapers
piling up in their houses.”

Young people “use the Internet for everything but news,” according to Mindich, “the Internet allowing many to develop expertise in their own narrow interests.”

Nowadays, Americans want to do whatever they want, whenever and wherever they want it, their attention is a scarce economic commodity, and those seeking information can turn to a million producers. “The greatest lesson from the attention industries is that we just don’t have enough attention to go around,” information technology researchers Thomas Davenport and John Beck wrote. “Audience attention is a zero sum game. Gains in attention share for one medium can be made only at the expense of another.”

Survey respondents told the Pew Research Center’s pollsters that they fill their free time with many other activities besides news consumption, including exercising, playing video games (via home consoles, computers and mobile devices); using social media, texting and emailing; hanging out with friends and family; watching TV; and reading books.

Facebook alone currently “reaches more people than all other U.S. media outlets combined,” according to the FCC. Newspapers once stood out in plastic sleeves atop doorsteps, but now, they labor to attract, maintain and monetize their audiences. “Americans,” the Pew’s researchers pointed out, now “turn to a wide range of platforms to get local news and information, and where they turn varies considerably depending on the subject matter and their age.”

John Temple, the former editor, president, and publisher, of the Rocky Mountain News once said that the paper’s staff thought its competition was the Denver Post. “But that was the obvious competition,” Temple added. He wished the paper had realized:

Much bigger competition – for people’s attention – was occurring elsewhere. We needed to experiment more, and yes, fail more, too. If we had, perhaps we would have been better able to build a range of publications, in print and online, that would have served our more diverse and demanding audience.
The next section delves even deeper into exploring how new information communications technologies have swung news preferences away from newspapers and changed how we interact with the world. Today, to quote author Dan Gillmor, “We are the media.” Gillmor was merely pointing out that the Internet has lowered the barriers of entry and production such that ordinary people can create and share all kinds of news and information. But it’s easy to imbue his words with a broader meaning. Often, it’s hard to tell where technology stops and the people begin as Americans zigzag between electronic entertainment options, hop on social media, blog, or sleep with their cell phones (as 44% of phone owners have done).

Newspapers: Outmoded and Outmaneuvered

The vision of the Internet as a democratizing medium, as everyone’s printing press, is real,

—Craig Newmark

Technology hasn’t merely changed our relationships with newspapers. It’s changed us. Americans are, to quote MIT sociology professor Sherry Turkle, “alone together,” interacting with electronic devices that provide the “illusion of companionship without the demands of a relationship.” If, as the playwright Arthur Miller observed, “A good newspaper is a nation talking to itself,” then what is a nation staring into its laptops and mobile devices? America, today, is millions of digital denizens, with their heads bobbing to the beats blasted through earbuds, fondling their flickering touchscreens. Technology has rewired brains – not to sit and read a newspaper or a book, but to pause, skim, jump, and skip about the Internet. “Once I was a scuba diver in a sea of words,” wrote Nicholas Carr, whose book The Shallows is among those that have addressed how our technology has affected our attention, memory, and cognition. “Now I zip along the surface like a guy on a Jet Ski.” Even search engine algorithms are designed to display results that reinforce their users’ preferences and opinions.
This chapter continues the discussion of the disruptive technologies and the societal changes that caused newspapers to struggle as they failed to adapt from the ’80s onward. To journalism scholar Keith Herndon, the newspaper industry’s trouble began with the end of their era of information control.62 Before the online revolution, author Charles Madigan wrote, news was “what happened today, that didn’t happen yesterday, dressed up and delivered tomorrow.”63 As University of Illinois communications professor Steven Jones put it, newspapers “sold space, trading on the attention people would pay to the spatial organization of the printed – mediated – word.” TV and radio hawked the time people would spend with them. But now digital media “sell attention without regard to space or time,” while emphasizing connection, linking, and interactivity.64 In just the last 35 years, Americans have abandoned the “imagined communities” they once inhabited to become “sovereign consumers.” The political scientist Benedict Anderson famously coined the former term in his 1983 book by the same name, while the communications scholar Bryant Jennings came up with the latter.

Anderson’s “imagined communities” were an evocation of philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel’s image of newspaper reading as a substitute for the ritual morning prayer, an act performed in the privacy afforded by one’s skull. “Yet, each communicant is well aware that the ceremony he performs is being replicated simultaneously by thousands or millions of others of whose existence he is confident, yet of whose identity he has not the slightest notion,” Anderson wrote.65 In that way, he added, newspapers play a role in the societal construction of the figurative community of thinkers necessary to sustain a nation.66 Writing just six years later in 1989, Jennings was describing the emergence of a new world of digital natives when he coined the phrase “sovereign consumers.” He predicted Americans would exert ever more power creating, distributing, discussing, and purchasing news and information.67
This idea of sovereign consumers fits neatly into mass communications scholar Peter Gade’s conception of today’s “postmodern” digital lifestyle, which prizes a “networked world that breaks down traditional national borders and merges cultures.” As sovereign consumers, we live in “societies where most things are at our fingertips, where the security of tradition and community is not apparent, where consumption replaces production.” Whereas newspaper reading offered a shared experience, incidental learning, and the collective, filtered formation of daily knowledge, Internet users can boundlessly create, collaborate, curate, and disseminate information. The news was easier to monetize when Americans imagined that they lived in one big community. But today’s individualistic media consumers will no longer listen to the news “as gospel” coming from “a godlike figure from above,” Rupert Murdoch warned a gathering of the American Society of News Editors in 2005. The time, he added, has passed since “news and information were tightly controlled by a few editors, who deigned to tell us what we could and should know.”

Those who want the news no longer need newspapers to define what’s news. As authors Thomas Davenport and John C. Beck put it, “Why read somebody’s else’s collection of news when you can construct your own?” Journalism professors Wilson Lowrey and Peter Gade liken online news consumers to “networked hunters and gathers, searching for news that interests them, visiting sites that aggregate news, and sharing it with others.” NYU’s Adam Penenberg compares today’s news consumers to window-shoppers “sampling a headline here, a blog entry there, a snippet of a story there, until their news cravings are satisfied.” They seek news online, he added, because they want to “customize their news-gathering experience in a way a single paper publication could never do. And their hands never get dirty from newsprint.”
Essayist Joseph Epstein can still recall those days. Throughout the twentieth century, Americans turned to newspaper reporters because they believed in their intelligence, impartiality, and genuine concern for the country. When Epstein was 15, he asked his father whom he intended to vote for in the 1952 presidential election between Dwight Eisenhower and Adlai Stevens. But his dad was ambivalent. “I’m not sure,” he said. “I think I’ll wait to see which way (newspaper columnist Walter) Lippmann is going.”74 Such was the trust that America had in the media that, following TV anchor Walter Cronkite’s 1968 declaration that the Vietnam War was unwinnable, President Lyndon Johnson supposedly lamented, “If I’ve lost Cronkite, I’ve lost Middle America.”75 As recently as the first half of the 1970s, after the Washington Post’s Watergate coverage, media credibility was at an all-time high – as more than seven in ten Americans expressed positive opinions about the press.76

Even in 1985, 66% of survey respondents still had a positive view of news credibility.77 But the status quo couldn’t be more different these days, and newspapers have suffered as a result. Forty years after Watergate, overall media credibility has never been lower, and polarization has never been higher among news seekers. Today, four in five Americans tell pollsters that newspapers can’t be believed.78 And “negative opinions about the media’s credibility now equal or surpass all-time highs on nine of 12 core measures,” according to the Pew Research Center.79 In Why Americans Hate the Media and How it Matters, Georgetown political scientist Jonathan Ladd offers a few explanations. For one, Ladd thinks increasingly partisan politicians have encouraged Americans’ growing disdain for, and distrust of, the mainstream news media. Congress has, indeed, changed. According to Ladd’s analysis of federal voting patterns, the American government was “relatively unpolarized until the late 1970s,” but by the mid-2000s congressional votes had become as politically divided as any time since
Ladd also determined that the general public’s mass exodus from consuming news to entertaining themselves with new technologies, such as cable and the Internet, has meant America’s remaining news seekers are more politically partisan.

Media executives, true believers, and entrepreneurs have taken note – embracing and encouraging opinion-driven journalistic content because it’s popular, profitable, and cheaper to produce than original reportorial journalism. And all manner of mainstream and alternative news programs and outlets have sprung up to compliment the politics of different Americans, who color themselves every shade across the electoral spectrum. Americans, in turn, have switched to news providers that match their political beliefs. According to author Eric Alterman, new media have empowered news consumers to “bypass the big media institutions and conduct conversations within a like-minded community.” Whereas not so long ago Americans accessed the same news sources, the Pew Research Center’s yearlong effort to study political polarization found that those on the left and the right have their own distinctive information streams. “When it comes to getting news about politics and government, liberals and conservatives inhabit different worlds,” Pew concluded. “There is little overlap in the news sources they turn to and trust. And whether discussing politics online or with friends, they are more likely than others to interact with like-minded individuals.” Across legacy media, ideological journalistic operations such as Fox and MSNBC have emerged alongside a general proliferation of news analysis and commentary, while print publications now emphasize opinion columnists, and coverage driven by personalities, controversies, and features. And across the Internet, search engines and websites personalize information and advertising to capitalize on research indicating that Internet users are most attracted to the content that dovetails with their ideological and partisan beliefs.
Those who don’t like the diversity of news and opinion around them need not merely
seek their own special versions of it, or comment on it with like-minded individuals via social
media. They can start their own websites and blogs or, if they’re dedicated enough, they can
report and write the news themselves. As the new media scholar Pablo Boczkowski put it, “an
information architecture dominated by one-to-many linear flows has exploded to include various
forms of user-authored content.” News generators are what one small, hardcore group of
Americans has become. They’re a mix of regular people, trained journalists, foundations, and
advocacy organizations, and in recent years they’ve founded 172 nonprofit news websites across
the country. Overseas, Korea has perfected that art of amateur news generation. There, more
than 70,000 ordinary citizens generate news each day for one website – the amateur citizen
journalism hub, OhmyNews – while another 6,000 post stories for its English-language sister
site. The point here is not to pine for the supposedly halcyon days of, say, the 1960s, when a
cadre of white, middle-aged men withdrew into a New York Times’ conference room to divine
the next day’s national news agenda. It is merely to explain some of the social and cultural
reasons contributing to the decline of newspapers. Newspapers were accustomed to being the
gatekeepers of mass communication – defining the news, its significance, and when and how it
would be disseminated. Now, Americans have few reasons to read a general interest product,
like a newspaper, when they might not care about or believe most of it, while their digital
devices offer what they want, and how they want it.

**Hoses vs. Straws**

To understand why and when newspapers thrived, one need only think of them as the
Sears Catalogs of mass media – affordable, bountiful supplies of general interest information,
packed with ads. Newspapers were, as Sears’ marketing material described the company’s 1943
catalog, “a mirror of our times, recording for future historians today’s desires, habits, customs,
Department stores, not so coincidentally, were once among newspapers’ biggest advertisers. But today both are obsolete. As the late sociologist James Beniger wrote, old media are no longer necessary to assert “bureaucratic control of consumption based on national advertising,” and to “create new markets, and to stimulate demand.” In 1970, the economist and technologist Herbert Simon predicted that every new source of information would consume the finite attention of its recipients. “Hence a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention and a need to allocate that attention efficiently among the overabundance of information sources that might consume it.” It would take just 23 years for Simon’s vision of today’s Instant Information Age to become a reality as the Internet began to achieve mainstream popularity.

Google executive chairman Eric Schmidt once estimated that digitizing all the existing human cultural artifacts and information from the dawn of time until 2003 would require 5 billion gigabytes of storage space. Now, humanity generates that much data every two days. “The public’s consumption of news and opinion used to like sucking on a straw,” Judge Richard Posner wrote, “now it’s like being sprayed by a fire hose.” Gone are the days, in 1961, when a Sunday edition of the Los Angeles Times contained 21 sections with 430 pages full of “ads for everything from Liquid Snail Killers from the Cha Kent Company to a spread for the Dinah Shore Models Wardrobe at a local department store.” As the TV age began its growth spurt in 1946, newspapers owned 34% of the American advertising market. That total was down to just under 30% in 1970, before it fell to 20% in 2000. Now, as of 2013, newspapers hauled in 13.7% (or $23.57 billion) of the $171 billion spent on all digital and print advertising in America. Things are even worse for newspapers if just the digital ad category is examined. Newspapers owned a mere 2.6% market share – and shrinking – of all online and mobile advertising in 2013.
In contrast, Google alone controlled 34.5% of that Internet ad market in 2014, and when the next three digital titans (Facebook, Microsoft and Yahoo) are factored in, that total rises to 44.3%. The same points can be made for online display advertising, the category from which newspapers derive their biggest share of digital ad revenues. Five firms – Facebook, Google, Yahoo, Microsoft and AOL – sucked up 51% of that nearly $18 billion U.S. market in 2013. The total amount of digital display advertising has been steadily rising for years (it’s up about 4% from 2012), meaning that newspapers are getting a smaller slice of the digital advertising pie even as the overall market grows annually. Meanwhile, the quantity and value of the newspaper industry’s digital advertising share aren’t growing at fast enough rates to compensate for the erosion and devaluation of print ads. Between just 2012 and 2013, the newspaper industry’s weekday and Sunday print ad revenues fell 8.6%, while digital advertising in 2013 grew at just a 1.5% rate.

For every $1 a newspaper charges for print advertising, the same paper is only able to ask for between 5 and 10 cents for a comparable digital display newspaper ad. That differential means that digital advertising is not replacing the more valuable advertising revenues as advertisers follow readers online. Thus, according to the media economist Robert Picard, the savings a typical mid-sized daily newspaper would realize in production and distribution costs from becoming an online-only news outlet wouldn’t make up for the lost print ad revenues. Picard has estimated that a newspaper that moved entirely online, and retained all its circulation revenue, would only break even if it earned three-quarters of the value of its print ads. But that’s impossible given that each digital ad is worth 90 to 95% less than its print version. So, although newspapers in many cities have stabilized, or even begun turning around, their declining circulation totals since 2013, digital editions simply aren’t as profitable. And more
people are reading newspapers digitally. In Denver, for example, nearly every Denver Post reader saw the news in print in mid-’90s, but today just 63% of Denver area residents prefer the Post on newsprint. Between 2005 and 2009, which covers both when the Rocky closed and the newspaper industry’s descent into its deepest, darkest doldrums, newspapers saw their online traffic skyrocket to 3 billion page views from 1.6 billion. That led to a $716 million gain in online ad revenue, but the $22.5 billion in print revenue that newspapers lost over the same span was 300 times higher.

Today’s digital ads are worth far less than their legacy media incarnations for several reasons. First, they’ve been commoditized. Advertisers have a superabundance of websites and mobile apps to place ads, including their very own corporate websites, and that glut of opportunities drives down the cost of digital ads. In 1998, Google’s search index tapped 26 million Web pages, but by 2008 that total had grown to one trillion unique web addresses. Regardless, making money off digital advertising has always been tricky because it’s difficult to quantify. There are several fuzzy, sometimes conflicting, ways to measure and value digital ads, including hits, page views, impressions, unique visitors, reach, click-throughs, and costs per thousand impressions. And each of those metrics can give the impression of more (or fewer) ad views depending on how it’s sliced. Advertisers paid newspapers more to advertise in their print editions when they knew consumers were opening up one product (an entire newspaper) from one access point (the front page), and perusing its pages. Now, millions of people still read newspaper online, but only in a piecemeal fashion.

For example, news aggregation websites, such as Google News, steer as much as 40% of the visitors to newspaper websites. But such readers often spend less time with a newspaper’s content than when they flip through the printed product or directly visit the paper’s website.
Just as importantly, digital ads are also far less valuable because they’re so easy to ignore. Not only do many consumers dislike the different types of ads that pop up in the digital realm, various software and different apps allow people to strip ads from websites and mobile devices. Advertisers, meanwhile, have embraced ads that aren’t content dependent. Given the choice between advertising next to a potentially controversial story on a newspaper website, or beside search engine results and popular, innocuous websites, many advertisers opt for the latter two. Finally, newspapers have been outgunned by the big tech companies, which spend more on efficiently presenting slick ads, while doing a better job exposing them to people. As one Pew Research Center report put it, “Google and other large tech companies are able to place display ads across a large network of websites and can target that advertising more effectively than a single website (or news organization) can.” Another recent Pew report concluded that, “Advertisers increasingly view Google, Facebook and other social media sites as better venues for their display ads than news outlets.”

As the authors of an FCC report about the future of the media wrote, Google lured advertisers by saying, “Pay us only as many times as people click on your ads,” instead of asking them to take the newspaper approach of hoping someone happens to notice an ad. To make matters worse, newspapers are facing even greater revenue gaps between all the people accessing their news via mobile devices and their ad earnings from the platform. Mobile device ads are worth between half and two-thirds less than what newspapers earn for attracting computer visitors. “Selling advertising on mobile devices is proving difficult” for newspapers, the Wall Street Journal’s Jack Marshall recently wrote. “It is hard to show mobile users enough ads, traditional ad formats like ‘banners’ perform miserably, and publishers can’t easily do sophisticated tracking and targeting of ads.” These issues extend from publishers’ mobile
websites to their apps.” Newspaper industry analyst Alan Mutter predicts things will only get worse as retailers move aggressively toward mobile advertising.\textsuperscript{116} Currently, half the $20 billion in annual advertising revenue that newspapers generate comes from retailers, who are expected to buy nearly $6.7 billion in mobile advertising (up nearly twice as much as other digital ad categories) this year. Mutter doubts most of that money will go to newspapers.

Nowadays, merchants can pay use a complex assortment of cookies to track their customers and potential buyers via cell phone and Web use, and they’re spending big on sophisticated in-store digital signage that connects to mobile devices. Meanwhile, Apple, Google, PayPal, Square, and other companies have mastered the art of capturing consumers’ dollars – and their personal information – via convenient apps that let people instantly pay online and on their phones. The mix of customer data gleaned and inferred from past purchases, captured by cookies, interactive displays, product searches, in store technologies, and payment processing apps create a vivid picture of consumers that newspapers can’t match. And as advertisers get to know their customers better, they get better at selling to them without newspapers. “In the mobile era, retailing is becoming a subtle, sustained and increasingly sophisticated process of psyching-out customers through a relentless blend of cyber-sleuthing, cyber-seduction and cyber-salesmanship,” Mutter wrote. “Unfortunately, print ads and much of the digital advertising sold by most newspapers do not capture the granular data that is the essential ingredient in the smart marketing programs that retailers are cooking up for smartphone owners.”\textsuperscript{117}

It’s a situation that newspapers put themselves in, according to Herndon. Rather than investing heavily in cutting-edge online advertising methods, print left their flank unguarded by assuming their brand names would be enough to attract ads. Newspaper “executives dismissed
the need for innovation,” Herndon wrote, and they watched as Google’s search-based advertising, eBay’s auction listings, Monster.com, and other websites leached their print advertising. “The complacency that underlies such decisions had its roots in profitability,” and preserving it rather than hatching new strategies to address how competitors were coming up with superior ways to serve the public.118 In 2010, Tom Rosenstiel, then a Pew researcher and now the head of the newspaper industry’s trade group, described how print media executives simply couldn’t wrap their heads around new forms of advertising. “If you talk to people at Google they scoff at the kind of display advertising that is in news organizations on news sites because they say it’s too crude,” he said at a panel discussion at the time. “(Newspaper advertising) is not targeted enough. One Google executive told us, ‘We’re in our tenth generation of online ads – you are still on your first.’”119

What Hath Craig Wrought?

If Kenneth Lowe were asked in the 1980s to picture the man who would blow up the newspaper industry’s business model, he probably wouldn’t have envisioned Craig Newmark. Lowe is the tall, square-jawed, handsome, well-coifed, power suit-donning Scripps chief executive of Scripps Interactive. Newmark, as New York magazine memorably described him, was an unremarkable IBM systems engineer for 16 years – a “short,” “schlumpy,” pink-cheeked, pudgy, bald man in an ivy-style Kangol cap, and hip glasses.120 With all due respect to Gil Scott-Heron, not only was Newmark’s revolution untelevised, he didn’t even know he was starting it. By 1995, Newmark was 42 and working at IBM, when he began “craigslist” as a listserv to inform his friends about San Francisco’s arts and cultural events. A year later, he responded to their requests by adding job information and other helpful Bay Area listings, and abandoned email in favor of his new creation – a simple, multi-column online bulletin board full of blue
hypertext links. Today, craigslist still retains that same rudimentary, no-frills website, except nearly one in five Americans use it every day.121

All told, 200 million users in 700 cities across 70 countries search and Post classified ads, most of which are free, to find all kinds of goods and services, including apartments, cars, couches, jobs, dates, and more.122 As craigslist has become the go-to place for all manner of ad listings, newspapers have seen their classified ad revenues destroyed. In 1990, newspapers earned $11.5 billion, or 35% of their advertising income from classified ads.123 By 2000, that total had grown to a peak of $19.6 billion, and it made up 40% of all newspaper ad revenues. But between 2000 and 2013, newspapers’ classified ad income would fall 78% to $4.2 billion. Now, classified ads make up just 17% of all newspaper ad revenues.124 And that revenue source may be fast headed toward extinction, according to journalism researchers John Nichols and Robert McChesney.125 In overall terms, classified ads made up more than 30 cents of every dollar of revenue newspapers earned in 2000, but they currently account for closer to 10 cents. All the same winds blew through Denver. The year craigslist entered the Mile High City in 2001 coincided with the Rocky and the Post entering their Joint Operating Agreement. Tellingly, the JOA didn’t even reference the Web despite the 104 million Americans, who were averaging more than four hours a week online at the time.126 “The Web wasn’t perceived as central to the success of the new business,” Temple said of the time. Scripps envisioned the efficiencies from melding the two papers, plus their newfound ability to jack up ad and subscription rates, would equate to fat returns for Cincinnati each quarter. Instead, from the JOA’s start in 2001 until the Rocky’s 2009 closure, classified revenues plunged more than $100 million, while national and display ads evaporated, too.127
That figure bears repeating. Not long before craigslist, classified ads had once provided upwards of $100 million in revenues for the two papers. After craigslist, that money virtually vanished.128 Meanwhile, craigslist has continued thriving. One media analysis firm has projected the site will earn nearly $400 million in 2015.129 Yet, there’s no reason so many millions of dollars had to go to craigslist or any other number online titans. Before the loss of their ad revenues, newspapers squandered chances to buy, invest in, or develop websites such as craigslist, Amazon, eBay, Facebook, Google, Yahoo!, Monster, Career Builder, Cars.com, Auto Trader, and Zillow.130 The emergence of such sites is the result of newspapers “leaving their advertising position unprotected,” according to the Herndon. Other companies were simply quicker and more innovative in filling the online market’s needs throughout the ’90s and early 2000s. For years, most newspapers treated their classifieds like news content. They retained tight control of both, and simply shoved their static content onto the Internet, while offering limited options for people to search it, interact with it, and communicate with others viewing the news and classifieds.131 “The arrival of the Internet … provided a generation of savvy entrepreneurs like Monster.com and craigslist with just the tool to offer classified for free,” wrote former Rocky editor Michael Madigan. When all those Internet companies emerged to poach ads from the paper, “it was as if someone had pulled the plug on Grand Lake.”132

The Rocky had just as little foresight about the Internet as any other newspaper company. Recall that in 1999, the Rocky led the nation in newspaper advertising by ranking first in total full-run inches. The Rocky was also tops nationally in classified ads with 7.2 million annually. And the paper ran 66% of all its Denver ads in color, or more than any other newspaper in the country.133 Temple once recounted a time early in the paper’s online history when it missed the opportunity to buy the Web domain “Denver.com” because its $50,000 price tag was considered
too pricey. Soon after, the paper hopscotched between names for its site – from “Denver-RMN.com” to “InsideDenver.com” (because management “thought the Web was going to be more about what to do than about news”), and finally to the unwieldy “RockyMountainNews.com.” At a tech conference speech about the Rocky’s closure, Temple asked why newspapers couldn’t have invented Yelp.com, which attracts 135 million unique views each month as people read 71 million reviews of local businesses written by the site’s users.\(^{134}\) Then, he answered his own question:

> Probably because editors would have gone ballistic over reader reviews with misspelled words and would have felt uneasy with reader contributions being given priority. The Rocky’s Web team producing InsideDenver.com used the slogan, ‘Before you go out, go InsideDenver.com,’ that could have led in that direction. But the mission was changed because InsideDenver didn’t sound like a newspaper and didn’t encompass the idea of our all-important classifieds.\(^{135}\)

As Temple pointed out, instead of investing in the niche print, online, and mobile products that could’ve helped their businesses, the Post and the Rocky spent some $200 million to upgrade their printing plant, while building a fancy new headquarters in downtown Denver.

Even when the two papers seemingly hit upon a good idea they somehow missed the mark. Remember the aforementioned citizen journalism website YourHub.com, which they launched in 2006. The Post and the Rocky so misunderstood how the Internet worked that they programmed YourHub.com to not appear in Google’s search results. The point here is that craigslist didn’t explode the newspaper industry’s business model merely because the site now hosts 80 million mostly free classified ads each month.\(^{136}\) As much as anything, it succeeded because Newmark understood the need to impart great agency to his site’s users, and he wasn’t hidebound by old business rules in the same way that newspapers were. Unlike newspapers’ initial online classified ads, craigslist has always given its advertisers ample space to write and publish ads as they see fit, including the choice to post multiple pictures. Craigslist users also can
readily search their ads, instantly contact others online, and even police their little online communities of posters, while the site’s tiny staff of 40 handles the removal of illicit content. And while craigslist doesn’t produce news, the site also has become something of a communal and cultural hub in the way newspapers have historically been likened to town squares. From poetry to politics, craigslist connects users figuratively and even literally. Its users carry on conversations in 100 different topical forums.

They post notes in a “missed connections” section, where a man can publicly lament not approaching with the woman clad in the “green argyle scarf, purple sweater and glasses” on the New York City commuter train last Tuesday (in case she too remembers and regrets not speaking with him). And they set up message boards, such as after Hurricane Katrina, following disasters to ensure their loved ones are alive and receiving the supplies they need. Craigslist itself didn’t invent any of those uses. Its users did. Thus, unlike newspapers, websites like craigslist, Google, and eBay ultimately succeeded at connecting their users to goods and services because they instantly recognized the “immediacy, customizability, and interactivity of the Internet.”

By comparison, as Temple himself admitted, the Rocky’s management “generally saw the Web as a few advertising boxes we could sell. We didn’t see the value of audience.” Or as one Scripps marketing executive put it, “We were not used to the market telling us how things should be. We were used to telling people what we thought they needed and how they needed it.”

Thus, the emergence of craigslist symbolizes a sad reality for newspapers. From the 1980s to the early ’90s, newspapers expected they would either lead or at least heavily influence the leaders of the mass media’s digital revolution. Yet, despite their strong financial resources, and their prime market positions, newspapers failed at becoming Information Age pioneers. As the next chapter documents, part of the reason was their fixation on profits at any cost.
Notes


4 Dave Krieger, “We were the best of teams,” *Rocky Mountain News*, February 27, 2009, final ed., 35.

5 For the claim that “(t)he 1920 (Cox-Harding presidential) campaign was a kind of last hurrah for the old political press,” see: Jeffrey Pasley, *The Tyranny of Printers: Newspaper Politics in the Early American Republic*, University of Virginia Press, 2002, 1. For the claim that newspapers reached their peak period of influence in the 1930s, see: James Beniger, *The Control Revolution: Technological and Economic Origins of the Information Society*, (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1986, 360-362.

6 Beniger, *Control Revolution*, 361.


8 Ibid. 32.


13 Ibid. 354-355.


15 Starr, *Creation of the Media*, 355.


18 Ibid.

According to readership data from Nielsen Scarborough’s 2014 Newspaper Penetration Report, 56% of those who consume a newspaper read it exclusively in print, while 11% also read it on desktop or laptop computers; 5% also read it on mobile; and another 11% read it in print, on desktop and on mobile. In total, more than eight-in-ten of those who read a newspaper do so in print, at least sometimes. Only 5% read newspapers exclusively on mobile devices.


33 Ibid. 275, 215.


37 Ibid.

38 Ibid.


40 Prior, Post-Broadcast Democracy, 256-257.

41 Ibid.

42 Ibid.


45 According to 2010 figures, which use slightly different age brackets, those going “newless” totaled 31% from ages 18 to 24, 21% from ages 25 to 29, 18% from ages 30 to 34, 12% from ages 35 to 49, 11% for ages 50-64, 15% for those older than 65, and 17% overall. See chart created (using data from the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press) by: Steven Waldman and the Working Group on Information Needs of Communities, Information Needs of Communities: The Changing Media Landscape in a Broadband Age (Washington, DC: Federal Communications Commission, 2011), 227.

46 Ibid.


48 Mindich, Tuned Out, 4.


53 Temple, “Did the Internet Kill the Rocky Mountain News?”

54 Dan Gillmor, We the Media: Grassroots Journalism By the People, For the People (Newton, MA: O’Reilly Media, 2006).


60 Ibid. 7. For another book on the subject of how technology has rewired our brains, see: Susan Greenfield, Mind Change: How Digital Technologies Are Leaving Their Mark on Our Brains (NY: Random House, 2015).


66 Ibid.


71 Lowrey and Gade, “Reshaping the Journalistic Culture.” In: Changing the News: The forces shaping journalism in uncertain times, 25.

72 Penenberg, “Newspapers Should Really Worry.”

73 Ibid.


81 Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel, Blur: How to Know What’s True in the Age of Information Overload, reprint ed. (NY: Bloomsbury, 2011).


83 Alterman, “Death and Life of the American Newspaper,” In: Will the Last Reporter Please Turn Out The Lights, 12.


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91 Beniger, *Control Revolution*, 343, 361.


99 The estimate that, as of 2013, newspapers owned a 2.6% market share of all online and mobile advertising in America is based on dividing newspapers’ combined digital revenue total of $3.42 billion by the $120.5 billion total for all such advertising. For 2013 newspaper advertising totals see: “Business model evolving, circulation revenue rising,” *Newspaper Association of America*. For overall digital ad spending figures for 2012, 2013 and 2014, see: Anonymous, “Microsoft to Surpass Yahoo in Global Digital Ad Market Share This Year,” *eMarketer*, July 15, 2014, http://tinyurl.com/o336ch9.

100 “Microsoft to Surpass Yahoo in Global Digital Ad Market Share This Year,” *eMarketer.com*. 204


103 Olmstead, “As digital ad sales grow.”


106 Ibid. 129.


109 Ibid.

110 Ibid. 127.


115 Ibid.


117 Ibid.

118 Herndon, Decline of the Daily Newspaper, 219-220.


In 1990, the newspaper industry’s overall ad revenues totaled $32.28 (with classifieds making up $11.5 billion). In 2000, overall ad revenue totaled $48.67 billion (with $19.6 billion for classifieds). In 2013, the industry’s overall ad revenue equaled $23.57 billion (with $4.21 from classifieds). For industry-wide ad revenue figures between 1950 and 2012 see: “Newspaper Advertising Revenue,” Newspaper Association of America, April 18, 2014, accessed March 6, 2015, http://tinyurl.com/h93xm8o. For the 2013 industry-wide ad revenue total, see: “Business model evolving, circulation revenue rising,” Newspaper Association of America. The NAA does not actually provide a 2013 number for classified advertising on the aforementioned website, but the Association does state, “Classified advertising was off 10.5%.” So, taking 10.5% from $4.68 billion (the industry’s classified ad total from 2012) equates to $4.21 billion. See: Rick Edmonds, “Newspapers: Classified Ad Revenue (in Millions of Dollars),” Pew Research Center’s New Media Indicators Database, website, accessed March 20, 2016, http://www.journalism.org/media-indicators/newspaper-classified-ad-revenue/.


McChesney and Nichols, Life and Death of American Journalism.

Temple, “Did the Internet Kill the Rocky Mountain News?” See also: Michael Madigan, “Rocky’s Long Run, Within a whisper of 150 years,” Rocky Mountain News, final ed., 8-11.


Waldman and the Working Group on Information Needs of Communities Information Needs of Communities, 40.

Herndon, Decline of the Daily Newspaper.


This information came from a June 2000 internal research presentation entitled “The 6-County Denver/Boulder Market.” Matt Baldwin, former director of research at the Rocky Mountain News, and the current president of ShoeString Research Services, emailed it to the author.

Temple, “Did the Internet Kill the Rocky Mountain News?”

Ibid.


Herndon, The Decline of the Daily Newspaper, 164.

139 Susan Mings and Peter White, “Profiting from Online News: The Search for Viable Business Models.” In *Internet Publishing and Beyond*, Brian Kahn and Hal Varian, eds. (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2000), 77. See also, Schuckman, “Commons or gated community?”; “A Web Site as 18-Ring Circus of Supply and Demand.”

140 Temple, “Did the Internet Kill the Rocky Mountain News?”

141 Ibid.

CHAPTER 6
NEWSPAPERS PUT PROFITS OVER PUBLIC SERVICE

Bald and brash, with his gray goatee, 66-year-old real estate tycoon Sam Zell was a tan picture of confidence. It was February 2008, as he stood before the Orlando Sentinel’s newsroom in an unbuttoned blue and white striped dress shirt that exposed a slice of his tan chest. Zell was meeting with the Orlando Sentinel’s staff two months after executing a leveraged buyout that saddled the newspaper’s parent, the former Tribune Co., with $13 billion in debt. (Zell would soon be out of the newspaper business after the deal bankrupted the paper less than a year later).\(^1\) Sentinel photographer Sara Fajardo told Zell that she had considered “revenue and the bottom-line.” But she wanted to hear his “views about journalism and its role and place in the community (because) we’re not the Pennysaver (ad circular), we’re a newspaper.”\(^2\) Zell glowered, clenched the podium, and eyed his questioner. “I want to make enough money so I can afford you,” he snarled in his high, hoarse nasal voice. “You need to, in effect, help me by being a journalist that focuses on what our readers want and therefore generates more revenue. Fajardo pressed him. She still wanted to know his views about journalism and its roles serving the public. “What readers want are puppy dogs. We also need to inform the community.”

Zell shot back that journalists were arrogant in “deciding that puppies don’t count,” and Tribune had to earn enough money by giving readers whatever they wanted until, “hopefully,” their paper earned enough to cover both “puppies and Iraq.” Then, he dismissed Fajardo with a “Fuck you.”\(^3\) Few moments in recent years better illustrate the newspaper industry’s tension between profits and public service, and the role that giant newspaper chains have played in exacerbating it. This chapter details how the shortsighted quest for profits by large newspaper chains’ led to a failure to innovate, the degradation of their productions, and years of price hikes that concealed the newspaper industry’s foundational fissures. As this chapter shows, the
newspaper industry’s approach from the early ’80s until it began to collapse in 2006, fit Harvard economist Michael Porter’s description of a “harvest strategy of eliminating investment and generating maximum cash flow from the business.”4 In the 20 years leading up to the worst part of the industry’s collapse, between 2006 and 2011, large corporate newspaper chains inflated profits by raising prices on ads and subscriptions. All the while, they cut journalists and newspaper pages. Additionally, this chapter traces the twentieth century’s newspaper chain-building boom, and the chapter ends the discussion, which began in the prior chapter, regarding the inability of those chains to adapt to the Digital Age.

To quote Keith Herndon, who was echoing former NYU journalism professor Jay Rosen, the years between the ’80s and mid-2000s were a period of “‘profitable demise’ underscored by the notion that newspaper companies had maintained high profits only by jeopardizing their long-term viability.”5 The last 50 years of the twentieth century were so obscenely profitable for newspapers that they paid little mind to the sociocultural, economic, and technological wolves standing at the industry’s door.6 Lord Thomson, the head of the Canadian newspaper giant Thomson Newspapers, declared that a profit of 45% wasn’t excessive, but anything more than that would be “gouging.”7 And Lexington Kentucky’s Herald Leader once banked 35% operating margins.8 As the 1980s began, the median net profit for American newspaper chains stood at 9.6% or double the same figure for the Fortune 500 Industrials, while newspapers typically logged returns on sales ranging from 14 to 18%.9 Then, between 1991 and 2001, the newspapers industry’s operating margins nearly doubled from 14% to 27%, while advertising revenues climbed 60% and overall profits skyrocketed 207%.10 Everyone’s boats rose. An investor who had bought 2,500 shares of Tribune stock at its initial public offering price of $26.75 in October 1983 would have held $1 million worth of stock by 1999.11 As large
newspaper chains crisscrossed the land, the companies justified their exceptionally high profits on the grounds that they facilitated “the independence required to uphold their end of the social contract free of influence.”

What all the post-World War II chain building resulted in, however, was the creation of new emphases for media managers. According to the media economist Robert Picard, the commercialization, corporatization, consolidation, conglomertization, and financialization of newspapers made profits and share prices the “major factors determining operations and content in major media companies.” Newspaper industry executives, analysts, and academic observers had seen the newspaper business maturing and reaping unsustainably high profits for 20 years before the industry began going into cardiac arrest in 2006, according to journalism scholar Philip Meyer. Yet, near-term earnings took priority over improving the quality of their products and continually investing to retain and build their audiences and secure new business. Whereas a supermarket owner, Meyer pointed out, might seek 2% margins, and a retailer might expect 6 or 7%, newspaper owners continued to chase high profits because they were baked into their revenue model. Bankers and investors based their capitalization of the publications on preset expected returns on their investments. “There was no easy way,” Meyer wrote, “to get from a newspaper industry used to 20 to 40% margins to one that was content with 6 or 7%.” Herndon wrote the consummate description of what the market’s imperatives did to newspapers from 1995 to 2005. “With the ability to earn a respectable long-term return on an investment in the industry in doubt, the financial community hammered newspaper companies for short-term profits.”

The result was a downward spiral fed by budget cuts and layoffs that drained resources and made the prospect of long-term viability even more unattainable. Newspapers had a
simple approach during their period of profitable demise. As former *Chicago Tribune* editor Jim Squires described it, running a successful paper depended on “the highest profitability coming from delivering advertising sold at the highest rates in a paper containing the fewest pages and sold for the highest possible retail price to the fewest high income customers necessary to justify the highest rates to advertisers.” For a while, all of that worked. As chains bought, merged and closed newspapers, the surviving publications benefited from oligopolistic conditions for local news and retail/classified advertising that allowed newspapers to raise prices. In the years leading up to the early 2000s, circulation prices shot up 30 to 40%, and ad prices climbed 20 to 30%, as newspapers grew more dependent on advertising. Advertising, which had made up 66% of the industry’s revenues in 1900, reached a high of 80% that would last for six years beginning in 2000. Now, as of the most recent 2012 data, ad revenues are down to 70%, and they’re fast falling as circulation sales and other business activities constitute a growing part of newspapers’ far-lower overall earnings.

Some newspapers have even experienced what was once unthinkable – earning more from circulation than advertising in a full fiscal year. For the first time since its 1854 founding, the *New York Times* marked the feat in February 2013. The passing of that major milestone for America’s flagship newspaper was decades in the making. When newspapers shed staff and stories from the ’80s to the 2000s, they were gambling that the strength of their name brands would be enough to retain readers and revenues. But as the *Miami Herald’s* president admonished his colleagues at a newspaper industry conference in 1989, “We’ve masked the seriousness of the problems,” of reaching fewer readers and declining advertiser interest, by hiking ad rates and subscription prices. “We’ve just about used all that up.” From 1990 to 2000 alone, the rate of daily newspaper readership fell to 37.5% from 52.6% of Americans.
advertising competitors, from direct mailers to cable channels, only widened the cracks in the industry’s business model. Paper cuts came next, as newspapers preserved profits by shrinking their products and, later, their staffs. From the 1980s to the 2000s, the average newspaper web (i.e. the width of two pages on a press before they’re cut) shrank from 60 inches to between 44 and 48 inches wide. That meant that the typical newspaper page dropped from 15 inches to a width of 11 or 12 inches.

Then, America’s newspapers blew up to their staffs – shedding $1.6 billion worth of editorial capacity just between 2000 and 2010. One in three full-time newsroom employees were laid off, bought out, fired, or lost through attrition, over that span, as the newspaper industry’s overall employment total fell from its recent high of 56,200 in 2000 to 38,000 in 2012. The changing ratio of public relations professionals to reporters puts those cuts into perspective. There were .75 PR people for every reporter in America in 1960. That ratio stood at roughly one to one in 1980. It was two to one in 1990, and as of 2010 PR professionals outnumbered reporters four to one. In perhaps the longest sentence in the history of twentieth century media criticism, Journalist Neil Hickey described the ’90s as a time when newspapers’ were weakening their bonds to the public:

As competition grows more ferocious; as the audience continues to drift away from traditional news sources, both print and television; as the public’s confidence in news organizations and news people continues to decline; as mainstream print and TV news outlets purvey more “lifestyle” stories, trivia, scandal, celebrity gossip, sensational crime, sex in high places, and tabloidism at the expense of serious news in a cynical effort to maximize readership and viewership; as editors collude ever more willingly with marketers, promotion “experts,” and advertisers, thus ceding a portion of their sacred editorial trust; as editors shrink from tough coverage of major advertisers lest they jeopardize ad revenue; as news holes grow smaller in column inches to cosmeticize the bottom line; as news executives cut muscle and sinew from budgets to satisfy their corporate overseers’ demands for higher profit margins each year; as top managers fail to reinvest profits in staff training, investigative reports, salaries, plant, and equipment.
Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Steve Lovelady dubbed such practices the “dog-eats-own-tail school of management.”

John Morton used a different analogy. In 1996, he wrote that the many large dailies had spent the ’80s and ’90s “eating their seed corn,” or pumping up profits by cannibalizing their reporters and coverage until they couldn’t grow or retain readership. After the *Rocky* closed, John Temple, who was simultaneously the paper’s top editor and its highest ranking business executive, lamented that far more of the *Rocky’s* profits should have gone toward research and development. Instead of spending more to create innovative products, newspapers were “looking longingly in the rear view mirror at 30% margins,” he conceded. Did readers really flee newspapers because of all the bloodletting and price increases over the last 35 years? As the previous chapters have shown, those factors alone didn’t do it. But it’s also doubtful anyone buying a newspaper over that span could be heard telling a loved one, “If only my local newspaper had fewer reporters, less news, and a higher price, I’d keep buying it.” As the syndicated columnist Molly Ivins wrote shortly before her 2007 death, the newspaper business had been struggling for years and its solution was to make “our product smaller and less helpful and less interesting.”

Newspapers weren’t just shedding staff and shrinking their pages, they were changing their content to pander to readers and advertisers, according to Harvard’s Alex Jones. Roughly 66% of any given newspaper is devoted to news, while the remainder is reserved for other content. Of the non-advertising space, Jones estimates that 15% (i.e. 10% overall) of a typical newspaper consists of public service and accountability journalism, which he defines as foreign and domestic political news, education stories, and other community coverage. But, during much of the last three decades, the corporate imperatives of attracting audiences and generating profits
led papers to decrease that 15% by varying amounts depending upon the publication. In so doing, Jones wrote, newspapers replaced their “iron core news” with more sports pieces, superficial crime stories, “crowd-pleasing soft news, features, comics, gimmicks, editorials, entertainments, (sic) and amusements.”

The Final Harvest

A decade after Morton’s 1996 *American Journalism Review* column about how all the news cuts, profit mongering, and puppy pictures were unsustainable, his prediction – that newspapers were eating their seed corn – proved prescient. Herndon dates the newspaper industry’s final harvest season to 2006. That’s when Knight-Ridder Co. gave up on newspapering by reaching a $4.1 billion agreement for McClatchy Co. to merge with the company, take full control, and sell many of its papers. (Afterward, Knight-Ridder boss Tony Ridder meekly claimed that he didn’t know McClatchy was going to break up the firm). Herndon sees the Knight-Ridder deal as the moment when investors’ perceptions crystallized around the industry’s long-term viability and profitability. “When Knight-Ridder’s management capitulated,” Herndon wrote, “the episode became symbolic of an entire industry’s plight. The U.S. newspaper industry collectively realized that its era of media dominance had ended.” No longer would investors evaluate newspapers primarily on their short-term profits, now the industry’s long-term prospects mattered, and those looked bleak. How could they not? The second largest American newspaper chain had just decided that going out of business was its best strategic option. And Knight-Ridder wasn’t even in financial trouble. The company just coldly calculated that it couldn’t deliver astronomically high profits anymore, so letting shareholders shatter it would maximize its value.

Author John McManus described the 2006 breakup of Knight-Ridder as the moment newspapers’ had to pay for the Faustian bargain they had struck in “hollowing out newsrooms”
to “stoke their stock prices” for Wall Street. To say that the swift end of the industry’s second-largest newspaper chain spooked bankers and investors would be an understatement. Media economist Robert Picard described Knight-Ridder’s demise as emblematic of the “widespread sense that investors, as well as some newspaper owners and managers, are giving up on the industry” and its future. Stephen Gray, a newspaper trade group leader at the time, captured publishers’ shock and fear when he dubbed Knight-Ridder’s corporate death a “tragedy,” and said, “the wolf is closer to our heels than we thought.” As Herndon put it, “Knight-Ridder’s inability – or unwillingness – to develop a strategy for long-term viability cemented the perception that the newspaper industry had squandered its opportunity to exploit the Internet and had passed into an era of long-term decline.”

Significantly, 2006 also was the first year newspapers experienced a decline in advertising dollars after decades of growth through rate increases. That year, “investors in the newspaper industry had moved beyond evaluating companies on short-term profits,” Herndon wrote. Instead, “they were far more interested in the newspaper industry’s long-term prospects.” Those were bleak. As mentioned, the newspaper industry’s advertising revenues fell from a peak of $49.27 billion in 2005 to a trough of $20.71 billion in 2013. And total circulation revenues reached their high of $11.02 billion in 2003 before, falling to their record low of $10.44 billion in 2012. No longer would banks and investors support the kinds of megadeals that had linked newspapers to immense chains in past decades. Many of the big-ticket purchases that helped sink newspaper companies had actually occurred as recently as the late ’90s and the early 2000s, when they were flush with capital and searching for growth opportunities to please investors.
By then, newspaper chains had already spent three decades consolidating their industry. So, the companies began to eat each other. Corporations traded newspapers like baseball cards in the period from 1994 to August 2000, swapping them 713 times. In less than a decade, from 1993 to 2007, the number of publicly traded newspaper companies was halved as “seven large chains were bought by other large chains at a cost of $24 billion.” To finance the transactions, big, publicly traded newspaper companies piled up debt and filled their books with goodwill—both of which would soon return to haunt them. The debt came from banks and bonds. The goodwill came in the form the value newspapers estimated for their intangible assets (e.g. their masthead brands, customer rosters, and advertiser lists) not reflected in what they’d just overpaid to buy other newspapers. Why spend too much on purpose to buy other newspapers?

With their stocks trading at premium prices after years of high returns, and their revenues reaching all-time highs from the ’90s to 2005, overpriced acquisitions were a way for newspapers to grow under-used capital for their profit-hungry shareholders. There were few newspapers to buy, and because there was little desire to invest in new media startups along the lines of Google, chains began buying other chains. Obviously, newspaper companies weren’t merely dumping excess capital. Newspapers believed their future profits would more than compensate for any short-term overspending to get them. But nothing would go as planned. Just as Knight-Ridder consented to let McClatchy buy, and quickly break up much of the company in 2006, and the newspaper industry’s ad revenues plunged, spooked investors fled the print media sector. As the communications scholar John Soloski wrote of the period from the 1990s to the mid-2000s:

Overpaying for the chains would not have been much of a problem if the newspaper business continued to operate as it always had. But it didn’t. The acquisitions could not have been more ill-timed. They occurred just as their
advertising markets went into free fall. This was the newspaper industry’s perfect storm: paying a premium prices for large acquisitions just as revenues collapsed.46

The depths of the newspaper industry’s recent crash are visible in a few choice statistics from eight of what were the largest publicly traded newspaper firms (Gannett, Lee Enterprises, Media General, New York Times, Tribune, McClatchy, Washington Post, and Journal Register).

Between 2006 and 2011, those eight big newspaper companies wrote off a stunning $19 billion in goodwill assets as investors lost faith in their value and acquisitions.47 A negative chain reaction had begun, which set the stage for the bankruptcy of the Denver Post’s owner, MediaNews, while creating the tumultuous newspaper industry conditions under which Scripps decided the Rocky was no longer worth operating. In just five years between the aforementioned eight newspaper companies’ most and least valuable years in 2004 and 2009, their combined market value tumbled to $6.2 billion from $48.9 billion.48 Falling newspaper values triggered loan clauses that led to unfavorable terms, including higher interest rates and greater collateral requirements, and the rest is history. Highly leveraged, saddled with debt, and worth less than ever, a long line of newspaper companies failed between 2008 and 2013. Eight major newspaper companies created an alphabetical list of bankruptcies just from 2008 to 2010.

The first big newspaper chains to go belly up included American Community Newspapers, Freedom Communications, Journal Register Co., the Denver Post’s owner MediaNews Co., Philadelphia Newspapers LLC, Sun-Times Media Group, Star Tribune Holdings Co., and Tribune Co.49 Another three newspaper companies, Lee Enterprises, Journal Register Co. and Gatehouse Media, respectively followed suit from 2011 to 2013.50 Ironically, MediaNews, which had rocketed to the rank of America’s second-biggest newspaper company before its creditors swallowed it in 2010, facilitated the transaction that signified the industry’s undoing. McClatchy received $1 billion toward its merger with of Knight-Ridder when
MediaNews bought four of the company’s former papers in an April 2006 deal that helped Singleton assemble 11 daily papers in and around the Bay Area. (Hearst Corp. was a minority investor in the deal).\textsuperscript{51} MediaNews’ role in facilitating Knight-Ridder’s breakup is not without a hint of irony. Before the collapse of the print media in the mid-2000s, many newspaper owners were more focused on short-term returns than effectively planning to ensure their future success.

Now, a short-term vision is the official strategy in the offices of Alden Global Capital, which is the dominant shareholder of MediaNews’ former assets. Although so many newspapers went bankrupt in recent years, their debt from over-aggressive expansion was actually what pushed them into failure, not their earnings. Newspapers may no longer turn out 20% profits, but many publications still monopolize their markets and boast high single- and even low double-digit operating margins, which have made them tempting takeover targets.\textsuperscript{52} In recent years, private equity funds specializing in turning around distressed companies have swallowed bankrupt newspapers like hotdogs at a Coney Island eating contest. Institutional investors/mutual funds snapped up dominant shares for the lowest possible price-to-earnings multiples, and raised revenues through cost-cutting measures, including layoffs and publication day reductions. Then, after what often takes three to five years, they’ve sold the newspaper companies – together or split apart depending on what maximizes returns.\textsuperscript{53} As of 2010, hedge funds such as Alden, Angelo Gordon, Apollo, Blackstone, Cerberus, and Providence held a collective ownership stake of between 60 and 90% of America’s ten largest publicly traded newspaper companies.\textsuperscript{54}

Herndon has blamed the fate that has befallen papers like the \textit{Denver Post} on a failure of imagination among newspaper executives when their publications still ruled the media world. Whereas the Internet empowered users to interact, share and communicate, traditional publishers were unwilling, or unable, to fundamentally alter a business model, and a culture, that profited
from information control. “As early as 1980, newspaper industry critics were cajoling executives to think about a broader market – an information marketplace rather than the specific product called a newspaper,” Herndon wrote. Yet, just as railroad executives made the fatal mistake of believing they were in the business of trains and tracks rather than transportation, newspapers didn’t realize they were an information delivery industry, not a printing profession. Newspaper executives falsely believed in “the preeminence of print,” and so they erred in attempting to replicate the format, while controlling the product in the online realm. They neither envisioned nor adjusted fast enough to a news-hungry world online without spatial and temporal constraints, the generalizable products had to become customizable, and all news could be local and global.

Thriving in the Internet Age required the early recognition of a digital realm where static paper publishing would have to become interactive, multimedia storytelling; and every newspaper reader could become a competing publisher. Throughout the ’90s the Rocky Mountain News’ leaders “thought we were in the newspaper business,” John Temple, the paper’s former editor and publisher, said in speech explaining the paper’s closure. “At a newspaper,” he added:

(P)eople largely think about tomorrow. In the Web era, you need to think of now and forever. Thinking about tomorrow isn’t enough anymore. Consumers today want services when, where and how they want them, and they want to be able to participate, not just receive. That means that thinking like a newspaper is not enough.

As the next section shows, newspapers closed in great numbers throughout the twentieth century. But it took just a few years, from approximately 2006 to 2011, for the giant newspaper chains that had been built over the previous century to become bankrupt behemoths bent on closing papers across America. The next section recounts the innovations that made newspapers
commonplace, the rise of chain ownership, the twentieth century history of closures, and why so many big newspaper companies failed in the 2000s.

**The Rise and Fall of Newspaper Chains**

A city with one newspaper, or with a morning and an evening paper under one owner, is like a man with one eye, and often the eye is glass,

–A.J. Liebling

When Alexis de Tocqueville toured America in the early 1831, he found “stage coaches dropping off newspapers in the wilderness” for remote citizens. “In America, there is scarcely a hamlet which has not its own newspaper,” the aristocratic Frenchman observed. The newspaper-mad nation that de Tocqueville encountered in the early 1830s boasted 1,265 papers, 90 of which were dailies compared with 369 papers, including 17 dailies, in Great Britain. America’s per capita newspaper circulation rate was likely two- to three-times higher than that of England despite its larger overall population. Little did de Tocqueville know it, but America’s newspaper total was about to climb precipitously as new communications, transportation technologies, and modern printing methods lowered the costs of mass production and distribution. By roughly the end of the Civil War until the 1960s, at least two daily papers competed in most American cities of at least 120,000. The widespread adoption of technology to manufacture newsprint from paper, instead of rags, in the 1860s and the 1886 invention of speedy linotype presses and web printing made newspapers ubiquitous.

The Industrial Revolution of the 1800s brought merchandise in search of a market. Newspaper advertising helped supply it. And modern information technology and transportation systems, from trains and steam ships to telegraphs and Trans-Atlantic cables, delivered it across the world. This chapter, however, is less concerned with the growth of newspapers than with their closures. Specifically, why were so many of the newspapers opened in the nineteenth
century swept away in a wave of twentieth century consolidation? And why did so many fail in the 2000s? The death of newspapers began, slowly enough, in the first half of the twentieth century as competition naturally thinned the ranks of competing dailies in mid-sized markets. But the pace of the closures really accelerated, and hit big cities, with the rise of newspaper chains, which merged afternoon and morning papers and shut down less profitable publications in the years following World War II. Three main factors drove the formation of so many American newspaper chains in the second half the twentieth century: technology-driven printing innovations (efficiencies to be had), skyrocketing advertising revenues (money to be made), and a new tax rule (inheritances for family owners to pass on before Uncle Sam took a bigger cut).

**Newspaper Chains Rise and Fall**

Business historian Elizabeth Neiva has documented all three, beginning with how the U.S. newspaper industry’s early 1950s switch from clunky linotype printing to photocomposition made newspapers radically more efficient, profitable, and valuable properties. The change made newspapers even bigger business as their more streamlined operations reaped ad revenues from America’s booming post-World War II economy. Over that 50-year span, newspapers would go on to earn more than three times as much at their advertising peak in 2000 ($66.2 billion) compared with the $20 billion they brought home in 1950 (after adjusting for inflation). It didn’t take long for the Wall Street, banks, and the Internal Revenue Service to notice all the moneymaking. Communications scholar Núria Almiron has described the twentieth century’s second half as an era when papers switched their primary allegiances from readers to the banks and markets that capitalized, corporatized, consolidated, and commercialized the newspaper industry. Although newspaper barons like William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer pioneered newspapers as a big business in the nineteenth century, E.W. Scripps and Frank Gannett popularized public chain ownership in the twentieth century.
Meanwhile, investors grew newspaper companies to sizes and values that would have been unimaginable to the early Americans de Tocqueville visited. By 1975, most of America’s 17 largest newspaper chains had listed stock, including Gannett (1967). As the author John McManus wrote, “Once newspapers discovered Wall Street in the 1960s, chain ownership spread like a sniffle in a daycare center.”

Ten other corporations, including the New York Times Co., the Washington Post Co., and Times Mirror, went public between 1969 and 1973. The Knight and the Ridder companies separately joined the stock market in 1969, before merging in 1974. Scripps, which didn’t join the stock market until 1988, and Tribune (1983) came to the party late. But those – and a number of other big newspaper chains including private companies such as Cox, Dow Jones, Hearst, and Advance – spent the latter half of the twentieth century snapping newspapers like the feudal lords of old consolidating territories.

In the 1960s, the feds demanded their cut. That’s when the IRS “began appraising papers according to their market values (or what a potential buyer might pay), not according to their book values (or the sum total of their assets).” As a result of the new appraisal process, smaller family-owned papers sold out, and “larger family-owned newspaper companies were warding off punishing inheritance taxes and finding money for expansion by going public.” Selling papers also allowed family owners to avoid implementing tough decisions to make their newspapers more efficient, including cutting extraneous family members from their payrolls and buying costly new photocomposition printing technology. As chains consolidated the industry, the total number of dailies in America plummeted. In 1950, America was home to 1,772 daily newspapers, 80% of which were published in the afternoon. By 2000, the overall newspaper total was down to 1,480. And as of 2014, there were 1,331 dailies, 72% of which publish in the morning. In all, nearly one in five daily newspapers closed in the 50-year period between 1950
and 2000, as morning newspapers emerged as the monopolistic victors over their afternoon rivals.  

Whether a town has one or two newspapers has a real effect on those living there. Those residing in two newspaper towns are capable of naming more political problems, and can cite far more reasons for their voting decisions. Even after controlling for individuals’ education levels and political interests, the communications scholars Peter Clarke and Eric Fredin showed that people living in areas with competing daily papers were better informed than those in monopoly newspaper towns. And they concluded that declining newspaper penetration rates, less competition among papers, and the shift to TV news were weakening the public’s understanding of all parties. Seattle Times associate publisher Ryan Blethen, a fifth generation member of the family that has owned the newspaper since 1896 has been vocal in lamenting the loss of two-paper towns. Blethen has decried the passing of local newspaper ownership and blamed publicly traded firms for degrading and closing newspapers. In 2009, Blethen noted that just six of the nation’s top fifty markets were home to locally owned and operated metro newspapers/websites (including Seattle, Pittsburgh, Columbus, Atlanta, Washington D.C. and New York).

The “crusading publishers of the past,” he noted, have been “replaced by executives with a laser focus on increasing quarterly profits while sacrificing the journalism needed to sustain America’s democracy.” Philip Meyer, who’s studied how chain ownership affects newspaper quality, has a more nuanced view. He thinks that family-owned newspaper chains have been guilty of the same sins as publicly owned companies – awarding high compensation packages, elevating profits über alles, price gouging, and squelching competition. Just recall E.W. Scripps’ early demand that bare bones newspapers crank out double-digit returns and his trailblazing use of JOAs, or read about other dynastic profit-seekers, such as the Chandlers. In
the end, for all their talk of an obligation to serve the public through their newspapers, like the *Los Angeles Times*, they sold Times Mirror to Tribune in 2000. In 2007, the Chandlers cashed out for good – divesting their last chunk of newspaper shares as the industry’s stock prices careened toward their epic recent crater.83 Not long after that in 2009, Sam Zell’s executives would bankrupt the company, ethically and financially, as they drank, smoked, talked sex, and played poker in its historic offices.84

Or simply consider the Blethens themselves. They shrunk the *Seattle Times*’ newsroom to 165 from 310 from 2004 to 2009 and sought to close the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, with which the *Times* had a JOA, until 2009. That year, the *Post-Intelligencer* switched to an online-only format and cut its staff from 165 to 25.85 Simply put, “there was no Golden Age in which the typical publisher was a self-sacrificing paragon, eager to demonstrate his rectitude by trading profits for high ideals,” according to Harvard’s Alex Jones. “Nor was there an Arcadia when news was not sometimes compromised by laziness, human error, greed, and bias.”86 Perhaps the most comprehensive and damning study regarding public chain ownership came in the form of the 2001 book *Taking Stock: Journalism and the Publicly Traded Newspaper Company*. Gilbert Cranberg, Randall Bezanson and John Soloski spent four years using a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods to examine the seventeen largest publicly traded newspaper corporations in the U.S.

At the time, the companies they studied produced half of Americans’ daily newspaper news, and all the private and public newspapers chains combined served three in four daily readers in the early 2000s. Their lengthy study revealed that big chain ownership led to smaller staffs and fewer dollars spent on the news, which degraded newspapers’ quality and accuracy; the reduction of coverage for lower-income readers; more specialized news focused on building
circulation among the most profitable demographics; a homogenization of the news to the
detriment of local readers; newsrooms that lost editorial independence to investor demands; and
business and editorial shifts away from readers and toward a loyalty to market imperatives.⁸⁷
Cranberg and company concluded that “(t)he news has become secondary, even incidental, to
markets and revenues and margins and advertisers and consumer preferences.”⁸⁸ And they
emphatically added, “At its worst, the publicly traded newspaper company, its energy entirely
drawn to the financial market’s unrealistic and greedy expectations, can become indifferent to
news and, thus, ultimately to the fundamental purposes served by news and the press.”⁸⁹

Others, such as the political scientist Johanna Dunaway, have found that corporate-owned
newspapers were far less likely than privately owned papers to produce stories containing
“substantive or informative content for use in voting.”⁹⁰ Instead, publicly owned chains were
more likely to provide horse race coverage about likely election winners and stories that focus on
the candidates’ superficial traits.⁹¹ Various studies also have attempted to characterize and
measure the potential relationships among newspaper ownership (public/private,
chain/independent), profits, levels of investment in the news, and quality. Publicly owned
newspapers earn higher profits, but newspapers with lower profits spend more on their
operations when they face competition, according to a study led by Michigan State Professor
Stephen Lacy.⁹² And Miles Maguire at the University of Wisconsin concluded that “ownership
and structure do matter” in that they correlate “with changes in the quality and quantity of news
coverage.”⁹³ But those studies represent just one small sample from a wide body of research on
how different types of ownership affect newspapers. The wider body of literature is more mixed.
Maybe, Jones put it best in his earlier quote. No type of newspaper owner – public or private,
chain or otherwise – is immune to putting the market before their journalistic missions.
None of it – not the chains that linked newspapers across America and especially not the revenue model in which 80% came from advertising – was foreordained. As the media ethicists Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel have pointed out, it was just a “happy accident” that a “commercial system (advertising) evolved to subsidize a civic good (professional journalism),” during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.94 The use of that advertising-based business model to support a professional, socially responsible press worked relatively well when newspapers were needed to introduce sellers and buyers. “Newspapers never made money on ‘news,’” Hal Varian, Google’s chief economist, told the Atlantic magazine in 2010. “Serious reporting, say from Afghanistan, has simply never paid its way. What paid for newspapers were the automotive sections, real-estate, home-and-garden, travel, or technology, where advertisers could target their ads.”95 But by the 2000s, as new media technologist and author Clay Shirky memorably wrote, “Wal-Mart” was no longer willing “to subsidize the Baghdad bureau.”96 Because newspapers operate in two-sided markets – dependent on advertisers and readers – the Digital Age packed a dangerous double whammy for the print model.

As discussed, the Internet supplied advertisers with a glut of more efficient, lower costing promotional options than buying space in newspapers, while consumers watched the value of content plummet as the news became decoupled from newspapers. Today’s media companies can no longer force consumers to buy all sorts of detritus before they see, read, hear, or play with information and communications technologies. Before the Digital Age, media companies forced consumers to buy an entire role of film to develop one photo, an encyclopedia set to read just one entry, an album to hear one song, and one big copy of the newspaper to read a single story.97 That was the business model newspapers knew – high fixed first-copy production costs (e.g. for paying staff), and low variable costs (e.g. for paper, ink, and distribution) that decreased as
readership increased. And it worked until the Internet made two things possible. Users could pay bupkis to read newspaper stories piecemeal on the Web. And businesses are now only willing to pay 5 or 10 cents on the dollar to advertise online versus what they paid for print ads because they have such a surfeit of places to advertise.\textsuperscript{98} In the end, newspapers made three mammoth mistakes in attempting to adapt to those changes.

**The First Mistake**

First, newspapers expected to use an analog business model in a digital realm, and they realized their error far too late to correct it. As 1993 brought the birth of Mosaic, the first mainstream browser, and 1996 ushered in a congressional act to open the Internet, most newspaper chains believed their print business model would work the same way on the Web. Like the first broadcast television and radio stations, newspapers thought they could use online content as a loss leader to attract the audience, who lured the advertisers, who paid for the creation of the news. As millions of Americans began surfing the Web in the ’90s, newspaper chains assumed online advertising would simply materialize, as it had for TV and radio, and gradually grow so bountiful and valuable that it would fund operations.\textsuperscript{99} Media industry analyst Alan Mutter believes newspapers committed their own “original sin” by giving away their content because of faulty, overly optimistic reasoning about the future of online advertising.\textsuperscript{100} Such thinking was on display early when, in the fall of 1993, the Associated Press and several major newspaper chains struck deals to provide free content to 3.9 million subscribers of the largest Internet service providers, CompuServe and Prodigy.\textsuperscript{101} The aforementioned birth of Mosaic, however, quickly rendered the ISPs obsolete because it gave Internet users the freedom to “travel through the online world along paths of whim and intuition.”\textsuperscript{102}

To the consternation of newspapers, most Americans chose to begin their browsing experiences through search engines such as Google rather than via the ISPs homepages and one-
stop-shop portals for search, news, online shopping, and email (e.g. MSN and Yahoo.com). Newspaper chains pivoted to providing free content on their own websites, and to letting the news aggregation websites of search engines (e.g. Google News) link to them for free, and selling some of their content to online portals (e.g. MSN.com). But advertisers began ditching newspapers’ websites in favor of the more popular, aesthetically pleasing, user-friendly portals, other slick websites, and search engines, which are appealing for their sophisticated ad-targeting and audience measurement techniques. By the time the newspapers realized they’d never recoup their first copy costs by using free content as a loss leader for online advertising, it was too late, according to Mutter. The chains had acculturated Internet users to expect the news to be free since the early days of the Web, and they’d devalued their content as a result. A few exceptions, including purveyors of specialty content such as the Wall Street Journal, always charged online. But many papers didn’t, and they’ve fought an uphill battle as they tried digital paywalls, micropayments, and subscription services. More than eight in ten online news consumers told the Pew Research Center that they would simply seek their news elsewhere if their favorite newspaper websites began charging.

The Second Mistake

Second, newspapers misconstrued their business model to be centrally contriving and linearly conveying “the news” instead of fulfilling public demand to create and share information in all its potentially beneficial, convenient, and profitable forms. Given their print dominance, newspapers assumed people merely had to adjust to using their digital products, but it was the newspapers themselves that had to adapt their business models to be relevant and profitable in the online realm. The print playbook wouldn’t work in a digital world where the personal computer penetration rate skyrocketed from fewer then one in ten American households to nearly one in four, between 1984 and 1993. And the number of Internet-hosting computers rose from
5.8 million in 1995 to 72 million in January 2000.\textsuperscript{109} Too often the online versions of papers were just that – like paper, static, and lacking in interactivity, and when they did allow features such as comment boards, they were too tightly policed.\textsuperscript{110} Many newspapers employed software that automatically shoveled their print content straight to the Internet with few if any enhancements and nearly nothing, such as videos or bonus content, to differentiate their websites from their traditional products. Throughout the ’90s and even into the 2000s, some newspapers even embargoed news from their websites until they could publish it in their printed morning editions, which allowed other websites to lure those seeking breaking news.\textsuperscript{111}

That was the case in Denver. Despite assigning a team that would win a Pulitzer for its photography of the 1999 Columbine school shooting, the Rocky decided to give its best photos to the Associated Press rather than using them to attract attention to its website. Despite working in a newspaper newsroom, the Rocky’s Web team was forced to rely on TV reports to update their website. After the Rocky’s closure Temple rued the memory of a city editor telling a Web producer, “I’m not giving you anything for the website (because) they (at the Denver Post) will steal it.”\textsuperscript{112} Newspapers’ online efforts to perpetuate the culture of information control they’d so successfully managed to create offline also neglected to account for the maxim that “information wants to be free.”\textsuperscript{113} When writer and hacker conference founder Stewart Brand uttered those oracular words in 1984, he touched on the paradox of the Instant Information Age. Digital technologies make news more valuable because they can get more of it, and get it faster, than ever before.

But by making the news even more valuable, it’s becomes invaluable. The public wants the news so badly, and they can get it so easily, that news outlets can’t easily contain and charge for it.\textsuperscript{114} Newspapers accepted that some of their content (e.g. sports scores, weather reports,
stock quotes) would become worthless due to their newfound ubiquity online. But they didn’t expect to lose so much control over nearly all their content, from local news to classified ads. Just as people could share the bootlegged digital versions of songs and movies, the Internet made it easy to copy and paste newspaper articles onto websites that hadn’t paid to display them. One federal study in recent years found that “70,101 online news articles generated 400,000 cases of articles being printed without permission.” And many of the websites earned Internet ad revenues from republishing the content because search engines often can’t, or don’t, distinguish between pirated and original content.

The Third Mistake

Third, newspapers failed to continually innovate when their early projects weren’t profitable, and when they did, they expected everything to be just like a newspaper. Instead of leading the Information Age, newspapers fell into a “technology cynicism that fomented protectionism,” the new media scholar Keith Herndon wrote. And when experiments weren’t immediately profitable, particularly from the ’70s through the ’90s, newspapers flinched. “Rather than invest in new technologies at a level required to make a difference, newspaper companies allowed those funds to flow to the bottom line, inflating current profits at the expense of long-term planning,” Herndon added. Few major chains wanted to gamble on fundamentally reinventing their business model in the ’90s when neither investors or they themselves understood the Internet. As a 1996 Editor & Publisher article put it, “Web publishers are betting there’s gold in them thar hills. The problem is, nobody knows where, how to mine it, or even for certain if it’s there.” That does not, however, mean that newspapers didn’t try to innovate.

Many newspapers spent millions of dollars on cable systems in the ’70s, either founding or heavily investing in them early, only to often sell them off too quickly. Then, there was Videotex in ’80s – an early online system that allowed Americans to bank, email, shop, and read
news on televisions connected to phone lines. Several major newspaper chains, including Knight-Ridder, lost tens of millions of dollars trying to develop what amounted to America’s first Internet. But the service, which shared similarities with Europe’s teletext, never attracted enough subscribers willing to pay for expensive hardware and a subscription to receive static news and information transmitted to their TVs via their telephones. Newspapers also tried to sell Audiotex (a news hotline with a simple voice response system that allowed callers to obtain prerecorded news and information), fax delivery in the ’80s and the early ’90s. As the Internet emerged in the early ’90s, many newspapers bet big on online bulletin boards – primitive websites full of stories and useful local information, every Internet users’ starting point.121

Other efforts followed in the early ’90s. Newspapers formed partnerships to provide news and content for the first popular dial-up Internet service providers – AOL, CompuServe and Prodigy. Such proprietary dial-up services failed to take off partly because they offered so-called “walled gardens,” or websites that managed users’ online experiences, but the public gravitated to free Internet browsers instead.122 In another experiment during the mid-’90s, eight newspaper chains teamed up, bickered bitterly for 18 months, and spent $25 million on what they called the New Century Network initiative – an unsuccessful stab at making an online news hub.123 And, of course, newspapers also dropped tens of millions of dollars more on building their own websites, though it took till the mid-2000s before most moved beyond rudimentary, unattractive sites that were barely updated.124 The takeaway here is that newspapers’ early embrace of Videotex, Audiotex, bulletin board, portals, proprietary online services, and even their early websites betrayed the industry’s inability to view the Internet as a new platform. To Herndon, newspapers’ investments didn’t pay off because they refused to see new media projects as anything other than an extension of their paper products. Knight-Ridder, for example, decided to
kill Viewtron partly because those using it spent 80% of their online time using its interactive features such as email, bulletin boards, and educational study guides. As a result, the company was making most of its money off time-based Internet-usage charges. That meant that Knight-Ridder was spending roughly eight in ten dollars to create news, but journalism was only generating 20% of the project’s revenue. As Viewtron’s former leader recalled 17 years later after its 1986 shutdown, “The more closely we approached a viable service, the less it looked like a newspaper.”

Had newspapers recognized that – surprise, surprise – they had just discovered the commercial market for mainstream Internet use in the mid-1980s, the whole course of the industry’s contemporary history might have changed. Instead, as one Knight-Ridder editor recalled, the company “decided that this was not a news medium and they wanted to continue to be a news company.”

Knight-Ridder’s research director, Roger Fidler, even wrote a visionary essay about tablet computers in 1981, and in 1994 the company unveiled mock versions that are eerily similar to Apple’s iPad. Alas, a year later, Knight-Ridder abandoned that project, too, ostensibly to focus all its attention on the Internet. When it came to digital innovation, the payoffs had to be immediate for newspapers to keep investing in their projects. And all of them were designed for newspapers to perpetuate the central control of news production and dissemination in the online realm, not for formulating new and novel forms of creation, communication, and collaboration. As the new media scholar Keith Herndon put it, “In looking forward, the newspaper industry envisioned an online marketplace that would largely resemble its offline world. In this market, large media companies centrally created content, controlled its distribution, and relied on advertisers to pay for the majority of it.”
A 2005 interview between a CNN reporter and Google ad executive Omid Kordestani compare how Google and newspapers approached online advertising. As Kordestani told his interviewer:

The difference between us and our (newspaper) competition is that we innovate through applying technology. The angle of a media company is you’re packaging content or advertising inventory. We look at ads as commercial information, and that goes back to our core mission of organizing the world’s information. When people in the media world hear this, they say, “What are these guys talking about?”

When newspapers came up with new technological ideas, such as Videotex, they did so “from the standpoint of a publishing mindset that had historically evolved over a couple of centuries of producing content for a large number of readers,” Boczkowski wrote. Thus, they pursued innovation “less out of a conviction that they needed to alter their production procedures and values to create an entirely different media artifact than because this was something that they ‘had to do.’” To make matters worse, newspapers dubbed anything that didn’t make money a “failure,” and became risk adverse as a result, Herndon added. Print media executives even derived a false sense of security from their early digital products not catching on, according to Boczkowski, because it “reassured them about the viability of print.”

In Denver, the Rocky Mountain News was no wiser than its newspaper industry brethren, according to its former editor and publisher John Temple. In 1995, the year Netscape, Windows 95, and Amazon began, the Rocky partnered with the Colorado Rockies baseball team to create a website with news, stats and scores about the team. It was the same year Colorado’s top TV news station unveiled its first website, which featured a picture of the station’s building, an address, and a phone number but lacked links or news. Five years earlier, in 1990, the Rocky had made what it considered a major strategic digital move. Those who wanted to read the paper on their computers could request its “A La Carte Edition,” which was accessible via the...
proprietary software the paper mailed to the few thousand users who requested it. The Rocky already had the distinction of being the first American newspaper to publish news of the first Gulf War’s outbreak, after it posted the big story online at 5:29 p.m. on January 16, 1991 – 12 hours before most newspapers hit doorsteps.

But the Rocky’s online service failed, according to Temple, because the paper never actually gave it a chance to succeed. While planning the digital edition’s launch, “We wrote that the goal of the new edition, was ‘ultimately to strengthen and preserve the printed daily newspaper,’” he recalled. Nine months later, when the service was shut down, Temple was told it was because “we just couldn’t show that it was having any measurable impact on the retention of print subscribers and it wasn’t producing revenue.”

The Rocky’s first dedicated website arrived a year later on March 1, 1996. As Temple remembered, no significant budget, staff resources or long-term thought went into the paper’s website. A small team on the night copy desk, who happened to have learned code, launched it for no other reason than that the Denver Post already had a website. Almost immediately, the Rocky’s Web staff members were moved to another floor of the newspaper’s building to dodge the unionized newsroom’s pay and rules. Their marching orders were clear – “Do not let it interfere with the print edition,” Temple told a conference after the Rocky’s closure. The paper’s leaders knew the paper needed to be on the Web. “But we didn’t have a clear strategy, mission, or objective,” Temple said. “We perceived the Web site as a newspaper online, as a complement to the paper, not as its own thing.”

The Rocky’s lack of a clear online strategy stood in stark contrast to its print edition goals of earning strong profits and destroying the Post in the process. “We didn’t understand the Web or new technology and didn’t have the time to learn much about it,” Temple said. “We weren’t a
consumer-driven company, except that we knew our priority was to get papers on the porch on
time in the morning. Otherwise, we feared our subscribers would switch to our competitor.”

As the chapters to this point have shown, the Rocky made its fair share of Denver-specific
decisions that contributed to its closure, and Scripps simply decided it didn’t want to run
newspapers anymore. But the Rocky’s struggles also mirrored wider industry turmoil that was
decades in the making. Despite the dawn of the Digital Age, newspapers, the Rocky included,
were unable to move beyond their Industrial Age factory mindset toward linearly delivering
news and information. If the Sergey Brins and the Larry Pages of the new media world were the
industrious, farsighted ants when they founded Google in 1998, newspaper chains were the fat,
improvident grasshoppers. Upstart information communications technology companies
considered new ways to monetize the Web. Newspapers, however, have social responsibilities
that Google lacks – special duties outlined at length in the next chapter. Ironically, by making it
easy for people to instantly locate knowledge on the Internet, Google immediately recognized
what the print media lost sight of. News and information are not merely widgets to be produced
and distributed at a low cost and a high profit. They’re an essential part of daily life.

Notes

1 The description of Sam Zell meeting with the Orlando Sentinel’s staff is drawn from watching a video recording of
the meeting. See: “Tribune Owner Sam Zell says ‘F#@k You’,” YouTube video, 1:27 minutes, posted by Scott
Jones of FTVlive.com, uploaded February 4, 2008, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LDy7vn7-LX4. See also:
For additional information about the Zell’s brief, catastrophic ownership of Tribune Co., see: James O’Shea, The
Deal from Hell: How Moguls and Wall Street Plundered Great American Newspapers (NY: PublicAffairs/Perseus

2 “Tribune Owner Sam Zell says ‘F#@k You,’” YouTube video.

3 Ibid.

4 Michael Porter, Competitive Strategy: Techniques for analyzing industries and competitors (NY: Free Press,
2004).

5 Keith Herndon, The Decline of the Daily Newspaper: How an American Institution Lost the Online Revolution


8 Ibid.


12 Herndon, Decline of the Daily Newspaper, 212.


15 Herndon, Decline of the Daily Newspaper, 205.


17 Picard, “Commercialism and Newspaper Quality.”


33 Alex Jones offers a number of examples of non-iron core news, including stories about “puppies” and “weekend getaways,” “recipes for cooking great chili,” “diet tips,” “movie reviews,” and “advice on buying real estate.” See: Alex Jones, *Losing the News: The Future of the News that Feeds Democracy*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 1, 2, 14-18.


40 Herndon, Decline of the Daily Newspaper, 194.

41 Ibid.

42 The Newspaper Association of America’s revenue estimates, which are included in this study, represent the combined totals for the online and print versions of traditional advertising categories (i.e. retail, national, and classified advertising) from their 2005 high of $49.27 billion to their 2013 low of $20.71 billion. Beginning with the NAA’s 2012 annual report (for the newspaper industry’s 2011 revenue totals), the Association began collecting a more comprehensive list of newspaper companies’ advertising revenue sources. Beginning in 2011, the NAA stopped tallying the newspaper industry’s ad revenues by only combining online and print revenues for retail, national and classified advertising. That year, the NAA also began including advertising revenues from newspapers’ niche publications, direct marketing efforts, and other non-daily publications created to house advertising. This study’s decision not to include the revenue from those other categories does not change the spirit of the point expressed herein. Simply put, the newspaper industry has suffered monumental, business model-shattering declines in its overall advertising revenue total. Here, however, for the sake of thoroughness, are the newspaper industry’s advertising totals with the aforementioned, additional categories added in. In 2011, the newspaper industry’s advertising revenue total stood at $27.07 billion, with the inclusion of revenues from niche publications, direct marketing, and non-daily products. Using comparable figures, the industry earned $25.31 billion in 2012 and $23.57 billion in 2013, which is the most recent available data (as of March 2015). In addition to the newspaper industry’s two traditional revenue categories (advertising and circulation), the NAA added yet another revenue category, “New/Other Revenue,” in 2013. That category, for example, serves as a catch-all grouping for all the miscellaneous revenues earned by newspapers that don’t fit the traditional mold. The decision by some newspapers to enter the business of delivering goods and services (like FedEx or the United Parcel Service) is one of many examples that fit under the “New/Other Revenue” category. In 2013, the newspaper industry brought in $3.15 billion “New/Other” earnings. Additionally, total circulation revenues have rebounded slightly from $10.44 billion in 2012 to $10.87 billion as of 2013. See: “Trends & Numbers,” Newspaper Association of America, online archives for advertising, audience and circulation data, accessed March 6, 2015, http://www.naa.org/Trends-and-Numbers.aspx. See also: “Business model evolving, circulation revenue rising,” Newspaper Association of America, April 18, 2014, accessed March 6, 2015, http://tinyurl.com/kljkj87. “Newspaper Media Revenue 2013: Dollars Grow in Several Categories,” Newspaper Association of America, accessed March 6, 2015; http://www.naa.org/Trends-and-Numbers/Newspaper-Revenue.aspx; “Annual, All Categories of Advertising,” Newspaper Association of America, accessed March 6, 2015, n.d., downloadable PDF of archived advertising and circulation revenue data from 1950 to 2012, http://tinyurl.com/h93xm8o.

43 The period between 2006 and 2008 was when all the newspaper chain building finally petered out. Thus, Sam Zell’s abortive leveraged buyout of Tribune Co., which he called “the deal from hell,” was among four ill-fated, last-gasp megadeals in which newspapers were purchased between 2006 and 2008. All four deals would lead to billions of dollars in write-downs. Besides Zell and Tribune, there was McClatchy’s aforementioned $4.5 billion merger with, and immediate dismemberment of Knight-Ridder (in 2006). News Corporation spent $5.6 billion to buy Dow Jones (in 2007). And Cablevision (now Optimum) bought Long Island’s Newsday for $632 million (in 2008). For information on News Corporation’s purchase of the Wall Street Journal, see: Paul La Monica, “News Corp. wins fight for Dow Jones: After a three-month takeover battle, Rupert Murdoch’s media giant will purchase the publisher of The Wall Street Journal for $5.6 billion,” August 1, 2007, accessed May 6, 2012, CNN Money.com. For the story regarding Cablevision’s purchase of Newsday, see: Richard Pérez-Peña, “Cablevision Is Winner of Newsday,” New York Times, May 13, 2008, http://tinyurl.com/4h23dy. Accessed May 6, 2012. For the details of McClatchy’s purchase, and breakup of, Knight-Ridder, see the aforementioned New York Times article: Seelye and Sorkin,


46 Ibid. 319.


48 Ibid. 312-319.


56 Herndon, Decline of the Daily Newspaper, 212.


58 Ibid.

59 Temple, “Did the Internet Kill the Rocky Mountain News?”


63 Starr, *Creation of the Media*, 86.

64 Though newspapers didn’t widely use wood pulp-based newsprint until the 1860s, manufacturing and printing on rag-based paper became cheaper and quicker following the invention of the better rag processing methods, the Fourdrinier paper machine, and the Hoe type-revolving printing press. David Sloan, *The Media in America: A History* (Vision Press, Northport, AL), 122.


71 Neiva, “Chain Building,” 16.


73 Neiva, “Chain Building,” 25.


75 Jones, *Losing the News*, 158-159.


Clarke and Eric Fredin. “Newspapers, television and political reasoning.”


Ibid. 195.


Ibid.

Ibid.


Ibid.


100 Mutter, “Why media must charge for web content.”


104 See Note 103.


107 Ibid. 53.

108 Ibid.

109 Herndon, *Decline of the Daily Newspaper*.

110 Ibid.

111 Ibid.

112 Temple, “Did the Internet Kill the Rocky Mountain News?”


114 Ibid.

116 Ibid.


118 Ibid. 215-219.

119 Ibid. 216.


122 See Note 121.


126 Ibid.


128 Herndon, *Death of the Daily Newspaper*.

129 Ibid. 132.


131 Ibid.

132 Ibid. 217.


134 Temple, “Did the Internet Kill the Rocky Mountain News?”

135 Ibid.

137 Temple, “Did the Internet Kill the Rocky Mountain News?”

138 Ibid.

139 Ibid.

140 Ibid.
BURKE said there were Three Estates in Parliament; but, in the Reporters’ Gallery yonder, there sat a Fourth Estate more important far than they all. It is not a figure of speech, or a witty saying: it is a literal fact. … Printing … is equivalent to Democracy. … Whoever can speak, speaking now to the whole nation, becomes a power, a branch of government, with inalienable weight in law-making, in all acts of authority. It matters not what rank he has, what revenues or garnitures: the requisite thing is that he have a tongue which others will listen to; this and nothing more is requisite.

—Thomas Carlyle, 1841

Fiorello La Guardia was better known for taming Tammany Hall than impersonating comic strip characters. But when eight major New York City newspapers’ deliverymen took to the picket lines on June 30, 1945, the three-term mayor donned his round black reading glasses and dove into Dick Tracey on public radio. Why, La Guardia thought, should the children suffer due to “a squabble among grown-ups?” Three times throughout the 17-day newspaper strike, La Guardia closed his weekly radio program by updating the city’s children about the adventures of America’s most famous detective and Little Orphan Annie. He swiveled his head between the newspaper pages and his desktop radio mic, and pounded his desk, as he narrated the action and impersonated different characters in his high nasal voice. La Guardia wasn’t merely clowning or winning political brownie points. That the mayor of America’s largest city would devote broadcast time to reading newspapers to soothe the public when they weren’t delivered to newsstands shows their essential function in New Yorkers’ daily lives. The Big Apple’s newspaper strike led Columbia University communications professor Bernard Berelson to produce his seminal study, “What Missing the Newspaper Means,” about how newspaper readers were affected when their papers disappeared. Today, this Denver case study is the topical and methodological godchild of Berelson’s work because it examines whether the Rocky Mountain News played a one-of-a-kind role in the lives of Denver residents.
This chapter begins by discussing the roles that Americans have historically expected newspapers to play in service to society, which sets the stage for this study’s examination of what Coloradans say that newspapers actually do. The chapter continues by mapping out the economic theory that underlies this study – whether the Rocky Mountain News was a contested commodity (i.e. if it had an extra value that transcended its form on screens and paper). After this study’s theory has been laid out, the chapter summarizes the literature surrounding whether the opening or closing of a newspaper affects a community. The chapter concludes by covering the scholarly literature about how the presence of a newspaper affects a community. On the one hand, a newspaper is a profit-seeking business like any other. “News is a commodity, not a mirror image of reality,” the media economist James Hamilton wrote. “To say that the news is a product shaped by forces of supply and demand is hardly surprising today.”5 On the other hand, the press has always held a privileged place in society. It’s a fact reflected by both how America’s founders viewed them and the way legislatures have treated them since the nation’s earliest days. James Madison, who wrote the First Amendment, believed that:

A popular government, without popular information or the means of acquiring it, is but a prologue to a farce or a tragedy, or perhaps both. Knowledge will forever govern ignorance. And a people who mean to be their own governors, must arm themselves with the power knowledge gives.6

And Thomas Jefferson articulated his preference to “live in a country with newspapers and without a government than in a country with a government and without newspapers” (though his other quote deploring their contents, “The man who reads nothing at all is better educated than the man who reads nothing but newspapers,” is seemingly cited less often).7

Since America’s founding, governments have sought to safeguard and financially support newspapers via laws that have codified their lucrative legal notice business, protected their access to information, offered them generous tax breaks, and subsidized their postal rates.8 Most
significantly, the publishing industry is the only business explicitly named and afforded protections by the U.S. Constitution. Why would America’s founders create an editorial privilege via the First Amendment? According to the late legal scholar C. Edwin Baker, the most rudimentary reason was “to protect a non-governmentally regulated source of information, argument, and entertainment.” Still, that explanation says nothing of the specific constitutional rationale for press freedom. Although freedom of the press does not rest alone on the value of individual self-expression, a reading of the English philosopher John Stuart Mills’ 1859 classic, *On Liberty*, elucidates the relationship between the two. It starts with the media’s ability to spread the truth and inform people such that they can recognize it. Mill offered several justifications for protecting free expression – chief among them was the idea that truth is the ultimate foil to dogma and seemingly infallible information in general.

Mills also believed that free expression allows people to “form the truest opinions they can” based on the best current intelligence. He valued exposure to varied viewpoints in case they turn out to be fully, or even partially, true. And he argued the free flow of information was the only way to facilitate the constant contestation necessary to define and revise the truth. Otherwise, how would people know whether what they believed was really true? The masses, he wrote, must be exposed to opposing views, so that people can better understand and defend their own positions. Without free speech, society risked intellectual pacification and the stigmatization of those who challenge dominant ideas. Similarly, Columbia University law professor Vincent Blasi wrote that exposing people to conflicting ideas allows them to question, doubt, justify and develop a better understanding of their own beliefs. Thus, free expression, and the media, help transform citizens into “critics capable of acquiring enough information to pass judgment on the actions of government, and also capable of disseminating their information and judgments to the
Those ideas are the heart of what Blasi has dubbed the First Amendment’s “checking value” – or the “idea that free expression is valuable in part because of the function it performs in checking the abuse of official power.” And the notion that the press has a checking value stands out as one of the justifications for why the media merit their own distinct constitutional protection. Indeed, the nation’s founders listed the checking value of the free press among its principal purposes. Consider the 1774 letter sent by the First Continental Congress to Quebec’s inhabitants. In it, the soon-to-be Americans explained why the letter’s recipients should also revolt against King George III by listing the fundamental rights he’d violated:

The last right we shall mention regards freedom of the press. The importance of this consists, besides the advancement of truth, science, morality, and arts in general, in its diffusion of liberal sentiments on the administration of Government, its ready communication of thoughts between subjects, and in its consequential promotion of union among them, whereby oppressive officers are shamed or intimidated, into more honourable and just modes of conducting affairs.

In 1948, the philosopher Alexander Meiklejohn offered another constitutional justification for protecting press freedom – a theory of democratic (or political) self-government. A democratic self-government is a nation where democracy subsists in the government being beholden to, and representative of, its citizens’ views. Meiklejohn believed in absolute protection for political discussion to ensure that citizens have the information necessary to express their desires for how the government should operate. As applied to the media, the theory holds that newspapers help people participate in the deliberative democratic process of forming public opinion. And through that process, individuals can develop their collective identity as citizens and learn to wisely vote for leaders who best represent their national interests.

Unfortunately, Meiklejohn’s advocacy of political speech in service of self-governance came at the expense of the individual right to free speech. He believed the government should act as a moderator by restricting what it deemed to be irrelevant or abusive speech so as to safeguard
the public discourse that underlies collective decision-making. In contrast, Yale’s Robert Post has set forth a “participatory” version of the theory, which holds that the only true way to achieve democratic self-governance is to protect each citizen’s speech so all can “participate in the formation of public opinion.” As the late Supreme Court Justice William Brennan put it, during a 1985 speech echoing his *New York Times v. Sullivan* decision, free speech and a free press are necessary to:

(R)edeem the promise of self-governance by facilitating – indeed demanding – robust, uninhibited and wide-open debate on issues of public importance. Such public debate is of course vital to the development and dissemination of political ideas. As importantly, robust public discussion is the crucible in which personal political convictions are forged. In our democracy, such discussion is a political duty, it is the essence of self government.

If Meiklejohn believed in protecting the public dialogue necessary for people to vote, the “marketplace of ideas” justification for free expression seeks to safeguard discourse that advances the truth. The phrase’s modern American incarnation stems from a 1919 decision by Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes. In it, he advocated for the “free trade in ideas,” opining that, “The best test of truth is the power of the thought to get itself accepted in the competition of the market, and that truth is the only ground upon which their wishes safely can be carried out.”

The underlying premise is that people, as the English poet John Milton put it, can only find the truth “in a free and open encounter” with all ideas and opinions surrounding them. Here again, there’s a short cognitive leap to identify roles that society expects newspapers to play. They can both create ideas and act as stores where information and opinions from various sources compete for attention and acceptance. Among other First Amendment scholars who’ve envisioned the media’s social mission, Yale’s Thomas Emerson believed that the press exists to advance knowledge, inform citizens, and promote individual self-fulfillment. Emerson, who subscribed to the Lockean views that free speech is a natural right, and society exists for the
betterment of each person, defined individual “self-fulfillment” as one’s ability to form, express (across media), inquire about, and listen to the beliefs of others. The newspapers, therefore, are critical in helping people fulfill all those roles. Emerson also saw free speech as a sort of “safety valve” for the maintenance of civil society by giving those who disagree a means to vent and convince others of their stances. In other words, newspapers prevent people from rebelling by making them feel like they have a say changing or simply commenting on society.

What all this lofty rhetoric about newspapers has in common is the idea that freedom of the press isn’t entirely free. It comes with an unwritten social contract to protect and better society. Or as Washington State communications professor Elizabeth Blanks Hindman put it, “For the press, much is given by the First Amendment, but, apparently, much is also expected.”

Perhaps the most famous modern effort to articulate what society expects of the media came from the Commission on Freedom of the Press. In the 1940s, *Time* magazine founder Henry Luce convinced his former Yale classmate, University of Chicago President Robert Hutchins, to lead a blue ribbon panel tasked with discerning the media’s proper function in a democracy. After two years, $200,000 in grants from Luce, 58 witnesses, 225 additional interviews, and a review of 176 documents, the panel released its landmark report in March 1947. Its 16 scholarly members decided that freedom of the press “implied a negative freedom ‘from’ what it called ‘external compulsions,’ but not from the ‘pressures’ necessary for robust public discourse,” according to journalism scholar Fred Blevins. But that also “meant the press had a positive freedom … for making its contribution to the maintenance and development of a free society.”

In other words, the press should be compelled to serve society because of its innate mission to do so, not by the behest of any governmental regulations. The commission, Blevins added, emphasized that newspapers should serve as “‘common carriers of public discussion.”
Or as they themselves wrote, “freedom of the press is freighted with the responsibility of providing the current intelligence needed by a free society.” Newspapers, they concluded, should provide:

- First, a truthful, comprehensive, and intelligent account of the day’s events in a context which gives them meaning; second, a forum for the exchange of comment and criticism; third, a means of projecting the opinions and attitudes of the groups in the society to one another; fourth, a method of presenting and clarifying the goals and values of the society; and, fifth, a way of reaching every member of the society by the currents of information, through, and feeling which the press supplies.

(In 1956, Theodore Peterson, the late dean of the University of Illinois’ College of Communications, notably built his “social responsibility theory of the press” on the commission’s recommendations). Equally important, however, was the commission’s conclusion for how newspapers should perform those duties – by self-regulation. Unsurprisingly, Zechariah Chafee, who co-chaired the commission, ardently espoused a marketplace of ideas ethos. In contrast, the late Columbia University communications professor James Carey thought that the primary responsibility of the press transcended promoting public discourse.

According to Carey, Americans have long wanted their newspapers to be independent representatives of the people, watchdogs, exposers of outside interests, lanterns for monitoring societal happenings, seekers and spreaders of the truth, and wellsprings of news and information. Carey’s list parallels that of the media ethicists Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel. But to his catalog they’ve added that the press should serve as the public’s official sense makers by exposing pseudo-journalism and spin and simply by aggregating and curating the Digital Age’s daily deluge of information. Most importantly, they wrote, “The primary purpose of journalism is to provide citizens with the information they need to be free and self-governing,” and to decide how to better their lives, from buying products, to picking schools for their children. Finally, from the German philosopher and social theorist Jürgen Habermas’
normative perspective, news outlets should facilitate and reflect the discourse of private individuals as they form a “public sphere” – an arena where ordinary people can gather around shared opinions to counter markets and governments.32

**Contested Commodification and Deweyan Democracy**

This study is most concerned with the work of legal and economic scholar Margaret Jane Radin, whose ideas are rooted in Dewey’s theories regarding democracy and human nature. To be clear, Radin herself did not explicitly reference journalism, but Dewey and former Colorado State communications professor Pamela Taylor Jackson did.33 And Jackson has convincingly applied Radin’s framework to newspapers. This study is designed to explore whether the theories laid out by those three scholars can be applied to what Denver residents thought the *Rocky Mountain News* did for them and their community before it closed. Jackson has argued that, unlike a haircut or basketball shoes, newspapers are one-of-a-kind products or “contested commodities,” and the government should create a new system to fund and protect them from destructive market forces.34 As discussed at this study’s start, Radin has defined contested commodities as goods and services that society feels conflicted about selling and pricing given their immeasurable extra-market worth in making us human and helping us flourish. But, without addressing the underlying conditions that cause their trade or creating a better system for it, the government shouldn’t ban trading or heavily regulate contested commodities because their sellers would be harmed.35

In other words, “contested commodification,” occurs in “instances in which we experience personal and social conflict (about) the appropriate relationship of particular things to the market.”36 Radin has laid out her thinking in the 1996 book, *Contested Commodities: The Trouble with Trade in Sex, Children, Body Parts, and Other Things*. A “commodity,” by its most basic dictionary definition, is “something useful that can be turned to commercial or other
Radin, however, has offered a more nuanced description of “commodification,” which covers four key criteria: “objectification, fungibility, commensurability and money equivalence.”38 A thing is objectifiable when it’s “manipulable at the will of persons;” it’s fungible when it’s “interchangeable;” it’s commensurable when it “can be linearly ranked” or ordered on a scale “as a function of one continuous variable;” and it has “money equivalence” when it “can be ranked by dollar value.”39 Some, such as Karl Marx, believe that commodification is always wrong, and that nothing should be commodified.40 Others, such as the aforementioned Judge Richard Posner and the late economist Gary Becker, think all items should be commodified except when the market can’t bear the cost of a particular item, while Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill advocate for the compartmentalization41 of things into socially acceptable market and nonmarket domains.42

Radin has carved out her own special niche for what she calls “contested” or “incomplete” commodities because they’re not merely goods or services, they’re important parts of what makes us human.43 Such commodities are “incomplete” because society doesn’t consider them free to be fully salable, and they’re “contested” because people are conflicted regarding their appropriate terms of sale and the consequences of their commodification.44 Examples of contested/incomplete commodities include the tangible (organs and babies) and the abstract (human labor and sexuality). Similarly, insurers are tasked with valuing “priceless” paintings, and courts strive to compensate individuals for the immeasurable losses of lives and limbs.45 Then, there’s the news, which Jackson has defined as a contested commodity. The contest over journalism occurs when the market’s demands lead newspapers to close, scale back serious news production, and shrink their staffs, all of which can threaten the publications’ abilities to carry
out their public service missions. As Jackson put it, “When the news media are expected to be
pursueryors of the public interest while pursuing profits for their corporate owners, the result often
is a clash of capitalist and journalistic imperatives.”

Zechariah Chafee, the Hutchins Commission’s aforementioned co-chairman, has echoed
that sentiment. “The means of production,” he wrote, “are owned and controlled by private
groups, who are not the servants of the people, not ultimately representative of their interests,
and therefore do not fit into a coherent concept of public service.” So, if contested commodities
like journalism are critical to society, why expose them to market forces? On that question,
Radin’s ideas are pragmatic. Contested commodities must remain in markets because their
sellers need funding somehow. So, it would be impractical or even unfeasible to prevent or
greatly restrict the sale of such goods and services bereft of solutions addressing the difficult
issues surrounding them. In other words, it’s necessary for society to respect both the monetary
and moral values that coexist within contested commodities. Thus, contested commodities are in
a “double bind” in that their sales can be both troublesome and necessary for humans to
flourish. Markets themselves don’t threaten contested commodities. Double binds do. What
potentially harms journalism is not that it’s sold, it’s that selling the news so often comes with
the tradeoff that its sellers debase it, and that was especially as the newspaper industry’s business
model fell apart.

The answer is not to ban the sale of journalism but for the public, the press, and the
government to come up with solutions to enhance and preserve it, and ensure the well-being of
society. (That’s doubly true, today, as newspaper advertising revenues continue falling, leading
to the loss of original reportorial journalism, without adequate replacements for either in sight).
Indeed, Radin’s definition of human flourishing is based on philosopher John Dewey’s theories
about democracy and human nature. Dewey believed the press should instill an ideal of democracy, which he called a “liberal faith,” or a deep desire to learn about the community and use an ever-growing store of cooperatively attained knowledge to improve life for everyone.\(^49\) That idea was rooted in his fervent faith that civil society is essential to facilitate individual attainment and self-actualization. At times, according to one expert on Dewey, his work “reads like a forerunner of Habermas, who views autonomy and a particular talk-centered conception of democracy as mutually sustaining ideals for modern societies.”\(^50\)

To Dewey, individuals can only reach their full potential when they form and work cooperatively in groups.\(^51\) Groups, he thought, transform humans into conscious, thinking, flourishing beings because they teach us how to communicate, and allow us to form, share, and preserve knowledge for the existential maintenance and advancement of humanity.\(^52\) Yet, Dewey believed that groups alone were merely the carriages that transported humans out of the wilderness. Individuals are most fit to survive and thrive together when they form democratic governments, participate in creating and prioritizing their policies, and select those who’ll uphold and better the state.\(^53\) Here again is where newspapers enter the picture. As Radin has explained, Dewey thought, “a particular kind of education is a primary requirement if the polity is to support human flourishing.”\(^54\) To Dewey, a free press facilitates the give and take of philosophic ideas and the dissemination of the facts by which individuals’ attitudes and values coalesce into the kind of cultures that form democratic governments.\(^55\) Only journalism, Dewey wrote, “can furnish knowledge as a precondition of public judgments” through its “daily and unremitting assembly and interpretation of ‘news,’” and its subsequent presentation in a widely accessible format with mass appeal.\(^56\)
Dewey’s views mesh with a “broadly republican conception of politics” and free expression. That, according to Radin, holds that “the purpose of free speech is to foster self-government,” while promoting the “wide range of activities that also foster the appropriate self-constitution of persons as well-developed citizens.” In other words, as Bernard Berelson explained, political knowledge leads to “enlightened public opinions,” and newspapers participate in the formation and dissemination of those opinions, while educating the electorate about issues and candidates. But Berelson also has cautioned that such philosophies have overlooked that most people are politically apathetic and others seem to have no trouble voting without much information. Undoubtedly, this image of the press as the primary teacher of an informed, civically obliged citizenry is a product of Dewey’s time, from 1859 to 1952. So, it’s relatively new given the long history of newspapers in America and abroad. Sociologist and historian Michael Schudson has tracked it back to America’s widespread adoption of the Australian balloting system the 1890s. Taken for granted today, the Australian ballot, so-named because it originated there in 1856, revolutionized elections across the world. It called for the use of secret ballots, pre-printed by the government, along with secure and private voting procedures.

Before secret ballots, various interests, from Americans’ employers to their unions, often preprinted ballots and goaded them to check a box to vote for pre-selected candidates. Given that fact, according to Schudson:

Nineteenth century newspapers were much more interested in reaching citizens’ feet than in influencing their minds, eager to get them into the streets marching, parading, and going to vote rather than to persuade them by argument or acts or reasoning to share an opinion, let alone to think for themselves. Top editors looked forward to political appointments if their party captured the White House.

As the Australian ballot gained in popularity from 1880 to 1910, political reformers developed and spread good citizenship rhetoric encouraging ordinary people to use newspapers to learn
about candidates, so they could make informed choices. Indeed, newspapers only gradually transitioned to become the instruments of the people, rather than the organs of the party press, as industrialization created the requisite consumers and advertisers to cover their costs, and new technologies reduced them. As late as 1870, 89% of urban, daily newspapers were still politically affiliated, compared with just 11% in 1920. Thus, although America’s founders pictured newspapers as democratic guardians, most among this chapter’s long list of public service functions are scarcely more than a 100 years old. And the field of the First Amendment, which effectively began with Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes’ 1919 articulation of the marketplace of ideas, is even younger. But over that relatively short span, America internalized the ideas that newspapers are the “central source of the democratic conversation” that animates the “soul of democracy.” Today, those ideals about the social responsibilities of newspapers continue to reverberate in America’s courtrooms, classrooms, newsrooms, and dining rooms. The next few sections step back from all the rhetoric to take a look at what scholars have actually found about the effects of newspaper closures.

**Measuring Newspaper Closure Effects**

Nineteen, to date, that’s the number of studies directly devoted to researching how the disappearance a newspaper affects either a community or its members. That’s a dearth of research, considering that America experienced a net loss of 414 daily newspapers, or nearly one in four, as their total fell to 1,331 from 1,745 in the 35 years between 1979 and 2014. Just five of the studies covered in this chapter estimated the effects caused by the permanent disappearance of newspapers due to their closures. One study reviewed herein uniquely used the loss of a newspaper due to home delivery issues as a proxy for the loss of a daily paper. And the remaining 11 scholarly analyses discussed in this chapter (including nine in America and two abroad) used labor stoppages as proxies for newspaper closures. Undoubtedly, the shortage of
scholarship is largely due to the difficulty of the studying the subject. Most researchers can’t just open or close a newspaper. Academic schedules don’t lend themselves to investigating events with the immediacy of a newspaper closure, given the one to three years that it commonly takes to publish a journal article. And newspaper effects studies are tough to document. How does one know that the effects observed were actually the result of a newspaper disappearing? The extant research on the subject can be broken into six topical categories, which have been studied using three main methods – open- and close-ended surveys, statistical modeling, and in-depth interviewing. In the first category, ten of the nineteen studies used open- and closed-ended surveys and/or in-depth interviews to measure the uses (practical purposes) and gratifications (pleasurable or personally fulfilling functions) of newspapers.\(^\text{70}\)

In the second category, which includes three studies based on statistical models, researchers estimated how the entry (opening) and exit (closing) of newspapers affected a variety of indicators, including those related to elections, government efficiency, politics, and the local economy.\(^\text{71}\) The third category features the only study conducted on Denver since the Rocky Mountain News closed.\(^\text{72}\) It’s a statistical model based on Census data estimating the extent to which Denver area residents were civically engaged immediately before and after the Rocky closed. The fourth category consists of two studies based on close-ended surveys – one of which tests the political knowledge levels and information acquisition habits of Pittsburghers after their newspapers disappeared, while the other focuses on where Israelis acquired information during a media blackout.\(^\text{73}\) The fifth category is composed of two studies – one that mixed a close-ended survey with a post hoc analysis of economic indices to discern how a newspaper strike affected the Minneapolis economy; and a second that relied on statistical modeling to assess how a Detroit newspaper strike influenced retail sales.\(^\text{74}\) And the sixth and
final category contains one study based on in-depth interviews of people’s impressions on how a newspaper strike affected the dissemination of public information, public debate on government decisions, and how well public officials were able to spread ideas to local citizens. All six lines of inquiry began with a pioneering study by Berelson that was published in 1948.

**Identifying Uses and Gratifications with Interviews and Open-Ended Surveys**

Berelson’s research on how the presence or absence of a newspaper affects people was precipitated by a newspaper delivery drivers’ strike that deprived most New Yorkers of their biggest dailies for 17 days in June and July 1945. His goal was to learn what, if any, features they missed about the newspapers, their emotional responses to not reading them, and how their daily habits and media consumption changed. His method was to divide Manhattan residents into a simple, stratified sample based on their zip codes from which he drew 60 New Yorkers for in-depth interviews. Seventy years later, some of Berelson’s findings still seem relevant. New Yorkers told Berelson they missed using newspapers as a source of “information about and interpretation of public affairs,” “a tool for daily living,” “a respite,” “for social prestige,” “for social contact,” and to satisfy their daily habits. Beginning with one the most oft-cited reasons, fully half of New York’s newspaper readers said that newspapers were “tools for daily living” that helped them with a range of things they wanted to regularly do. In those days, such help could take several forms, including radio and movie listings, stock market results, and the weather forecasts.

Of course, newspapers are generally no longer the go-to sources for most of those items. But it’s easy to imagine the sort of modern newspaper content readers might cite as invaluable. Perhaps some of the parents living in a big city like New York, where 3-year-olds vie for

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1 New Yorkers could still get copies of their favorite newspapers if they went each paper’s headquarters. But most didn’t get to read the paper because it was neither delivered to homes nor dropped off at newsstands.
admission to elite local preschools, would miss the sort of newspaper that ranked such programs. And if a small, rural community’s newspaper died, it’s hard to imagine the nearest big city daily newspaper’s reporters would swoop in to provide as much in-demand coverage of high school football games and county fairs. The New Yorkers in Berelson’s study also said they missed using newspapers as “a respite” to escape “from the boredom and dullness of everyday life” – particularly via “comics,” “recipes,” and “fashion notes.” For many Americans, today’s fluffy fare is more likely to come in the form of Internet cat videos. But most newspapers in America still carry at least a portion of same soft items from the ’40s, including coverage of the arts and culture, comics, features, and lifestyle stories. And America’s sixth biggest newspaper, the New York Post, is rife with celebrity gossip and zany news that attracted more than 3.5 million unique Internet visitors per day and roughly 500,000 digital and print subscribers in 2013.79

Even America’s largest paper today, the Wall Street Journal, contains plenty of “soft” content about cooking, homes and gardens, parenting, vacationing, books and movies, and, as of 2010, a sports page. Besides enjoying their newspapers’ softer stories, the New Yorkers in Berelson’s study viewed their papers as a way to feel a sense of “social contact.” They scrutinized their columns, society pages, and obituaries to share common experiences with, feel closer to, and learn lessons from the lives of other community members.80 And they derived “social prestige” from reading the paper because they could sound informed and intelligent among their friends and their family. Those who said they used newspapers “for information about and interpretation of public affairs” longed for the “serious” coverage and the “full information about news events” supplied in their newspapers’ news and the editorial sections.81 It’s important to note, however, that Berelson thought participants were exaggerating due “social desirability” bias, or when people state what they think makes them look good. (Similarly, a
“response” bias also can be factor when people provide answers they think a researcher might like).

For example, nearly all of them reflexively stated that newspaper reading is important, while claiming that pares are especially valuable “as a source of ‘serious’ information about and interpretation of public affairs.” But the majority didn’t actually use newspapers primarily for those purposes, and most could neither answer questions about current events nor cite a serious news story that the 1945 delivery workers’ strike prevented them from following. Finally, for most of Berelson’s participants, the disappearance of New York’s dailies left news holes in their hearts as they longed to perform the rituals and the habits they’d developed while reading their favorite publications. The publications were like paper pacifiers for the adults, who cherished using them to fill spare time as most thumbed their pages while eating or riding on commuter trains. “You can’t understand it not being there because you took it for granted,” one interviewee told Berelson. Another felt that, “Something is missing in my life. I’m suffering … (without the newspaper) I sat around in the subway, staring, feeling out of the place.” Yet another, “sat around the subway, staring, feeling out of place,” with no newspaper to read. New Yorkers derived a sense of security from both the custom of newspaper reading and from the mere presence of the authoritative, informative publications in their lives.

Or as Berelson wrote, “Apparently, the newspaper represented something like a safeguard and (it) gave the respondents an assurance with which to counter feelings of insecurity and anomie pervasive in modern society.” New Yorkers expressed many of the same sentiments 13 years later in December 1958. That’s when the late journalism professor Penn Kimball and his student assistants at Columbia University seized the opportunity to replicate Berelson’s study following the 19-day shutdown of the city’s seven major newspapers.
York’s dailies also furloughed their journalists when the Mail Deliverers Union workers went on strike. So, the city was completely bereft of its biggest newspapers in 1958. In the study that ensued, nine in ten among the 164 interviewees said they missed the newspapers during their interviews with Kimball. Two of three regular readers intensely longed for them. “I might as well be in Alaska, I feel so cut off,” one of them responded. “Being without papers is like being without shoes,” another interview lamented. A third claimed to be “lost” without the city’s biggest dailies. 

One of Kimball’s most interesting findings, however, didn’t involve what New Yorkers missed about newspapers but rather how well they got along without it. Even back in 1958, four in ten of Kimball’s study participants were already watching four hours of TV per day, at the time, and seven in ten tuned in for at least two hours per day. So, when New York’s newspaper readers lost their dailies, one in three of Kimball’s research participants simply increased their television consumption, while those who watched at least three hours per day doubled their viewing time. TV newscast watchers averaged an extra news program per day, and four in ten radio users doubled their listening time to hear more news. Like Berelson’s study, most of Kimball’s research participants couldn’t identify specific issues and current events they missed following. But one in ten were able to actually name one story. All of them mentioned a serious diplomatic crisis with Russia, which would eventually lead to the Berlin Wall’s construction.

Kimball’s survey respondents listed the same uses and gratifications as Berelson’s study, plus they suggested that newspapers serve two more functions. They’re a form of “occupation” (for time killing) and “stimulation” (for the entertainment and vicarious excitement derived from reading about others’ misfortunes). Kimball’s work is especially important to this study as he twice tried to replicate Berelson’s research. Fortunately, he was already conducting interviews
about the media usage patterns and preferences of the Big Apple’s residents when yet another strike between 1962 and 1963 made New York a laboratory for what can happen when newspapers disappear. His fortuitous timing allowed him to create a panel of interviewees to gauge their feelings about newspapers before, during, and after the strike. In all, the pressmen at New York’s big seven papers caused 600 million copies to go unprinted over 114 days. Little did the New Yorkers know that the closures would only be temporary, in a manner of speaking, for three of their city’s big newspapers. Though all seven resumed printing immediately after the strike, the after-shocks would soon lead four to close as photocomposition technology roiled the newspaper industry then much like the Internet has today. Kimball spoke with an average of nearly 300 participants for each of his three rounds of interviewing during the study, and roughly 100 participated in all three of his survey’s phases.

Although nearly every one of Kimball’s study participants said they missed New York’s newspapers when they disappeared, those who missed them the most also used them the most. Hard-core newspaper readers were the most likely to complain that TV and radio were insufficient news substitutes because they lacked informative details, analysis, and context. They especially longed for serious news – national and international coverage along with local news and editorials. They were the same people who most often turned to the remaining outside newspapers that were still published. And by far, they had reached the highest education levels – three times as many of the most loyal newspaper readers had attended college as the interviewees who primarily stayed loyal to broadcast media.” As with Kimball’s 1958 study, the last noteworthy finding in his 1963 research was that, regardless of their loyalty to newspapers, those who wanted news never went without it. News seeking New Yorkers relied on TV, the radio, and the other towns’ papers to create a complimentary mix that mostly filled that void.
Yet, that doesn’t mean they thought the other news outlets did just as good of a job informing them as newspapers. They complained about only a getting “smattering” of foreign coverage and in-depth news. “TV news has improved considerably since the strike (in 1958),” one interviewee said. “But it doesn’t take the place of the paper. You get all sides of a question in the papers.” In part, this study focuses on the *Rocky Mountain News* focuses on where the Denver area’s residents have turned for news since the closure of the *Rocky Mountain News*, and how well Colordans think other information sources have replaced the paper. Berelson and Kimball conducted their studies in eras which little resemble today’s media rich environments. But, based on a wide body of mass communications studies, few things remain true today. Past research has shown that those who consume news via any sort of platform, from a TV set to a mobile phone, are more likely to seek out news from newspapers. Plus, the way people feel about newspapers is influenced by personal traits, including their age, income, and educational attainment levels. As each of those rise, so too does newspaper readership, according to research by the late Leo Bogart, a sociologist and marketing specialist, who studied the role of the newspapers in society. (Others have reached similar findings).

In 1978, Bogart made his own contribution to the literature about how a missing newspaper affects readers when striking pressmen again knocked out New York’s major newspapers in what would become the city’s second-longest media work stoppage. For 88 days, from September to November, the *New York Times* and the New York *Daily News* vanished, while the *New York Post* was out of action until it reached its own labor accord that October. Among Bogart’s survey takers, a quarter didn’t miss the city’s newspapers when they were gone (mostly because suburban papers were still available). Three in ten in ten felt a sense of continual loss (because they were news junkies or they were simply bored without their
habitual paper). Another two in ten were concerned at first by the absence of the paper, but they became indifferent (because they switched to using other media such as the TV). The most recent effort to replicate Berelson’s work came a little more than 30 years later, in 2001. With no labor stoppage and no ability to close a newspaper, Missouri journalism professor Clyde Bentley came up with a unique way to study how people feel when their local newspaper disappears.

He interviewed 35 subscribers of a small, rural Oregon newspaper within hours of calling their telling the paper to say their copies hadn’t arrived. Like Berelson’s interviewees, most participants in Bentley’s study said they valued the newspaper as a serious source of community news they couldn’t easily find elsewhere. They especially missed the comfort they derived from the habit of newspaper reading. As one interviewee put it, the paper’s arrival of was “like a friend or a neighbor coming in.” Older couples described the unique satisfaction of their daily newspaper reading rituals. “Each took a section of the paper to their favorite easy chair, read it leisurely, then exchanged sections with their (sic) partner,” and discussed its stories. Whole families had their own pleasurable newspaper-reading routines, including the mother in her mid-30s, who described how:

My sixth-grade son grabs the front section and reads all the news. My fourth-grade daughter flips through all the sections, looking for names of people she knows. My husband reads the whole paper, cover to cover. I just read the headlines and the obituaries. I’m a nurse, so I always look to see if any of my patients have died.

As with Berelson’s study, Bentley’s interviewees also viewed the newspaper as a social and a cultural link to where they lived – from the aforementioned nurse1, who regularly consulted the obits to the 63-year-old man, who viewed the newspaper “as an important way to keep track” of the community.
Replicating Berelson’s Research with Close-Ended Surveys

The 2005 closure of a tiny newspaper in a rural southeastern Kansas community was the topic of study for Steven Smethers and his Kansas State University communications department colleagues. Armed with a Likert scale-based survey and a convenience sample of 123 churchgoers, researchers studied the local reaction to the demise of a publication that circulated about half as many copies as its town’s 2,000 residents. Nearly all of their survey respondents said a town should have a newspaper; they missed their little weekly paper, and they most longed for its local events, government coverage, and obituaries. Those surveyed also agreed that the paper improved their understanding of local government issues and that it influenced their opinions. But such a research design carries a risk of both response bias and social desirability bias. Using a close-ended survey, the researchers asked people the extent to which they agreed with statements such as: “Having a local newspaper gave me a sense of pride in my community;” and “I based my opinions about local issues from information I read in the Humboldt Union.” It would be somewhat bold to check “neutral” for every question about missing the paper or to tick a box indicating they had no use for it when they were staring a long list of suggested uses.

Thus, to paraphrase an old expression about doctors making medical diagnoses, such studies risk seeing what they’re looking for and looking for what they know. Ironically, there’s something to be said for anecdotal evidence sometimes serving as the best proof. After Smethers and company conducted their survey, demand for the dead little Kansas newspaper was so high that another local newspaper owner restarted it two years later. And when he decided he didn’t want to run the resurrected Humboldt Union, one of his employees and her husband took it over the paper, and they’ve managed to sustain it going since March 2008. Like Smethers and his colleagues, Dutch media researcher Harold de Bock sought to test Berelson’s findings when a major strike shut down much of the Netherlands’ media in 1977. In all, two national TV stations,
along with 16 regional and two national newspapers, were closed for up to two weeks (depending on the station and the publication). Using a representative national sample of 364, de Bock asked Netherlanders whether they missed their newspapers, whether they used papers, and were gratified by them, like those in Berelson’s study. Most of the survey respondents said they longed for their newspapers as a ritual of news consumption (77%), for the information (63%), and for the respite that newspaper reading provided (45%). Social prestige and time killing tied (34%) for the fourth-most cited reasons why people used newspapers.\textsuperscript{106}

When asked open-ended questions about the newspaper content they most missed, 69% of those who cited a specific feature of the paper chose “local/regional” news. Plus, a whopping three in four newspaper readers were moderately or very irritated by the absence of their newspapers. Unfortunately, the greatest strength of de Bock’s study may also be its greatest weakness. Among his sample of Netherlanders, “95% normally had a newspaper at home.”\textsuperscript{107} On the one hand, that sort of a newspaper-loving society might be especially good at speaking for newspaper readers everywhere. On the other hand, how many Americans are nearly as passionate about newspapers today? As mentioned, in 2012, just 29% of Americans said they read either an online or a print newspaper, “yesterday”. As with Smathers’ study, one potential issue with de Bock’s research is that close-ended questions with lists of choices may steer respondents toward answers they would not have made if unprompted. Then again, to a certain extent, researchers run the same risks with open-ended questions because merely asking people what they think about newspapers can make them feel obligated to come up with answers when they might neither contemplate nor care about newspapers.

\textbf{Using Statistics to Study How Newspaper Closures Affect Political Behaviors}

One of the most publicized recent studies about the potential repercussions of newspaper closures relied on a very different method – the construction of a statistical model to estimate
effects. As the Rocky closed and the newspaper industry reeled in 2009, former Princeton economist Sam Schulhofer-Wohl and his undergraduate assistant, Miguel Garrido, published “Do Newspapers Matter? Short-Run and Long-Run Evidence From the Closure of The Cincinnati Post.” The study focused on the Cincinnati Post, Scripps’ first newspaper, and the sight of a JOA with the Gannett-owned Cincinnati Inquirer. The Post’s execution date was actually set three years before its 2007 closure, when Scripps notified Gannett it wouldn’t renew their 30-year JOA when it expired. The rarity of the coordination between a planned closure and the ability to study it helped them eliminate some of the exogenous variables that might have explained whatever they observed. Schulhofer-Wohl and his assistant turned their empirical lens on the Kentucky suburbs, where the Cincinnati Post and its sister paper the Kentucky Post were most popular. Specifically, they found a slight correlation between the paper’s closing and the voter turnout, and campaign spending going down slightly, while incumbents’ reelection chances improved because fewer candidates ran for office.

Yet, the hubbub surrounding the study overlooked the researchers’ two crucial caveats that most of their results weren’t statistically significant, and that their standard error rates were often too high for the conclusions to be trusted. Thus, despite the study’s inconclusive results, newspapers undoubtedly covered the research because it superficially validated that they, and their decay, matter to society. At the same time, three University of Chicago economists also published a 2009 study estimating how the opening and closing daily newspapers has historically affected voter turnout levels, party vote shares, and incumbency advantage. Focusing on presidential and congressional elections, Matthew Gentzkow, Jesse Shapiro and Michael Sinkinson came up with net tallies for the number of general interest daily newspapers for every American county between the years 1869 and 1928. For each county, they also estimated totals...
for voters, party vote shares, incumbent vote shares, TV viewers, radio news listeners, newspaper readership, and the respective political affiliations of voters and their local newspapers.

According to their model’s statistically significant estimates, fewer people voted for congressional incumbents in the counties that experienced a net increase in newspapers. Those counties also saw a roughly .3 percentage point rise in voter turnout and their voter participation rate climbed by 1 percentage point as the net number of newspapers increased. Newspaper reading in general upped the overall probability of voting by 4 percentage points. Those effects were stronger in congressional (i.e. local) elections than in presidential (i.e. national) contests. All of the aforementioned findings, however, were generally confined to the initial period after a given county experienced a net newspaper increase. None of the effects of the newspaper’s closure endured when the researchers searched for changes over time by using data all the way up to the year 2004. Gentzkow and company concluded that the opening or closing of a newspaper does, indeed, influence electoral politics. But even if one accepts that they created a valid, reliable statistical model despite all the data points they had to estimate and control for, at best their study indicates that newspapers were influential. America has changed significantly since the period they analyzed, between 1869 and 1928, when newspapers were king. Plus, their results can be used to make a case against newspapers influencing elections.

Not only were their estimated effects brief, they actually declined with the introduction of other media competition. In 2013, a trio of Italian economists examined the effects of newspaper openings and closings on voter turnout, whether politicians ran again, and the efficiency of local governments by using the same methodological approach as the studies led by Gentzkow and Schulhofer-Wohl. Francesco Drago, Tommaso Nannicini and Francesco Sobbrio created a statistical model focusing on the election results and government spending data for 664 Italian
municipalities between 1993 and 2010. Like the related studies, the Europeans tallied and compared the years in which Italian municipalities experienced net spikes and declines in their newspaper totals. Compared with cities experiencing net drop-offs in newspapers, those with higher net totals observed an 18.6% rise in voter turnout; a 13% higher likelihood that the average mayor would run for another term; and municipal governments that were an average of 3% faster at collecting tax revenues, and 7% quicker at paying their bills. Italy, however, cannot be compared with the United States. Northern European newspapers have historically relied a bit less on advertising and slightly more on subscription dollars, while the Italian population reading newspapers at the time of their study was larger and more stable than America’s readership.112

**Estimating Civic Engagement in Denver with a Statistical Model**

Just one study has actually addressed Denver since *Rocky Mountain News* closed, and the limitations of the research warrant more attention than the results. Portland State University communications Professor Lee Shaker’s statistical model correlated the *Rocky’s* departure with a 4.6% overall decline – and a 30% decrease compared with 20 similar cities – in Denver’s civic engagement level between 2008 and 2009.113 To reach those conclusions, Shaker analyzed the differences in Denver residents’ answers to a battery of civic engagement-related U.S. Census questions in 2008 and in 2009, the year of the *Rocky’s* closure (that February). The Census Bureau defined “civic engagement” in a number of ways, including whether survey takers had contacted public officials, bought or boycotted anything based on their social/political values, and attended or led community group meetings such as those of a Parent Teacher Association. Shaker also estimated the year-over-year civic engagement score differences in Seattle, where the *Post-Intelligencer* shifted from a full-fledged newspaper to a small online-only publication in 2009. Unlike Denver, that city’s aggregate civic engagement score did not decline significantly.
But the potential issues with Shaker’s study are immediately evident in light of the two-year period of study he chose to examine.

It’s only natural that Americans would be more civically engaged in 2008, a presidential election year, than in the following year. Shaker recognized and attempted to control for that variable in his statistical regression, but it’s hard to say how well he managed to do so. It’s difficult to quantify and statistically adjust for all the confounding factors that can skew estimates of how a newspaper’s closure might have affected a community. It’s also worth noting that the American economy tanked between 2008 and 2009 years. So civic engagement might not have been as high of a priority for a laid off worker with a house entering foreclosure. Indeed, as Shaker himself expected, his results indicated that the entire country’s civic engagement score decreased between 2008 and 2009, not just Denver’s tally. However, he argued that Denver’s results were still notable because the city’s 5 to 8% civic engagement score decreases were higher than the 1 to 2% declines elsewhere. But there’s a serious question as to whether the people in Shaker’s study were actually reading (or not reading) newspapers. In 2008, the first year the feds included such civic engagement questions in the Census, the survey asked participants whether they read the newspaper.

Unfortunately, the government dropped its media usage questions the next year. Thus, Shaker was forced to rely on 2008 media usage data to extrapolate readership over both years. Even if one were to assume that Shaker’s statistical analysis was perfect, a few other issues remain. He was working with just two years of data (2008 and 2009), and that’s just not enough time upon which to confidently base conclusions. Shaker himself admitted that civic engagement scores actually *rebounded* by 3.4% in Denver, when he ran his statistical calculations for 2010. Finally, as mentioned, quantitative studies like Shaker’s research only show that there’s a
potential relationship between civic engagement decreasing and a newspaper closing. They don’t indicate which came first. Given the past research showing that newspaper readers tend to be a community’s most civically engaged members, its equally possible – as Robert Putnam pointed out – that decreasing civic engagement levels actually precede the disappearance of a newspaper and not vice versa.

**Using a Close-Ended Survey to Study Information Acquisition**

In 1992, University of Illinois journalism professor, Jeffery Mondak got about as close to simulating an experiment in newspaper extinction as a researcher can get. As with Berelson’s seminal study, a newspaper delivery strike aided Mondak, who focused on whether Pittsburghers were affected when they were deprived of 350,000 copies of their daily newspapers from May 17, 1992 until January 18, 1993. Mondak conducted phone surveys to compare the political behaviors of newspaperless Pittsburgh voters and their demographically similar counterparts in Cleveland, who still had newspapers throughout the 1992 presidential/congressional election season. Set beside Clevelanders, Pittsburghers knew little about their congressional House of Representatives elections because they viewed TV as an inadequate substitute for their missing newspapers. Mondak attributed the drop-off in Pittsburgh residents’ knowledge about local election candidates to differences in how television and newspaper reporters cover politics. Newspapers are known for more hyperlocal coverage. But TV news coverage areas overlap with multiple congressional districts, so any one report on a House race may be irrelevant for a large share of a program’s viewers. Given the two-minute and twenty-three second median length of a typical TV news piece, it figures that even Walter Cronkite complained that TV news offers little more than a headline service.

A group of USC researchers affirmed that fact with their 2010 study of TV news stations in Los Angeles. A typical 30-minute news program contains just 15 minutes and 44 seconds of
news, including a mere 2 minutes and 50 seconds devoted to civic issues and local governments.\textsuperscript{118} Faced with no newspapers and inadequate TV coverage of House races, Pittsburgh residents mostly turned to their social connections to learn about and select their candidates. But Mondak’s results were not monolithic. Compared to Cleveland, both his subjective and objective political knowledge quizzes indicated that the Steel City’s voters were just as well informed about U.S. Senate and presidential candidates, and they felt equally confident about choosing among them thanks, in part, to television and big American newspapers.\textsuperscript{119} Mondak’s study reached two notable conclusions about his findings that may still be relevant today. First, it offers what he calls a “relatively optimistic assessment of information acquisition” regarding state, national and international news.\textsuperscript{120}

Even when local newspapers disappeared, Pittsburghers subjectively perceived that they were adequately informed regarding such topics. Despite the continued presence of newspapers in Cleveland, Mondak’s objective information tests revealed that Clevelanders were no better informed than Pittsburghers. In other words, they were all equally poorly educated regarding current political news – from campaign coverage to the candidates’ positions. In the absence of local newspapers, however, Pittsburgh’s electorate still managed to adapt and make reasoned political decisions by seeking out news and information from a variety of other sources, including national newspapers, TV, friends, and family.\textsuperscript{121} But Mondak’s study offers a second and more disconcerting conclusion. Pittsburgh’s residents freely admitted they were ignorant about their area’s news and affairs without their local newspapers. “The local newspaper is important because it often is the only medium to cover local politics,” Mondak wrote. “If broadcast media fail to report on U.S. House races, then it is safe to assume that they fare even
worse for most municipal and county elections.”122 Besides Mondak’s research, one other related study is worth mentioning.

Fifteen years before and an ocean away from Pittsburgh’s newspaper strike, a massive shut down of Israel’s news media in April 1978 created the conditions for Tel Aviv University communications professor Akiba Cohen’s study. Like Mondak, Cohen employed a close-ended survey (in his case with 229 Israeli respondents) to study where people acquired news in the absence of newspapers.123 But the Israeli media blackout was even worse than Mondak’s. With the exception of an army news radio station, Israel went without every one of its newspapers (for two days), and all of its state-owned radio and TV stations (for two weeks) following a strike by Israeli journalists. Whether in New York City, Pittsburgh, or Tel Aviv, the research participants in the studies by Berelson, Kimball, Mondak, and Cohen had at least one thing in common. If they wanted news, and in each case a sizable, hard-core segment of each study’s participants did, they found it. Israelis simply turned to foreign newspapers. Somewhat remarkably, just 10% of the population reported not reading the newspaper at all during the strike; 13% read newspapers less often than before the strike; 62% read papers at the same rate; and 15% actually read them more often.124 Cohen’s survey respondents were much more bothered by the absence of TV than newspapers. It’s also worth noting that, more than gender, education, and age, the frequency of newspaper reading best predicted whether Cohen’s research participants missed newspapers. Indeed, the more frequent newspaper readers were the most bothered by the absence of newspapers (though invariably those readers also were the oldest).125 Thus far, this literature review has discussed how the disappearance of a newspaper affects can affect a community or the paper’s former readers. Yet, a whole other body of related research is worth mentioning regarding how the presence of a newspaper can affect different facets of society.
Quantitative and Mixed Methods Newspaper Effects Studies

An array of statistical model-heavy quantitative studies have found that newspapers are correlates for all sorts phenomena, including: government efficiency and responsiveness for citizens in need (they might increase both);\textsuperscript{126} the formation of local political knowledge, participation among voters, and the creation of opinions about candidates and issues (they appear to promote all three);\textsuperscript{127} investing (there have been mixed results in detecting a correlation);\textsuperscript{128} government corruption (they seem to lessen it);\textsuperscript{129} voting following endorsements\textsuperscript{130} and the influence of the media’s slant\textsuperscript{131} (results have been mixed for both); and civic engagement (those who are civically engaged are more likely to read newspapers and vice versa).\textsuperscript{132} The FCC created a statistical model that indicated newspapers widen the range of viewpoints supplied in local news markets.\textsuperscript{133} Other research has predicted that foreign investors’ perceptions of press freedom affect whether they invest in certain countries.\textsuperscript{134} At least one study has determined that corporations are more likely to be financially transparent when newspapers surround them.\textsuperscript{135} And there’s a long tradition of researchers studying how newspapers potentially influence public opinion (e.g. what constitutes a legitimate public interest group, a viable candidate, or an item worthy of a public policy agenda).\textsuperscript{136}

Quantitative surveys are another favored method for estimating how newspapers impact government corruption (as mentioned, they appear to discourage it).\textsuperscript{137} Such surveys are often used to measure whether newspaper endorsements and/or regular coverage influence voters, political donors, consumers, and business investors (the results are mixed for all four categories).\textsuperscript{138} Quantitative content analyses also have been employed to see if newspaper coverage leads readers to take actions based on what they saw in the paper. Researchers have, for example, used such studies to examine how newspapers affect the efficacy of community-wide health information initiatives (they likely play a key role in spreading the word about important
topics); bank runs and the collapse of financial firms (they may help spark both); corporate corruption such as accounting fraud (they might discourage it); executive compensation (they generally can’t compel companies to lower salaries); citizens’ levels of policy-specific knowledge (they appear to raise them); elected judges’ sentencing decisions (they seem influence judges toward following the public’s desired punishments); and the amounts awarded in civil cases (they lower them).

A number of scholars have produced valuable, comprehensive books on newspaper effects by mixing qualitative and quantitative methods (e.g. close-ended surveys, content analyses and interviews) Princeton Public Affairs Professor R. Douglas Arnold blended opinion surveys and content analyses for his 2004 work, Congress the Press, and Political Accountability. In it, Arnold showed that congressional representatives in districts that received considerable newspaper coverage were more responsive and active. (Other researchers have since echoed these findings). In 1994, Robert Putnam published his decades-long mixed methods study of democracy in Italy, which demonstrated, among other things, how areas with high rates of newspaper reading correlated with more efficient regional governments. Finally, one more mixed methods newspaper effects study merits mentioning. Sociologist Morris Janowitz’s The Community Press in an Urban Setting (published in 1952 and updated in 1967) convincingly linked Chicagoans’ civic involvement with reading weekly newspapers. Janowitz began his work by chronicling the close historical connections between community life and metro weeklies, which were often founded with support from households, neighborhoods, voluntary associations, and decentralized commercial districts.

Through interviews with journalists, a content analysis of newspapers, and a survey of readers and non-readers, Janowitz detailed how neighborhood newspapers are among the modern
mechanisms for social integration in urban communities. Such “mechanisms allow individuals to participate meaningfully in a small unit of a larger structure – the fabric of the metropolis.”¹⁴⁸ In other words, the community newspaper and its publisher promote and engage in community involvement (i.e. a wide “range of collective action … from blood bank campaigns to support for police” departments).¹⁴⁹ Not only are newspaper readers more likely to be members of community groups, they tend to be more politically active and competent (e.g. they vote more often and they’re better than non-readers at naming local leaders).¹⁵⁰ And Janowitz found that newspapers acted as a “social control” by spotlighting the activities people should engage in to be respectable and moral citizens.¹⁵¹ Although Janowitz’s study is noteworthy, his research – as with all the correlational research in this chapter – carries a few caveats. Even if other researchers could replicate every study mentioned in this chapter, it’s difficult to characterize the true nature of the correlations that were uncovered. Did, for example, reading a local newspaper make a citizen more likely to vote? Or is someone who likes to vote more likely to read a local newspaper?

**Two Qualitative Newspaper Effects Studies**

Two books by the aforementioned communications scholar Phyllis Kaniss stand out for the quality of their qualitative research on newspaper effects. In 1991, Kaniss blended a small content analysis of news stories with in-depth interviews of journalists and community leaders to produce *Making Local News* – a compelling case study of news production in Philadelphia.¹⁵² Her community sources, which ranged from elected and appointed officials to city department heads, attested to how coverage from the city’s biggest daily newspapers (the *Daily News* and the *Inquirer*) and TV news programs influenced their on-the-job decisions and how they communicate with the public. Kaniss showed how Philly’s papers helped construct a cohesive regional identity, while influencing urban policy and development, and defining the problems
and opportunities of the metropole and surrounding areas. In some respects, this case study of the
Rocky Mountain News extends her work by asking Denver’s community leaders what purposes
newspapers serve and how the news ecosystem functions in the Rocky’s absence.

Kaniss’ interviewees saw coverage from Philly’s big dailies as a critical tool for helping
them convince members of the public and private interest groups to support or reject
governmental proposals. City officials also used the papers as a means to float tentative ideas for
the public’s consideration, a way for minority parties to communicate their positions, and a
platform to educate the public about the implementation of new policies. And community
leaders relied on the newspapers to attract positive media attention for their initiatives; learn
ways to improve the city; make attention-grabbing quotes to raise public profiles; and even as a
means to manipulate information (e.g. decontextualizing facts, lying about them, or obfuscating).
Local officials often harnessed the city’s papers for public relations purposes, too, including for
creating or repairing the images of agencies and their heads; publicizing a steady stream of news
and information about their successes, troubles, and announcements; and for counteracting
criticism.

For their part, mid-level managers sometimes leaked information to the press to offer
alternative views to those of agency heads, to discredit their bosses and opponents, and to expose
wrongdoing in order to force leadership or policy changes. As for community groups, they
relied on the city’s newspapers to attract free publicity to all sorts of causes and organizations
from residents teaming up to protest a traffic signal to union laborers lobbying for a public
construction project. Outside of how newspapers directly affected those they covered, Kaniss
identified a self-appointed duty – unifying the region. Philly’s dailies, Kaniss wrote, strove to
make those in their coverage area feel like they lived in one place with a shared identity despite
decades of fragmentation from the “suburbanization of metropolitan areas and the
decentralization of residences, employment centers, and retail areas.”

They did so, in part, by making cities the symbolic centers of their coverage even if their news wasn’t necessarily relevant to everyone in their regional audiences. Philly’s big newspapers, Kaniss wrote, most heavily covered and emphasized news from the metropole, while overplaying coverage of “downtown-oriented developments and other regional projects because of their symbolic capital in attracting the suburban audience.” Four years later in 1995, Kaniss uncovered even more ways that newspapers affect the world around them. They came in the form of The Media and the Mayor’s Race, her authoritative, meticulously crafted narrative case study of Philadelphia’s 1991 mayoral race. Her book illustrates how newspaper stories influence TV reporters’ election coverage, the candidates’ behaviors, and whether the public views them as viable. Kaniss spent considerable time observing Sal Paolantonio, then an ambitious young political reporter for the Philadelphia Inquirer, who eventually became a national sports correspondent for ESPN.

By giving certain stories the best play, the Inquirer cued Paolantonio to the type of work it most valued. That was horse race coverage about the mayoral candidates’ strategies to win the election, odds-making pieces about their chances of success, and stories teeming with conflict, drama, intrigue, and personalities. In all, the “Inquirer devoted 65% of its coverage to the horse race, information that had nothing to do with the candidate’s plans or proposals or positions or qualifications. Only 19% of the stories focused on issues.” Whereas the paper buried pieces in which Paolantonio engaged in critical scrutiny, such as a story about a mayoral candidate’s sales tax proposal, “his interpretations of the polls and endorsements and campaign finance reports and
the insider information he managed to unearth … would get far more prominent display.” As Kaniss put it:

That Paolantonio may have brought a slant to his reporting on the campaign – or that sometimes in the course of writing hundreds of stories he would read the signs wrong – would not have been a problem if he had been one of many voices interpreting what was happening to the candidates. But the simple fact was that he, like so many political reporters at metropolitan newspapers around the country, had almost a monopoly on political interpretation in the city and came to play a major role in influencing broadcast journalists in the market. As a result, his reporting – interpretations and all – influenced important decisions on fundraising, voter registration, and actual voting.

Ironically, no TV reporter ever cribbed any of the solid, substantive stories Paolantonio periodically wrote. But the moment he engaged in horse race coverage, TV news reporters “took their cues from him,” amplifying his most interpretive pieces by assembling their own similar stories.

Notes


7 For the first Jefferson quote, see: Robert Park, “The natural history of the newspaper,” American Journal of Sociology (1923): 273-289. For the second Jefferson quote, see: Robert McChesney, Rejuvenating American


11 Ibid. 11.

12 Ibid.


14 Ibid. 528.

15 Ibid. 535.


30 Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel, Blur: How to Know What’s True in the Age of Information Overload, reprint ed. (NY: Bloomsbury, 2011).


36 Ibid. xi-xii.


38 Radin, Contested Commodities, 181.

39 Ibid. 181.


41 Radin, Contested Commodities, 41-51.


43 Ibid. 20.

44 Ibid. xi.


46 Jackson, “News as a Contested Commodity,” 146.


48 Ibid. 112,123.


51 Ibid.


54 Radin, *Contested Commodities*, 74.


58 Radin, *Contested Commodities*, 170.


60 Ibid. 313-330.


66 See Note 65.


76 Berelson, “What Missing the Newspaper Means.”

77 Ibid. 117-121.

78 Ibid. 118.

79 For the print, digital, average circulation, and the percentage of growth for the top newspapers in the U.S. (for the newspaper reporting period ending in March 2013), see: Alliance for Audited Media, “Top 25 U.S. Newspapers for March 2013,” blog post, March 2013, http://tinyurl.com/d4afusr. The tally for the New York Post’s unique visitors was accessed on October 9, 2013 via a paid subscription to www.complete.com, a Millward Brown Digital company-owned website, which provides marketing data on the popularity of websites across the Internet.


81 Ibid. 117-118.

82 Ibid. 114-115.

83 Ibid. 125, 126, 127.

84 Ibid. 125.

85 Penn Kimball was a busy bee before he died at 98 in 2013. Besides teaching and researching journalism at Columbia he was a long-time journalist and an author. And as his New York Times obit recalled, he achieved some renown after he “successfully sued the federal government in a 10-year quest to clear his name after he discovered that secret government files had identified him as a national security risk.” See: Bruce Weber, “Penn Kimball, Journalist Who Sued U.S., Dies at 98,” New York Times, November 12, 2013, http://tinyurl.com/l6zvkjy.


87 Ibid. 392-393.

88 Ibid. 394.

89 Ibid. 396.


91 Sherman, “The Long Goodbye.”

Ibid. 47.

Ibid. 52.


For example, see: Judee Burgoon and Michael Burgoon, “Predictors of Newspaper Readership,” *Journalism Quarterly*, 57, no. 4 (1980): 589-96. See also: Edward Malthouse and Bobby Calder, “Demographics of newspaper readership: predictors and patterns of US consumption,” *Journal of Media Business Studies* 3, no. 1 (2006): 1-18. Edward Malthouse and his co-author found that “the strongest predictors of readership are length of residence and age in most markets, although the effect sizes vary across newspapers and markets.” Additionally, though they determined that “income also has a highly significant positive overall effect,” the effect of education was “small” (though it too varied by newspaper and market).


Ibid. 11.

Ibid.

Ibid. 2.


Ibid.


As Schulhofer-Wohl and Garrido put it, the results offer a “compelling story,” but they were “imprecisely estimated, often not statistically significant, and sometimes sensitive to the use of weights.” See: Schulhofer-Wohl and Garrido, “Newspapers matter,” 78.

Laura Houston Santhanam and Tom Rosenstiel, “Why U.S. Newspapers Suffer More than Others.” In: “State of the News Media 2011,” Pew Research Center’s Project for Excellence in Journalism, April 25, 2011, accessible at: http://www.stateofthemedia.org/2011/mobile-survey/international-newspaper-economics/. Additionally, it’s worth noting that, while the U.S. newspaper industry was imploding between 1993 and 2010, Italian newspapers were not suffering as severely. One part of the reason why is that the U.S. newspaper industry was slightly more mature in terms of exploiting the efficiencies from printing technologies. Ever since the Patriot Ledger (in Quincy, Mass.) in 1953, U.S. newspapers have adopted phototypesetting techniques (with many papers switching in the ’60s and ’70s), which use film paper, lights and a photoengraving process. But it wasn’t until the mid-’80s that many Italian papers abandoned expensive linotype and other hot metal typesetting machines in favor of photocomposition and, later on, computerized production systems. So, while some American media companies were closing papers or cutting staff to sustain the profits they’d already experienced from new technologies, Italians were opening comparatively more newspapers and increasing news because they were still realizing technological benefits. None of this is to say, however, that the European newspaper industry also hasn’t suffered mightily in recent years. Between 2007 and 2009, or during the heart of Drago’s study, Italian, British and Greek newspapers were especially hard hit by many of the same storm winds that buffeted American newspapers as those countries’ respective newspaper industry revenues fell a total of approximately 20%. For information on the U.S. newspaper industry’s shift toward new technologies, see: Elizabeth MacIver Neiva, “Chain Building: The Consolidation of the American Newspaper Industry, 1953–1980,” Harvard Business History Review, 70, no. 01 (1996): 1-42. For an explanation of photocomposition, see: Dennis Hevesi, “Louis Moyroud Dies at 96; Helped Revolutionize Printing,” New York Times, http://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/02/business/media/02moyroud.html. For more information about the Italian newspaper industry doing comparatively better than the U.S. newspaper business, in recent years, see: Francesco Drago, Tommaso Nannicini and Francesco Sobbrio, “Meet the Press: How Voters and Politicians Respond to Newspaper Entry and Exit,” University of Bonn Institute for the Study of Labor Discussion Paper No. 7169 (2013): 9.


Mondak, Nothing to Read.

Ibid. 83, 99, 155-168.

Ibid. 57.


Mondak, Nothing to Read.

Ibid. 158.

Ibid. 155-158.

Ibid. 99.


Ibid. 176.

Ibid. 174, 179.


147 Putnam, Leonardi, and Nanetti, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*.


150 Ibid.

151 Ibid.


153 Ibid. 160-184.

154 Ibid.

155 Ibid. 221.

156 Ibid.


158 Ibid. 367.

159 Ibid. 368-369.

160 Ibid. 369.
CHAPTER 8
NEWSPAPERS STILL PRODUCE MOST JOURNALISM

The question that mass amateurization poses to traditional media is ‘What happens when the costs or reproduction and distribution go away? What happens when there’s nothing unique about publishing anymore, because users can do it for themselves?’ We are now starting to see that question being answered.

–Clay Shirky

One function that’s hard to replace is the kind of reporting that comes from someone going down to city hall again today, just in case. There are some in my tribe who think the web will solve that problem on its own, but that’s ridiculous.

–Clay Shirky

“Will the last reporter please turn out the lights?” Illinois communications professor Robert McChesney and the University of Pennsylvania’s Victor Pickard ask in the title of their 32-essay anthology about the crisis of layoffs and newspaper closures in recent years. Their 2011 collection’s cover photo is an entrance to nowhere – a vacant newsroom, devoid of desks, full of windows without gazers. One influential band of journalism prognosticators has never envisioned such a bleak future for newspapers. These scholars – henceforth “news futurists” – picture the emergence of a growing, tech-savvy, socially responsible corps of ordinary citizen journalists, and independent, entrepreneurial reporters (a.k.a. “journoprenuers”). A number of news futurists have predicted that a slew of citizen journalists and new media outlets would arise to replace newspapers. This chapter, however, shows that those predictions simply haven’t come true. The sections that follow cover some of scholarship on news ecosystems (i.e. which news outlets create and spread most of the news in a given area), which show that newspapers still produce the greatest share reportorial journalism. Newspapers still have the largest staffs, the highest output of in-depth stories, and they remain the most vital of news creators in a given news ecosystem. This chapter concludes by both spotlighting a 2015 Pew Research Center study describing Denver’s current news ecosystem, and by listing this study’s research questions.
The Vision vs. Reality

Clay Shirky, an author and New York University journalism lecturer, is one of the most prominent of the news futurists, some of whom include CUNY journalism professor Jeff Jarvis, and, to different degrees, legal scholars as Yochai Benkler and Cass Sunstein, USC communications professor Henry Jenkins, technologists like Dan Gillmor and Nicholas Negroponte, and Jay Rosen, a media critic and NYU journalism professor. Dean Starkman, who performed a public anatomy of their views in a December 2011 *Columbia Journalism Review* feature, has summarized their positions thusly.

(T)he future points toward a network-driven system of journalism in which news organizations will play a decreasingly important role. News won’t be collected and delivered in the traditional sense. It will be assembled, shared, and to an increasing degree, even gathered, by a sophisticated readership, one that is so active that the word “readership” will no longer apply. Let’s call it a user-ship or, better, a community. This is an interconnected world in which boundaries between storyteller and audience dissolve into a conversation between equal parties, the implication being that the conversation between reporter and reader was a hierarchical relationship, as opposed to, say, a simple division of labor.3

Such thinking is rooted in a few core beliefs. One is that the Internet has lowered production and dissemination costs to such an extent that collaborative networks of amateurs can literally form their own *mass* media to generate a superabundance of news and information. Another is that ordinary people will revolutionize information and communications technology systems by manning a million laptops, camera phones, social media websites and as-yet-to-be-invented ICTs. As Shirky has written, “It makes increasingly less sense even to talk about a publishing industry, because the core problem publishing solves – the incredible difficulty, complexity, and expense of making something available to the public – has stopped being a problem.”4

Amateurism and volunteerism will triumph over professionalism, according to the news futurists, whose thinking goes something like this. First, the wisdom of crowds will prevail in choosing story ideas, pooling expertise to “crowd-source” them, and spreading them across
platforms, including social media. Second, journalism will be redefined as a conversation between everyone in the public, not just reporters addressing audiences in a one-to-many information delivery model. Third, there will be little time or need for long-form narratives. Fourth, driven by ordinary people working together, news reporting will continue to become more rapid, spontaneous, and informal. Jarvis, for example, believes that news is gradually taking the form of “networked journalism” that:

(T)akes into account the collaborative nature of journalism now: professionals and amateurs working together to get the real story, linking to each other across brands and old boundaries to share facts, questions, answers, ideas, perspectives. It recognizes the complex relationships that will make news. And it focuses on the process more than the product.

Jarvis and company have pointed to the power of the open-source collaborations that created the Linux computer operating system and Wikipedia, which they see as proof for the feasibility of “open-source journalism.” As Shirky put it, “Social production (is) people you don’t know making your life better, for free.” Or, in the words of Sunstein, the Internet-enabled “development of cumulative knowledge” will empower ordinary people “producing an astonishing range of new goods and activities.” Nicholas Negroponte, founder of Massachusetts Institute of Technology’s Media Lab, has declared that the Internet will “flatten organizations, globalize society, decentralize control, and help harmonize people.”

The news futurists believe “the Internet will be a force for democracy and good worldwide, ending monopolies of information and centralized control over communication,” journalism scholar Robert McChesney wrote. But, as he has cautioned, we’re not quite ready to “head off to a beach with our laptops, iPods, Kindles, and smartphones – not to mention a daiquiri and a bag of potato chips – and live happily ever after.” Society, he added, also has to keep an eye out for just how well new media are actually augmenting, or even replacing, newspapers. So far, the signs are not so auspicious. A long list of one-man news bands have not
materialized to democratize the Internet with a deluge of daily news. Or at least those who have emerged have neither had the scale nor the popularity to replace all the content newspapers created before so many of them collapsed or attenuated their staffs. When it comes to the Internet’s promise, Australian media scholar Lincoln Dahlberg has identified three schools of thought, though some draw from more than one. Those holding “liberal individualist” views of media evolution believe in the Internet’s power to create a digital marketplace of ideas.

They think rational, independent citizens will inform themselves by choosing among all the competing, self-generated news, entertainment, and opinions online. “Communitarians,” by comparison, have espoused an even broader belief in the Internet’s ability to empower ordinary people. And they think the Internet has empowered humanity with the means to circumvent governments and corporations, and to unite and create their own informational communities for a shared, greater democratic good. Their views resemble those of John Dewey, who believed in the power of the masses to create the ideal, cooperative, democratic society.12 In the third category, “deliberative democrats” envision the Internet as a sort of cross-disciplinary, neutral space wherein people of diverse backgrounds can collaborate and create ideas that fill a vibrant public sphere. These are the Habermases of the digital futurists.13 Author Evgeny Morozov acknowledges the Internet’s potential, but he’s also made a career of pointing out where the promises have fallen short. Part of the problem, according to The Net Delusion: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom, is that governments and corporations have learned to use the Internet to effectively counter all three of the visions Dahlberg outlined. The other trouble, according to Morozov, is the Internet’s users. Most aren’t using the “Internet to discover the truth about the horrors of their regimes, about the secret charms of democracy, and about the irresistible appeal
of universal human rights.”¹⁴ They’re more easily satiated using the Internet to buy things, and to watch cat videos and porn.

**Powerful Intermediaries**

Many early ’90s mass communications scholars eagerly anticipated the evolution of a World Wide Web that would be “‘a freewheeling, unregulated outpost where any ‘Joe from Dubuque’ could express his or her view.”¹⁵ Even if most Americans preferred consuming news and commentary over porn flicks and cat videos, they almost certainly would not turn to the news blogs and websites created by Joe and Jane. The fact is that most new media are old media. America’s biggest newspapers, TV channels, and radio stations are no longer confined to those platforms. They’re online, too. They produce nearly all of the Internet’s news, and they attract almost all of its news seekers. Legacy news outlets account for 17 of the 25 most popular news websites in America, while producing nearly 100% of the content on the other eight. Their ranks include 11 newspapers (e.g. the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Wall Street Journal* and *USA Today*) and six TV stations (e.g. CNN, ABC, Fox, CBS and the BBC). Another one of the 25 most-visited news websites is a wire service (Reuters). Even the most popular new media websites that aren’t owned by traditional news outlets are simply displaying stories created by old media entities. Four more of the top 25 sites are pure aggregators – they simply repackage and/or redirect users to legacy media content (e.g. Google News, The Examiner, Topix, and Bing News).¹⁶

The remaining three websites among America’s most popular online news sources are “hybrid,” “online-only sites” (e.g. Yahoo! News, AOL News, and Huffington Post). They feature a mix of aggregated legacy media content and a miniscule amount of original reporting (i.e. generally around 1 or 2% of the sites’ total news content).¹⁷ Take Huffington Post, which is owned by AOL. It attracts millions of visitors largely by simply dolling up Associated Press
stories with more attractive headlines. All the same points can be made about the most popular news websites visited by Denver residents. The beginning of this chapter quoted Shirky asking “what happens when the costs or reproduction and distribution go away” and “there’s nothing unique about publishing anymore because users can do it for themselves?”¹⁸ The answer so far is that most Americans – be they ordinary citizens or corporate CEOs – don’t want to produce news, they just want to link to newspapers and TV stories. And when the average Joe or Jane are prolific news producers, most Americans ignore them.

Those are the two main findings of one comprehensive, multi-year Pew study, which determined that “80% of the (online) traffic to news and information sites is concentrated at the top 7% of sites.” Seven in ten “news websites” simply linked to the shrinking content of legacy media websites. “Another 13% of these news sites are aggregators, whose content is derived from legacy media,” and “only 14% of these sites are online-only operations that produce mostly original reportorial content rather than commentary.”¹⁹ Aggregators like Google News and social media websites, including Facebook, Condé Nast-owned Reddit and Twitter, don’t produce journalism. Yet, they too have rapidly emerged as one of the most popular ways the public can find the news produced by traditional news outlets like newspapers.²⁰ In Denver, for example, a 2015 Pew study found that city’s residents only used social media to share legacy media stories, not news stories produced by ordinary people. The most commonly shared news stories among the Denver area’s Facebook users came from two newspapers, three TV stations, one magazine, and one radio station.²¹

In fact, no independent news websites or blogs received enough visitors to even qualify for Pew’s list of Denver’s most popular news websites. Like the rest of America, Denver residents spent their time linking to, sharing, and visiting traditional, brand name media such as
the Washington Post and the Denver Post. Yet, the “myth of digital democracy” persists, and it holds that just as many people who can speak online can also be heard, according to the communications scholar Matthew Hindman. Instead, as McChesney and other political economists of the media have pointed out, “communication systems and content are shaped by ownership, market structures, commercial support, technologies, labor practices, and government policies.” In other words, the existence of the Internet itself isn’t freeing. Like any other information communications technology, the degree to which it “serves to promote or undermine democratic institutions and practices” is contingent upon how “economic and political systems work and how social power is exercised in society.” The websites of big businesses and governments have distinct advantages in drowning out the little guys. Corporations and nations run the Internet or pay Internet Service Providers and search engines for favored treatment over smaller, independent websites. As a result, the biggest online players benefit from faster service and search algorithms that steer the public toward them.

Large corporations in particular have imperialistically colonized the Internet, according to the New Zealand-based media scholar Lincoln Dahlberg. By attracting Internet traffic or influencing how its routed, governments and big businesses act as powerful intermediaries such that ordinary Internet surfers seldom visit vast swathes of the World Wide Web. As Dahlberg put it, “Large corporate portals and commercial media sites are dominating online attention for news, information, and interaction, privileging consumer content and practices while marginalizing many voices and critical forms of participation.” Morozov has forcefully applied precisely the same point regarding the governmental influence on the Web. “The idea that the Internet favors the oppressed rather than the oppressor is marred by what I call cyber-utopianism: a naive belief in the emancipatory nature of online communication that rests on a stubborn refusal to admit its
downside.” Critics of Dahlberg, Hindman, McChesney, and Morozov might draw a distinction between local and national news ecosystems. “Sure,” they might say, “big businesses dominate the creation of national news, but local news is increasingly generated by an array of new, digital native news websites and blogs.”

Unfortunately, that too isn’t the case, according to a 2011 FCC study by Hindman. In all, he identified 1,074 websites that respectively owned at least a 1% market share of local news seekers in each of America’s 100 largest media markets. Among all 1,074 of those websites, daily newspapers operated 590 (55%); TV stations ran 395 (36.5%); weekly papers handled 41 (4%); radio stations managed 31 (3%); while digital-native, media sources were responsible for just 17 (1.5%).

Even then, a closer examination of Hindman’s data reveals that there were only 14 bona fide, independent, online-only news publications. Three of the online-only websites Hindman counted were actually the remnants of newspapers, which had maintained a skeletal online presence after closing their print editions. For example, two of the sites were the Tucson Citizen, which is now deceased both online and in print, and Seattle’s Post-Intelligencer, which is still publishing online with one-sixth its newsroom staff.

To reiterate, Hindman found barely more than a dozen independent, online-only, local news-producing websites with at least a 1% market share among news seekers in America’s 100 biggest media markets. That means that even in a city such as New York, with 6 million adults, it’s difficult to find an independent news website that attracts even 60,000 regular visitors. Although local citizens’ news-related blogs and websites attracted too few visitors to register in Hindman’s broader 2011 FCC study, he recognized that they too merited an examination. After all, 10% of Americans older than age 30 are bloggers, so there are some who contribute their own news and information to their communities’ journalistic ecosystems. To get
a sense of how much news they generate, Hindman conducted a separate, smaller study in which he analyzed five sample markets (Dallas-Ft. Worth; Houston; Portland; Oregon; Cincinnati, Ohio; and Charlotte, North Carolina).

His goal was to find regularly updated, Web-native, non-legacy news blogs that mostly produced local journalistic content like amateur news stories. Hindman counted three such local news blogs in the Dallas area, nine in Houston, six in Charlotte, 12 in Cincinnati, and 18 in Portland. But, as he wrote, the “biggest problem with the content in these local blogs is that there isn’t much of it.”31 The blogs in Hindman’s analysis typically published no more than six posts per day. Even after adding together every daily post in a one-day work sample from Portland’s vibrant news blog scene, Hindman counted just 4,000 words worth of content, or a “small enough (amount) to be printed on a single page of a full-size daily newspaper.” Yet, even those small, simple story counts might overestimate the local news sites’ journalistic contributions because Hindman didn’t check to see if they relied on newspaper or TV coverage to generate story ideas, facts, and angles. “Many continue to assume that the Internet allows motivated citizens, for the first time, the potential to be heard by a worldwide audience,” Hindman wrote.32 But in reality, as he concluded, few ordinary people seize the opportunity to be heard online, and those who do rarely reach wide audiences or overcome the far more voluble corporate and governmental voices across the Internet.

Newspapers: Seeds and Soil of News Ecosystems

To hear media futurists like Jeff Jarvis tell it, news is a reasonably homogenous, uniform product regardless of the producer. Just as two oxygen atoms and one hydrogen atom constitute water, so too does journalism consist of reporting, writing, and publishing. “Future of news thinkers remind (journalists), as often as possible, that what they do is nothing special and is basically a commodity,” Columbia Journalism Review’s Dean Starkman wrote.33 Such rhetoric
reduces journalism to a means of production rather than an entity that’s valuable in and of itself. The purpose of this section, like the sections immediately proceeding and following it, is to make the opposite argument. News producers are not merely different types of mushrooms (white button for the neighborhood blogger and Portobello for the New York Times). Newspapers are both the most fruitful news-producing seeds and the germinable ground from which most other journalism sprouts. And to blow them away today like Dust Bowl topsoil, would require the restoration of their original journalistic output and the replacement of their fertile reportorial foundation.

Contesting the complete commodification of the news begins with assessing journalism’s worth. Media economist Robert Picard’s 2009 Christian Science Monitor did just:

> Journalists like to think of their work in moral or even sacred terms. With each new layoff or paper closing, they tell themselves that no business model could adequately compensate the holy work of enriching democratic society, speaking truth to power, and comforting the afflicted. Actually, journalists deserve low pay. Wages are compensation for value creation. And journalists simply aren’t creating much value these days.

Picard’s reportorial rabble-rousing is rooted in his designation of journalism’s value. “Intrinsic value,” he wrote, “involves things that are good in and of themselves, such as beauty, truth, and harmony.” In contrast, “journalism produces only instrumental value,” which is to say “it is important not in itself, but because it enlightens the public, supports social interaction, and facilitates democracy.” Journalism, Picard continued, used to create value by “providing useful information and ideas,” creating a “sense of belonging and community, reassurance and security, and escape,” and by supporting people’s opinions or allowing them to express their differing positions. But, he concluded, journalism is no longer economically valuable because news and information are neither scarce nor tightly controlled. And modern technologies have empowered
any reportorial aspirant to assemble, publish, and disseminate information – to readily inform, entertain, and persuade the public.

News futurists such as Clay Shirky have derided newspaper executives as hopelessly clinging to their antiquated medium, when they should be finding ways to preserve and promote the practice of journalism. To Shirky, the question “How can we save newspapers?” misses the point. The print business model failed because media companies were too attached to newspapers “as a general-purpose vehicle for publishing a variety of news and opinion.” Those “committed to saving newspapers” have made the mistake of “demanding to know ‘If the old model is broken, what will work in its place?’” But, “Society doesn’t need newspapers,” Shirky added. “What we need is journalism.” Picard and Shirky’s arguments are an appeal to ridicule, and they miss two critical points. First, the problem facing newspaper executives nowadays is no longer a failure to realize, or an unwillingness to adjust to, the reality that they’re not in the news-on-paper delivery business. Their far more daunting challenges involve identifying the most economically viable, publicly beneficial ways to survive and thrive. Second, for all practical purposes, newspapers are journalism. In any given market, newspapers generate 85% of the original reportorial journalism, according to Harvard’s Alex Jones, who’s seen credible estimates that the real total may be up to 95%.

That means two things. Newspapers produce a radically higher quantity, a greater frequency, a wider range, and a larger proportion of America’s daily journalism content than every other type of news outlet. Plus, all other news creators and commentators decide what stories to cover, and as often how to cover them, based on reporting that began in newspapers. David Carr, the New York Times’ late media critic, poignantly made the same point in a 2011 documentary film about the paper. Responding to questions about whether the world would need
and want newspaper journalism given the array of online options, Carr held up a print out of popular news aggregator’s website. But he had already snipped out every story not produced by traditional news outlets, and the page was so full of holes there was nearly nothing left of it.\(^\text{38}\)

Although some lively and advantageous iteration of the journalistic world envisaged by the news futurists may yet continue to evolve, it’s not here yet. The points by Carr and Jones are supported by the body of academic literature about news ecosystems.

**Trying to Find What the Prognosticators Predicted**

CUNY Staten Island journalism professor C.W. Anderson spent five years, from 2006 to 2011, studying the composition of, and collaboration within, Philadelphia’s news ecosystem. Anderson’s book, *Rebuilding the News*, represented his quest to find the networked, open, collaborative news partnerships that so many news futurists had described. But it didn’t exist in America’s fifth biggest city. Indeed, the central paradox of Anderson’s book was his determination that, “For networked news to be possible, traditional (news) institutions dedicated to collaborative production must also exist potential. News networks do not appear out of nowhere, emerging from a digital swamp of news ecosystems (emphasis in original).”\(^\text{39}\) New media “networks need dedicated (old media) institutions to help build them,” Anderson wrote.\(^\text{40}\)

It’s overly simplistic to think of newspapers spontaneously combusting as digital news creators replace them. To quote USC communications professor Jenkins, “Old media are not being displaced. Rather, their functions and status are shifted by the introduction of new technologies,” and, as time passes, the old and the new co-exist and even converge.\(^\text{41}\) For example, newspapers now operate their own websites and occasionally partner with other online only news outlets and TV stations.

Just as record collections sit beside CDs and laptops full of digitally downloaded and streamed music, so too do Americans still read newspapers in paper form and on the screens of
their computers and mobile devices. Even if new media aren’t simply replacing old media, they’re still contributing varying amounts of valuable news, opinion, commentary, and analysis to news ecosystems across the U.S. As often, new media write stories for, advocate on behalf of, and give voice to a wide range of constituencies such as immigrants, minorities, environmentalists, educators, a sports team’s fan base, or a neighborhood’s residents. Among the “earliest batch of web-native, local Philadelphia media organizations” that Anderson documented in Philadelphia were an “explosion of blogs, user-generated content, new online activist groups and nontraditional journalism institutions.” Their ranks included the on-and-off-again presence of the now-defunct Philadelphia Independent Media Center, which began around 2000 as one among a worldwide network of 150 participatory news projects led by ordinary citizens.

Philly IMC.org was one of the six non-mainstream media websites that Anderson analyzed. But it’s worth noting that just three of the websites in Anderson’s study are still operational, and only two produce anything approximating original reporting. Yet, where there’s a will to produce journalism, there’s not always a sustainable way. Sure, Joe and Jane from Dubuque can start a news website to “speak truth to power.” But they probably can’t afford to continue if even one of their scorned story subjects tries to muzzle or intimidate them with a costly lawsuit. One major metro daily has the scale to pay, insure, and defend hundreds of news producers. And there’s something to be said for the value of reporters themselves. The pros generally have years of formal and/or experiential training, considerable institutional knowledge and subject matter expertise, hard-won source lists, baseline standards for quality, and professional codes of conduct. As Starkman put it:

Whether it be called the New York Times or the Digital Beagle, we must have organizations with talent, traditions, culture, bureaucrats, geniuses, monomaniacs,
lawyers, health plans, marketing divisions, and ad salespeople – and they must have the clout to take on the likes of Goldman Sachs, the White House, and local political bosses.45

Ironically, it wasn’t a government or a corporate lawsuit by some scorned story that did in the Philly IMC. The paper lacked the resources to defend itself against trolling copyright attorneys with a cottage industry of suing websites for photo use without proper permissions. After 14 years, the site’s operators decommissioned it in 2014 “due to insufficient capacity to provide responsible site maintenance, including spam, inappropriate posts, security upgrades, and threats from copyright holders.”46

Philly IMC wasn’t unusual merely for its longevity; generally speaking, it was also a rare gem of citizen journalism – a vibrant, alternative, independent, crowd-sourced, digital native news outlet. Anderson found that most of Philadelphia’s independent news websites were aggregating traditional news outlets’ stories, not producing original journalistic content. They simply ranked what they viewed as the best local newspaper stories, repackaged them with snappier headlines and illustrations, and linked them to other related, informative, and entertaining information across the Web. The non-legacy media websites Anderson examined also provided commentary and opinion on traditional news outlet stories. They corrected and found new information or details overlooked by the newspapers. And, occasionally, non-mainstream media sites even broke stories. But when they did, they often reprinted verbatim copies of newsmakers’ press releases. The point here, as Anderson concluded, is that “the Philadelphia news ecosystem’s … center remained the traditional media organizations that have produced the news objects we call ‘newspaper.’” And all “those dominant (newspaper) organizations were concerned with reporting the news in a particularly traditionalist sense (emphasis in original).”47
In practice, Anderson added, that meant Philadelphia’s newspapers were most focused on governing the production and dissemination of news, not regularly teaming with independent news producers to create collaborative, networked news operations. Around the same time, 100 miles away, the Pew Research Center reached many of the same conclusions, during their 2010 study of Baltimore’s news ecosystem. Baltimore doesn’t lack for journalistic organizations – from traditional news outlets (including newspapers, TV channels, radio stations, and niche media such as ethnic publications) to new media (from blogs to citizen journalism efforts, and online alternative news outlets). Yet, “Fully eight out of ten stories studied simply repeated or replaced previously published information,” according to the Pew researchers, who analyzed much of the journalistic content produced in Baltimore over a one-week span in 2009. Out of the 53 total news outlets studied, 44 legacy media organizations accounted for 96% of the city’s original reporting (i.e. finding stories, breaking, and advancing them).

Thus, the nine nontraditional media outlets in Pew’s sample supplied a mere 4% of all the reporting the researchers encountered. Non-legacy media sources broke just two stories, but they gained little public attention until traditional news outlets noticed and reported on them. In one case, the city’s police department tweeted information about a shooting. In another instance, a citizen journalist’s news blog broke a story about the state’s plan to prevent crime by installing surveillance devices on public buses. Yet, few saw that blog post, and the public outcry that spurred legislators to rescind the plan didn’t occur until the Baltimore Sun began covering the story. Baltimore’s new media were no better at producing follow-up reporting. Among the news operations publishing stories that contained new information on a previously reported topic, “95% came from traditional media – most of them newspapers,” which “set the narrative
agenda for most other media outlets.” One of the Pew study’s most disturbing discoveries was tied to the researchers’ tallies of *Sun* stories over the years.

For the entirety of 2009, the city’s flagship news outlet produced 32% fewer stories than it did in 1999, and a 73% lower total than in 1991. The *Sun*, for example, generated just one-seventh as many stories about a round of state budget cuts in 2009 compared with similar coverage in 1991. Overall, the Baltimore metro area’s major newspapers provided one-third as much coverage as during their better-staffed days in the early ’90s. Naturally, the *Sun*’s lower story totals corresponded with the paper’s 2009 decision to reduce its newsroom to fewer than 148 reporters – a 65% drop from the paper’s 1999 total of 420 journalists. As in Philadelphia, a long line of online-only news outlets hasn’t been at the ready to replace the *Sun*’s news production. At best, citizen journalism websites, blogs and other digital native news entities “serve as complements to daily newspapers,” according to a 2010 study by a team Michigan State researchers. One reason is that they’re not nearly as timely as daily papers, according to the study.

Among the 139 news websites and blogs analyzed in 46 metro areas, only 28% of the citizen journalism websites were updated daily. A bit more than 34% of the content on these sites was between one and seven days old. Another 22% of the news produced by volunteer and amateur journalists was eight or more days old, and the remaining 16% was 120 days or older. Not only did the urban daily newspapers in the study average a greater quantity of local government coverage than the citizen journalism websites (six stories per day for the former compared with .68 from the latter), the dailies were more likely to offer substantive coverage of education, crime, courts, accidents, and disasters. The daily papers also utilized a greater number and variety of sources than the online citizen journalism outlets. And they covered
government news on all levels across the local area (e.g. in counties, suburban municipalities, and big urban centers), while the citizen journalism websites concentrated only on reporting the political news for big cities or specific neighborhoods.

None of the research referenced in this section should be construed to demean or detract from the very important contributions of hundreds of online-only news websites from coast to coast. In particular, dozens of nonprofit news websites often exist in each state, and many have been designed to fill the void left by shrinking newspapers, according to two related Pew studies (in 2011 and 2013). These digital-only news operations generally focus on state or metro areas. And they often specialize in producing investigative reporting, along with coverage of governments, public and foreign affairs, the environment, health care, the arts, and culture. Such non-legacy media websites and blogs vary widely by business and ownership structures, reaches, sizes, levels of original news reporting, levels of collaboration with news outlets, professionalism, depth and breadth of coverage; and the extent to which they’re professional, and profitability. But it’s crucial to note that these websites don’t necessarily strive to be objective.

Across America, a handful of opaque organizations have funded or seeded many online-only news operations, according to the aforementioned Pew studies. Those backers are often aligned with liberal and conservative groups and/or nongovernmental advocacy organizations such as environmental preservation funds. Overall, Pew estimates that 172 nonprofit digital native/online-only news outlets have been founded since 1987. Yet, just one-third of such sites are wholly independent because advocacy, activist, or political groups sponsor the rest. According to Pew, such news websites employ only three (or fewer) people, and their news production is paltry. Overall, the nonprofit websites in Pew’s 2011 study registered a median weekly story count of just eight, and they generally focused only on their organizational parents’
pet issues (e.g. labor issues for those run by liberal groups). Meanwhile, half the stories Pew analyzed provided only one viewpoint on controversial issues, while a mere 2% included two or more points of view.  

As Pew’s researchers concluded in a 2013 follow-up study to their 2011 efforts, “Nonprofit journalism (is) a growing but fragile part of the U.S. news system. Most nonprofit news organizations are small, with minimal staffs, and modest budgets.” Indeed, for both years, the vast majority of the websites Pew examined ran on shoestring budgets, and nearly all struggled to find the resources to raise money after their seed grants. One in five of the online-only news outlets earned $50,000 or less annually, according to Pew’s follow-up study. Just one in four generated between $50,000 and $250,000. Nearly “two-thirds of the survey respondents (61%) began with a startup grant that accounted for at least one-third of their original funding.” Yet, “only 28% of those organizations reported that the funder had agreed to renew that grant to any degree.” Ironically, the lack of a business model for such websites hasn’t hastened the emergence of new operations.  

In 2013, Pew released a groundbreaking study on whether the jobs created by 468 digital native news outlets – most of which have come since 2004 – had offset those lost by traditional news operations closing and cutting staff in recent years. In all, non-legacy media outlets on the Web – which include all manner of nonprofits, for-profits and hybrids – produced nearly 5,000 full-time editorial jobs in the past decade. Nearly one in three of those new media outlets opened between 2010 and 2014. “But the question of whether digital news outlets can ultimately replenish the loss of legacy media jobs and reporting resources hinges on creating the kind of successful business model or models that have proved elusive,” Pew’s researchers added. “Many
native digital outlets are still unprofitable and there is a finite supply of billionaires willing to spend $250 million on a startup.”  

**Are Newspapers Irreplaceable?**

New media have a long row to hoe to even begin to replacing the one in three full-time newsroom employees that newspapers shed from 2000 to 2010. As mentioned at the inception of this study, the newspaper industry’s newsroom employment total plummeted to 38,000 in 2012 from its recent high of 56,200 in 2000. Eighty-percent of that carnage (14,600 of the 18,200 journalists lost) has occurred since 2007, when newspapers’ still employed as many as 52,600 journalists. Consider Philadelphia again, where the *Inquirer* and the *Philadelphia Daily News* are sisters under the same owner. By early 2011, the *Inquirer* had shrunken its newsroom to 280 staff members compared with its peak of 721 in 1989, while the *Daily News* has whittled itself down to approximately 100 journalists in recent years. Nonetheless, even in their enfeebled states, Philadelphia’s top two papers still employ more than 300 journalists, and no Internet news creature – fish, fowl, or flesh – can now replace that level of news production. That’s equally true for Denver. At their recent peaks in the mid-2000s, the *Rocky Mountain News* and the *Denver Post* employed a total of approximately nearly 600 journalists.

As recently as 2006, the *Rocky* had approximately 275 journalists (though it was down to 228 when it closed), while the *Post’s* newsroom was up around 300 in the mid-2000s. Now, the *Rocky* is gone and, as of the spring of 2016, the *Post’s* newsroom is down to 115 journalists. Even after all the attrition, layoffs, buy-outs, and firings, big, urban daily newspapers like the *Post* are still far better staffed than every other type of news outlet. Across America, the average newsroom staff sizes stand at 27.5 employees for a community newspaper, 4.4 for a digital native news outlet, 1.5 for a radio station, and 38.5 for a TV news channel. By those estimates, replacing the 115 journalists would respectively take the equivalent of four community
newspapers (e.g. weeklies, smaller dailies, and ethnic papers); 26 online-only news outlets; 77 radio stations; and three local TV news stations.

Making such comparisons, however, is not so simple because newspaper staffs proportionately produce more news, and stories of greater depth, per journalist than those of other news outlets. That’s partly a function of the newspaper format. TV and radio stations have time limits on their news stories. So, even when TV and radio stations equal or surpass the story counts of local newspapers, their coverage isn’t commensurate. No matter how one slices it, the average big city newspaper contains far more substantive, in-depth news than a typical local TV newscast. The USC’s research is a case in point. The college’s 2010 study of Los Angeles news stations found that a typical, composite half-hour of local TV news contained “8:25 of ads; 2:10 of teasers (stay with us – there’s a story you won’t want to miss; 3:36 of sports and weather; and 15:44 for everything else.” Of that 15 minutes and 44 second of news, 2 minutes and 50 seconds went toward crime stories; 2 minutes and 26 seconds covered “soft news, oddball news, human interest stories, contests, make-overs, world record attempts, fashion, travel, cooking, animals going wild, weddings etc.”; 2 minutes and 2 seconds were devoted to entertainment news; business and economic stories received 1 minute and 20 seconds of attention; while catastrophes got 1 minute and 19 seconds.

A mere 2 minutes and 50 seconds went toward stories about civic issues and local governments and other hard news topics such as education, the environment and community health. And the remaining 3 minutes 19 seconds in the TV newscast were spread across miscellaneous stories about everything from foreign countries to car crashes and science and technology. “Looking closely at the content of local newscasts is a little like reading the ingredients on a box of Lucky Loops cereal,” the late communications scholar Phyllis Kaniss
once wrote. “You always knew it wasn’t oatmeal, but until you scrutinized the list, you didn’t realize just how much junk was thrown in to make it taste so good.” Kaniss’ description of the limits of local TV news coverage, from her 1991 book *Making Local News*, remains just as relevant today:

The emphasis on local news anchors and the “cult of personality,” the constraints of time and format, the limited number of television news reporters and the lack of beat assignments, the need for effective video and sound bites, and the premium placed on emotional content and drama all weaken the informational content of local television news. Government news, in general, tends to be downplayed by local newscasts, and when policy stories are covered, the sexiest and most emotional angles are taken. In addition, the need to humanize government plans and proposals often leads to emphasis on conflict and to the coverage of demonstrations in opposition to policies, no matter how small.

One last thing that local TV news doesn’t replace when newspapers shrink or disappear is local news. Because newscasts are designed to serve regional audiences, they overlook a great many daily local happenings that affect the lives of people throughout their coverage areas.

In some ways, radio is an even poorer substitute than TV when it comes to replacing lost newspaper coverage, according to a 2011 FCC report. Just one in three Americans have access to a free, terrestrial commercial news radio station. Just 30 all-news commercial radio stations serve the entire country, and they only reach 30 to 40% of the American population. But even those with access to commercial news radio stations are unlikely to hear a ton of local news content. Nearly half of all commercial all-news radio stations outsource their news production. The FCC’s study cited the example of a Casper, Wyoming news station. When the radio conglomerate, Clear Channel, owned the station, “Its news was produced in Denver, more than 200 miles away, and just 4% of the stories related to Casper. When the station was sold, however, the news was no longer produced remotely and 41% of the stories were local.” It should be noted again that most commercial, all-news stations employ just one full-time journalist (sometimes alongside a part-timer). And that full-time staff member is generally a
radio news director, who handles several non-journalistic duties in addition to overseeing one or more additional local radio stations, according to the FCC.

Although most American towns with a news/talk station air an average 67 minutes of local news per day, the rest of the station’s news programming is national.\(^{74}\) When it comes to filling the local news void, radio’s saving grace comes from the 681 public stations that air at least a little local news programming on a regular basis. Yet, “while public radio does more local news and public affairs than public TV, and more than commercial radio, these are mostly small-scale operations,” according to the FCC’s report. The reality is that just one in six local public radio stations employ three or more reporters, and only 4% actually have more than three editors.\(^{75}\) Fortunately for the Denver area’s residents, their city is home to two especially vibrant local news stations. One is the Rocky Mountain Investigative News Network, which periodically produces in-depth reports about Denver and Colorado. It’s the product of a three-way January 2013 merger between Denver’s PBS TV station, the I-News Network, a digital news start-up designed to provide local investigative news, and the Denver FM station KUVO.\(^{76}\) The other is the news/talk radio station KHOW (630 AM), which generated just as many stories (nine) about Colorado’s primary elections as the Denver Post during the time period the Pew researchers analyzed (June 16-20, 2014).\(^{77}\)

What about small-town weekly newspapers and itty-bitty dailies? What role do they play in news ecosystems? How commensurate is a small paper’s coverage to that of a large metro daily papers (i.e. how well would its coverage replace a dead daily)? Did small papers hold up any better during the newspaper industry’s recent dark years? To be sure, America’s 8,000 “community newspapers” – most commonly defined as weekly or daily papers with a circulation of 15,000 or less – have seen their fair share of financial strife in recent years. But, generally
speaking, big city papers have been hit far harder, according to a comprehensive FCC analysis.78 Compared with their larger brethren, America’s community newspapers still attract high brand loyalty from small businesses and readers with fewer options for hyperlocal news, advertising, and entertainment.79 More than 50 years after former Montana publisher and UNC journalism professor Ken Byerly coined the term “community journalism,” his characterization of small-town newspapers still fits. A community newspaper:

Reports local news items that appear in no other newspaper; reports details of local news that are not included in stories used by other newspapers; aids local shoppers, and serves as an advertising medium for a town’s merchants and other business firms; promotes local welfare and projects; gives recognition to those who work on community programs, further helping promote such projects; creates interest in government and elections; serving to make the former better and the latter more effective; stimulates thinking, particularly on local problems and projects; instructs, entertains, and informs; serves as unifying force in a community.80

The other difference between big city dailies and community papers is the latter’s much shorter reach.

In Denver, Pew’s 2015 study found that just 8% of news seekers turn to community and alternative newspapers compared with 23% for the Denver Post.81 Community newspapers fulfill different functions than large metro daily papers, according to late sociologist Morris Janowitz’s research. They’re much more likely than major metro dailies to assume the tone of cheerleaders, boosters, and public relations agents that put the best possible face on local people, places, and businesses.82 Byerly wrote that community newspapers can be differentiated from major metro dailies because the former have a “friendly neighbor” relationship with readers that can create problems.83 “Community newspapers have something that city dailies lack – a nearness to people,” he added. “This is a great strength, and a great problem.”84 Plus, community newspapers have far fewer resources and less space to match the news production of big city papers. Unsurprisingly, a nationwide content analysis conducted by Michigan State University’s
researchers in 2012 determined that news ecosystems lose the most news when big daily papers pare reportage.  

Moreover, many weekly newspapers are not substitutes for dailies because they don’t update their websites each day. Big city papers don’t just produce the lion’s share of local journalism, they also use the greatest quantity and variety of sources in their reporting, according to the Michigan State researchers, who found other differences, too. Compared with smaller papers, large dailies were “more likely to emphasize substantive topics” over government processes in their stories. They more often used their staff to cover stories. And they published fewer unbylined stories, a common practice among newspapers to veil the reprinting of newsmakers’ verbatim press releases. “Whatever their weaknesses and the competition facing them,” the researchers concluded, major metro dailies “continue to do the ‘heavy lifting’” in a given news ecosystem. As for which news producers do the heavy journalistic lifting in Denver, the next section finishes summarizing the findings, presented throughout this study, of the Pew Research Center’s early 2015 report on the subject.

A Closer Look at Denver’s News Ecosystem

For all the hand wringing and bemoaning of the newspocalypse since 2006, it’s worth reiterating a simple fact. The general collapse of newspapers was, primarily, a result of advertising models breaking down, not readers completely abandoning journalism. Today, the central question is not how to create demand. It’s about finding new income streams and boosting circulation and digital advertising revenues that haven’t increased anywhere near enough to replace the decade-long erosion of more lucrative print ads. Yes, as discussed, America’s per capita newspaper consumption rate has been sliding since the 1930s. But daily newspapers still averaged a weekday circulation of 40.42 million copies (printed and via digital subscriptions) per day in 2014. And that’s just the paid circulation number for newspapers. As
recently as 2012, nearly 57 million Americans said they’d read a newspaper, “yesterday,” in print or digital form. (Understanding why newspaper readership exceeds paid circulation begins with picturing several barbershop customers reading one loose copy of a newspaper or family members sharing a digital device with a New York Times subscription).89

As long as humans exist, it’s hard to envision a time without news sharing, yarn spinning, and gossip spreading. Science tells us our species is hard-wired for such behavior. Indeed, our stories abet the imposition of a comprehendible order on a complex world, forms of escapism, sources of shared history, guides for empathy, rubrics for societal and cultural norms, and lessons in life improvement and danger avoidance.90 Today, in the Denver area, the percentage of people who want to know what’s going on in their communities’ remains sky-high. According to a 2015 Pew Research Center study on the state of the city’s news ecosystem, “Nearly nine in ten (Denver Metro Area) residents follow news about their local area very or somewhat closely, and roughly half follow it very closely.”91 As mentioned, Pew’s recent research offers an especially valuable, insightful general description of Denver’s news producers and consumers. Besides analyzing Denver in its 2015 study, the research center spotlighted Macon, Georgia, and Sioux City, Iowa. In each city, Pew catalogued news sources, polled residents about their preferred news outlets and the media’s performance, and analyzed composition of local media coverage.

Perhaps “143” was the most notable number in Pew’s Denver report. That was total number Pew tallied for the city’s “news sources.” But quoting that impressing-sounding total to describe the state of Denver’s journalism also requires caveats and context. To begin with, all of the news sources within that total are not even remotely equivalent. It doesn’t appear that new media websites and citizen journalists are gradually replacing Denver’s old media outlets. The
Denver Post and the city’s TV news stations create most of the market’s journalism and the public strongly prefers using them.\textsuperscript{92} Even if the 25 online-only news outlets, which were identified by Pew, were among the city’s favored journalism providers, they neither produce enough general interest news nor update it often enough to replace the legacy media. Eleven don’t update their homepages daily, 18 of them focus on niche topics (e.g. websites about health care, firefighting, education, and the arts), and seven rely on outside news sources for significant portions of their content.\textsuperscript{93}

Besides those digital native websites, Pew’s tally of 143 news sources, included: one daily paper (the Post) within the city’s bounds; seven local TV news stations (ABC, NBC, CBS, Fox, CW, and two public stations); 28 community newspapers (all weeklies except for the daily Aurora Sentinel); four talk radio stations; three college newspapers; 17 ethnic news outlets (e.g. black or Chinese weekly papers, Hispanic TV stations); 18 specialty news operations (e.g. business newspapers, an alternative weekly, and regional magazines); and two multi-platform sports news providers. Plus, Pew’s tally incorporated 38 non-journalistic websites run by town governments, neighborhood groups, and politicians because they publish their own press releases and briefs.\textsuperscript{94} Yet, with only two minor exceptions, Denver’s residents preferred using a mere five sources – NBC, the Denver Post, ABC, CBS, and Fox – for news about education, crime, governments, politics, arts and culture, real estate, development, businesses, transportation, and sports. Remarkably, Denver’s 5280 magazine, and the alternative weekly Westword, were the only other local news sources that residents listed for those subjects. Each came in third place for a single news category (the former for business stories and the latter for arts and culture coverage), while the Post and NBC generally traded first for the other categories.\textsuperscript{95}
Just as telling were the sources from which Denver residents reported that they “often”
derived any sort of news. In order of popularity, they were local TV (58%), the Denver Post
(23%), other residents (23%), local radio (23%), weekly newspapers and local magazines (8%),
neighborhood associations (7%), local governments or politicians (2%), and digital-only news
outlets (2%).96 Less than 1% of all residents sought any news whatsoever from citizen-produced
journalism.97 Denver’s most civically engaged residents were the most likely to visit the city’s
digital-only news outlets (5% compared with 2% among the “somewhat engaged” and 1% for the
“unengaged”). They held the highest regard for the value of Internet news sources (59% versus
49% and 45% for the latter two groups).98 They most often read the Denver Post (33% of the
most engaged compared with 20% of those somewhat engaged and 19% of the unengaged).99
They paid the closest attention to neighborhood news (52% versus 38% and 35% for the other
two groups). They were far more likely to follow the largest number of news topics, and chat
about them with other local residents.

And in vastly greater quantities, they participated in a long list of news activities,
including publishing or submitting their own content, sending letters to the editor, commenting
on and sharing news stories, and even calling into TV and radio shows. It’s also worth noting
that Denver’s most engaged residents were the least satisfied with the city’s news media. Forty-
four percent thought the city’s news outlets only “do a fair or a poor job” meeting the needs of
their local community, compared with 26% of the “somewhat” civically engaged residents, and
25% of the “unengaged.”100 In all, just 18% of Denver residents (fewer than one in five) thought
Denver’s local news media were “doing an excellent job of meeting the community’s needs,”
according to Pew.101 A large number of news sources aren’t enough to satisfy people. What
matters is their coverage. Moreover, the composition of Denver’s local TV newscasts – which
are far and away the most popular local news sources – wasn’t all that different from the LA TV news shows mentioned earlier. Denver’s on-air talent primarily focused on events-driven coverage with strong visuals, including stories about crime, accidents, mishaps, and the occasional segment about what government officials said and did.

Up to 35% of the time Denver’s TV newscasts were devoted to weather, sports, and traffic coverage in contrast to 22% for the Denver Post. Indeed, much can be learned about Denver’s news ecosystem by making a side-by-side comparison the stories covered by newspapers and TV stations. Including online content, but excluding traffic, weather, and sports coverage, the Post and Denver’s five major TV channels differed mainly by the percentages of stories each devoted to: crime (12% versus 31%); lifestyles (12 versus 10%); businesses, the economy, and jobs (11% versus 4%); governments (11% versus 1%); police and fire reports (7% versus 6%); accidents/mishaps (7% to 16%); politics (5% to 3%); and recreation (4% to 3%); and disasters (1% versus 2%). And each provided the same amount of education stories (3%).

Yet, even when Denver’s TV news programs took on more substantive topics, they often weren’t presented as full-fledged stories. Again excluding sports, traffic, and weather, just 16% of local TV stories consisted of edited news packages, while brief anchor voiceovers – when a newscaster reads a few sentences for no more than 30 seconds – accounted for 55% of all the city’s TV news coverage.

In all, nearly half of the TV segments that weren’t about sports, traffic, or the weather lasted 30 second or less, less than a quarter aired between 31 and 60 seconds, and less than a third were 60 seconds. In summary, Denver’s specialty news outlets play a valuable role in diversifying the city’s news ecosystem, according to Pew. They do so by covering different topics than their larger journalistic brethren, using novel angles, and by periodically publishing
in-depth and investigative stories. But the health of journalism in the city is best represented by it’s daily news providers – namely those at the Denver Post and 9News KUSA (NBC) – which still supply most of the local reporting, while grabbing nearly all the populations’ journalistic attention.106 “Large, legacy daily news providers still delivered the vast amount of reporting, but the providers beyond those added a second layer of vibrancy not found in smaller cities,” Pew wrote of its June 2014 week studying Denver. “Indeed, Denver’s constellation of blogs, nonprofit organizations, ethnic media and specialty publications dug into current issues in alternative ways and pushed a range of other subjects into competition for the public’s attention.”

Now, between the news ecosystem research reviewed in this chapter, and the previous chapter’s studies about how the appearance, disappearance, and presence of newspapers affect citizens and their communities, this study aims to make its own contribution. The operative question behind this study is whether 41 Denver area community leaders and 223 ordinary Coloradans would describe the Rocky in terms that fit the legal scholar Margaret Jane Radin’s definition of a “contested commodity.” More formally stated, this research project gauges their perceptions regarding the Rocky’s:

**Role in the Community**

**Purposes and Social Mission**

- RQ1a: How, if at all, do community leaders think the Rocky was carrying on a public service mission?
- RQ1b: How, if at all, do local residents think the Rocky was carrying on a public service mission?

**Information for Participation**

- RQ2a: How, if at all, has the Rocky’s closure affected how community leaders learn about and spread the news and information necessary to participate in the community?
- RQ2b: How, if at all, has the Rocky’s closure affected how local residents learn about and spread the news and information necessary to participate in the community?
Closure Affecting Community

- RQ3a: In what, if any, ways do community leaders think the Rocky’s closure has affected the community?
- RQ3b: In what, if any, ways do local residents think the Rocky’s closure has affected the community?

Replaceability

Fungibility

- RQ4a: How well, if at all, do community leaders think other media outlets are replacing the Rocky as a news source?
- RQ4b: How well, if at all, do local residents think other media outlets are replacing the Rocky as a news source?

Necessity and Relevance

- RQ5a: To what extent, if at all, do community leaders think a daily local newspaper is still necessary and relevant, today?
- RQ5b: To what extent, if at all, do local residents think a daily local newspaper is still necessary and relevant, today?

Media Usage Habits

- RQ6a: How, if at all, have community leaders changed their news consumption habits since the Rocky’s closure?
- RQ6b: How, if at all, have local residents changed their news consumption habits since the Rocky’s closure?

Emotional Ties: Missing the Paper

- RQ7a: Do community leaders miss the Rocky, and, if so, what do they miss?
- RQ7b: Do local residents miss the Rocky, and, if so, what do they miss?

Uses and Gratifications

- RQ8a: What, if any, uses do community leaders think the Rocky served in their lives, and how, if at all, did they derive gratification from reading the paper?
- RQ8b: What, if any, uses do local residents think the Rocky served in their lives, and how, if at all, did they derive gratification from reading the paper?
Chapter 9 will now explain the challenge of quantifying newspaper effects and outline this study’s design. Thereafter, the remainder of this study summarizes and discusses its findings, their limitations, and some opportunities for future research.

Notes


5 Starkman, “Confidence game.”


9 Nicholas Negroponte, Being Digital (NY: Knopf, 1995).


11 Ibid. 15.


13 Ibid.


22 Ibid. 104.


25 Ibid.


28 Ibid. xvii.


30 Here a little back-of-the-envelope math is in order. New York, America’s largest media market, is used to illustrate the larger point that non-legacy media outlets attract few audience members. In all, 27.9% (2.3 million) of New York City’s 8.4 million residents are age 17 or younger, according to U.S. Census data from 2010 and 2013. And across America, a 2012 Pew study estimates that 72% of adults follow local news closely. The total 6,060,608 equates to 72% of New York’s 8,405,837. According to Hindman, less than 1% of the residents in each of America’s 100 largest media markets visit non-legacy media news websites and blogs. Thus, among New York City’s adults, at most, just 60,606 people may visit the popular non-mainstream news blog on any given day. See: Carolyn Miller, Kristen Purcell and Tom Rosenstiel, “72% of Americans follow local news closely,” Pew Internet & American Life Project, April 12, 2012, http://tinyurl.com/zasjbb2.

31 Hindman, *Less of the Same*, 16-17.

32 Ibid.

33 Starkman, “Confidence Game: The limited vision of the news gurus.”


35 Shirky, “Newspapers and Thinking the Unthinkable.”


40 Ibid.


42 Anderson, *Rebuilding the News*.

43 Ibid. 32.

44 Ibid. 34.

45 Starkman, “Confidence Game.”


49 Ibid. 29-30.

50 Ibid. 1.

51 Ibid. 2.


54 Ibid. 40, 44.

56 Ibid.


61 See Note 59.


63 Ibid. Note, Pew’s estimate for the number of journalism jobs created in recent years by news websites does not include Vice media—a company for which data wasn’t readily available.


Ibid. 5.


Ibid. 103.


Ibid. 63.

Ibid. 66.

Ibid. 67.


Waldman and the Working Group on Information Needs of Communities, Information Needs of Communities, 42.


84 Ibid. 25.


86 Ibid. 36.

87 Ibid. 35.


89 As of 2013, 76.7% of the U.S. population was aged 18 or older (i.e. 244.56 million adults). And 23% of that total read a newspaper (in print or digital form) “yesterday,” according to: “Trends in News Consumption: In Changing News Landscape, Even Television is Vulnerable, 1991-2012,” Pew Research Center For the People and the Press, (2012), 11.


92 Ibid. 7, 41, 107.

93 Ibid. 90.

94 Ibid. 13, 14, 153.

95 Ibid. 41.

96 Ibid. 39.

97 Ibid. 130.

98 Ibid. 79, 80.

99 Ibid. 78.

100 Ibid. 81.

101 Ibid.

102 Ibid. 107, 108, 110.

103 Ibid. 114.

104 Ibid. In total, 16% of Denver’s TV news stories were edited story packages, anchor voiceovers accounted for 55%, 28% were live stand-ups by reporters, and roughly 1% were interviews.

105 Ibid. 112.

106 Ibid. 106.
There are three kinds of lies: lies, damned lies and statistics.

–Benjamin Disraeli

Smoking causes lung cancer. Nearly everyone knows it, and just as many people take the factuality of the statement for granted. But even without the barriers tobacco companies spent decades erecting to prevent people from establishing that fact, it still took researchers years to overcome sizable scientific obstacles to transform a reasonable explanation into a definitive conclusion. Pardis Sabeti, the Harvard computational geneticist behind a series of educational lectures on statistics, has offered an illustrative example why. In a perfect scientific world, or a demented real world, researchers could’ve conducted an experiment in which they randomly assigned babies to a treatment group (that was forced to smoke) and a control group (i.e. that didn’t). Then, researchers could’ve eliminated other potential factors that might’ve explained the development of cancer because the children would’ve largely been the same except for their smoking habits. Obviously, Sabeti’s example of a perfect study design would’ve been logistically and ethically unfeasible. Yet, it does illustrate a crucial point. Without the ability to conduct controlled, randomly assigned scientific experiments, the burden of proof to show a causal relationship is very high regardless of whether a researcher is working in medicine or the social and behavioral sciences. This chapter begins illustrate the difficulty and the imprecision of measuring newspaper effects, and the chapter ends by discussing the methodology this study used to accomplish that goal.

Before undertaking those tasks, however, another quick cigarette break is in order. In the end, it took thousands of studies, over four decades, and a landmark 1964 U.S. Surgeon General’s report, for scientists and ordinary Americans to reach a consensus that cigarette
smoking causes cancer. Such research wasn’t difficult just because the tobacco industry strategically sought to undermine it. It was methodologically challenging, too. Even after repeatedly showing strong correlations between cancer and cigarette smoking, researchers still had to definitively rule out all the possible common causes, confounding factors, and coincidences that might’ve explained their findings. Unlike cancer research, most journalism studies neither save lives nor magnetically attract grant funding. So, while mass communications researchers may face similar challenges in isolating and measuring the potential contributions newspapers make to their local communities, thousands have not taken up the task. Luckily, several dozen have. As mentioned, such scholarship has mostly relied on statistical models, which have defined the presence of “newspapers” by the amount of coverage they provided, how many readers they reached, or simply by publication counts in a given area.

The Challenge of Measuring Newspaper Effects

As with linking cigarettes to cancer, mass communications researchers aim to estimate clear, consistent, specific correlations between newspapers and how they affect the world. The presence of a tumor, however, isn’t subjective. Doctors share a fundamental understanding of cancer and a battery of proven tests to detect it. In contrast, the social and behavioral sciences rely on human instruments. Their imprecision stems from how well researchers redefine abstract concepts as quantifiable constructs, measure the relationships between them, and adjust for outside explanations of how they interact. So, for example, a researcher investigating whether the presence or absence of a free press leads to more corruption in a given area would have to concoct a scale to respectively measure a newspaper’s presence and corruption. Yet, even if a researcher perfectly quantified press freedom and corruption, employed appropriate statistics to measure their relationships, and adjusted for outside variables, limitations would still exist. To begin with, all such quantitative research is, at heart, qualitative. Statistical models aren’t
objective. They’re the product of numerous subjective human judgments, including the how
scholars choose to construct their scales and samples, which choose formulas they choose to use,
and how they interpret their results. As statisticians Stephen Ziliak and Deirdre McCloskey wrote
in *The Cult of Statistical Significance*, “Statistical significance is not a scientific test. It is a
philosophical, qualitative test.” In other words, no researcher can’t literally measure corruption
and press freedom. All he or she can do is produce theoretical estimates or scores for those
concepts and the relationships between them.

Even then, however, quantitative researchers are only estimating the probability that
newspaper effects potentially exist in each study they conduct. And most are only hoping there’s
at least a 95% chance ($p < .05$) that a real, non-random relationship was shown to exist between
two variables (e.g. that newspaper reading was associated with a voter turnout increase). That’s
not exactly a stringent confidence rate. By those odds, even among perfectly designed studies,
three in sixty of the quantitative studies cited herein can’t rule out that chance determined their
conclusions. It’s also worth noting that the findings in a given newspaper effects study *only*
apply to that study. Before the results can be generalized, others have to determine that the
research was accurate and replicable. Then, they must repeatedly emulate the study, and produce
identical results. Rare is the newspaper effects study for which all of that has actually been done.
Like most statistical modeling in the social sciences, one of the biggest weaknesses of the
newspaper effects studies is their concentration on estimating *whether* statistically significant
relationships exist between variables (e.g. if a newspaper’s presence is associated with less
government corruption). Yet, as Ziliak and McCloskey point out, figuring out and reporting the
*size* of any effects is what matters the most.
Finally, statistical models in mass communications too often focus on detecting correlations rather than addressing bigger picture questions about the repercussions, relevance, and practical solutions surrounding the topic.\textsuperscript{6} Does, for example, an informed electorate actually translate to a better run, more responsive government? If newspapers actually raise voters’ political knowledge levels, how well do other information sources replace them when they close? Regardless of their limitations, quantitative studies are still valuable because, if correctly designed and performed repeatedly, they offer a way to estimate relationships between variables, and to help people find replicable, generalizable patterns. Put another way, well-executed statistical models can promote the search for frameworks to explain real-world phenomena in the social and behavioral sciences. But inferential statistics are just one among many ways to study newspaper effects, and, by no means, are they less subjective or more valuable than qualitative research. At heart, this study is qualitative. So, it avoids the aforementioned challenges of creating scales and using inferential statistics by relying on in-depth interviews and a descriptive statistics-based survey with a healthy mix of open-ended questions. But it’s still a perception-driven study – meaning the best it can do is describe how the Rocky’s closure may have affected the Denver area based on the reflections of the region’s residents and community leaders.

**Methodology**

Two approaches – mixed methods surveys and in-depth interviews – were used to determine the Rocky’s roles in the lives and communities of the Denver area’s residents, to assess whether they were emotionally tied to the paper, and to ascertain its replaceability. The two methods were used in tandem to produce a qualitative case study. Qualitative research expert John Creswell has defined a case study as an examination of a “bounded system … over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information” like interviews and surveys.\textsuperscript{7} Similarly, as the business professors Paivi Eriksson and Anne
Kovalainen have noted, qualitative case studies are especially suited to produce “detailed and holistic knowledge based on the analysis of multiple empirical sources in a rich context.”

Ideally, they added, a case study should take the form of “a good story worth hearing” – or a narrative that explores a particular case “in its economic, social, cultural, technological, historical, and physical setting.” Moreover, the best case studies provide what the anthropologist Clifford Geertz has called a “thick description” – or detailed depictions of the layers of understanding that structured what research participants thought and felt.

In-Depth Interviews: Study Design and Sampling

A total of 41 semi-structured phone interviews were conducted in February and March of 2016. Forty of the research participants were interviewed once, and the interviews generally lasted 40 to 60 minutes apiece depending on the responsiveness of the research participants. One interviewee was interviewed twice, for a total of 90 minutes, because his schedule interrupted the initial interview. All of the interviewees were asked the same scripted set of questions. But the interviewer also followed each conversation’s natural flow by asking additional questions, as necessary, to gently prod the participants to clarify or elaborate on their statements. Raw notes were typed during interviews. And these notes were later copyedited and formatted into transcripts, which underwent minimal editing or only what was necessary to insert punctuation and proper spacing. To select interviewees, this study drew a purposive sample from among the leaders of Denver’s “social institutions,” which will be defined in a moment. For the purposes of this study, “Denver,” which is both a city and a county, was defined as the six-county Denver Metro Area (as designated by the federal government), when the Rocky was in its prime in the late ’90s.

Those counties include Adams, Arapahoe, Boulder, Denver, Douglas, and Jefferson – where the Rocky derived 90% of its readers. This study also added a seventh county, Broomfield,
which was incorporated in 2001. Broomfield was included because it overlapped with parts of those other counties for much of the Rocky’s existence, and it too supplied a number of the Rocky’s readers. The list of “social institutions” from which this study drew interview sources was based on a common definition for the term. “Typically,” according to the Australian philosopher Seumas Miller, “Contemporary sociologists use the term (social institutions) to refer to complex social forms that reproduce themselves such as governments, the family, human languages, universities, hospitals, business corporations, and legal systems.”13 To that broad base, this study added another key criterion. Prospective interviewees did not need to have had any interactions with journalists from the Rocky Mountain News or the Denver Post, but the interviewees did have to be “newsmakers.” Generally, newsmakers are those with external-facing duties, including ordering the dissemination of press releases, being interviewed by reporters, leading an organization that stages public events, or engaging in official actions that a newspaper might cover.

More specifically, communications scholar W. Lance Bennett has fittingly defined “news” as what “elite” sources “promote as timely, important, or interesting; from which news organizations select, narrate, and package (stories); for delivery to people who consume and use it in various ways from entertainment to political action.”14 For example, Bennett wrote, one can easily identify the newsmakers because “the bulk of important news is devoted to the official actions of government and elected officials.”15 With these criteria in mind, this study fielded a diverse source pool that included – but was not limited to – five governors of Colorado (including the current governor); two Denver city councilors; two Denver school board members; a former U.S. Senator, who also served as a Secretary of the Interior under President Obama; a past mayor of Denver; a Presbyterian minister; the head of the regional chamber of
commerce; a local Masonic leader; a Colorado Supreme Court Justice; the chairman of the local 
safety net hospital’s board of directors and two other board members; a municipal economic 
development official; a former Colorado state Senate majority leader; the president of a local 
university; a health care activist; a senior citizens’ advocate; an urban preservationist; a 
contemporary art museum director; and numerous neighborhood association presidents.

A preliminary interviewee list was assembled in a few main ways. Search engine queries 
were initially used to identify some of the largest, best-known social institutions within the 
Denver Metro Area. Local journalists, journalism educators, and the archives of local news 
organizations also were consulted, including those of the Rocky, the alternative news weekly 
Westword, the Denver Business Journal (a popular local business newspaper), the Denver Post, 
and academic databases. Additionally, a snowball-sampling technique was employed whereby 
interviewees were asked to recommend other potential community leaders.¹⁶ Loose quotas were 
set for different types of sources (e.g. church leaders, state legislators) and by geography (i.e. 
where they resided within the Denver Metro Area) to ensure one place or category of 
interviewees didn’t dominate the dataset. Choosing the total number of interviewees for this 
Denver case study (41) involved both interviewing people until a state of “saturation” was 
reached and consulting the sample sizes used by similar studies.

Qualitative research expert John Creswell defines “saturation” as the point at which “the 
researcher stops collecting data because fresh data no longer sparks new insights or reveals new 
properties.”¹⁷ Most qualitative research experts, however, discourage preselecting sample sizes 
on the grounds that researchers should organically interview or work with as many individuals as 
are necessary to reach a point of saturation.¹⁸ Complicating matters, those research experts who 
do offer sample size recommendations for various qualitative methods generally don’t support
their suggestions with evidence of their efficacy beyond their general opinions and anecdotal experiences. Yet, most qualitative researchers don’t have unlimited time and resources to interview as many people as might be necessary to exhaustively uncover and explore every potential finding. Luckily, at least a few scholars have offered guidance on the optimal sample sizes to achieve saturation.¹⁹ This case study of Denver strove to interview between 40 and 60 community leaders – a range based partly on the recommendations of Mark Mason, a British professor of social work.

Mason studied the number of interviewees other researchers needed to reach a point of thematic saturation. Out of 179 case studies, 36 was the average number of interviews conducted to reach a point of saturation, 40 was mode number of interviewees, 33 was the median, and 95 was the biggest sample size. Those 179 case studies were part of a larger sample of 560 qualitative studies, which Mason also examined. Out of all 560 qualitative studies, the mean sample size was 31 interviewees, the mode was 30, and the median was 28. Moreover, his subsequent statistical checks affirmed that those qualitative studies’ sample sizes represented real patterns, not fluke coincidences, of qualitative researchers choosing similar sample sizes to achieve saturation. Other examples of interview-based qualitative research, such as ethnography and ethnoscience, have relied on similar ranges of interviewees. The behavioral anthropologist and health care researcher Janice Morse has suggested conducting between 30 and 50 interviews.²⁰ Former anthropologist Harvey Russell Bernard has recommended 30 to 60 interviews for the same sort of studies.²¹ Bernard Berelson, the researcher who pioneered studying how a newspaper’s disappearance affects a community, used a sample size of 60 interviewees.
In-Depth Interviews: Data Analysis and Presentation

A few main criteria were used to create the thematic codes that would later be used to find patterns among this study’s interview results. To begin with, this study’s topical codes were based on the themes in this study’s research questions (i.e. what, if any, roles the Rocky played in serving the community, the paper’s replaceability, whether the paper’s readers were emotionally tied to it, and the paper’s uses and gratifications). Thematic coding categories also were created based on the frequency with which research participants gave particular answers, the novelty of their responses (i.e. unexpected, conceptually interesting, and unusual perspectives), and potentially relevant themes from the participants of similar studies. Then, interview transcripts were carefully scrutinized to begin a process that Creswell has dubbed “lean coding.” The technique calls for shortening a large initial list of codes to approximately a half-dozen explicit, specific thematic categories, each of which can be readily defined with a few key words.

Subsequent readings of the interview transcripts facilitated the lean coding process of affirming, negating, expanding, and consolidating the initial set of codes. Then, a final review of the gathered data led to the solidification of thematic categories, which were color-coded for organizational purposes. Answers were tallied for each group of ideas, and compelling quotes (i.e. those that encapsulated main themes) were plucked for inclusion in this study’s results section. Although some themes were highlighted for being notable because interviewees discussed them often, a research participant only needed to mention an idea once for it to be spotlighted among this study’s key findings. “Frequencies,” Mason wrote, “are rarely important in qualitative research, as one occurrence of data is potentially as useful as many in understanding the process behind a topic. This is because qualitative research is concerned with meaning, not making generalized hypothesis statements.”
Creswell agreed. “Counting conveys a quantitative orientation of magnitude and frequency contrary to qualitative research,” he wrote. “In addition, a count conveys that all codes should be given equal emphasis and it disregards that the passages coded may actually represent contradictory views.” The point here is not that case studies don’t produce generalizable results, it’s that they’re not meant to do so. According to Eriksson and Kovalainen, “The uniqueness of the case justifies the appropriateness of the case study approach.” It’s the case researcher’s job to interpret the symbolic meanings of what he or she encounters to show how the themes fit together, and to weave together an explanatory narrative about that particular case. With those research principles in mind, this Denver research project strove to present its findings in the form of clear, compelling storytelling. In so doing, the final narrative has been assembled on the basis of the interrelated ideas, unique perceptions, and common themes uncovered throughout the data analysis process. While a photographer considers angles, color, and light in creating a picture, this study relied on the anecdotes, observations, and opinions of those who lived through the Rocky’s closure. By carefully analyzing such data, Creswell wrote, a researcher can uncover “the story they have to tell, a chronology of unfolding events, turning points, and epiphanies.” But, as Geertz argued, case studies should also be able to stand alone as rich descriptions of a subject based on all the available evidence surrounding it (from the researcher’s findings to the subject’s history).

**Survey Design**

In addition to interviews, this study’s survey design relied on a mix of open- and close-ended survey questions. Organizational psychologists Peter Bachiochi and Sara Weiner recommend that researchers answer four questions before employing open-ended survey techniques. Their first question relates to whether the wider picture surrounding the study matters, or as they put it, “Is the context central to the research question?” The answer for this
study of the *Rocky Mountain News* is “Yes.” When the *Rocky* shut down in 2009, other news outlets covered the event as a sad, significant occurrence, while characterizing its demise as a symbol of the newspaper industry’s wider struggles. This study’s partially qualitative survey, however, allows Denver residents the chance to personally discuss what the *Rocky’s* closure meant to them. Bachiochi and Weiner’s second and third questions were: “Is the participant’s interpretation central to the research question(s)?” and “Is depth/richness of data essential?” Once again, the answer is “Yes” to both questions. Rather than testing hypotheses, qualitative surveys are more concerned with exploring the thoughts and feelings of study participants.

Whereas open-ended questions allow respondents to formulate answers in their own words, close-ended surveys present choices that research participants might neither have considered, nor cared about without prompting. Over relying on close-ended survey questions full of Likert scales can open up a survey to all sorts of potential biases. For example, “end aversion” or “central tendency” biases can skew a close-ended survey respondent’s answer choices when he or she “tries to be conservative and wishes to be in the middle.” Those biases can pop up among Likert scale respondents, who are more likely to opt for milder answers, such as “agree” or “disagree” or over strong choices like “strongly agree” or “strongly disagree,” according to the health care researchers Anita Pak and Bernard Choi. Additionally, “positive satisfaction” or “positive skew” bias occurs when a close-ended survey’s participants don’t want to be perceived as dissatisfied with the conditions around them, so they don’t check negative answers. “Social desirability” bias (when research participants give answers that they hope will reflect well on society’s view of them) and “response bias” (when a study’s participants give certain answers just to please a researcher) are likely harder to detect in a close-ended survey because respondents simply check boxes that are tied to a scale.
Open-ended survey questions also work well for gathering unanticipated answers, soliciting unvarnished opinions, and addressing novel situations like the closure of the Rocky, the largest, oldest American paper to fail in a big city since 1991.\footnote{32} Plus, a partially qualitative survey design is a sound choice based on Bachiochi and Weiner’s fourth question, “Is the research exploratory?” Too often, mass communications scholars have simply expounded on the social responsibilities of newspapers without ever asking their readers whether they think the publications live up to such expectations. This study continues the modern mapping of what a community and its members might think, feel, and do after a newspaper disappears, which is an important task given that many studies on the subject were conducted before the Internet age. Open-ended survey techniques are also a convenient way to readily glean thoughtful, interview-like answers from a large number of busy, ordinary Coloradans without actually speaking with them at length. Besides choosing to include open-ended survey questions, an online survey format was selected for its ease of distribution and because Denver has one of the country’s narrower “digital divides” (i.e. the gaps between those with and without high-speed Internet, personal computers, and mobile devices).

In all, 70% of Denver residents have access to high speed Internet (broadband), 85% own a laptop or a desktop computer, 76% have a smartphone, and 53% use tablets, all of which are common ways to acquire news and information.\footnote{33} To develop survey items, questions were written on the basis of this study’s research questions and the interview questions used for Denver’s community leaders. But the interview questions couldn’t simply be copied into the survey. Instead, survey questions had to be designed to induce study participants to expound – with no additional prompting – in long-form answers about a newspaper that’s been closed for six years. Copies of this study’s survey – and its interview questions – were provided to
journalism faculty members, and the head of the history department, at the University of Florida, who reviewed and provided feedback on them. Additionally, journalism faculty at the University of Colorado and the University of Denver respectively pilot tested the survey to ensure it was clear, comprehensible, and on topic. To follow the best scholarly practices for preventing respondent fatigue, those testing the survey timed it to ensure it wasn’t longer than 20 minutes.34 Friends and family also tried out the survey, which was pilot-tested and improved, over the course of two months, by at least two dozen people.

**Survey: Sample Size and Inclusionary Criteria**

A total of 223 Denver area residents completed this research project’s survey between late February and mid April of 2016. Researchers generally don’t recommend a specific number of survey participants for surveys with a lot of open-ended questions because qualitative research doesn’t require representative samples. But given the need for a methodologically justifiable sample size, this case study drew on similar, successful studies to pick the ideal number of survey takers. In related research, Akiba Cohen used a sample of 229 respondents, Steven Smethers polled 123, and Penn Kimball respectively relied on panels totaling 99 and 113 and 164 respondents in two different studies.35 This study’s survey takers had to meet a few main criteria for inclusion, including following local news at least occasionally, reading the Rocky at least once before it closed in February 2009, and living in Colorado continuously for at least six months before and after that. Additionally, survey participants were proportionately pulled from the same counties the Rocky used to serve. So, just as 90% of the paper’s former readers lived in and around Denver (while the rest mostly lived elsewhere in the state), nine in ten of this survey’s participants came from the same area. In another move aimed at mirroring the Rocky’s readership, gender was evenly split among the survey’s takers.
Furthermore, all survey takers were required to have been at least 18 years old at least six months before the Rocky’s February 27, 2009 closure – meaning they were adults when the paper was still open. That decision was made because the Rocky only tallied adults in its official circulation figures and those who were young children when the paper closed in 2009 are probably less likely to remember it. Early on, efforts were made to discern the complete racial composition of the newspaper’s readership to create a similar survey sample. Yet, the Rocky appears to have only broken down its readership in terms of Hispanics and non-Hispanics. Based on the newspaper’s internal demographical data, it likely captured 5% of the Hispanic adults in the Denver Metro Area. So, this survey strove to sample the same proportion of the population. (In the end, 12% of the sample ended up being at least partially Hispanic). It’s worth noting that the Rocky also used to track a number of other characteristics about its readers, including their incomes, education levels, and whether they were blue- or white-collar workers. Although this study tracked down those demographical characteristics for the paper’s readership, they could not be used to assemble a panel, nowadays, because they’re fluid. For example, a Rocky reader with no college degree and a blue-collar job in 2008 might be a lawyer earning six figures today.

Survey: Participant Recruitment, Data Analysis, and Presentation

The online surveys used in this study were created with software from the private research firm Qualtrics, which also was hired to help construct a survey sample of Coloradans that met the inclusionary criteria discussed in the last section. Qualtrics is what’s known as a panel aggregator – meaning it didn’t actually recruit members of the public to take this survey. Instead, it collected and organized the results from three market research companies – Tap Research, SSI, and Clear Voice Research – with which Qualtrics subcontracted to email this study’s survey to prospective participants. Multiple panel providers were enlisted because no single company was able to gather enough individuals to satisfy this study’s sampling needs.
Such firms maintain pools of potential survey respondents, who supply the companies with a range of demographic and psychographic data. The Panel providers incentivized participation with monetary awards ranging from 50 cents to a $1 per completed survey. The marketing research firms use a variety of methods to recruit panelists from the general population. One source comes from retailers across a wide range of industries that conduct their own surveys (e.g. a clothing store administering a customer satisfaction survey).

Online publishers regularly share their reader lists. And the research firms themselves incentivize past survey takers to refer friends and family members to take more surveys. The market research firms maintain strong presences on social media and webpages. Plus, they buy online recruitment ads, often through advertiser networks, which place the ads on search engines and websites across the Internet. To ensure that this study’s panelists were willing participants, each survey taker went through a double opt-in process whereby they were required to consent at least twice, including by responding to recruitment emails. As with this study’s interview participants, each prospective panelist also agreed to the terms of an informed consent form. It’s also worth noting that each panel provider controlled the quality of prospective research participants by limiting the number of surveys they could take on a regular basis, while employing a number of identity verification procedures. For the survey takers, the consent agreements contained a confidentiality clause. And the identities of this study’s participants were safeguarded by the aforementioned panel providers, which anonymized the data before sharing it with this research project. Just as interviewees could leave the study at any time in the process, survey takers were permitted to similarly withdraw.

The verification procedures include checks of their postal, email, and Internet Provider addresses, digital finger printing, and data validation services, such as TrueSample and Verity,
which cross check survey takers’ personal information against public records. The panel providers employed the same methods to ensure no one took this *Rocky Mountain News* survey more than once. Other general quality control measures included the disqualification of those who finished far faster than the average completion time for this survey. And individuals who straight-lined the survey (i.e. they conspicuously answered all the survey’s questions in a similar fashion just to receive a reward for completing it) also were disqualified. In addition, the researcher personally checked each survey to ensure it was answered completely and thoughtfully, and the panel providers found new survey respondents to replace any of those deemed unsatisfactory. Data analysis only began after all 223 respondents were gathered, identified, and verified to ensure that they met this study’s inclusionary criterion.

The first set of thematic categories used to organize their survey responses were based on the topical foci of this study’s research questions. Other sources of thematic categories came from the frequency, uniqueness, and salience of survey respondents’ answers (i.e. the same criteria employed in formulating themes to analyze the responses from this study’s interviewees). Finally, the same lean coding process and color-coding system were applied to choose and organize the final topical categories used during the analysis of the survey data. The next several chapters summarize this study’s findings. In so doing, the remainder of this research project details whether Denver residents’ thought the *Rocky Mountain News* was something more than a bag of potato chips or a pocket watch. What might “something more” mean? As discussed, Margaret Jane Radin has coined the term “contested commodities” to describe goods and services that have both a monetary worth and a conflicting, priceless value because they better the human condition.
The philosopher John Dewey believed that newspapers organize intelligence, promote communication, search for truth, create knowledge and culture, and meld disparate interests into communities.\textsuperscript{36} Academia generates knowledge slowly, Dewey observed in \textit{The Public and Its Problems}, but newspapers swiftly find, assemble, and spread the contemporaneous knowledge necessary for the public to form policies that better society.\textsuperscript{37} According to Radin, Dewey believed that “the purpose of free speech is to foster self government.” He drew “a close connection between knowledge and democracy,” and he believed that free expression equated to no less of a democratic ideal than “community life itself.”\textsuperscript{38} As Dewey put it, “There can be no public without full publicity in respect to all consequences which concern it.”\textsuperscript{39} By examining themes related to Coloradans’ reactions to the Rocky’s closure, this study has created a consultable record of what happened, in one place, when one major newspaper closed.\textsuperscript{40} The remaining chapters explore what uses Coloradans made of their 150-year-old newspaper before it closed, the Rocky’s meaning to them, its roles in the community, and whether they think the paper was replaceable. The next two chapters include interview results followed by a chapter summarizing this study’s survey findings.

Notes


3 See Note 2.


6 Ibid.
9 Ibid. 120.
15 Ibid. 118.
17 Ibid. 248.
19 Ibid. 11.
20 Ibid.
22 Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design*, 152.
23 Ibid.
27 Ibid.
28 Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design*, 152.
31 Ibid.


37 Ibid. 179.

38 Radin, *Contested Commodities*, 170, 171, 172.

39 Ibid. 167.

40 Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 10, 11, 16.
CHAPTER 10
PART I: INTERVIEW RESULTS

RQ1a: Purposes and Social Mission

How, if at all, do community leaders think the Rocky was carrying on a public service mission? Three main themes emerged among the interviewees. First, without the Rocky, Colorado’s community leaders believe they’ve lost a powerful news outlet that used to amplify and advocate for a diversity of views, while looking out for a cross section of society. Second, the interviewees said the paper made a difference as a philanthropist and a civic evangelist. The Rocky was a philanthropist in that it generously fundraised and donated directly to local nonprofits and charities in addition to providing in-kind services like advertising and coverage. The Rocky was a civic evangelist in that it spread the word about the community’s strengths. Third, the Denver area’s community leaders think the Rocky’s loss means the area now lacks a historian and a community biographer to document and preserve the area’s history, chronicle its day-to-day affairs, and shape public discourse.

Amplify and Advocate for Different Views and Voices

Society needs newspapers to spread all kinds of opinions to ensure that a citizenry doesn’t develop a monolithic view of the world. That’s the view that Svein Reichborn-Kjennerud first began to form when Denver’s Seventh Avenue Neighborhood Association president was a tiny child. The 74-year-old mortgage banker was born in Norway during the German occupation between 1940 and 1945 – a time when the Nazi government censored mass media and created a single, unified narrative for the country. “And newspapers became very important to me, and I started to read very early, as a result,” he said. “You have to have media and newspapers. My parents drummed that into me. The Rocky was good in that it was uncensored … and it’s good to have more papers (like that) than fewer papers. I don’t think there’s any exception to that
statement.” That’s a sentiment former Colorado Governor Roy Romer (1987-1999) strongly holds, too. “The newspaper is just story after story in the history of the us, and there have been some very brave people, who ran papers, who were trying to tell the truth against demagogues,” Romer said. Several community leaders said that the diversity of opinions in the Rocky and the Post’s both reflected and shaped the public’s perspective on their community.

Although the Rocky leaned right and the Post was left of center, each paper maintained a moderate opinion page and employed columnists from across the aisle. The Rocky “had a conservative point of view, but it was very open-minded about letting other views be expressed and recognizing alternative points of view,” said David Griggs, who designs huge public art installations (including one at Denver International Airport) when he’s not leading the city’s La Alma/Lincoln Park Neighborhood Association. The Post, for example, endorsed George W. Bush in 2004. While at various points in the nearly 30 years before the Rocky’s closure, it crucially endorsed the campaigns of Democratic Denver mayors like Federico Fabian Peña, Wellington Webb, and John Hickenlooper. The Rocky and the Post also added value to the community by taking contrasting angles toward stories. “The selling point of each paper was that it took a different view in how it covered things than what the other paper had, and I could see the difference in the coverage of my school,” said Principal Andy Mendelsberg, who oversees Denver’s East High School and its 2,500 students. Like any business, the Rocky strove to make money “to pay bills and reporters,” said Governor Romer. “But it had a vocation all its life, too, and that was to report to on our community, and what the people were interested in, from a whole lot of perspectives.” The Rocky didn’t stop there though, said Stephen Jordan, Metropolitan State University of Denver’s president.
The paper lent a powerful voice to and advocated for new Americans, those of all socio-economic strata, and residents of different races and ethnicities. “The Post had the more pro-business perspective, and I really felt the News had much more of a working man’s perspective, and it had more empathy about the issues surrounding low-income and first-generation people.” The Rocky was the kind of paper that produced feature series like “Osveli’s Journey” in 1999. Those stories led the paper’s staff to painstakingly trace the path of a 14-year-old Guatemalan immigrant, who died on Colorado highway while being smuggled into the U.S. The staff anchored their powerful narrative with photos from his village in Guatemala, as the boy’s friends and family grieved around his casket. At the urging of a Hispanic journalism organization, in April 2003, the Rocky also launched an effort to regularly represent and engage Colorado’s sizable Latino population, and it worked. The Hispanic advisory committee that began that spring remained active and gratified till the Rocky stopped publishing. The initiative was part of the National Association of Hispanic Journalists’ Parity Project, for which the organization identified and worked with newspapers where there were large gaps between the local Hispanic population’s size and the news organizations’ representation of Hispanics.

To its credit, the Rocky didn’t just increase its Hispanic coverage. By 2005, it had nearly doubled the number of Latino journalists (from 12 to 23) in its newsroom. Those moves were the Rocky’s successful response to criticisms from NAHJ and Hispanic community members that, like the Post, it was disconnected to 20% of Colorado’s population.1 “The Rocky Mountain News was not only an Anglo newspaper to me,” said Julissa Soto, a local health care activist and the American Diabetes Association’s regional director for community outreach in and around Colorado. “The paper wanted to be effective reaching out to all races and ethnicities and it did a good job.” That’s not to say the paper was completely unbiased or entirely ecumenical, said
Morgan Carroll, a state Democratic senator representing Aurora and a former president of the chamber. “There’s a little bit of revisionism here,” said Carroll. “I miss the Rocky now, but I’m not sure I would have at the time. It was a pretty conservative paper, but it provided more perspectives and more voices. What’s survived is one paper, the Post, and it’s become more conservative, while shrinking its news.”

**Philanthropist and Civic Evangelist**

Second, Colorado’s community leaders saw the Rocky and the Post as philanthropists and civic evangelists or promoters and boosters for the Denver area and its businesses. The two papers enthusiastically advocated for the region and the state, while supporting its social institutions. Denver’s daily newspapers did so by providing a valuable mix of funds, news coverage, advertising, volunteers, and board members for programs benefiting children, the arts and culture, education and literacy, human services, and local neighborhood associations.

Between 1993 and 2015, the Denver Post raised and distributed more than $66 million, as part of its Season to Share charitable campaign, for local nonprofit agencies. The Rocky both made its own philanthropic contributions to the community organizations and teamed with the Post’s Season to Share efforts from 2001 to 2009.2 “A healthy community means customers for a newspaper, and they knew that,” said Urban Neighborhoods’ president Dana Crawford, who’s long been a preservationist and an urban renewal activist in Denver. But with the Rocky’s closure, those leading the city’s nonprofits and charities said it’s far harder to get coverage, donations, and marketing help. “Nonprofits and the philanthropic community tend to get less coverage to begin with, and we depend on public service announcements and donations for fundraising causes,” said Roger Armstrong, director of the Capitol Hill United Neighborhoods’ association. “But when the Rocky closed we lost half of that reporting.”
With the *Rocky*’s death and the *Post*’s weakening, “the city has suffered from the loss of cultural promotion,” said Claude Dutro, treasurer of Denver’s Masonic Lodge No. 5 and a past Worshipful Master. “I think of things like the symphony and the theater, and the lack of newspaper competition has caused the remaining paper to not be as interested in seeking out and promoting those types of community things.” Robin Wise, who leads a Colorado chapter of Junior Achievement, a national nonprofit that helps children become more work ready, fondly recalled the *Rocky*’s society page. That section, and its resident columnist, the late Penny Parker, helped give local nonprofits a well-heard voice that’s gone, given the *Post*’s diminished staff and the *Rocky*’s absence. During her two *Post* stints and her time at the *Rocky* from ’99 to ’09, Parker “made the big city seem a little smaller, and feel like a place where people cared about each other and celebrated success,” her former colleagues said.³ Many an interviewee for this study cited her “On the Town” column as the go-to place for those seeking gossip, news, and notes about Denver’s nonprofits and charities, area businesses, local notables, the regional entertainment industry, and even restaurants. “Back in the day, you could call reporters and talk about things you had going on, and they actually knew what you were talking about and wanted to help,” added Wise. “Reporters were out and about. They went to things. They were part of the community. There made friendships. Now, they just don’t have time.”

With the *Rocky* gone, its more essential than ever that the *Post* monitors those in power, keeps a historical record of the area’s daily business, and supports the area’s nonprofits, said Roger Armstrong, the Capital Hill United Neighborhoods’ association director. Not only do people still pay attention to newspapers, he added, newspapers still play supporting roles in helping area nonprofits and charities stage their events. Over the years, Denver’s daily papers provided tens of thousands of dollars worth of corporate sponsorship (e.g. advertising) and
publicity (i.e. news coverage) for CHUN’s 45th annual Capitol Hill People’s Fair. Each spring, the community organization’s signature event – a two-day festival full of arts, crafts, music, and food – attracts more than 200,000 people, over 300 volunteers, and 500 exhibitors and food booths to downtown Denver. “There’s still value to being on the front or the back page of a newspaper,” Armstrong said. “People notice and come to the event, and you get accolades from that kind of coverage.”

Historian and Community Biographer

Third, local leaders lamented the loss of the Rocky as a documenter of Denver’s history, an author of its narrative, and a facilitator of the collective discourse. Many believed that the Rocky’s reports formed and fed a body of bygone knowledge and a wider civic discussion that has both been diminished due to rarer, more random news coverage and fewer expert journalists. “In a lot of ways, the Rocky and the Post defined the community, the city, and the state, and they were also the institutional memory,” said Ken McConnellogue, the University of Colorado’s vice president of communication. “Part of what papers do is keep a community honest and remind people who we are and what we’re about.” That goes for newcomers, too, whom the Rocky educated, he added. The paper didn’t just create historical records of the events that shaped the state – events like Gregory’s Diggings. It told all the newcomers, who poured into the state in modern times, historical stories like the unlikely tale of John Gregory, said McConnellogue. Perhaps, a 100,000 people came to the state seeking fortune in the late 1850s, and many had left disappointed when they merely found the traces of gold washed down the area’s streams. But Gregory actually discovered the source of all that gold dust. By finding one of the richest square miles on Earth (in a gulch near present-day Central City) in May 1859, the humble Georgia miner salvaged Colorado’s first gold rush just as doubters were skedaddling. And for 150 years, the Rocky was around to tell and retell such stories.
Without the *Rocky*, a full-fledged, balanced record of the community’s happenings is no longer assembled each day, said Dana Crawford, the aforementioned urban preservationist. And she wasn’t the only community leader, who said that. Several others thought the same thing because it’s not just that the *Rocky* is gone. It’s also that the *Post* has cut so many pages and reporters. “From my perspective, we’ve lost a respected source to tell a story over time, and build the record of history, or at the least its very, very fractured,” said Crawford. The *Rocky* wasn’t just a historian. It was, literally, a historical record. Community activist and La Alma Neighborhood Association president Helen Giron-Mushfiq can still point to clippings of *Rocky* stories from all the demonstrations and rallies she’s taken part in. She’s saved them, including one with a big photo of her at a Columbus Day protest at the state capitol. And Inspiration Point Neighborhood Association president Jerry Guida still rhapsodizes about the “unbeatable excitement” of picking up the *Rocky*’s swollen Super Bowl editions for the Broncos. The digital news that flits across Colorado Supreme Court Justice Monica Marquez’s computer screen may be archived somewhere, she said, but it’s still more ephemeral than print media. “It’s sad enough when the tangible newspaper goes away,” Marquez said. “But if we’re talking about losing the newspaper altogether, that’s just a huge loss to the community because it’s a loss of an identity, and of a common source of information, and of a bulletin board about what everyone’s talking about.”

Newspapers don’t just set the agenda, they sustain the public discourse in a way that makes reforms possible, said Colorado’s current governor, John Hickenlooper. “For some issues, like same sex marriage, the media played an important role in keeping those stories discussed,” Hickenlooper said. That’s not to say that the governor, or any of the other Colorado community leader who was interviewed, idealized the *Rocky Mountain News*. The communications scholar,
W. Lance Bennett, has extensively detailed how journalistic professional norms lead to erroneous stories because reporters often shape stories around personalities, hyper-focus on conflict, and shoehorn complex, ongoing issues into pat narrative structures. Since the Rocky’s closure, however, state Senator Morgan Carroll and other community leaders think that sort of skewed, inaccurate news coverage, is even more common. “Fewer issues get covered because there are fewer reporters and the issues that are getting covered are more superficial,” Carroll said. Colorado’s community leaders believe that the combination of fewer available resources to cover the news and the media’s financial pressures to attract readers and advertisers has lead local journalists to concentrate even more on sexy or controversial stories.

This study’s interviewees think that the important minutiae of day-to-day public affairs, which were better covered when the Rocky was around, are frequently ignored, and reporters more often fail to challenge the fallacious narratives propagated by newsmakers. In more recent years, a slew of bipartisan initiatives, and the complex negotiations behind them, were “too boring for the press” to cover, said Carroll. And when several bills were killed along party-line votes, many of the veteran reporters, who would’ve analyzed what was going, had long ago lost their jobs at the Rocky or been laid off by the Post. As Carroll put it:

You want veteran reporters because they can call “bullshit” on bullshit faster. Without that, people get to lie and reinvent themselves faster. Five of my bills were killed on party line votes. And then there’s the public cynicism that they don’t believe politicians. Understanding what was going on with those bills takes work and time, and it’s easier for the remaining media to just be like, “Democrats and Republicans are fighting. It’s business as usual.”

Josh Hanfling, a principal at the Colorado firm, Sewald Hanfling Public Affairs, has the same complaint. “The unfortunate part, with the closing of the Rocky and the cutting back of the Post, is that those who go first are the ones who’ve been there the longest and those who have the institutional knowledge,” Hanfling said. “When issues come up, if you weren’t around for 20
years, in most cases, you’re not going to ask the right questions or you’re going to spend so
much time doing research, and you can’t get to the core issue.”

Ironically, now, many of the best, brightest, and most experienced former Rocky and Post
reporters have taken jobs with the very government and corporate institutions they used to cover,
said former Denver Mayor Wellington Webb. That’s left Denver with a pared down workforce
of younger reporters, who often lack the expertise, motivation, time, and space to “really put in
the necessary hard-nosed investigative reporting to get the story,” Webb added. “So, basically
government can do whatever it wants at the local and state levels because very little is going to
get reported.” As a result, said former Colorado Governor Bill Owens, the Rocky’s disappearance
has meant “less debate, less discussion, less involvement, and less oversight by the people of
their governments than when there were two well-read and widely distributed papers.” The
operative question, he added, is whether the public’s civic disengagement preceded or followed
its loss of interest in buying newspapers. Regardless, he thinks the two phenomena are somehow
tied together, and newspapers gave people less incentive to be readers by cutting content and
adding fluff. “I don’t know if the chicken or the egg came first, but clearly the decline of
newspapers has led to a lack of civic awareness, which is leading to a decline of newspapers,”
Owens said. “Why should you spend $15 bucks a month on a newspaper subscription when you
don’t give a shit?”

As the communications scholar Matthew Hindman has pointed out, it wasn’t supposed to
be this way. When newspapers diced their operations and died, the “myth of digital democracy”
held that the Internet would lead to countless motivated, ordinary individuals, and new media
outlets to record the community’s history and chronicle its everyday happenings better than ever.
Instead, Richard Grant, who recently retired as the long-time communications director of Visit
Denver, the city’s tourism trade association, kids about the failed promise of new technologies for democratic deliberation in the new media age. “There’s a joke about a guy, who goes back in time, and he says to someone in the 1950s, ‘In the future, we’ll have a little device that you can put in your pocket, and it has access to all the world’s knowledge.’ And the guy in the ’50s says, ‘What do you do with it?’ And the time traveler says, ‘We use it to look at funny videos of animals.’”

RQ2a: Informing to Promote Civic Engagement

How, if at all, has the Rocky’s closure affected how community leaders learn about and spread the news and information necessary to participate in the community? Denver’s community leaders believe the Rocky’s closure has had three main effects on how they learn about and engage in the community. First, they think they’ve lost a democratic decoder. They believed the Rocky helped educate them about and translate what was going on in their governments and their communities. And a number of community leaders said that, even today, they’ve continued to rely on the legacy media for disseminating messages about what’s going on in local government because old media still have tremendous reach. Second, the interviewees said that, more than ever in the Rocky’s absence, local reporters simply transmit messages like dumb pipes, instead of actively pursuing, verifying, interpreting and synthesizing information to create original journalistic accounts. Third, with the Rocky gone, the interviewees think the Denver area’s channels of mass communication are a bit narrower – meaning it’s more difficult for them to get news coverage and it’s more likely to be inaccurate.

Democratic Decoder

Monica Marquez can remember being a young law clerk and incredulously reading the opinions of U.S. District Court Judge Michael Ponsor. Posnor, whom President Bill Clinton appointed to Massachusetts District in 1993, had a habit of “consciously slipping in sound bytes
in the opening and concluding paragraphs of his opinions in high-profile cases,” said Marquez, who became a Colorado Supreme Court Justice in 2010. “And I remember at the time thinking that was really pompous like, ‘Wow, you flatter yourself thinking you’re going to get attention for your opinion. Shouldn’t you just decide the case?’” But, over time, Justice Marquez realized the significance of what Judge Posnor was doing. He was helping the media explain what was going on in the world. He was recognizing that news outlets like newspapers play a critical role in helping the public decode democratic institutions and processes, including the legal system. And, in spite of the Rocky’s disappearance, that’s a role that community leaders still think the local media carries out. “A paper can serve a very useful opinion in explaining the nature and the reasoning of a decision, but if it’s not accessible to the non-lawyer public, there’s a great danger of it being misunderstood or misreported,” said Marquez. The media still “have the potential to make our work accessible and understood by the wider public, but we (newsmakers) have some work to do as well.”

Josh Hanfling he isn’t ready to write the obituary for America’s major metro daily papers just yet. Every day, the Colorado public affairs specialist and lobbyist said he watches Denver’s remaining daily newspaper color how politicians and the public view issues and candidates. Like Hanfling, Ken Salazar also has watched the media make democracy understandable his 30-year career in politics. It was a career that began when he served as an advisor to Governor Roy Romer in the mid-’80s, and it continued during his stints as Colorado’s attorney general (1999-2005), a Democratic U.S. senator for the state (2005-2009), and as President Obama’s Secretary of the Interior (2009-2013). Since the Rocky’s closure, Salazar thinks, “The consequence of that is that there’s been less substantive content delivered to the citizens of the state, and a less informed citizenry on what the government is doing on their behalf.” There’s no question that the
Rocky’s loss has led to fewer reporters explaining what’s going on in Denver’s democratic institutions, said city councilor Paul Kashmann.

Kashmann should know a thing or two about analyzing newspaper coverage. Before being elected as Denver’s District 6 councilman in May 2015, he spent more than 30 years as publisher of a small, monthly community newspaper called the Washington Park Profile. Before the newspaper industry began tanking in 2006, and long before the Rocky closed in 2009, the Post and the Rocky employed around 570 journalists, including 300 at former and 270 at the latter. Now, the Rocky is gone. And as of the spring of 2016, the Post was planning on cutting its newsroom to around 109 journalists from already shrunken total of 135.6 In its hey day, the Denver Post alone printed up to 280 pages for a Sunday newspaper compared with up to 96 pages today. And a weekday issue of the paper, could reach up to 144 pages on the paper’s heaviest day, while today a weekday edition ranges between 56 and 28 pages.7 “I have absolutely no question that the boots on the ground folks, the writers and the editors, are invested in making Denver a better place to live by informing the population what’s going on so they can participate in the decision making process,” Kashmann said. “But the 32 pages of news you get now isn’t all news. The reality is the corporate people on top add up the ad dollars, divide them by the pages they can afford to put news on, and they cut the news to ribbons because there’s no space for it.” Increasingly, since the dawn of the digital age in the 1970s, all manner of scholars and commentators have pondered whether newspapers are irrelevant, especially in print form, and if they’ll die out completely.

Yet, neither Julissa Soto, the American Diabetes Association’s local community outreach director, nor Angela Cortez, the director of communications at AARP Colorado, entertain such thoughts. They know first hand that the legacy media remain a valuable mass communications
tool for large swathes of Americans to make sense of the world. And given their everyday experience dealing with minorities, the elderly, and low-income individuals, who commonly lack Internet access, they’re well aware of the elitism embedded in the aforementioned predictions that newspapers are approaching extinction. Indeed, one in eight American adults (13%) don’t use the Internet, and one in five households (19%) are in a similar boat. Plus, minorities, especially Hispanics – who make up 21% of Colorado’s population – are more likely than other races and ethnicities to lack Internet access via a computer. Those over the age of 40 often still like and use legacy media like TV news programs and newspapers for news, and that’s why stations like Telemundo are a powerful tool in Soto’s communications arsenal. She’s also quick to point out that social media and other websites may be full of news, but they don’t actually create it, and they don’t fully take into account the quality of the content they’re aggregating. “A lot of people can say social media is big – Twitter, YouTube all that crap,” said Soto. “But I’m 43, and I’m not that old, but I’m still old fashioned. I don’t want to be looking at news on the phone. I am also saying that social media don’t make (news), and quality is often missing” in what the news they spread.

As for Cortez, she’s a former Denver Post reporter, and in her AARP role she knows first hand that many millions of Americans still rely on printed media – from news letters and magazines to newspapers – for news and information. If Denver’s remaining daily paper were to disappear, or even if it were to go purely online, “I would worry about our members getting the information they need,” she said. “I hear from people all the time, even middle-aged people, who say, ‘I just like that printed product. I like to open it up. It just feels good.’ They want something to hold and pin up on their bulletin board as a reminder. They want to be able to cut something and share it.” Soto pointed out that Hispanic immigrants are very often enculturated in their
native countries to the use newspapers to understand the community and its institutions. “I always had a great relationship with the Rocky and Telemundo,” she added. “And I think Latinos will never change. We’re still going to turn to legacy media because it’s so close to our culture. We come here and we still have the same habits – we still want to watch our soap operas, and the TV, and we grab newspapers.”

**Dumb Pipes**

At least a half dozen community leaders offered one of the strongest themes in regard to how the Rocky’s closure has affected the way locals learn about and participate in the community. Rather than interpreting and analyzing the information they gather to suss out the truth, local journalists are far more likely to simply convey it to the public like – to borrow a popular telecommunications industry analogy – dumb pipes. Few community leaders are better-equipped to gauge how, if at all, local institutions have been affected by the Rocky’s closure than Kevin Flynn. He’s worked on both sides of the fence. He served as a Rocky reporter from 1981 to 2009, before becoming a public information manager for the Regional Transit District, and he’s been a city councilor since 2015. It was one of Flynn’s experiences running communications for the RTD’s FasTracks program – a $2.2 billion Denver-area project to build commuter rail lines – that underscored just how much more stenographic the city’s reporters are, today. In December 2010, Flynn promptly called a Westword reporter, after noticing the alternative weekly had just published an online news story about a citizens’ group opposing the proposed location of a new Adams County railway station.8 “Why,” Flynn asked the newspaper reporter, “would you do such a one-sided account?” The reporter attributed his decisions to “the pressures of constantly feeding the 24-hour beast of digital journalism.” The result of the reporter’s strain to continuously produce content was what journalism ethicists have dubbed “he said, she said journalism.”
It’s what happens when reporters simply let their sources have it out in the news, rather than gather and sort through the best available evidence to create veracious reports. False equivalence is the norm, as lies are juxtaposed with the truth, and both are given equal weight. And reporters abdicate their ethical and professional duties to interpret what they find (by verifying information and separating facts from opinions) rather than just spreading whatever their sources say. “I find it frustrating because the news is full of more People magazine journalism, and there aren’t a whole lot of questions – like ‘Well, are those the facts? Is that true? Well, that’s one side, but what’s the other side?’ – being asked by journalists,” said Kathleen McCall-Thompson, a long-time local actress and a board member for Denver Health, the city’s safety net medical care system. “I’m constantly talking to the TV, and saying, ‘But that’s your opinion. I don’t want your opinion. I want you to tell me what’s happened.’” Communications scholar Jay Rosen has described “he said/she said reporting” this way:

There’s a public dispute. The dispute makes news. No real attempt is made to assess clashing truth claims in the story, even though they are in some sense the reason for the story (under the “conflict makes news” test). The means for assessment do exist, so it’s possible to exert a factual check on some of the claims, but for whatever reason the report declines to make use of them. The symmetry of two sides making opposite claims puts the reporter in the middle between polarized extremes.9

For his part, Flynn was thrilled to almost immediately set the record straight by offering additional information, and even documentation, to both correct the reporting and balance the local resident’s concerns. Yet, ideally, the reporter should be the one, who gets all sides, checks who’s right, and composes a news report accordingly. “In the Westword piece, I had verbatim access to the reporter’s readers because he had to come up with about a dozen blog items a day,” Flynn said. “That kind of pressure is the opposite of what you need as a reporter to really examine civic issues and businesses in the Denver area.”
Inspiration Point Neighborhood Association President Jerry Guida thinks his neighborhood would have been the subject of considerable newspaper attention if a 2015 dispute over building a homeless shelter there had occurred 10 years ago. As mentioned recently as 2005, Denver’s dailies blanketed the city with a combined total of 570 full-time journalists, and the Post is down to around 115 now as of June 2016. Those cuts are a big part of the reason why various community leaders now think the public is without a journalistic arbiter on key issues of public concern. For his part, Guida is adamant that his organization’s resistance to the Northwest Denver project was not the product of a narrow-minded not-in-my-backyard attitude. He contends his group helped convince the nonprofit Denver Foundation not to build the shelter because the neighborhood association was primarily, and legitimately, concerned with engineering issues in the building.\(^\text{10}\) Without two full-strength dailies, the project received a smattering of attention from the North Denver Tribune, a hyperlocal paper, and the Denver Post, and each produced a story following the proposal’s withdrawal. Guida was happy to shape the coverage. “The point is sometimes we try to stay out of the media, and we need to make sure to control the message coming out of the neighborhood,” Guida said. “What I wanted to communicate to the reporters was the need to focus on the engineering issues in the building. The neighborhood could not be presented as anti-homeless because how are you going to win a battle with the homeless?” Over at East High School, Principal Mendelsberg has noticed fewer critical school stories, and he thinks the remaining media coverage is more fair than when both the Rocky and the Post were around.

Nowadays, Denver’s remaining reporters “look for the good stories about the schools as opposed to what would just sell a paper,” Mendelsberg said. “Being a flagship school in Colorado, when the newspapers used to find something, they loved to beat up on it for a few
days. Now, we get a better perspective from the Post because they don’t want to alienate the school, but they still have to report what they think is news.” Other interviewees agreed with Mendelsberg that newsmakers dictate the Denver news media’s narratives far more frequently than when there were more reporters. “The upside is that, once you get your story straight, chances are that’s the story that’s going to play, today,” said Kelly Brough, president of the Denver Metro Chamber of Commerce. “The downside is that there’s not as much probing to make sure that the full story is represented. There aren’t enough resources and experts, with a depth of knowledge and a history with topics.” After the Rocky closed, the Post tried to replace its rival by employing full-time reporters, who closely followed each beat, said Ken McConnellogue, the University of Colorado’s top communications administrator. The effort didn’t last. “I called them dead cat reporters because it was like the city editor swung the dead cat, and if it hit you, you got to cover CU, for however long after that,” McConnellogue said. “The longest one lasted 9 months, and then there was a series with shorter stints. They wouldn’t cover the business of the university, or this scandal, or that opportunity, or tuition costs.”

In the absence of two well-staffed general interest newspapers, with curious, knowledgeable reporters, community leaders said they carefully tailor and target pitches based on each media outlet’s location and news niche. “People just want press releases,” said Robin Wise, of Junior Achievement. “They don’t have photographers. You send in photos. And everything is more specialized, so the people in Northwest Denver are only getting news about what’s happening in their area rather than the whole community.” Wise also described how staff-strapped news outlets like the Post will “just kind of plop in your news release” without changing a word, and sometimes without attributing it to the newsmaker who created it. Metropolitan State University president Stephen Jordan made similar points. He recalled a time
when each paper had a reporter, who knew higher education. Stories about what was going on in
the field, and at the local campus, were covered as a matter of course, and the university didn’t
have to doll up pitches and sell them hard. Reporters came to events, brought photographers,
spoke at-length with sources, expressed a genuine interest in learning about topics, and did their
research on subjects. Today, Jordan said the university has to hand stories to reporters on a silver
platter. And even if they do accept the college’s story line – a big “if” given all the other colleges
seeking the understaffed paper’s attention – the best Jordan can hope for is usually a short phone
interview.

The bottom line is that “there’s demonstrably less coverage in general and you have to do
a much better job of selling your story because you have more competition for fewer stories,”
said Jordan. Other community leaders said they go to great lengths to feed stories to reporters,
much like mothers zigzagging imaginary airplane spoons toward the mouths of reluctant,
distracted children. Newsmakers recalled a time before the Rocky closed, when they built and
managed relationships with individual beat reporters by befriending them, learning their
coverage interests, experience levels, and thoroughness covering topics. “You still do that to
some degree now, but there are only like two reporters, who are covering everything,” said Wise.
“There’s not a banking specialist or an education specialist. Also, reporters used to be out and
about. They went to things. They were part of the community, there were friendships” between
community leaders and journalists. Now, “you don’t see anyone from the Post out and about
anymore, and that makes a difference in what their reporters know, and who they know.”
Reporters didn’t pull punches because of their close ties with sources, Wise added. But the
friendships did get journalists to pay more attention to what newsmakers were doing. And they
gave newsmakers the confidence to offer more deep background information and to speak
candidly off the record. Now, as Denise Maes, the public policy director for Colorado’s ACLU branch, put it, “At the Denver Post, they basically wait behind their desks and wait for the stories to come to them.”

**Narrower Channels**

Several newsmakers said they missed the days of having two publications because the competition incentivized coverage and accuracy, and ads were far cheaper – which meant community leaders had wider channels for mass communication. Back then, relationship development with reporters was well worth it because Denver’s journalists “knew they were competing, so you could play them off each other to have more options, and if they didn’t get the story right they knew they had the chance to get it right,” said Josh Hanfling, who runs a statewide lobbying and public affairs firm. Hanfling, who’s also a board member for Denver Health, can remember the days when the city’s movers and shakers actually got to know and maintain relationships with beat reporters. “Now, reporters work really hard because there’s so few of them, so it’s just about getting to one reporter and hoping for a story,” he added. Former Colorado Governor Bill Ritter reminisced about the days when reporters proactively contacted him for his opinions and news tips. “I remember (Rocky opinion page editor) Vincent Carroll, who’s now over at the Post, would call and talk with me about my perspective,” Ritter said of his time as Denver’s District Attorney from 1993 to 2004. “Criminal justice stuff was not something that the public paid too much attention to, but I’d share with him, he’d make use of my own thinking about the right tact the community should take on the criminal justice system, and the relationship was helpful.” To compete, each Denver reporter had to “show that a story was either more in-depth or it had a different twist,” said Denver Board of Education member Landri Taylor.
In contrast, the *Denver Post* now offers much less and charges far more, including for ads, said Nancy Barlow, who’s president of the Cook Park Neighborhood Association, the East Evans Business Association, and her own firm, Barlow Advertising & Design, Inc. “It was extremely cost effective to advertise in papers, and as soon as the *Rocky* went out, advertising rates went up in the *Post,“ Barlow added. The Digital Age’s deluge of information has left reporters just treading water, said Wayne Vaden, Denver’s former city clerk and the board chairman of the Urban League of Metro Denver. “Back in the day, you could trust a reporter more,” Vaden said. “You could say ‘OK, this reporter is going to do an independent report on fracking, they’re going to write the pros and cons and there will be an in-depth investigation and an editorial opinion,’ and we (readers) can make a decision about it.” Vaden used to trust reporters to give voice to community leaders on all sides, and to call to verify stories. But sensationalist news and mistakes are now the norm, he added, as reporters take a publish-first and ask-questions-to-correct-the-record-later attitude. When the *Rocky* was around, “there was a bigger news hole, there was more opportunity, there were people on the beat who knew the significance of things, and they could take them and run with them,” said CU’s McConnellogue. “Now, it’s hard to get reporters to pay attention at all unless it’s a no brainer story or something bad happened, and then they’re knocking on the door. (The *Rocky’s* closure) has diminished our opportunity to tell our story significantly.”

**RQ3a: Closure Affecting Community**

In what, if any, ways do community leaders think the Rocky’s closure has affected the community? Denver’s community leaders touched on two main themes in describing whether they thought the *Rocky’s* closure had affected society. First, most don’t think the area’s social institutions are any different as a result of the *Rocky* closing. They think there’s simply less local coverage. But – crucially – many said their knowledge of what’s changing or going wrong in
society has changed from a state of known unknowns (i.e. uncertainties that can be foreseen) to unknowable. With two well-staffed Denver dailies, those following local news could more easily surmise which organizations and social institutions (e.g. a local nonprofit, a college division, a government agency) might be inefficiently or unscrupulously run. Yet, with the Rocky gone and the Post’s staff down 55% since 2006, several said they have nearly no way of knowing those sorts of things because two papers used to provide such uniquely comprehensive and prolific coverage. Second, now that the Rocky has disappeared and the Post has been weakened, the interviewees think society’s governing institutions are going unchecked, while views being spread throughout the region are often imbalanced. Community leaders believe that robust local newspapers check and balance the power of society’s governing bodies by galvanizing people into making legislative, regulatory, and electoral changes. Additionally, by vetting and endorsing candidates, monitoring those in power, and informing the public about the issues surrounding social institutions, newspapers can, indeed, directly influence the world around them. But the consensus among this study’s participants was that those journalistic functions are no longer being carried out as effectively.

**From Known Unknowns to Unknowable**

Several public officials said that society hasn’t necessarily changed because the Rocky closed. But the public doesn’t know what it doesn’t know about the machinations of their governing institutions because they receive far less scrutiny than when the paper was around. “It doesn’t seem like there’s more public graft and corruption,” said Andy Farr, a retired air traffic controller, who serves as president of the University Hill Neighborhood Association. “But it’s hard to know isn’t it? And that’s what I worry about.” TV news outlets aren’t constantly monitoring the activities of politicians, the police or societal institutions, Farr and others said. “And there’s a common public perception that the Denver Post has become less effective and
less aggressive because it doesn’t feel a need to compete now that it’s the only paper on the market,” he added, again reflecting what many other local leaders thought. Typical were the responses of Rosemary Rodriguez and Denise Maes. The former is a Denver school board member, a state director for U.S. Senator Michael Bennet (D-Colorado), and she was a top aide for Denver mayor Wellington Webb. The latter is a public policy director for Colorado ACLU, and she served as general counsel for President Obama’s administration and as a budget and finance director for Vice President Biden. “I think society hasn’t changed since the Rocky closed,” said Rodriguez. “But I wouldn’t know how to measure or to argue that. If it’s more corrupt, how would you know because nobody is telling the story?”

Maes sounded a similar note. “How would I know if society’s institutions have changed if there’s no reporting to tell me they’ve changed? It’s just kind of a circular argument.” The bottom line she added is that it’s safe to say, “We know less now because we’re a one paper town.” That’s not to say that the past should be idealized, said Rocky-reporter-turned-Denver-city-councilor, Kevin Flynn. He pointed out that, even when Denver’s dailies thrived, plenty of people personally chose to be ignorant of, or apathetic to, the community’s happenings. And as a former government reporter and now a city councilor, Flynn knows just how much the public doesn’t find out because reporters can’t cover everything that’s going on and politicians don’t care to share a lot of it. Even 10 years ago, when nearly 600 journalists staffed Denver’s dailies, reporters could barely siphon the steady stream of information about what was happening in the halls of power. “Now, if you’re standing on a bridge drawing a bucket of water out of the river, you don’t notice that one less bucket is being drawn,” Flynn said. “I have no illusions that we really covered the waterfront when we had two papers. There was so much water flowing under
the bridge that we had to pick which buckets we pulled up. But the Rocky was very good at picking – we won four Pulitzers over our last 10 years.”

That’s an opinion shared by Paul Kashmann, the other former journalist on Denver’s city council. “Even at their worst, what a wonderful service Denver’s daily newspapers did in interpolating a huge amount of information and getting it out to the general public and making sure they’re informed,” Kashmann said. Yet, with the Rocky gone, several public officials said that Denver’s news outlets are often worse than their worst pre-Rocky days because the remaining local news coverage is so shallow and perfunctory. Flynn cited an issue he’d recently dealt with to make that very point. In late January 2016, Denver’s city council approved $9.54 million in contracts to fund and monitor a program to house and help up to 250 of the city’s most chronically homeless residents. The council’s 10-2 vote made Denver just the ninth U.S. locale to use social impact bonds – a model whereby investors finance public initiatives that are expected to create efficiencies, and cities gradually return any estimated savings like dividends. But while Flynn and a colleague argued Denver would save more by self-funding a project upfront, the Post and Colorado Public Radio each gave those counterarguments just one sentence at the bottom of their after-the-fact stories. “If the Rocky and the Post were both still trying to clobber each other, there would be reporters calling me and exploring the issue in-depth,” said Flynn.

With Denver down 455 daily newspaper journalists between 2009 and June of 2016, those interviewed said that the stories that are still covered are often bereft of valuable information, history, and context. Of course, that’s when local stories get covered at all. “The Rocky there kept us honest,” said Richard Grant, who recently retired from his long-time position as Visit Denver’s communications director. “There were people assigned to every aspect of
government, and public spending, and any type of corruption. It’s not that the papers don’t uncover things now. It’s just more hit and miss. It’s a lightening strike now.” Other local leaders agreed that it was far more difficult to say what might be going on in the halls of power. But, to them, the Rocky’s disappearance doesn’t mean the underlying structures of society have been affected. There’s just less local news, and that’s not even so terrible because there’s plenty of compelling national news, and they can flick on the TV or check the Post if a big local story breaks. That’s how Michael Pollak feels. He’s the co-founder and the CEO of Hyde Park Jewelry. And he chairs the board of the Denver Health Foundation, which funds the state’s huge safety net health care system and its flagship institution, the Denver Health Medical Center.

“Whether it’s through curated news sources or social media news sources, there are more places to derive opinions and news content than in the history of man, and those sources are multiplying faster than ever,” Pollak said.

With the Rocky gone, the beat goes on, Pollak and others said. “No, I think there isn’t any difference to society from the paper closing, and I don’t need to pause to say that,” said Svein Reichborn-Kjennerud, the aforementioned mortgage banker and the Seventh Avenue Neighborhood Association’s president. “I also think that vacuum was rapidly filled by other sources of information.” Social institutions may benefit from newspapers covering them, but they certainly didn’t need them to function, said Denver school member Landri Taylor.

“Whether it was AT&T or the United Way, nonprofits and corporations and whatever else didn’t depend on the Rocky to achieve their mission,” Taylor added. Governor Hickenlooper agreed. “I haven’t seen it yet,” he said of whether the community is any different since the Rocky’s death. “It’s logical to assume that there will be some evolution based on less intensive scrutiny. But in terms of nonprofits and the businesses, they’re still trying to better themselves and the
community.” Regardless the true “impact of a newspaper closure on society is unknown,” said former Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar. For his part, Salazar agreed with community leaders like Michael Pollak, who said there are plenty of digital and traditional options for national news. “But the even bigger question,” said Salazar, “is whether or not you can have digital media at the local and state level that can provide similar local content to what the newspapers provide.”

**The Rocky Checked and Balanced the Post and Advocated for Change**

It may be difficult to prove a newspaper closure changes a community after the fact, but Denver’s leaders had no trouble thinking of ways the Rocky influenced the community when it was still around. They believe the paper’s absence means there’s one less powerful news outlet creating a diversity of viewpoints and spurring the public to press for changes. And the interviewees think that societal institutions are less often checked without the Rocky’s scrutiny. That’s what urban revivalist Dana Crawford believes. Although she led the effort to preserve and transform the 1400 block of Denver’s Larimer Street into a thriving, historic district, she freely shares the credit with the Rocky. “I spent 22 years of working on Larimer Square, and it absolutely would not have happened if the newspaper was not very interested,” she said of the area, which escaped demolition in 1965 and earned a historic designation in 1971. “There were lots of martinis, and lots of support, they covered it very thoroughly, and they kept the project alive because I didn’t have a penny for advertising.” The Rocky didn’t vote for legislation. It didn’t make political appointments. And the paper’s staff didn’t – directly – do anything to actually administer the city or a state. Yet, the people who actually do all those things said that the Rocky consistently created the conditions that led them to act.

They described how the Rocky coaxed and embarrassed them into action, while setting the agenda for the issues the public wanted them tackle. A five-day series in 2005 spotlighting
the high dropout rate in Denver’s public high schools pushed the district to address the problem. A lengthy three-day report in 2009 about the U.S. government failing to compensate irradiated former workers from the Rocky Flats nuclear weapons plant prodded the feds to make the claims process less onerous. On and on the paper went for 150 years, and it never ran out of issues to spotlight, citizens to rally, and people in power to pester. “With the Post, the Rocky, and Westword all thriving, there were a number of times when the media would help us unravel problems,” said Governor Hickenlooper. “Democracy is based on two things – empathy, if people don’t have some empathy they won’t help a stranger, they’ll only help family and friends – and information.” The Rocky employed “a ton of good reporters,” who informed and engaged the public such that its readers understood and cared more about solving the community’s problems, Hickenlooper added. “Sometimes, the Rocky helped solve things like the waiting times at the Department of Motor Vehicles because what we were measuring wasn’t accurate.”

Hickenlooper knows the Rocky’s influence well.

Its early, effusive 2003 endorsement distinguished him from seven mayoral candidates and vaulted him from a brew pub owner (best known for lobbying to keep “Mile High” in the Broncos’ new stadium name) to a serious contender. “I would never have gotten elected without that endorsement,” said Hickenlooper, a two-term Denver mayor, and since 2011, a two-term Democratic governor for Colorado, who hadn’t held office before that 2003 election. Though the Post, among others, ended up endorsing Hickenlooper, too, the Rocky’s support carried great power for a few reasons, according to the paper’s former media critic Jason Salzman. For one, it was quirky and independent. So, Rocky endorsements were based on the paper’s own inclinations, not those of the establishment or a bunch of glad-handing powerbrokers. Second, it was politically right-of-center, so a decision to pick a Democrat for a major office implied the
candidate was special. Finally, the effusive warmth of the endorsement, and the fact that it came out five weeks early, helped shake up the race. Though it didn’t gush as it did with Hickenlooper, the *Rocky*’s strong endorsements similarly launched the careers of long-shot Democratic mayoral candidates Federico Peña in 1983 and Wellington Webb in 1991, according to community leaders.

Peña’s endorsement came three weeks before the primary and two weeks before the *Post* backed Dale Tooley, while the *Rocky* picked Webb two weeks before his primary, and on the same day the *Post* chose Norm Early. Community leaders, like Rosemary Rodriguez of the Denver School board, still remember how the *Rocky* changed Denver by helping Hickenlooper, Peña, and Webb get elected. The paper’s support of Peña in the early ’80s was especially significant in era when Hispanic community leaders rarely held top elected posts. “It just really legitimized Peña,” recalled Rodriguez. “They took a risk on him, and it was so powerful.” Webb, who led Denver from 1991 to 2003, used similar language. “The *Rocky*’s endorsement legitimized me,” he said. Webb remembered the *Rocky* backing him for his first and third elections, but not endorsing him for his second term. When he first ran for mayor, he wrote the *Rocky*’s editorial board a note. “I said, ‘Why don’t you endorse someone you believe in rather than who you think you should endorse?’” In the end, the paper did just that. As the *Rocky*’s endorsements of Pena, Webb, and Hickenlooper showed, the paper didn’t just play to type. Rather than always endorsing right-leaning candidates and positions that matched its conservative politics, the *Rocky* picked the politicians and positions that it viewed as best for the community, said John Temple, the paper’s editor and publisher.

And the paper’s ability to be liberal in its politics was one way it made its mark on the community, said Webb, though those the *Rocky* clashed with didn’t always appreciate it at the
time. “I don’t think that most people would’ve thought they’d miss the News until it was gone,” mused Webb, who had his fair share of battles with the paper. Just as the Rocky could be strong-willed, independent, and a nonconformist in its politics, those same traits were evident in its news coverage. That was certainly the case when the Rocky successfully persuaded Coloradans to make Denver the only host city in history to ever give back a winter Olympics bid. Yet, the Rocky didn’t merely help scuttle the 1976 games with its early ’70s stories and its editorials about the true costs and benefits of hosting the Olympics. The paper put a future governor on the map, too, and Dick Lamm knows it. He’s in his 80s now, but he was a young Democratic state assemblyman when the Rocky backed his anti-Olympics movement in 1972. Three years later, Coloradans had successfully voted to cut off public funding for the games, and Lamm had been sent to the governor’s mansion, where he’d live till 1987. “The Denver Post was just a chauvinist, and it was very pro-Olympics, and it would not listen to any of the evidence that the costs had been under-estimated and the benefits were overestimated for the games,” Lamm recalled. “The Rocky was a real paper, and it listened, and it did a real investigation.”

The question to Lamm isn’t whether Denver has been affected by the Rocky’s loss. Instead, he wonders how many laws and leaders have gone – and will go – unchanged without another vigorous editorial voice that’s willing to oppose any person or policy. “Sometimes the Rocky would go after me and make me uncomfortable, but it was a very aggressive paper in the tradition in the best of newspapering,” Lamm said. “Its loss was nowhere compensated in this area by the existing institutions. We’ve just simply lost a very important part of the total policy picture.” That is, indeed, what’s missing today, said Metropolitan State University president Stephen Jordan. These days, Jordan opens a Denver Post with less than half the number of pages it had just a decade ago. And his phone’s Associated Press app doesn’t contain the sort of
analysis and perspective about local issues that the *Rocky* used to provide. It’s full of national stories. The *Rocky* “had a decidedly distinct perspective and views about what was best for the community, and its editorial pages created a call for action,” said Jordan. “Because people were reading their stories and editorials, they could create pressure, and that became the crux of significant public policy changes, and that’s what’s missing when a newspaper closes.”

**RQ4a: Rocky’s Replaceability**

How well, if at all, do community leaders think other media outlets are replacing the Rocky as a news source? Variations of two themes consistently ran throughout the more than 40 interviews conducted with Colorado’s community leaders. First, the interviewees think that Denver’s news outlets went from shining a spotlight, when the *Rocky* was around, to providing a spotty light on newsmakers’ daily doings. Local leaders said the paper’s closure was a particularly big loss because it so deftly mixed succinct daily coverage with periodic in-depth reports, and neither the *Post*, which is a shell its former self, nor TV come close nowadays. The interviewees readily recalled the days when two newspapers hounded them. And while they often resented the past glare from Denver’s dailies, they appreciated how they brought controversial and common stories to light, unlike today, when far too many stories are missed. Second, the local leaders interviewed said that the *Rocky*’s closure has caused community disunity. They believe that the *Rocky* played a vital role in uniting the community. Many said it was the more local paper, and it made people feel like they had a vested interest in the community and a shared cultural identity as Denver area residents. Whereas they felt unified reading the *Rocky*, they feel more divided without it, and they can’t imagine not at least having the *Post* around because they think a newspaper makes a community a community.
From Spotlight to Spotty

To Governor Hickenlooper, few anecdotes better illustrate the necessary tension between the press and the government – and much of what’s been lost with the Rocky’s closure – than a Teddy Roosevelt tale. “Roosevelt,” the governor recalled, “once handed his card to a reporter, and he instructed the Secretary of Commerce to ‘Give this reporter open access to all files,’ because he believed that muckraking could expose and fix things.” But so too, the governor knew well, did Roosevelt deride some journalists as muckrakers for only presenting sordid news to provoke public interest at the expense of accuracy and evenhandedness in depicting what was right in the world. In 1906, T.R. famously likened such print reporters to the muckrake man, who could see only the filth he raked, in John Bunyan’s Pilgrim’s Progress. Hickenlooper, and the local leaders who mirrored his thinking, was referring to the tension between all Denver’s remaining news outlets – particularly the Post and local TV news stations. They believe the necessary tension no longer exists between the local media and community leaders, who want the press to cover the routine and the remarkable. Now, they said, the media scarcely share the minutiae of government, scandals are rarely revealed, and salacious stories steal the show. “Sometimes there’s something that seems like a little thing to us, and we’d say ‘God, that’s overkill,’ but it can turn out to be pretty important,” Hickenlooper said. “An unfettered and determined media is an ally of good government.”

Given that the Post now has about half as many staff members as it had about 10 years ago, the paper is doing “an incredible job,” the governor added. But when Denver had two newspapers, “They were really monitoring every meeting, they were trying to break all kinds of stories, and that was good for any elected official, who cares about good government. Hickenlooper’s predecessor was less diplomatic. “The Monday edition of the Denver Post looks a lot like a high school paper,” said former governor Bill Ritter, who now run as an energy policy
institute at Colorado State University. “It’s very thin, and it reflects the effort of the paper to remain lean and financially viable. They’ve lost a lot of great reporters and that’s had its impact.”

Ritter remembered calling the Post’s business reporter to ask why he hadn’t attended a local energy conference, back in 2013, with heavy hitters like the CEOs of General Electric and Noble Energy. “I said, ‘What was the deal there?’ And he said, ‘Look, there’s an apple harvest, and I can cover that from my desk,’” Ritter recalled. “I think the reporter was embarrassed” about the paper’s inability to do what it once did. The city of Denver’s employees “joke about the fact that, ‘Oh yeah, we don’t have any one breathing down our back,’” said Ledy Garcia-Eckstein, a longtime senior policy analyst in Denver’s Office of Economic Development.

As peculiar as it was to hear public officials sentimentally reminisce about being hounded, it was clear they were sincere. Former Governor Roy Romer went so far as to nostalgically mention the Miami Herald’s 1987 takedown of his friend, Gary Hart – one of the most infamous, consequential stories in the history of political journalism. The U.S. senator from Colorado was the frontrunner for the 1988 Democratic presidential nomination when the Herald responded to his challenge to find impropriety in his life. Following a tip in April 1987, the Herald placed a reporter on the same flight as Hart’s suspected mistress, model Donna Rice. Then, the paper staked out his house, surveilling and tailing him, before accosting him in an alley outside his home to ask what he’d been doing with the woman spotted walking inside. To put it politely, as the New York Times’ magazine did in 2014, it was “the very moment when the walls between the public and private lives of candidates, between politics and celebrity, came tumbling down forever.” At its best, Hart’s story represented the end of journalistic deference and the beginning of a universal vetting process, for the greater good of society, that held nothing sacred about every politician and celebrity. At its worst, it inaugurated the present period of scandal-
seeking, gotcha journalism, wherein nearly any means justify exposing every dark untruth surrounding public figures, regardless of the consequentiality of the deceit. As the New Yorker described the incident, in a review of Matt Bai’s 2015 book on the subject, All the Truth is Out: The Week Politics Went Tabloid, the Herald’s reporting “turned reporters into character cops, fundamentally changing the way the press covered campaigns. Much of the political press turned into a supermarket tabloid. Instead of probing the substance of Hart’s positions, reporters chased him from the race.”

Romer, now 87, has thought about the incident for years, and he has a different perspective. “Certainly there were things I thought were excessive” about the Post and the Rocky’s coverage, he said. “But newspaper reporters really performed their roles like real professionals. I argue with Gary Hart about this all the time. You have to live with the kind of culture that you’re living in.” Before the newspaper industry imploded, “We all recognized that there were just lots of investigative reporters looking for a good story,” added Romer, who led Colorado from 1987 to 1999. “Gary should have seen it coming.” Over in Boulder, the University of Colorado was embroiled in two controversies around the time Ken McConnellogue became its top communications administrator in 2006. There were tawdry media tales of a sex-for-football-recruits scandal, with allegations of drugs, drinking, strippers, and even rape, at raucous parties. And the blowback was strong from the spread of an essay by former professor Ward Churchill, who had compared some of the 9/11 attack’s victims to Nazi Adolf Eichmann. “When the Rocky went away, the prevailing opinion was, ‘Oh great, one less newspaper to cover us,’” McConnellogue said. “And I always said, ‘No, it’s not great. It’s terrible because, while the competition created good and bad news coverage, they kept us honest,’ and there was great value in that.” Since the Rocky closed and the Post dramatically shrunk over the last 10 years,
McConnellogue said some of his colleagues have expressed contempt toward Boulder’s *Daily Camera*, which has been left to provide most of the CU system’s news coverage.

Given the system’s 61,000 students and its $3.55 billion annual budget, CU administrators wondered why they should care about the news coverage and the opinions of a relatively small, 26,000-circulation daily paper like the *Camera*. Those thinking, “It’s just the *Camera*, why are we paying so much attention to them?” miss several points entirely, McConellogue said. Good, watchdog journalism is a public service, and news outlets of all sizes perform it, not just the biggest organizations. Plus, the size of news outlets no longer limits their reach. Online news stories are accessible anywhere with decent Internet access, and in a globalized media landscape with a 24-hour news cycle, big players like the Associated Press can spread a community newspaper’s work far and wide. To be clear, local leaders like McConellogue were touting the value of negative journalistic attention when it was warranted. They don’t think the hot klieg lights of the modern media should shine on every public figure at every moment. And they don’t wish solely for the routine reportage of government meetings and holiday parades. Were it possible, they want both. But they feel they hardly get either, nowadays, with the *Rocky* gone, and the *Post* a thin shell of itself, and TV’s time and format constraints. As Romer put it, “When I screwed up, the word got out, you couldn’t hide. Today, the lack of attention, the failure of the spotlight, and the artificial attempt of investigative journalism by TV stations is just crazy.”

Now, on any given day, he’s “just blown away by the lack of news in the paper – what they do cover is well-written and it’s not inaccurate, but there’s just so much that’s not covered.” As for the news coverage that’s left, local leaders complained that, too often, its not local. They think it’s too often sensational, exploitative, unsubstantiated, or, quite simply, unsubstantial (e.g.
horserace coverage of national politics or a local TV news piece about a car wreck). Those are
the complaints of Helen Giron-Mushfiq, a community activist and the La Alma Neighborhood
Association’s president. And they speak to the conclusions of the mass communications scholars,
Anita Biressi and Heather Nunn. As they wrote in a 2007 anthology on the subject, the mass
media’s tabloidization has led content creators to “prioritize entertainment, human interest
stories, and commercial profitability” over serious, substantive public service journalism.16
Giron-Mushfiq is more succinct, and her views were typical of Colorado’s community leaders.
“There’s a void,” she said. “The TV news has really turned into ‘shows,’ and shows are not there
to inform you about things. There are very shallow reports on the TV news.” Given its format
constraints and its disinterest in more meaningful reporting, most local TV news doesn’t seek out
enough information and perspectives, so it’s more biased than the Rocky used to be, she added.

Giron-Mushfiq thinks TV news shows are formulaic and facile (full of crimes and
crashes, repeated, rinsed, dried, and begun anew in a daily fluff cycle). And national TV news
programming frustrates her because it amounts to infotainment – a sprinkling of analysis atop a
thin wafer of news. Plus, busy local TV reporters don’t get back to her. That makes sense given
how the average TV news station in America employs about 38 journalists or just one-sixth the
size of the Rocky’s 228-member staff.17 “The Rocky was at least responsive,” she said. “The TV
news editors don’t even reply to me when I write them.” Governor Romer agreed. The difference
between a typical TV news story compared with good newspaper coverage “is huge” because
“TV news just has a sound bite mentality,” he said. “I didn’t want to screw up the truth because,
when we had good newspaper reporters everywhere, they’d hang you by your thumbs because
they’d follow up on you. I miss investigative newspaper reporting terribly. You just don’t get it
anymore.”

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Another consequence of media owners asking local news staffs to do more with so much less, nowadays, is that few local reporters are minding the till in state and federal capitol buildings. That burden always disproportionately fell to newspapers. And, following all the staff cuts over the last decade, just a few full-time reporters from around the state cover the Colorado State Capitol and state affairs in Washington D.C. For example, Ken Salazar estimated that, when he was U.S. Senator in the mid-2000s, there were 10 to 15 Colorado newspaper reporters covering state and federal government. He can’t believe that was just 10 years ago. “They produced robust content, and I knew all the reporters at the capitol,” he said. “Now, fast forward to me leaving D.C. (after serving as Secretary of the Interior) and coming back to Colorado in 2013, and (local newspapers) have all essentially taken a huge step backward. There’s less than half a full-time-equivalent reporter assigned by the Denver Post to cover national affairs.” Bill Owens made a nearly identical projection that Colorado’s newspapers had 12 to 15 full-time political reporters during much of his time as governor from 1999 to 2007. Among them, he said, were several from the Rocky and the Post and others representing the Pueblo Chieftain, the Colorado Springs Gazette, The Coloradoan (from Fort Collins) and the Grand Junction Sentinel. “They really kept a watch on me, and mostly (the reporters did so) fairly,” Owens said. “Sometimes, you could see them try to force headlines. However, that was a small price to pay for the fact that there was an awareness across the body politic of what was happening.” Owens thinks TV is a pale ghost of a substitute, and he doesn’t envision it getting any better. “Look at some of the great parodies of all time, like ‘Anchorman’,” he said. “The economics of TV are that you have a 30-minute newscast whittled down to 20 minutes (after teasers and advertisements), and by the time you have the actual news there’s only a few minutes of it.”
For Owens, there’s just no comparison between the state government nowadays versus when he in office. In his first full year in office in 2000, “there was intense coverage of the governor every other day, and I was on the front page,” he recalled. “Today, there’s no Rocky, and because the Post is mostly wire driven, big stories aren’t covered, they’re not able to follow-up, and the feet aren’t being held to the fire.” Since the Rocky’s closure, there are nearly no state-level political reporters left for relationship building, said Morgan Carroll, a current Democrat legislator and former majority leader in Colorado’s Senate. “You can’t expect half as many people to be able to cover as many issues in as much depth,” said Carroll. “We’ve always had tradeoffs. They could never cover every issue, but now it’s very hit and miss. And there are financial pressures to sensationalize in a desperate attempt for viewers and readers.” University Hill Neighborhood Association president Andy Farr has observed other differences in political coverage – namely a dearth of national coverage with a Colorado angle. Plus, in-depth coverage is far rarer. “A lot of times, I’ll read a paper’s article, and I’ll think, ‘Well, they scratched the surface because they didn’t have enough people on it,’” Farr said. One of the Rocky’s biggest strengths, he added, was its mix of concise stories, which didn’t jump, and thorough, probing features about weighty topics like drug use, prison, or the environment.

City councilor Paul Kashmann saw a similar blend of stories in the Rocky. It was like Time magazine in its heyday, he said – a combination of short and long stories written in lay terms, and each Rocky story built on the next such that residents gradually developed a full picture of what was going on. Now, however, the spotlight is spotty, and it’s not hard for Kashmann to think of examples stories that are hardly covered. Among them are the consequences of the Great Recession. Where, he asked, are the reporters documenting the ramifications of Denver cutting millions of budget dollars? The city, for example, hasn’t trained
a class of police in five years, and it’s cut so many building inspectors that it can take months to get a permit for a simple roofing job, Kashmann said. It’s not just that stories are falling through the cracks, now that Rocky’s gone, said school board member Landri Taylor. It’s that too often local news outlets fail to look deeper into stories by providing context, nuances, and analysis. He gives the local media a “D+” since the Rocky closed. “For instance, when they tell a story about a gang shooting in a low-income community, they create a reputation for the community and the expectation that people should expect that,” Taylor said. “But a shooting in a higher income area becomes a disagreement between two people that had nothing to do with the community because it’s so great.” And don’t get him started on the area’s television news, which disappoints him right alongside the Post. In theory, “The 6 o’clock news can only give you 55 seconds on a local story, whereas the printable news gives you more of the story.” In practice, “Newspapers also have gotten away from giving people most of the story.”

Like Taylor, Garcia-Eckstein also misses the depth and detail of local newspaper reporting. She fondly remembers the days when Rocky reporters, like Tina Griego, did things like embed themselves in the local schools. Then, they churned out stories about institutional deficiencies for days or even weeks at a time. “There were things that she discussed that she just wouldn’t have found by covering a meeting,” Garcia-Eckstein added. “Hardly anyone does that sort of coverage anymore. But by really talking with people and understanding the community, Tina could see how the Denver Public Schools were failing our kids. And I think changes came about as a result.” Angela Cortez, a former Denver Post reporter, can understand why local news stories about complicated issues and ongoing problems seem to be going by the wayside now more than ever. “Sometimes those aren’t sexy enough stories,” said Cortez, who now serves as Colorado’s AARP communications director. “But it really is the media’s job to try to find the
person who’s in need, and to show how people aren’t eating, and it’s pretty disappointing when they can’t. It’s not that no one cares. It’s just that there’s too much going on, and that stuff is going to be put on the back burner, and no one ends up covering it.” As chairwoman of Colorado’s judicial Public Access Committee, state Supreme Court Justice Monica Marquez has seen firsthand how reporters have gone from shining a spotlight on all kinds of issues to providing spotty coverage.

Created by the state’s chief justice and staffed with judges and judicial administrators, the committee deals with the constant push-pull between providing timely, transparent access to legal records and protecting confidential information. Before the Rocky closed, the local press was likely to cover all kinds of court cases, including those that weren’t gory or sexy, said Marquez. “In past, if it was a reasonably high profile case, you could kind of guarantee coverage,” she said. “Now, they’re just going gravitate to the stuff that sells papers, like the bloody criminal stuff.” Generally speaking, only newspapers have the resources, the time, the desire, and the format to consistently dive deep into outlining issues and deciphering what policy makers have to say about them, said Metropolitan State University president Stephen Jordan. With the Rocky gone, and the Post depleted, he thinks important issues are going unexplored. Jordan referenced state funding discrepancies between Colorado colleges wherein the neediest schools (those with the most first-generation and minority college students) can end up getting less money than colleges with smaller populations of at-risk students. And he mentioned the huge educational attainment gap between whites and Hispanics and well-meaning state tuition caps that leave the colleges with the highest populations of disadvantaged students hamstrung to serve them.
When newspapers reporters still do in-depth work, it’s usually fair and accurate, and they invest a lot of time in the pieces, he said. “But there’s been a demonstrable depletion in the amount of education coverage,” Jordan added. “And as a result, a lot of really important individual stories that speak to larger public policy conversations that we should being having in this state are not being told.” Few public relations people worked harder than Visit Denver’s Richard Grant, when the Rocky and the Post were at the peak of their powers. Throughout the ’90s, and up till 2008, a phone call from one of Denver’s dailies was cause for concern at Denver’s tourism bureau. The organization, which is overseen by a private board and partly funded by taxpayer dollars, was embroiled in multiple controversies. Two of the tourism bureau’s presidents were very publicly fired for controversies that involved the improper use of funds to buy booze and a business meeting at a strip club. The ’90s and early 2000s were a time when each Denver paper had a full-time reporter devoted to tourism, aviation, and other travel-related topics, and the two papers printed dozens of pages of business news each week. “That’s a lot of space, and they were each devoting a lot of attention to the community every day, and when we went down to one paper, eventually, we had just four pages of business coverage,” said Grant. Though he’s retired, Grant still runs into the reporters, who used to call him, from time to time. “But now it’s a very different world,” Grant said. “All the reporters who were tough on us are now in PR.”

Community Disunity

Study Denver’s newspapers enough and a theme recurs. Their names were transposed. The Rocky Mountain News owned Denver’s reportage, while the Denver Post, which calls itself the “the Voice of the Rocky Mountain Empire,” was always more concerned about the whole of Colorado. Or, as city councilor and Rocky alumnus, Kevin Flynn put it, “If you wanted to know what policies the government was considering, you bought the Denver Post, and if you wanted
know why that siren was streaking down your street, you bought the Rocky. We just knew the Denver the best.” The Rocky, local leaders said, was unique and unifying. It acculturated new arrivals to the city’s customs and traditions and enculturated natives to the community’s shared heritage and habits. Now, its loss means there’s one less pervasive force to make the community a community. After all, a newspaper, literally, puts people on the same page. “Both newspapers were community builders,” said Robin Wise, the local Junior Achievement branch’s president. “It was like a water cooler effect. Did you read this in the Post today? Did you read it in the News today? You coalesced around something, and that was the newspaper.” To be a Rocky reader was to be in two clubs – a devotee of the paper and a true Denver resident, said community activist and La Alma Neighborhood Association president Helen Giron-Mushfiq.

Plus, she added, there was something intimate about getting to know the paper’s employees and staff, especially being a subscriber in the days when the Rocky’s carriers still knocked on doors to collect payments. Denver area residents got to know their newspaper delivery people. And, until the Rocky switched its billing and delivery systems to adult drivers and mail-in payments in the early ’90s (the Post made the same change a few years earlier), neighborhood kids were as likely to deliver the paper. “It gave me a sense of belonging – a sense of community because the newspaper was there every morning, so I could just go out the door and pick it up,” said Giron-Mushfiq. “And when that went away, there was a void, even though I didn’t always agree with the newspaper, I always picked that paper up and read.” More than one interviewee made the same observation. They felt like they could get closer to those at the Rocky. They thought it was the more local paper – it was more connected to the community and it made them feel like they were part of the community. Whereas Denver Post publisher Dean Singleton was a jet-setter, Rocky Mountain News editor and publisher John Temple “had kids that went to
the same schools that mine went to,” said Ledy Garcia-Eckstein, a senior policy analyst in Denver’s Office of Economic Development. “John and his wife Judith were a really important part of the community.”

During his time as Denver’s district attorney, from 1993 to 2004, former Governor Bill Ritter thought he had a good relationship with Temple, but none to speak of with Singleton, though they did get to know each after Ritter became governor. Temple and the Rocky were conveners, he said. Their personalities were special in that way. “It was the character of the Rocky that those relationships were just a little deeper in the community and its network was broader than the Post,” he added. The Rocky and the alternative weekly Westword were Denver’s leading sources of news and information about people involved in the city’s arts and cultural scenes, said David Griggs, president of the La Alma/Lincoln Park Neighborhood Association. Other interviewees said the Rocky’s right-leaning editorial page’s strong point of view and snappy writing didn’t just make it a must-read for those who agreed with it. It was essential for liberals, too, so they could understand local opposing views. And who knew the reactions, and the conversations, the paper’s folksy columnists might spark next? Laughter? Tears?

As he died from cancer, Gene Amole generated plenty of the latter when he chronicled his death, including the lessons he’d learned throughout his life. “Even though Gene passed, you enjoyed getting his perspective, and it made us a healthier community because he’d give you an opposing point of view of what was going on in the community,” said Denver school board member Landri Taylor. “He’d remind of us of our roots, and our mission in the community, and he’d ask, ‘Why are we moving in this direction?’” That was the case when Amole was coming out against the $4.8 billion construction of Denver International Airport, which replaced Stapleton International Airport in 1995 (16 months late and nearly $2 billion over budget). And it
was so when he opposed the arrival of Major League Baseball’s Colorado Rockies franchise, which replaced Denver’s minor league team. “Gene Amole was a very strong news guy, with a great personality, and he had real influence in community,” said Governor Romer. He too recalled how Amole was opposed to the building of the new airport because, among other reasons, it was too far out of town. “The Post was more likely to represent the establishment, whereas the Rocky had a whole lot more actors in it that made the paper bristly.” And the community could be sure, he added, that at least one Rocky reporter or columnist was reporting on, and taking a strong stand about, every issue of the day.

Griggs views the Post’s reduction of arts coverage, in recent years, as a prime example of how Denver’s remaining daily “is not as interested in seeking and promoting community things.” With the Rocky gone, “I feel less connected to some of the social institutions,” Griggs said. “I feel like I know less about what’s going on in some of the city agencies and in state government. I feel less informed.” Part of the reason for those feelings, is undoubtedly his fondness for the Rocky and his lack of enthusiasm for the Post, which gets thinner every year, Griggs said. Another part of it is the Internet, which has neither replaced the local news content of newspapers nor completely filled their shoes in other ways, he added. Unsurprisingly for a long-time local artist, Griggs is still dismayed by the loss of the Rocky’s lively arts coverage. Those, too, are the sentiments of Claude Dutro, the former Worshipful Master of Denver’s Masonic lodge. “Things like the Denver orchestra don’t get anything near the publicity they once did” when the Rocky was open, he said. “Consequently, that’s a resource lost, and, culturally, the city has suffered from the loss of promotion more than anything else.”

Just as Coke drinkers crave their soda, McDonald’s munchers need their fast-food fix, and Mustang loyalists love their muscle cars, the Rocky was a powerful brand for those who
cared about Denver and the wider region. Readers like Andy Farr, of the University Hill Neighborhood Association, grew attached to the paper. From around junior high in the mid-’70s to his first year of high school in the early ’80s, Farr delivered the Rocky in Cheyenne, Wyoming. Though the Rocky regarded the area as just one of the far-flung places (along with locales in Kansas, Nebraska, New Mexico, and South Dakota) where it circulated in its prime, Farr thought of the of the paper as a cosmopolitan trophy. He threw it on the porches of state legislators and, if his memory serves, at the governor’s mansion, too. The Rocky seemed powerful because he could find it everywhere – from the Wyoming doorsteps to which he heaved it, to the weekend editions he spotted 500 miles away in Montana. Reading it made Farr feel no less than a part of the American West. “I always thought the Rocky was the holy grail,” said Farr. “At an early age, I had this impression that the literati of Wyoming, who really need to know what’s going on, got this highfalutin paper from Denver. You could get it hundreds of miles away, along with the Post, and they seemed important because they spoke for an entire region of the country.”

Years later, as a Denver resident, he remained a newspaper nerd, and the Rocky was still his go-to source for news about the region. “I remember they’d have a legislative guide that would come out each year, and it was like waiting for the annual swimsuit edition,” Farr said. “You could get it and keep it through the whole legislative term because it was such a good reference. And when you’d hear people start squawking over Senate bill such and such, you could consult the Rocky, and say, ‘That’s not true, that’s not what the bill says.’” The Rocky shrunk the city and the region. And that is, in part, what Farr and other interviewees meant when they used the word “folksy” to describe the paper. Various community leaders said the Rocky was of the people and for the people, and it was determined to cover a big region in a way that
made it feel more like a small town. The Rocky reminded people that their slither of the Earth, the American West, was full of ordinary folks with vested interests – from regional businesses, to the economy, and the management of shared resources like water and land. The Reverend Larry Grimm, a retired clergyman, who still works part-time at the Capital Heights Presbyterian Church in Denver, thinks the Rocky shrunk Denver. “When I came here in ’92, and throughout the ’90s and into the 2000s, the Rocky Mountain News seemed to make Denver a small town, and when the city began to expand and the area’s dynamics changed that’s something it continued to do,” Grimm said. “It was a folksy paper, and it highlighted Denver, the whole state, and the Rocky Mountain region.” To Dutro, the Rocky was always “more neighborly and friendly.”

It was a newsprint welcome wagon that integrated new residents by delivering loads of information to them about the community’s character, its culture, and its history. “What an entity like the Post still does is bring some community continuity by saying, ‘Hey, this is what this place is, this is what we have,’” said the University of Colorado’s spokesman Ken McConnellogue. “We don’t have that in many other kinds of social institutions.” Indeed, many a story about what it meant to live, work, and play in Colorado could only be found in local newspapers. “I remember, in the ’90s, the Rocky did a series on who we are, and the altitude, and it was a description of all the mountains, and how they were formed, and what it was like living at altitude,” said Richard Grant of Visit Denver. “I’ve never seen anything else like that. No one had ever done that sort of in-depth local story on what mountains are and what it was like to live in them.” The Rocky’s personality united Denverites, too, said Dana Crawford, the urban preservationist. She remembers it as “peppy” and “fun,” while others described the Rocky as a punchy, working-class paper full of feisty reporters, who scrapped and clawed for Denver stories. The Rocky, and now the Post’s remnants, are what made the community a community.
Now, there’s one fewer local paper tying people together as Denverites. Denver Health Board member Kathleen McCall-Thompson wondered where she would go for local entertainment news and prep sports coverage if Denver didn’t have at least one daily paper. Interviewees like Grimm and McCall-Thompson can’t even picture a major city like Denver not having at least one daily paper.

The same goes school board member Landri Taylor and Adam Lerner, the director of Denver’s Museum of Contemporary Art. “Even when we’re very critical of the newspaper in a one-paper market, I still think we define ourselves as a metro area by having at least one paper in our city,” said Taylor. Lerner would feel a little sad for the city if it had no daily periodical. “It would feel embarrassing, like a kind of loss of status,” he added. Newspapers don’t just matter because of the prestige of their presence or the size of the stories they cover. Sometimes it’s the simple, little things that papers do that make people care about a local area and each other. There are the public services of chronicling prep sports, publicizing the local arts and cultural scene, and snapping photos of events like pageants and parades – subjects few news outlets besides newspapers would care to cover. Then, there are obituaries, said Dutro, and he should know. At 73, he’s been a masonic lodge member for 52 years, and his peers crack open the paper to see who’s departed. “There are some things that a newspaper does that the other news outlets just don’t do,” said Dutro. “I think definitely the newspaper serves a very important function, and that’s informing the public of mundane things.”

Dutro thinks that sort of coverage would be hit hard if the Post closed. What else would happen if the Post disappeared? “I think there would be a tremendous uproar with people asking, ‘What the fuck is going on?’” said the Reverend Grimm. “The local business community and the local government would demand a new newspaper. The Denver Post really does occupy a
cherished place in many of the minds of the movers and shakers in the community. They use it. They need it.” Colorado Supreme Court Justice Monica Marquez couldn’t agree more. She thinks the newspaper also ties together the region’s sports fans. She thinks the Rocky and Post helped create a figurative town square, where people gathered to talk and learn about prep and pro sports. “It would be a great tragedy for a metro area this size to lose the Post,” she said. “It’ll never happen that the Post closes because of the Broncos. It’s so hard for me to contemplate because if nothing else we’d have daily Broncos stories coming out of somewhere.” Sometimes, it doesn’t seem like the Post can continue, said Grant, who thinks the paper is down to a skeletal staff. But he still can’t envision a community without some form of daily paper even if it was only delivered in the mail. “If the Post didn’t exist, someone would create another daily,” said Grant. “It might not be delivered, but what we always heard was that it’s cheaper for the Sunday supplements to be delivered by the Post not the mail, and amazingly the coupons and the Sunday supplements still work. So, there’s just enough revenue to wrap some news around them.”

Notes


Phone interview with Dean Singleton, March 21 and March 25, 2016.


The estimates that the “average U.S. daily newspaper now has 27.5 news staffers” and “the average local TV news staff is 38.5” came from: Bob Papper, “Newsroom staffing stagnates,” *Radio Television Digital News Association*, April 30, 2015, http://tinyurl.com/ju8t2kn.
CHAPTER 11
PART II: INTERVIEW RESULTS

RQ5a: Necessity and Relevance

To what extent, if at all, do community leaders think a daily local newspaper is still necessary and relevant, today? Three thematic response categories were well-saturated and unambiguous regarding the question of whether a daily local newspaper is still necessary and relevant, today. The answer is, “Yes,” on a societal level, and “No,” on a personal level. Denver’s community leaders recognized the necessity and relevance of a major metro daily in terms of benefiting the community. But in their personal lives, many of them said they could mostly do without it. The answers to this research question can be broken into four categories. The first theme is “the juice isn’t worth the squeeze.” Many community leaders think it’s not worth the effort to buy and regularly read the Denver Post given its sorry state. Many don’t actually read or subscribe to the paper. They receive digital alerts if a major story breaks or if their organizations are mentioned, and they have assistants or clipping services deliver potentially pertinent stories for skimming. Plus, a few said they barely consume or care about the local newspaper because they prefer national news. Even those who do still regularly read the Denver Post agreed with those who don’t in that most community leaders said the paper has grown increasingly irrelevant as it’s become stick thin over the last decade. The second theme is best described as “telling their own tales.” Several community leaders said the Rocky’s closure didn’t majorly affect their ability to communicate with the public. Now, they rely far more on their own information dissemination and marketing methods, including social media, to share messages with the public.

The third theme is best characterized as “better off together.” Local leaders said there was a time when a local, general interest daily paper was far more necessary and relevant, and that
was when both the *Rocky* and the *Post* were around. The competition between them made them more informative, compelling, and indispensable. Fourth, and finally, on a societal level, community leaders think a local, general interest, daily paper is still necessary and relevant because of the credibility it carries. That, the interviewees said, is because the public trusts the news more when it comes from a daily paper than from the newsmakers themselves. Thus, on a societal level, there’s still value in professionally trained reporters taking educated opinions on an editorial page, and in journalists curating, aggregating, and disseminating local news. Newspapers still have great credibility thanks to their still-large audiences, their professional standards, and their roles in researching and verifying information in an objective way. So, Denver’s community leaders said, when newspaper reporting disappears, there’s a credibility gap between newsmakers and the public. Local news outlets, like the newspaper, mediate the newsmakers’ messages and, in so doing, add credibility to what those local leaders have to say.

**Juice Isn’t Worth the Squeeze**

There’s just one reason Nancy Barlow and her husband decided to get a paper copy of the *Denver Post* every Sunday. It’s for their dog to play with, said Barlow, who’s president of the Cook Park Neighborhood Association, a local business association, and her own local advertising and design firm. For years, Barlow and her husband received both of Denver’s dailies when they were thriving. Then, four years ago, they canceled the *Post* as it steadily shed staff and pages in the *Rocky’s* absence. But something unanticipated happened. Spencer, their 12-year-old, black and white border collie rescue dog, missed the newspaper terribly. He’d grown so accustomed to running outside to fetch the *Post* that he’d spent the last few years coping by stealing the *Wall Street Journal* from a neighbor’s porch. That practice started long ago, after Barlow ran out of newspapers to toss on the driveway each morning for the dog to retrieve. Barlow finally caved in the fall of 2015. Spencer was elated when his owner resubscribed to the
Post’s Sunday edition. Now, he wakes like clockwork just before the 4 a.m., and he peers excitedly out a second-floor window, as he awaits the paper’s delivery, before racing out of the garage to retrieve it. “Quite honestly, the only reason I get the Post on Sundays is for my dog,” said Barlow. “I wanted my dog to have something to do in the older years in his life. He just lives to pick up the paper. So, I spent $100. We don’t even read it. We throw it away. He knows there’s no mail on Sundays, but there’s a paper in the driveway for him to enjoy.”

Six years after the Rocky’s closure, many of Denver’s community leaders were remarkably consistent in their feelings about the Post. Several think the juice isn’t worth the squeeze when it comes to the effort and money required to read Denver’s remaining daily paper. A large slice of the interviewees complained that the Post is radically smaller, and others said it’s still necessary and relevant but not even remotely as much as when the Rocky was around. If the Denver Post closed, “I don’t think anyone would care,” said Wayne Vaden, the board chairman of the Urban League of Metro Denver. “Actually, I think the old folks would care. But I saw a paper the other day, and it looked like it was 10 pages, it was so light and weak. And I was thinking, ‘Why would you buy that?’” Reader loyalty was always based most strongly on what newspapers could do for people and advertisers, not on the institutions themselves, said Denver school board member Landri Taylor. And bad things happened to newspapers when they stopped delivering ads and news in the ways that most satisfied advertisers and readers. “It’s a downward spiral (wherein the ad revenue goes down) and the magazines and newspapers become thinner and thinner, and then fewer people read them because they’re not being served,” said Taylor. La Alma/Lincoln Park Neighborhood Association’s David Griggs can’t believe how little so many Denverites know about local current events. “I find the lack of interest stunning,” said Griggs. “I hear from other people, and they just don’t have that habit of consuming news or paying
attention. It’s also surprising to me when people aren’t aware of stuff, even when the *Denver Post* picks up on something that’s a major infrastructure change, and I’ll say, ‘I can’t believe you don’t know about this.”

Like Governor Bill Owens, Governor Dick Lamm wonders which came first – a decline in interest in the news or a decline in its quality. “What’s the prime mover here?” Lamm asked. “The newspaper has far fewer readers, and I just don’t know, and the *Denver Post* is just a pale imitation of what it was at its heights.” Just the other day, Seventh Avenue Neighborhood Association president Svein Reichborn-Kjennerud was asking his wife why they even subscribe to the *Post*. And they discussed how they could still get much of the information they needed from using the free online editions of local news outlets and from other Web sources like the Broncos’ news sites. “I don’t get that much value out of the subscription, and not because of money, though they did raise their subscription by 50%,” said Reichborn-Kjennerud. “Were the *Denver Post* to fold up and pack and leave its suitcases in another town, I wouldn’t be unhappy.” Sometimes, it seems a bit like the *Post* is just going through motions of delivering a high-quality newspaper with great customer service, said Andy Farr, who runs the University Hill Neighborhood Association. “We get the *Post* still, but we pay like $30, and we don’t get a subscription renewal notice for like three years, and we’ve started to realize the paper is a throwaway,” said Farr. “The revenue from the customer is inconsequential. They just keep on delivering and, literally, every three or so years they ask us for money,” so the paper prop up its readership and charge advertisers more.

It’s not like those working at Denver’s dailies didn’t care about putting out a high quality product, said former *Rocky* reporter and current Denver city councilor Kevin Flynn. It’s that newspaper employees have been increasingly hamstrung by dwindling resources. At the *Rocky,*
“We took a lot of pride in trying to tell people, ‘This is what’s going on in your neighborhood,’” and ‘This is what affects your taxes,” said Flynn. But by the time the paper closed, it was already becoming harder to miss because the paper’s staff wasn’t doing more with less. They were doing less with less. Toward the Rocky’s end, “I became great in telling a story in 8 inches instead of 20, but we didn’t miss that when the Rocky closed,” Flynn added. It’s not just that the Post isn’t replacing the Rocky, said Richard Grant, the former Denver tourism official. “It’s that they’re not doing anywhere near an adequate job.” And, for that matter, TV news is just not a substitute for local newspaper. “I think nationally, there’s enough blogs and information sources, but I was just going crazy two nights ago,” Grant said. “NBC devoted a minute and a half of news to some girl that was killed somewhere. With the way the world is and how they only have so much time, why would they devote so much time to a grizzly murder?” Former Denver Mayor Wellington Webb said he doesn’t even read the Denver Post anymore.

He just skims an online version, and he relies on a subscription clipping service to pluck out any local stories of interest from Denver’s news outlets. He thinks local TV newscasts are even less useful because they’re full of sound bytes and talking heads. Those over age 60 prefer a home-delivered newspaper, Webb said. Yet, the newspaper industry neither deduced how to make as much money off digital advertising as print ads, nor did newspaper executives come up with successful ideas to be just as useful and entertaining as other modern diversions. “The era of the newspaper is gone,” Webb said. “And what the era of the newspaper has not done is find a way to be competitive in a very brisk computerized social media world and to make it snappy enough that young Millennials and others would be more attracted to reading the news on an iPhone or on a light rail or on a subway.” When a newspaper stops giving people what they need, it stops being relevant, it degrades, or it dies, said Robin Wise, of Colorado’s Junior
Achievement chapter. Then, people simply find other means to replace it – even if they have to consult multiple news sources instead of one. That’s what happened when the local Safeway supermarket near her home closed. Wise had shopped at it for 20 years, but now she goes to a few different stores to pick up what she needs from each one.

She has faith in the free market to give people what they need even when a newspaper closes. “If there was a terrible news need that wasn’t being met, something would bubble up. Right now, the Denver Post is mostly furniture and mattress ads, and ads for a big liquor store. I think something would replace it” if it disappeared. Now that the Rocky has closed, Denver economic development official Ledy Garcia-Eckstein has “absolutely no ties” with the city’s remaining daily, and she wouldn’t really miss the Post if it disappeared. “No city should be without a newspaper, but I can’t tell you that it would be as big a deal to me if it closed,” said Garcia-Eckstein. “I imagine someone would fill the void.” Slowly but surely, local daily newspapers have come to matter less to people, said Rob Klugman, a board member of the Rose Foundation and the retired head of global head of strategy for Molson Coors. “Twenty years from now, I very much doubt there will be a daily paper here of any sort of magnitude,” he added. What would it take for the Denver Post to be relevant and appealing to Klugman and other local residents? “You’re asking me what I’d have to do to climb Everest. I could be fitter, I could be younger, I think the deck is too stacked heavily against newspapers.” To replace the Rocky and to capture more interest, the Post would need to spend more money and hire more people, Klugman said. Yet, the Post, and most other publications can’t do that. “So, newspapers should find very wealthy philanthropists,” he added.

Klugman doesn’t think it would be such a bad thing for newspapers to return to the days, back in the 1800s and the first half of the 1900s, when newspapers were commonly owned by
barons. Of course, the worldviews of today’s billionaires would likely seep into the papers. But Klugman doesn’t know how else to preserve papers in a digital age in which profits are so hard to come by and fewer young people read the paper. That’s what’s already happened with mixed results across the country. In San Diego, a company led by billionaire real estate developer Doug Manchester owned the *Union-Tribune* from November 2011 to May 2015. In Washington D.C., Amazon founder Jeff Bezos bought the *Post* in 2013. And in Las Vegas, casino magnate Sheldon Adelson bought the *Review-Journal* in January 2016. Colorado ACLU public policy director Denise Maes couldn’t disagree more with Klugman’s view. Billionaire-owned papers cut content and journalists, too, and they’re especially at risk of being skewed by their rich owners’ beliefs, Maes said. For Denver’s remaining general interest paper to stay vital and relevant, it’s not enough for it to simply avoid closure. “It would be equally sad, frankly, if the *Post* is bundled with a bunch of other news outlets across the country and bought by a billionaire like Colorado’s Philip Anschutz,” Maes said. “It’s terrible because not only does that color the paper’s ability to do investigative reporting, but then we’d have (the whole paper) colored by one person’s viewpoint.”

**Telling Their Own Tales**

Once upon a time, Richard Grant followed some very specific rules for sending press releases to Denver’s news outlets. When he started as the mouthpiece for Visit Denver, the city’s tourism bureau, back in 1979, press releases had to be tight, and he would type 10 copies of the same announcement on separate sheets of white paper. Reporters in search of real typewriter key strokes would hold the envelopes they received up to the light, as they tossed photocopied press releases in the trash. Those releases were clearly mass distributed, but the reporters wanted exclusive access to the news. Today, Grant wouldn’t even dream of going to such lengths – no longer do legacy news outlets like newspapers assert bureaucratic control over information
dissemination. Several community leaders, including Grant, said they have plenty of ways to tell their own tales without using newspapers, which have limited staff and set standards for picking and reporting on stories. Today, for example, many newspapers, including the *Denver Post* and the *New York Times*, won’t hire freelance travel writers who’ve received anything complimentary from the places they’ve visited, said Grant. Yet, the same papers will only pay a freelancer $200 for writing such stories. Travel bloggers, on the other hand, play by their own rules. They accept trips and travel perks that can be worth thousands of dollars, and they barter with the organizations about which they write. “There’s no need trying to get the press to cover you because you can just create your own content,” said Grant. “Why would I try to get a reporter to write a travel story about Denver when I can work with a blogger or write my own story and get just as many people to view (my organization’s message)?”

As recently as between 2003 and ’05, when Wayne Vaden served as the clerk, recorder, and election commission chief for the city and county of Denver, he still needed the local media to spread news. It was a time when city employees assiduously prepared press releases for Denver’s dailies and other neighborhood publications. Newspapers charged exorbitant prices by the line for ads. And though they occasionally gave free press to nonprofits, it was a toss up where their ads might land and whether they’d be buried. Now, Vaden thinks newspapers are largely obsolete when newsmakers need to share a message. “With social media you can just blast it out in the same manner,” he added. “In the context in which the *Rocky* existed, I think it was important. In the context in which we are now receiving our messages through multiple channels, it may not be as important.” The University of Colorado’s top PR man, Ken McConnellogue, recently listened to a *Denver Post* pitch in which the paper offered to let the college use its reporters to write sponsored content. Such newspaper ads look very similar to
stories, but they’ve been tweaked slightly (e.g. they have a different font style and size and a small disclaimer). McConnellogue and the college’s president, Bruce Benson, didn’t mull the offer for long. “My response was, ‘Half of your newsroom already works for us,’” McConnellogue said.

Besides former Post staff members, he pointed out that the university has two reporters who worked for the Rocky, including a Pulitzer prize winner, who writes speeches for a chancellor. “At the university, we’ve taken a much greater hand in connecting with the audience and shaping our content and telling our story,” he added. When newspapers close or cut their staffs, it has ever been thus that the organizations the papers used to cover scoop up their best former staff members. Often, they end up in PR, but not always. Not so long ago, Joseph Patrick Mahoney was part of the Rocky Mountain News photo teams that won the Pulitzer Prizes for Breaking News Photography in 2000 and 2003. Now, he’s an affiliate faculty member in Metro State University’s journalism department. “The Rocky had some great photographers, and we stole them,” said Metro State’s president Stephen Jordan. “Our journalism program has been a huge beneficiary of both papers (shedding journalists). That’s the positive side of what’s happened. The young people they teach will go out and continue those traditions in photo journalism even if it’s not for newspapers.” Local organizations seeking to spread their messages needn’t have a whole staff of former Rocky and Post reporters to serve as in-house storytellers. A number of Denver’s community leaders said they use an array of websites, especially social media, to communicate with the public.

Seventh Avenue Neighborhood Association president Svein Reichborn-Kjennerud said his organization spreads the words via emails and by relying on an umbrella neighborhood association, Capital Hill United Neighborhoods (CHUN). The University Hill Neighborhood
Association’s president, Andy Farr, likes nextdoor.com, a social network begun with venture capital funding in 2011, which restricts access to residents of a given neighborhood. CHUN’s leader, Roger Armstrong, gradually began ramping his organization’s social media use as local newspapers got smaller and ads became pricier. And Nancy Barlow, who runs her own ad agency, the Cook Park Neighborhood Association, and a local business association, said her clients barely even use newspapers anymore. “Newspapers don’t work for them,” Barlow said of her clients. “It’s not just because the Rocky is gone that they’re not advertising in the Post. It’s that they’re only advertising in the Post if they have a business that appeals to an older group.”

Few methods of communication have better empowered newsmakers to reach the public than email and Facebook. Before Facebook, which began open registration in September 2006, Grant remembers a time when Denver’s tourism bureau would produce two or three news releases on a regular basis. Then, as in now, TV was tough to crack, with its short news programs full of even shorter sound bytes.

And it wasn’t so long ago – not until interoperable electronic mail systems really took off in ’80s and ’90s – that email wasn’t widespread. “Facebook and email have really come in and fulfilled a lot of the roles that newspapers were doing,” Grant said. “There used to be no way of easily getting information to the general public. We didn’t have email lists, and mail wasn’t cheap. You had to labor to produce and address messages, and it could take two or three days to reach people.”

Sure, communities are better served when they have at least one newspaper in addition to social media, not just the latter, said former Denver mayor Wellington Webb. He knows that most social media sites have little if any ability to produce original reportorial journalism, especially reporting of any depth. But such websites can efficiently and attractively curate and aggregate the news, and they give community institutions an equally streamlined,
captivating way for them to promote their activities, Webb and other community leaders said. Newsmakers are well aware of the power they wield in reaching the public with Twitter and Facebook and other websites. Instead of relying on one general interest product like a newspaper, which only writes a little bit about a lot of things, and which mostly only reaches a local audience, newsmakers turn to social media, said Dana Crawford. Much like how Robin Wise, of Junior Achievement, gets groceries from several different stores since her local supermarket closed, Crawford and other local leaders rely on an array of different news outlets, including specialized niche media.

As an urban preservationist, she gleans all sorts of information from real estate-related websites and blogs, which she augments with the *Denver Business Journal*, colorful trade publications, and slick local magazines. A multi-pronged media approach is exactly what Adam Lerner uses to communicate with his organization’s constituencies. As director of Denver’s Museum of Contemporary Art, he gets by just fine without newspapers, though he knows, likes, and respects local journalists. When it comes to his organization communicating with the public, “I couldn’t notice any difference between the *Rocky* being here and it not being here,” Lerner said. That’s because, like other community leaders, whom Lerner’s organization relies on an eclectic blend of communications methods depending on who the museum is trying to reach. Based on the museum’s constituencies, those techniques include various social media accounts, email, direct mail, different types of advertising, local arts and culture websites, and press releases to traditional news outlets. The museum’s “life-long learners,” for example, tend to be older than 40, and when they’re often veteran supporters of the local arts and culture scene. So, they largely receive direct mail. The museum mostly uses social media to reach “do-it-yourself” patrons, who are often in their 20s and 30s. They’re a fairly easy sell too because they tend to be
creative types, like photographers and graphic designers, and they’re plugged into technology. Finally, the museum relies on a mix of all its methods to get ahold of “cultural consumers.”

They’re generally in their late 30s and 40s, and they only visit the museum when they want something fun to do and the MCA Denver has successfully marketed a new, interesting exhibit or activity. Lerner said his organization is always assessing its marketing mix to see what works. And, in part to reach Millennials, the museum even hired a marketing manager from the energy drink Red Bull. As for newspapers, given their older audiences, Lerner thinks they’re far from the most effective way to reach those born between 1981 and early 2001. “Although I still think it’s important to have a presence in, and a pretty good relationship with, newspapers, we’re using a lot of techniques that are designed to attract Millennials, and newspapers are a pretty small part of that,” he said. “We’re just much more sophisticated about how we work with the press” in the digital age. Of course, for some community leaders, newspapers aren’t even in their mix of communications methods. Given its advisory council of Hispanic leaders, and its early 2000s efforts to more often cover the local Latino population, Julissa Soto thinks the Rocky was more committed to serving Colorado’s largest minority than the Post. Now, Soto, a Colorado health care activist with the American Diabetes Association, mainly relies on Telemundo to convey her organizations’ messages to a targeted audience. “I don’t know whether the Post cares” about Colorado’s Hispanic population, she said. “I believe they care more about who’s running for what office and who’s buying their ads, and they don’t care enough about, or pay enough attention to, the stories that touch the community’s heart.”

**Better Off Together**

Morgan Carroll remembers when newspapers endorsements really mattered. That’s not to say they don’t matter at all, today. They do. Several community leaders cited the Denver Post’s endorsement of Republican U.S. Senate candidate Cory Gardner in 2014 as a game changer in
his victory over incumbent Democratic Senator Mark Udall. But Carroll, who’s now a Colorado state senator, thinks local newspapers were really a force to be reckoned with when she first ran for a seat in the Colorado House of Representatives in 2005. Having a much smaller editorial crew confined to just one Denver paper, today, means fewer endorsements. And there are no point-counter-point arguments between the two papers as they pick candidates. To Carroll, there’s “less texture and variety” to endorsements in the Rocky’s absence. “There’s no possibility of having different content, different articles, different editorials, and, overall, that’s meant that what’s left of the Post is less read.” Carroll’s view is typical of the sort of ways that local community leaders think Denver is different because the Rocky closed. With the Rocky gone, several local leaders said they think Denver’s remaining daily paper is less relevant and the quality of its journalism is lower because its rival is no longer driving it to succeed. It’s not like Denver’s dailies never mirrored each other. Sometimes, they agreed editorially. And Carroll and others remembered times when the two papers’ news stories matched each other angle for angle and thought for thought. Yet, the Rocky’s presence meant newsmakers had a better chance of being heard, said Carroll.

She recalled getting the Rocky to bite on a story about her legislative efforts to help injured workers access independent physicians, not just company doctors, if they were hurt on the job. Without the Rocky around to push the Post, there’s less reason for it take deep dives into important issues, said Denver City Councilor Kevin Flynn. The Post still produces in-depth journalism, Flynn said. “But,” he added. “I just don’t think it would be as deep as it might be if there were a competitor.” A Post investigative team was never far behind the Rocky when it worked on major investigations, Flynn said. He would know. He can remember being a Rocky reporter and digging deeper on major stories to beat the Post – like in 1984, when local white
supremacists gunned down Jewish talk radio host Alan Berg of Denver’s KOA station. And there was the time when he investigated the Oklahoma City bombers, who were of local interest because they were tried in a federal court in Denver. One of Flynn’s former competitors at the *Post* couldn’t have agreed more. Before Angela Cortez became the Colorado AARP’s communications director, she toiled as a reporter and, later, as an editorial writer at the *Post* from 1994 to 2004. “I was constantly in fear of the *Rocky*,” said Cortez. “It was lot of stress knowing that you had to get, at the very least, what your counterparts got in terms of interviews and information. But it made us all better, and the state, if not the region, was better served for it.”

When *Post* played like an infielder in a live game when the *Rocky* was around, but now the *Post* acts more like it’s scooping up grounders on a practice diamond, said Governor Bill Ritter. “The presence of the *Rocky* in the Denver community was a healthy and a positive thing because it made journalists work harder and look for more stories,” said Ritter. “And it made them think more creatively about the angles they’d take that maybe the other wouldn’t.”

Cranmer Park-Hilltop Civic Association president Jay McCormick harkened back to a different analogy to make the same point. Like the slogan Avis began using in the ’60s, while battling its market-leading rival, Hertz, the *Rocky*’s attitude about competing with the *Post* was “‘We’re No. 2, so we have to try harder,’” he said. Pushed by the competition, “I did think the *Rocky*’s journalism was of a slightly higher quality, and they dug harder.” Reporters on both sides became authorities on their subjects, like “stock market analysts,” McCormick added. “One was good in one area, and another was an expert in another area,” and the community was lucky for it. Denver Health Board member Kathleen McCall-Thompson misses those days. No longer is the *Post* full of specialists, instead “it’s spread thin,” she said. The same journalist who’s writing about the theater is covering several other disparate beats. “I think losing the *Rocky Mountain*
News has made the Denver Post less important,” McCall-Thompson said. “I don’t think their reporting is as in-depth, and if the Post doesn’t cover a story there’s no other paper to cover it.”

Source after source said the same thing. The Post is just not as a good of a paper because it no longer has to compete with the Rocky. In all, 16 community leaders – or 40% of those interviewed – offered some iteration of that point. To East High School Principal Andy Mendelsberg, “zero competition means the Post can get away with putting nothing in the paper and no one is calling it out.” To Denver City Councilor Paul Kashmann, the “tension” is gone between the Post and the Rocky, which means there’s less incentive for the Post to do in-depth reporting. Whereas he thought both papers excelled together, he gives the Post a “C” grade, nowadays. Former Governor Dick Lamm is less kind. He thinks the Post is “20% of what it used to be” when the Rocky was around. “Not having the competition to really make it sharp and seek out important stories has left the Denver Post reduced to below even a reasonable minimum of its coverage of the legislature,” Lamm said. “Some of those great stories about things going on with the bureaucracy, like the fact that they spent too much money on the wrong type of the computer, are simply missed.” Lamm, and Metro State’s Stephen Jordan, each wondered what big stories are going uncovered. Without the Rocky, “really meaningful stories will get lost now because we don’t have the reporters to go in,” Jordan said. “Had that been the case in Boston, in the early 2000s, we’d never have gotten the Catholic Church stories.” Lobbyist and public affairs specialist Josh Hanfling, who sits on Denver Health’s board, feels the same way. Now, a day’s big stories are often missed, and those that are covered by the Post “are not as detailed” as when the Rocky was around.

Junior Achievement’s Robin Wise and local neighborhood association president Andy Farr respectively lamented the lack of a diversity of opinions in the Mile High City. “That may
be because the Post is underfunded,” Farr acknowledged, “but it’s also because they don’t have the challenge of competition.” Like McCall-Thompson, Wise also homed in the Post’s sports section, which she thinks has dropped off. Dana Crawford, the savior of Larimer Square also thinks the Post is less interesting without the Rocky as its rival. “Imagine if the Broncos didn’t have a competitor in the Super Bowl, and they were just crowned the champ,” she added. “It would be dullsville just like it is without two newspapers competing in a regular fashion to exceed one another.” Richard Grant doesn’t just think the Post is different without the Rocky. He knows it from firsthand experience. For 30 of his years as the local tourism bureau’s mouthpiece, Denver had two daily papers, and, in his final five years, the city was down to one. As discussed, Grant repeatedly dealt with controversies that led to the resignations of Denver’s top tourism officials. “It was extremely different working in a two-paper town because there was competition to get the story, sometimes too much competition, but it kept everybody honest,” Grant recalled. “When we had just one daily paper, it was harder to get positive press and reporters to show up at events, but it also was easier in a way not having to worry about the media anymore.” Wellington Webb feels the same way. Where once the Post was full of local stories about the arts, culture, politics, and prep sports, he finds far fewer stories and wire copy.

Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter do a heck of job helping users find and share interesting content, Denver’s former mayor said. But Lord knows they’re not going to send reporters to cover local activities in and around the city. It’s not that Denver necessarily needs more newspaper journalists. It’s just that it needs at least one paper’s staff to provide accurate, balanced information. And with the Rocky closed, and the Post ravaged from years of cost-cutting, the ability of Denver’s remaining daily to do just that has been compromised. Long gone are the days when up to six newspaper reporters regularly called City Hall. As Denver’s mayor,
Webb remembered contending with two *Rocky* reporters, who covered city affairs, another two doing the same for *Post*, one working for the alternative weekly, *Westword*, and one more representing the Associated Press. Now, at most, Denver Mayor Michael Hancock might hear regularly from one daily newspaper reporter, Webb added, as countless stories about all levels of government go uncovered. Denver’s former mayor will never get all warm and gooey about the *Rocky*. But like nearly half the community leaders interviewed, he thinks the *Post* was a much better paper when the *Rocky* was around. “When there were two papers that were fully staff they provided for a very educated public when their reporters got it right,” Webb said. “Of course, they didn’t always get it right. But, at least on balance, it was better having two competing newspapers, as opposed to one newspaper that doesn’t report at all because they don’t have the staff to do the work necessary to look in depth into issues.”

**Credibility Gap**

Here’s the thing about Denver’s community leaders. A lot of them will say it wouldn’t affect them personally if the *Denver Post* closed, and that the *Rocky’s* loss, while sad, only mildly disrupted their lives. But most of the same prominent people think that the *Rocky* and the *Post* fulfilled indispensable roles on a communitywide level. So, while many may not personally need a local daily paper, they don’t think society can do without at least one daily. Local leaders said they recognized the power daily papers have from the credibility that comes from verifying and researching subjects, reaching large audiences, and maintaining professional standards for newsgathering and publication. So, when newspaper reporting disappears, there’s a credibility gap between newsmakers and the public. For all the power local leaders have to generate and share their own messages in the digital age, “People still look at us with varying levels of skepticism,” said University of Colorado spokesman Ken McConnellogue. “Their B.S. meters are finely tuned.” But newspaper-mediated messages are more believable because “newspapers
still bring a certain third-party credibility.” As Denver Metro Chamber of Commerce president Kelly Brough put it, newspapers still have great worth in an age “where everybody is a reporter, nobody needs to be paid, and there aren’t the values and ethics that went along with reporting in the old days.”

Papers like the Post and the Denver Business Journal might not be as thick with news and ads as they were 20 years ago. But Brough thinks they’re still essential sources of news about local policy decisions and broader regional economic issues. To state Senator Morgan Carroll, Denver’s newspapers are also a last bastion for professional newsgatherers, who are trained to verify facts and follow codes of ethics in assembling and publishing information. Yes, social media and other digital news outlets have democratized reporting, but they also represent the “complete elimination of fact checking,” said Carroll. “If you repeat the lie enough it becomes true and people get away with it,” said Carroll. “While I was canvassing, I ran into a constituent, who’s a teacher. And he said, ‘I’m struggling with what my role is as a teacher in a post-factual society.’” Ideally, Americans are supposed to literately consult a variety of sources to tell facts from falsehoods. But Carroll thinks the lines between the two have been blurred in an era when any website can publish anything without compunction. Losing the Rocky was bad enough, Carroll said. “The ultimate casualty of losing the Post would be that it would leave a big hole in public discourse and knock down one of the last lines of defense we have against public fiction,” she added.

Carroll’s points don’t negate the fact that newspaper reporters inject their own interpretations of the facts into their stories. And, naturally, they sometimes misrepresent the facts in headlines or in the stories themselves. But their staffs try hard to mix fact with opinion and to not repeat false accounts, said Denver school board member Landri Taylor. “I think that’s
what the *Rocky* most contributed to Denver,” Taylor added. “It reported the facts, and then sliced them with opinion versus opinionated headlines that did not have much value when you would read the story in the other paper.” These days, people are tempted to think they don’t need newspaper reporters because they’ve got plenty of websites and blogs to visit, said the AARP’s Angela Cortez. “Bloggers are great, in fact, part of my focus is to learn about them and pitch them,” said Cortez. “But the value of a trained newspaper reporter is without question and they’re absolutely, positively needed – not just in Denver but in democratic society.”

Organizations can publish material left and right via their own channels, Cortez added, “but it’s more valuable to the reader and it means more if it’s coming from an unbiased source” like a newspaper.

Several of Denver’s community leaders think the same can be said for newspaper editorials. While online opinion-makers are given to bloviation, obfuscation, and fraudulent arguments, newspapers seek to offer well-reasoned, well-researched, factually supported arguments on their opinion pages. “Even as depleted as the *Denver Post* is, in terms of it’s news coverage, people still look to the editorial page in terms of their decisions,” said Metro State University president Stephen Jordan. “The influence of the *Rocky* and the *Post* came not so much from who was right or wrong, but because they gave people choices to sort out some position in between, and when you only have one choice of that you lose out.” A newspaper’s editorial page is supposed to be a place for calmer, better-reasoned discourse that makes people take notice of important issues regardless of their opinions, said Denver school board member Rosemary Rodriguez. For policymakers, “the editorial page can be very powerful, and without it there wouldn’t be any place for somebody to try to rise above what’s going on and say, ‘Hey folks this makes no sense’ or ‘this is a great idea and these are the reasons why’,” Rodriguez added.
The Rocky’s loss has meant that Denver has one less powerful public institution pointing out when community leaders have screwed up, said Inspiration Point Neighborhood Association president Jerry Guida. “The ability of the fourth estate is that it keeps the other estates honest,” he said. Community leaders “may have the best of intentions, but they’re still mixed up, and they may end up doing the wrong thing, and the Rocky’s editorials pointed out when they were doing the wrong thing.” To Guida, Colorado lobbyist Josh Hanfling, and Denver Contemporary Art Museum director Adam Lerner, what Denver has lost in the Rocky is an unmatched local content creator. Lerner said he can find plenty of niche media about his industry via social media. But they’re bereft of hyperlocal content about governments, businesses, crime, real estate and development. And while various websites and other news outlets may provide such information in a piecemeal fashion, Lerner thinks newspapers consistently “keep an eye on, and awareness of, what’s happening and the issues affecting the city and the state.” It’s bad enough that the Rocky closed. “It would hurt to see the Post closed, too,” said Hanfling. “People would be online and saying, ‘Who do I believe now?’ unless someone filled the vacuum. Good, bad or indifferent, the Post and these big daily papers are still viewed as a real, valid resource” for news,” Hanfling added. Millennials “care about the snow in the mountains and what’s the next musical act coming to Denver, but at least every four years they’re going to care about presidential shit,” and they’ll need newspaper.”

Regardless of whether ordinary Coloradans realize it, newspapers are the most thorough, widest-reaching sources on local news and politics, and newspaper news permeates everything online, Hanfling said. The persuasiveness of newspaper news on the Internet can be obvious (e.g. people sharing stories from the Denver Post) or subtle (e.g. other local news outlets aping a paper’s coverage). “There are very few original stories, and there aren’t a lot of places where
news starts, and that’s the problem,” Hanfling said. “I’ll bet you that there’s a lot of stuff that people are getting from the paper, but they don’t realize it.” In the 1980s, AT&T banded about more than one slogan. But the decade began with, “To communicate is the beginning of understanding. Reach out and touch someone.” That’s what Denver’s local leaders think has been lost with the Rocky’s death. Denver, they said, is now without a powerful mass communications outlet – a newspaper that touched hundreds of thousands of Coloradans by helping them learn about, and comprehend, the world around them each day. The Rocky “was your window to everything in Denver, to every play, museum, cultural event, politics, and God knows just about everything else,” said Visit Denver’s Richard Grant. Other news outlets do a good job, but they’re specialized, said Junior Achievement’s Robin Wise and other interviewees.

With niche publications come niche audiences – smaller groups of people who are focused on one narrow topics. Thus, the Denver area’s leaders think there’s still value in a major metro daily newspaper because it’s a one-stop information shop with a mass audience. “You can look at newspapers as being honest brokers,” said Wise. “Maybe, that’s giving them too much credit, but they keep people honest.” Armstrong thinks there “would be a huge effect” if the Denver Post closed. Bereft of Denver’s last local daily, Armstrong doesn’t know where various neighborhood associations’ members would turn for coverage on specific issues about land use, zoning, traffic, parking, public works improvements, and historic preservation. In recent months, for example, the Post has tackled developers buying parcels of land with plans to tear down historic sites and the need for the city to create short-term rental policies given the explosion of websites like Airbnb. Such websites have proven popular among entrepreneurial locals, who’ve turned residential neighborhoods into havens for overnight rentals for the pot tourists flying to Colorado legalized marijuana. “The newspaper is publicizing these issues and having local
meetings, and, without the newspaper and the local media, people just wouldn’t know about these things,” said Armstrong.

Newspapers don’t just have credibility because they consistently make people pay attention to local issues. Different swaths of society – Latinos included – are culturally invested in trusting traditional news outlets. “It’s still radio, and TV, and newspapers that matter in my community,” said Julissa Soto of Colorado’s American Diabetes Association branch. “Latinos are still turning to the legacy media, and I think we’ll never change. They’re so close to our culture. We’ll keep watching the soap operas. We still grab newspapers. We take the same habits with us when we come to America.” Denver’s community leaders think there’s something special and powerful from reading information on a page. They think it’s a little easier to trust the news that some one took the time and trouble to physically publish. Ultimately, that trust, that credibility is what kept people reading the Rocky for 150 years. “The Rocky Mountain News certainly didn’t disappear because people thought, ‘Oh, it’s a terrible newspaper, and if I had to choose I’d choose the Post,’” said Andy Farr, who’s president of the University Hill Neighborhood Association. “It wasn’t like the Rocky Mountain News was considered not worthy. It just sort of disappeared, and it was a financial thing.”

**RQ6a: News Consumption Habits**

How, if at all, have community leaders changed their news consumption habits since the Rocky’s closure? Two themes emerged in their answers to various media usage-related interview questions. First, Colorado’s community leaders think the public’s collective body of knowledge has been wounded. When the Rocky was around and the Post’s coverage was far more robust, local leaders and the public were much more likely to be reading the same newspaper stories. Indeed, as recently as 2009, nearly a half million Coloradans used to turn to the same newspaper pages of the Rocky and the Post each morning. Now, however, both this study’s interviewees and
its survey takers report reading the Post slightly less in the Rocky’s absence. And the community leaders interviewed for this study said they now consume the news in a much more targeted way. Rather than flipping through newspaper pages and stumbling upon stories that they wouldn’t have otherwise seen, many local leaders now use technology (e.g. phone apps, social media) to consume only the news that appeals to them. Second, local leaders also said they’re exposed to fewer viewpoints that are different from their own (i.e. they’re more likely to occupy their own echo chambers). That’s partly because Denver no longer has both the right-leaning Rocky and the left-leaning Post – both of which also featured columnists across the ideological spectrum. But the interviewees also said that they occupy their own ideological echo chambers because, as with the news, technology has made easy for them to seek out the views they agree with. As for the specific news outlets that the community leaders use to replace the Rocky, the most popular were the Denver Post (48%, 20), the Denver Business Journal (22%, 9), and the alternative weekly Westword (19%, 8).

Wounded Body of Knowledge

To Andy Farr, reading the Rocky on a weekday was a bit like paging through a Hemingway work. It was full of succinct one-page stories and snappy writing, said the University Hill Neighborhood Association president. Post readers have it harder. Finishing a story on any day of the week often requires jumping deeper into the paper with repeated page flips. That’s not to say the Rocky was always concise. On the weekends, it was richer read full of features and lengthy investigations. At times, Farr felt like he was reading the New Yorker as he delved into the Rocky’s eclectic enterprise pieces – from an examination prison drug abuse to Kevin Vaughan’s 33-part epic about a horrific 1961 traffic accident:

The Rocky’s series “were long and well written and they still had a lot to say even though it wasn’t always the news of the moment. That style of writing is long gone. Occasionally, you find something like that in a documentary, and the Post has some
of it, but reading the Rocky you’d get into a really good article and you’d think, “That’s something that I never would have read about, but I’m glad I did.”

With the Rocky gone and the Post much weaker, today, Farr’s feelings were typical of several interviewees, who think the community’s collective body of knowledge has been weakened. In the past, local newspaper stories used to compel people to convene and converse. But now they point to less incidental learning and fewer common conversations about newspaper stories and editorials due to a lack of local citizens flipping through papers. Meanwhile, the Post’s coverage cuts have compounded matters by giving locals even fewer reasons to read the paper.

Denver’s “newspapers were community builders,” said Rocky Mountain Junior Achievement branch president Robin Wise. “It was like being at a water cooler. You asked people, ‘Did you read this in the Post today? Did you read it in the News today?’ You coalesced around something, and the newspaper was what you coalesced around.” Sure, TV stations, national news outlets, and other media would try to pick up the slack if the Denver Post ever closed, said East High School Principal Andy Mendelsberg. But they don’t unite people like newspapers, which have long gotten community members to think and talk about the same things. “If we lost a medium like the Denver Post, we’d still be connected to the wider world through national media, but we’d not be as connected to Denver because other news media just don’t connect people to their communities like newspapers do,” said Mendelsberg. Wise is sentimental about the days when Denver’s dailies served as daily digests and conversation starters. “It was kind of cool,” said Wise. “It used to be that you learned a little bit more about things going on in the public sector and in the private and social sectors, and the Rocky just brought people together because everyone knew what was going on outside of the obvious business stuff or the city council stuff.” Flipping her way through the paper to find the business section, Wise said she was might halt for headline about a city council meeting or pause if a Jay-
Z item caught her eye. Newspapers were a grab bag of things she didn’t know she cared about.

“Of course, I still read the Post,” she added. “But you can tell they’re running out of ink” with all their content cuts.

Denver Metro Chamber of Commerce president Kelly Brough is struck by the narrowness of the band of local information from which she picks what she sees, hears, and reads. While she might thumb through full copies of one or both of Denver’s dailies in the past, now she only peruses the information that’s pertinent to her profession and her interests. “In the olden days, one of those reporters would catch my eye with something I wouldn’t normally be reading, and I’d be better for it,” said Brough. “When we only have media pushed to us, we become more informed about our specialties and less informed about our whole culture and our society.” People may know who the mayor is, but only a small subset know all the initiatives local leaders are working on, said Denver city councilor Kevin Flynn. “We’ve already suffered from a diminished (interest in the) civic conversation,” he added. “I don’t know if there’s a common base of knowledge in the community anymore.” If that’s true, the reasons why are simple, said other Denver community leaders. While newspapers spent the 20 years between 1995 and 2015 giving people fewer reasons to read their products with every page and staff cut, a slew of slick of websites began curating and aggregating the news. Bloggers blew up the Internet with passionate opinions, compelling commentary, and the occasional news scoop.

New social media sites began offering tools to tailor the news to every need. And apps abound for consumers to customize their journalistic experiences on their digital devices. Urban League of Metro Denver board chairman Wayne Vaden’s phone buzzes with CNN alerts, and he occasionally skims little neighborhood newspapers like the Greater Park Hill News and Front Porch Stapleton. “But I don’t get the Denver Post anymore because it’s just not relevant to me,”
he said. “Most of the stories that are written are incomplete, and there are so many others stories that aren’t in Denver, like a traffic accident in Grand Junction.” And for his law practice, Vaden has plenty of niche publications to check for legal news. “I see more news and it’s more thorough with regard to my specific subjects. In terms of general news, I look less, and I don’t go through the paper and lollygag with all sorts of junk.” Denver Health Foundation board chairman Michael Pollak doesn’t take a newspaper anymore. He uses curated content from his favorite media outlets along with a consolidated news feed featuring national and financial news providers. “I get the Denver Post’s major news alerts on my phone,” Pollak said. Beyond that, “I don’t know that the (print versions of) local, general interest daily newspapers have much relevancy anymore. Today’s news consumers want to know what’s happening now, not in a news story 24 hours later. Very few people would record TV news and go back and watch it.”

Helen Giron-Mushfiq feels similarly. “I remember when you’d go to work, and people would say did you read that story in the newspaper, and right away you were all on the same page, and you knew what they were talking about,” said the La Alma Neighborhood Association president. “Now, first and foremost, I go to Facebook for news.” With their complex algorithms and narrow news streams based on what users and their social circles like, Giron-Mushfiq thinks social media disseminate breaking news better than the legacy media. “I’d rather go to Facebook and find what’s going on in the world because it’s more informative than any of the traditional news outlets,” she said. “I truly believe the news media in this election are trailing social media.”

Visit Denver’s Richard Grant agreed. There’s just no reason to get a paper edition of the Post when you can more efficiently spend your time seeing the stories you want to see online, and the paper’s digital news preempts the print edition anyway. “The Post is just a shadow of what it was, it’s actually better online than in print,” said Grant. “Now, I’d rather give that hour to
Facebook. Depending on who your friends are on Facebook, you can get a tremendous amount of news through their feeds.” Grant has hundreds of travel writer friends, who re-post their articles on Facebook, plus all his favorite travel publications, bars, and breweries regularly post on the site. And he even gets to enjoy the news generated from former Rocky journalists like real estate editor John Rebchook, who still writes about his field for the website denverrealestatewatch.com.

**Entering Echo Chambers**

There are some simple reasons why opinion-driven news offerings are especially prevalent today. For one, it’s cheaper to stick glib guys and gals behind a desk to serve up opinions than to fund a 10-part poverty investigation or to staff a capitol bureau. Plus, people like opinions – a lot – especially when they match their own, said state Senator Morgan Carroll. With the Rocky gone, local leaders like Carroll think that Coloradans are exposed to fewer alternate viewpoints. “A higher percentage of attention and ratings goes to the TV and radio outlets that are more interested in inflaming people, who are already agreeing with them then on actually doing fact checking and research,” said the Aurora Democrat. If the Post closed, “I think the very question of what is and isn’t news would be eroded in a way that’s very detrimental to our community and to citizenship and to thinking and to people.” Over at the chamber of commerce, Kelly Brough also thinks newspaper closures matter, but there’s no quick and easy way to measure the extent to which they affect a community. At a minimum, Brough added, the loss of a newspaper would mean that Denver area residents would have one less source of the information and opinions necessary to be informed, fully involved citizens. Today, with no Rocky, “It’s much easier to find people who have the same crazy views as me,” said Brough. “In the old days, it was much easier for me to see outside views, and maybe it tempered me.”
Changing the world begins with getting people to talk and think about all sorts of topics they might not otherwise have cared about and considered, and that’s what newspapers are good at doing, said Governor Ritter. Print copies in particular promote incidental learning because readers can’t just click on the links to only the stories they want to see. Reading a newspaper, “People have to get out of their echo chambers, rather than just going to the websites that resonate with them most,” said Ritter. “The good thing with a newspaper is that people can still read something that might cause them to think differently on an issue, which is superior to just reading whatever’s most comfortable.” Perhaps, not surprisingly, Colorado Supreme Court Justice Monica Marquez was on the same page as the governor, who appointed her to the state’s high court. Of course, people can visit all sorts of opinionated websites and flick on the TV to see this, that, or the other deliberately biased news show, she said. But newspapers offer all those opinions under one roof, and they carry the paper’s imprimatur – an assurance that editorials have been researched, and they’re rooted in fact. Newspaper closures and staff cuts means fewer educated local opinions across the spectrum, she added. “The news reported when I was a kid is very different from the Fox and MSNBC spectrum,” said Marquez, who’s 47. “When you lose a newspaper you further contribute to that splintering. People go to whatever blog or website reflects their views, and we no longer have that exchange of views because they go to their own echo chambers.”

Denver Health’s board chairman, Michael Pollak, is a case in point. “It’s a natural inclination for you to listen to or go to news providers that are more like you,” Pollak said. “I pick and choose voices that are more consistent with my general point of view.” Metro State University President Stephen Jordan agreed. “Why wouldn’t I want to reinforce my own beliefs?” he asked. Though Jordan still reads the Post, the paper’s politics are different than his,
and he thinks it gives him, and anyone else with different views, fewer reasons to continue reading it every time it bleeds staff. Just as it’s natural for people to seek out news sources that match their beliefs, Cranmer Park-Hilltop Civic Association president Jay McCormick said that it’s equally common for people to assume the worst about their leaders. And he thinks that’s more true than ever in the absence of news and information. When a newspaper closes, “the amount of coverage is a fraction of what it was before,” said McCormick. “We might even get a more polarized electorate on a local basis because, if people don’t have information, it’s a natural human instinct for them to fill the dark hole with their worst possible imaginations.” McCormick knows about journalism and the degradation of its quality over the years. Besides his 17 years living in Denver, he spent four years as a financial editor for USA Today, served as a reporter and the managing editor of Crain’s Chicago Business, and he later opened a Denver-based investment management firm.

It’s easy to find national news and opinions, but losing a local newspaper means it’s far tougher to find coverage of state and local political issues, said McCormick. Colorado’s community leaders think the early mainstream Internet Age expectation that all manner of high-quality, credible websites and blogs would proliferate to create a surfeit of local news and information has gone unrealized. “I haven’t seen anything really step up,” said McCormick. “There’s nothing (that’s a nontraditional news outlet) on the Internet that gives me well-edited local stuff.” Local leaders also think that what passes for informed opinions on the Internet are often shrill, uncivil diatribes with questionable sources. Talk with Coloradans, and they’ll say that high-quality news and opinions aren’t full of empty calories. They’re rich with research and sources, they’re written in a snappy way, and they seek to avoid logical fallacies. By no means do newsmakers think newspapers are perfect. Undoubtedly, all can recall when a newspaper
journalist missed the point, mischaracterized it, was too slanted, or was overly dependent on shoddy evidence like anecdotal sources. But at least major metro dailies are full of trained professionals, who try to get the story straight and they have a lot of practice conveying sound information and opinions, said McCormick.

To write news and opinions for a newspaper is to deal with an editor questioning sources and research materials and pushing for more substantial, better substantiated work, he added. “I miss the vetting and the ability to have confidence in that journalism you find on the Net,” McCormick said. Nancy Barlow trusted the reporting and the editorial writing so much in Denver’s dailies that she consulted both of them to help her make voting decisions. She liked the right-leaning Rocky because it counterbalanced the left-leaning Post, which made the state more purple. Now, the president of both the Cook Park Neighborhood Association and the East Evans Business Association thinks Colorado is more blue because of the Rocky’s disappearance. “In the Rocky, I first turned to editorial pieces and read all the opinions just to compare the views of the writers in the two papers,” said Barlow. “I stopped reading the Post because we don’t have two sides any longer, and I want both sides. I think the community has shifted to the left.” The operative question is: “Does the world really work like that?” Does the reduction of original reportorial journalism at local newspapers and the glut of opinion-driven news that’s filled the void really make people more partisan?

What the existing research has shown is that consuming partisan media isn’t so much what’s made Americans more polarized, though that’s somewhat accurate in select cases (e.g. for those who are already very partisan).² Rather, part of what’s made America more partisan is that Americans don’t do as much incidental learning of political news and opinions. In the ’60s, for example, when Americans had so few media choices for news and entertainment that the
majority watched the evening newscasts on ABC, CBS, and NBC, they were incidentally exposed to political news and information. These days, those who care less (or couldn’t care less) about local politics don’t have to pay attention. They have a million TV shows and movies to watch on cable, satellite, and streaming services, video games to play, and every other digital diversion imaginable to distract them via the Web, mobile devices, and social media. “Now that they can avoid news altogether, they know less about politics and are less likely to participate,” according to communications scholar Matthew Levendusky, author of *How Partisan Media Polarize America*. “So the growth of media choice strengthens the extremes while hollowing out the center, making the electorate more divided.”

Like so many people when they spotted the *Rocky* in a barbershop, a restaurant, or an office, Debbie Harrington, picked up the paper and read news and opinions she wouldn’t have otherwise seen. As often, said the vice president of the University Park Community Council, her incidental learning occurred at home. She got the *Post*. Her husband received the *Rocky*, and each reached for the other’s paper when it was lying around. When there were two Denver newspapers, far more local news stories and editorials were around for everyone to absorb and discuss, said Harrington. Now, however, it’s easy for both the public, particularly Millennials, and the *Post* to become complacent – the former about seeking news and perspectives and the latter about producing them, said Harrington. “It’s a slippery slope when there’s no newspaper,” she added. “I have some hope that the younger generation will say, ‘Gee, I ought to learn more about what’s going on in my community, and a great place where I can go to get that information is a newspaper.’” Similarly, local masonic leader Claude Dutro said having two newspapers meant he was regularly exposed to views he wouldn’t have otherwise seen, “especially in the editorials, you might see a completely different perspective in the one paper than you saw in the
other. When the two papers were different, I definitely thought it was a public service and a valuable public service.”

Having varied media perspectives is especially important because one dominant newspaper can make mistakes, as when the Denver Post initially supported pricey tax subsidies for a hotel project that initially flopped, said Visit Denver’s Richard Grant. With no Rocky around, “now, one paper can side with something and be wildly wrong,” he added. “When there’s one paper there’s just one side of the story.” When a community loses a newspaper, the loss is greater than an extra perspective, said Jordan. Metro State’s leader wonders how many, if any, different choices the public and local leaders might have made differently (e.g. in voting or supporting certain state and municipal initiatives) without the Rocky’s editorial page advocating for various positions. And Jordan thinks local TV news programs just don’t offer editorial opinions like newspapers do, though he has seen the exceedingly rare “editorial comment” on television over the years. “The Post and the Rocky were influential, and that influence came not so much from who was right or wrong, but from how they gave people choices to sort out some position of their own in between the two,” said Jordan. When the Rocky closed, “We lost a voice that broadened our perspective.” To Denver schools’ Landri Taylor, the Rocky’s presence meant “You’d read the stories and actually think about what was going on as opposed to just absorbing it” and forgetting it. “Really good journalists will do that to you – they don’t want you to end reading without thinking about what was going on, and when a journalist can inspire you that’s simply magic.”

RQ7a: Missing the Rocky

Do community leaders miss the Rocky, and, if so, what do they miss? In all, 31 of the 41 community leaders interviewed (or three out of four) said they miss the Rocky. And three main themes became apparent as they discussed the reasons why. First, the interviewees said that the
Rocky’s journalists felt like friends. Despite either not actually knowing the Rocky’s writers and editors, or only knowing them on a limited, professional basis, a number of community leaders felt like they were close friends with the paper’s staff. That contented feeling of intimacy came from community leaders believe that the paper’s journalists genuinely cared about bettering the community and from the interviewees regularly reading the reporters and columnists and getting to know their personalities and positions. Second, a number of the interviewees said they missed the Rocky because it was a treasure trove of influential local opinions and information. Third, a sizable share of the community leaders interviewed, about one in four, didn’t miss the paper. Their responses fall under the thematic category “ain’t no thang” – as in it was no big deal to them that the paper closed. It’s not that they don’t think the Rocky was useful to society. It’s just that they, personally, don’t miss the paper. The operative word in their thinking about the paper is that it “was” useful. To most among this group of interviewees, getting a daily, printed newspaper like the Rocky was a perfunctory act. They did it, they said, because local newspapers were once far more relevant, and there weren’t a lot of other options for news and entertainment. Now, they don’t miss the Rocky because it’s neither a tool nor a diversion that they need any longer in a digital age full of information and entertainment options.

Journalists Felt Like Friends

Ken Salazar can’t forget the faces. He was there in the end, just before the paper closed. He visited the Rocky’s offices for one final interview. “I walked into the headquarters, and saw the sadness in people’s faces, and I felt that same sadness because it was the end of an era that started in 1859 and ended 150 years later,” said Salazar. Salazar and other community leaders said they missed the Rocky because the paper’s staff members felt like friends, even when they didn’t actually know them. The interviewees felt a sense of kinship with the paper’s journalists for a few reasons. The local leaders said they felt close to the reporters and columnists because of
a belief that the journalists were trying to better the world. Plus, the Rocky’s staff members got to know various community leaders, and the personalities of paper’s writers came out in their columns and stories. Salazar’s relationship with the paper went back nearly 25 years to the mid-’80s, when the future U.S. senator and got his start as Governor Roy Romer’s chief legal counsel. “I’d known the people at the editorial board, and they were at the center core of what I considered to be the Colorado community – that’s both the political community and the civic, business community,” he added. “The Rocky Mountain News was an extremely important paper, and it made a huge difference for a century and half. They’re missed very much.” Claude Dutro falls into the latter category. As a long-time leader of Denver’s masonic temple, he met movers and shakers, including journalists. But their work is what made them seem so familiar. “Over the years, I’d come to know those writers and the people who produced the Rocky,” he said. When the paper closed, “it was a little bit like losing friends. If you read it on a regular basis, you got to know them.” Like Salazar, Junior Achievement’s Robin Wise spent years both building relationships with Rocky reporters and enjoying their work.

When the Rocky closed, she and her husband tried the Post regularly. But he stopped getting the paper because he thought its sports section was inferior. The pair agreed they didn’t like local newspaper journalism as much because it was too “one-sided.” And they thought the Post had regressed without the competition. “So, he quit the Denver Post, and it pissed me off because, for a week, I didn’t have my paper, and I said you better call them and re-subscribe,” said Wise. “Yes, I miss the Rocky, and I would very much miss losing the Post even though it’s a brochure.” Mornings used to be predictable for La Alma/Lincoln Park Neighborhood Association president David Griggs. There was the bowl of cereal and the tabloid that fit just right on his table beside it. And he always had good company – at least figuratively speaking.
“There was something very satisfying about reading columns by people, who I felt like I knew, like Mike Littwin, and following and being curious and interested in their thoughts about things,” said Griggs. What, he wondered as he cracked open the paper, did the people he liked and trusted at the Rocky think about “this sports team, this political campaign, this legislation, this construction project?” If the Post were to close, Adam Lerner would feel hurt. “Emotionally it would matter,” said Denver’s Museum of Contemporary Art director, who’s close with Ricardo Baca, the editor of paper’s marijuana news blog, the Cannabist, and the paper’s fine arts critic Ray Mark Rinaldi. “I’m friends with some reporters,” said Lerner, who appreciates them both as people and for their civic contributions.

The Rocky’s reporters didn’t just produce stories, said Roger Armstrong, who leads an umbrella group of neighborhood associations. They went out into the community. They forged relationships. They built reputations. And when the Post hired just 11 of the Rocky’s 228 journalists after the paper closed – five columnists, the paper’s editorial page editor, four reporters, and a Pulitzer-winning photographer – Armstrong said the public paid careful attention. Readers were rooting to see their favorite journalists at Denver’s other daily, and they were sad to see so few switch sides.³ “The community at large mourned the closing,” he said. “You got to know different beat writers, and you knew what they covered. Emotionally, it was hard for Denver to lose the Rocky.” Long-time community members, like school board member Rosemary Rodriguez, remember forming their connections to local newspaper employees very early on. For her family, it started when they greeted the Post delivery man in the afternoons.

“We were a Post family, but in my adult life, I ended up subscribing to the Rocky and the Post because I’d say, ‘You can only get half the story, so you have to read both,’” Rodriguez said. If the Post closed, “I think I would miss it. It’s one of the first things I do every day even though
there’s not a lot of news in it, and I just don’t know where I’d access a lot of that information without the paper.”

**Treasure Trove of Influential Opinions and Information**

The final group of community leaders, who miss the **Rocky**, described it as a treasure trove full of persuasive opinions, high-quality local news, and snappy writing. Most of these interviewees were also enchanted by the tabloid newspaper’s format. They liked its short, bold, playful, personalized headlines, direct leads, clear, uncluttered book-like design (which fit even the smallest of breakfast tables), big colorful, emotional, dramatic Colorado photos; and visual storytelling full of infographics and an array of pictures. And then there were the **Rocky’s** writers. It was both a destination paper and an incubator for staff members, who would go on to work for some of the largest news media outlets in America. Its staff was a diverse and miscellaneous group of educated, opinionated people – a place where columnists were king. Gene Amole, Norm Clark, Tina Griego, Bill Johnson, Dave Krieger, Bernie Lincicome, Mike Litton, Penny Parker and Dusty Saunders all ruled the roost, alongside cartoonists Ed Stein and Drew Litton. And that’s just to name a few in the paper’s final years. That list doesn’t include much-beloved former columnists from decades past like John Coit, Greg Lopez, and Woody Paige. It’s no surprise that interviewee after interviewee said they miss the **Rocky’s** columnists.

That was the point, said **Rocky Mountain News** editor and publisher John Temple in a recent interview. Readers were supposed to feel close to the paper’s columnists, even if they were never actually personally acquainted. And the columnists were supposed to feel like they were carrying on a conversation with readers – one that built loyalty to the writers, the **Rocky**, and the larger community’s best interests. As La Alma/Lincoln Park Neighborhood Association president David Griggs said:
I felt like I knew them. I had this sense that I could sit and have a cup of coffee with them. (The Rocky’s columnists) seemed much friendlier – like there was a much greater receptivity and interest (on their parts), and like it was easier to talk with them. Now, the Post is down to one art and architecture critic, and he controls the dialogue because he has no competition.

What made the Rocky’s columnists so special, besides their entertaining writing, and their down-to-Earth natures, was that they felt like a caring family, who joked with each other and the community and looked out for everyone, Griggs added. Other local leaders said the big personalities of the Rocky’s columnists filled the city and somehow made it smaller, and they kept and shared Denver’s memories. “The columnists were a voice in the community that wrote about interesting things, compelling things, heartbreaking things, wrong things,” said Ken McConnellogue, the University of Colorado’s top communications administrator. “I miss that. We were a better city and state for having those two newspapers. Sadness is kind of the overwhelming emotion thinking about losing that.”

There was no way to match everything Denver’s dailies provided – the columnists, the local news and information, the photos, the ads – for the price they charged, said Inspiration Point Neighborhood Association president Jerry Guida. He remembers paying around $100 a month to get both papers in the not-so-distant days when they were locked in an existential struggle. “A lot of these local writers had great views on what was happening, and they have completely disappeared,” said Guida. “There’s a big hole, and it’s probably never going to be filled. How on earth can you go from something like 400 (Post and Rocky) journalists (in 2009) to fewer than 150 and cover the same amount.” In the absence of news and educated opinions about local issues, wire copy prevails, said Guida. “The Rocky had history in Colorado, it had roots, and it provided more perspective and more voices.” As mentioned, when Denver’s dailies duked it out, the Post leaned to the left, while the Rocky was right of center. But, now, with the Rocky gone, the Post shrunk and pivoted toward conservative views, said Carroll. “I miss it, ”
said Cook Park Neighborhood Association president Nancy Barlow. “Having two different viewpoints made it fun to read a story in the Post, and then to read a story in the Rocky to see how it was positioned differently.” Denise Maes wouldn’t be depressed if the Post closed, but Colorado’s ACLU public policy director would be a bit sad to see it go. Then again, with the Rocky gone, “it’s equally sad because the Denver Post barely has an editorial board anymore,” Maes added. “It would be nice to have a good dialogue with different viewpoints.” That is, literally, what Maes used to do when she’d pitch the Rocky and the Post on the ACLU positions she wanted the paper’s editorial boards to take.

Now, she grouses, that’s a difficult task when Rocky- turned-Post-opinion-editor Vincent Carroll often occupies an island of one in shaping the Post’s positions. The Rocky was a source of instant intimacy for East High School principal Andy Mendelsberg, who misses the paper’s tabloid format, its layout, and the writers he’d come to know and like. Though he now gets the Post on weekends, it’s not the same. “The News had great writers and, personally, I connected more with the News more than the Post,” he said. “I just miss having two newspapers that look at the world a little bit differently.” With its down home style, columnists that buddied up to readers, and a tabloid format seldom seen in a major metro daily west of the Mississippi, “the Rocky Mountain News always felt like the more local paper,” said Josh Hanfling. The Colorado lobbyist and Denver Health board member doesn’t just miss paper. He, and the rest of Denver, mourn former Rocky and Post columnist Penny Parker, who died at age 62 in early 2016. “That was a big loss,” Hanfling said slowly and dolefully. Talk to local leaders and they’ll say that Denver’s dailies didn’t just employ personalities, the papers themselves had them. And while the Post always had its charms, several interviewees said that its newsgathering, presentation, and columnists were always a little more staid, or a bit squarer, than at the Rocky. Ultimately, said
CU’s McConnellogue, the *Rocky’s* closure meant that Denver lost a “pugnacious” pack of “feisty” fighters – its writers. “Frankly,” he added, “they took no shit.”

To former Governor Bill Owens, the paper’s closure has also meant the loss of a well-written publication that had enormous potential to change opinions. Owens should know. Just as radioactive spider bit and transformed Peter Parker, Owens was bit by the newspaper bug. Of course, Spiderman’s biography is fun fiction, far more often told, while Owens real-life rise to Colorado’s governorship (from 1999 to 2007) is unlikely to inspire comics and a lucrative film franchise. Owens’ life-changing moment came at 16, when he first cracked open the *Wall Street Journal*, and its editorial page led him to conservative politics. Inspired by the paper, Owens also would buy 10 shares of former Radio Shack owner Tandy Co., and he reveled in their rise. “A newspaper like the *Wall Street Journal* was really probative for me, and I’ve told this to the *Journal*,” Owens said. “I told them, ‘Your paper hit this kid when I was just interested in stocks and formed me because I was probably pretty malleable.’” Before the *Rocky’s* downfall and the *Post’s* decline, he doesn’t doubt that they too changed people’s views and shaped them as citizens.

Owens was just one of several sources who’ll always think there was a little magic in how the *Rocky*, and how other well-run newspapers in their prime, could engage people and change their beliefs. “Democracy functions with the consent of the governed, with some level of basic knowledge, and with people buying into the system,” said Owens. With the *Rocky* gone and the *Post* substantially smaller, “I believe that system is breaking down today, and I think part of it is that civic awareness is almost nonexistent. We’re all in this together, and papers could have done a better job.” Former Governor Roy Romer misses how the *Rocky* policed the community. He longs for the paper’s feistiness and fight, and he yearns for the days when
Denver was full of newspaper professionals with a strong streak of social responsibility. “The Rocky was more of a street fighter, a young buck, it was always pushing the edge, it was more aggressive, and it was kind of like that younger street fighter pushed the old, established Post,” Romer said. “Newspaper guys have a strong ethic of policing the truth, and there are a whole lot of people in the profession, who aren’t just trying get a paycheck. I miss them the most. We live in a society in which it’s very very hard to find proof that we can understand and then rely on.”

The magic for former Governor Dick Lamm came in the form of the Rocky’s probing journalism, the all-out daily effort of its reporters, and its convenient tabloid format.

As Lamm said somewhat plaintively, “I do miss it. I miss that it always had an edge to it. It was a much better newspaper for investigatory journalism, and I miss it because it was easier to read at my breakfast table.” He had “great loyalty” to the newspaper that helped launch his political career with its coverage of his winter Olympics opposition during the ’70s. “The Rocky tried harder and that made the Denver Post better, but the Post has become just a shrunken newspaper from what it was in glory days,” he added. Like Lamm, other community leaders’ loyalty to the Rocky also lay in their appreciation of how its editorial voice counterbalanced that of the Post. Governor Ritter experienced what it was like to be covered by both papers, and by just one, because his time in office (from 2007 to 2011) overlapped with the Rocky’s closure. For the most part, he thinks that the newspapers’ criticism made community leaders better. But Ritter said that government leaders, nowadays, find it far harder to counter the views of just one dominant paper. “I missed the Rocky a lot, and I still do,” Ritter said. “When I was governor, the Denver Post really took a hard tack on me – like they said ‘let’s just unleash reporters on this guy. (Former Post editor) Greg Moore would say, ‘No that didn’t happen, and (former Post
owner) Dean Singleton would say, ‘No.’ But when the Rocky took shots at me, and when it had differences with me, it always felt like they were far more objective.”

Another big draw for the Rocky was its columnists, including the likes of Woody Paige. During his time at the Rocky, he went from a cub columnist to a star sports critic. Paige, who came to the Rocky in 1974, and jumped to the Post in ’81, where he still resides, has also served as one of ESPN’s drollest, most trenchant commentators since the early 2000s. Metro State University President Stephen Jordan was one of those enchanted Rocky readers, who turned to the paper for its columnist, its sports coverage, its convenient format, and the overall quality of its writing. “It’s one thing to say that reporters are there to report the facts, but the way they report the facts creates an interest in them,” said Jordan. At the Rocky, “They’re take on things just resonated with me.” Denver school board member Landri Taylor loved flipping the Rocky’s pages because he never had to deal with a fold in the middle of the paper. Between its format and its writers, the Rocky made Taylor want to turn every page to find out what would come next. “The Rocky had a way of just inspiring you to open it up, and read it from beginning to end,” said Taylor. “It was not just the format, the stories inside the paper were written so well. It was journalists at the top of their game. I do miss that.” Just go back and look at the collection of talent the paper employed, Taylor added. If their current positions are any measure, they weren’t just compelling writers, they were subject matter experts. Taylor fondly recalled reading the work of Rocky education reporter Brian Weber is a charter school principal in Fort Collins; city hall reporter Kevin Flynn is a Denver city councilman; and political reporter Lynn Bartels works in communications for Colorado’s Secretary of State, and those are just a few examples.

It’s bad enough that the Rocky closed, but if the Post disappeared, “I’d desperately miss it.” Denver Health board member and local lobbyist Josh Hanfling also would miss the Post if it
closed. And he still longs for its rival seven years after the fact. “I miss the Rocky,” he said. “I miss engaging my brain first thing in the morning and waking up with it. And I think I would miss a world without a local paper.” Even today, whenever he overhears something, he visits the Post’s website because he expects the paper to be among the first, and the most credible, sources of local information. “So, it’s hard to imagine a world without a daily paper, even if the daily paper is on the Internet.” His fellow Denver Health board member, Kathleen McCall-Thompson, wasn’t even a Rocky reader. But she misses having an extra 228 professional newspaper journalists blanketing the community with coverage and adding their own spin on things. “Even though I find the Post to be hit and miss, and I find it to not be as relevant as I’d like it to be, I’d still miss it,” she said. “It’s the only daily paper in the area that we have now.” McCall-Thompson, who’s 57, said she’s of the generation that wants tangible records, and newspapers provide a book-like experience – pages to turn, and printed text to peruse. She joked that it just wouldn’t be the same to hang computer screen on the fridge to showcase an article about her children’s prep sports achievements.

Colorado Supreme Court Justice Monica Marquez is 10 years McCall-Thompson’s junior, but they couldn’t agree more. She too preferred the Post. But she could appreciate the size, shape, look, and feel of the Rocky – a paper with opinions as colorful as its photos. “What I miss is competing viewpoints because of that sort of left-leaning/right-leaning perspective that (the Post and the Rocky’s) op-eds took on whatever the issues were, and now there’s been a real loss because one side of the equation was taken away,” Marquez said. “I’d absolutely miss the Post if it closed. I like books. I like the tangible. I like to hold the newspaper and feel it and read it. I like to crawl through stacks in a library.” Angela Cortez would also miss feeling an actual paper in her hands.
Yet, what she really misses most about the *Rocky* was the quality of its writing, and how its reporters pushed the *Post* to reach more people, to get more sides, and to cover more stories. “You hear about things going on, today, and you think, “Wow, that would be a great story, but no one’s covering that because there’s no one to do it, and you worry about government oversight when that watchdog isn’t there,” said the former *Post* reporter, who now serves as Colorado’s AARP communications director. Things come and go in an industrial society, she added, and it would be sad to see the *Post* go. But she thinks she’s not the only one “with a warm spot in my heart for print journalism and holding an actual newspaper.” Denver Metro Chamber of Commerce president Kelly Brough is right there with her. Yes, she misses the *Rocky*, but it’s not just the paper she misses. She misses its history as both the longest continuously run business in Denver (from 1859 to 2009) and the second oldest business in the state. And she yearns for the days when it was more economically viable to create a colorful compendium of the region’s daily happenings. Just 10 years ago, before newspaper ad dollars began nose-diving, papers still played such a vital role in connecting buyers to sellers that ads funded sections full of opinions and much of the local news of the day. When the *Rocky* closed, “it was a very sad, emotional day for everyone because it really signified more than a business going under,” said Brough. “For some, that day represented no longer having competitive reporting. For others, there was the recognition that newspaper enterprises were not going to be funded as well in the past. It was the beginning of a new reporting model.”

**Ain’t No Thang**

About one in four community leaders said that it “ain’t no thang” that the *Rocky* isn’t around anymore. That’s not to say that they disliked the paper. Most had at least a few nice things to say about it. It’s just that its closure has hardly affected them personally. These local leaders either didn’t miss the paper after it closed or they missed it a little, and they quickly got
over it. They think there are plenty of news sources to replace the Rocky. And, even when the paper was around, some only read it because there were far fewer options for news and entertainment in the past – particularly before the explosion of choices in the 2000s. Other interviewees weren’t especially devoted to, or enamored with, the Rocky, they just followed local news reports for their jobs. A final group of local leaders hardly ever read the Rocky. That’s the category Denver Health’s board chairman Michael Pollak falls into. “You don’t miss something you don’t use,” said Pollak, who also doesn’t subscribe to the Denver Post, and who wouldn’t be sad to see it go. Though he does get the Post’s news alerts on his cell phone, he only reads the occasional story if there’s serious, major local news. Pollak represents those Denver area residents for whom a local newspaper isn’t relevant and essential. “Newspaper publishing is more and more of a niche business and not so much a valued source of local information” for everyone, said Pollak, who might just be right.

As discussed, a typical American household in 1930 received 1.3 newspapers per day – meaning that some households read more than one paper – compared with .37 per home as of 2010. As was also mentioned, the newspaper economist Robert Picard thinks modern newspaper readership levels will eventually fall to, and stabilize at, between 25 and 33% of all American adults. “I don’t think the local papers in the ‘B’ and ‘C’ markets have the resources to provide the level of editorial content, or the in-depth research or investigative reporting, that really is enough to capture my attention,” said Pollak. “More and more, they’re regurgitating syndicated information or what they’re covering locally I don’t find to have that much depth.” Wayne Vaden isn’t particularly attached to the Post. The Urban League of Metro Denver’s board chairman initially missed the Rocky because he loved its colorful, compact tabloid format, and reading it was his morning habit, but he’s over it now. “I wish that the Post closed and the Rocky
stayed open because I probably would have hung with the paper a little longer,” said Vaden. “The Post is a monster. I never got the Post. Not only do I not like the way it’s formatted, but there’s nothing in there anymore to read.”

For Seventh Avenue Neighborhood Association president Svein Reichborn-Kjennerud, the Rocky was always a curiosity, but never a necessity. He paid attention to it because it was hard to ignore – what with its big bold headlines and its ability to hype, and blanket, any story it deemed consequential. Since moving to the city in 1971, Reichborn-Kjennerud, a mortgage banker, who owns rental properties on the side, read both of Denver’s dailies. But he’s quick to point out that, for much of the 38 years between his arrival in Colorado and the Rocky’s 2009 closure, there were far fewer news and information choices than there are nowadays. Now, for movie reviews, he uses flixster.com. EaterDenver.com fills him in the city’s restaurants. The Broncos news he needs abounds on the Web. Craigslist has replaced the Post when he needs to create real estate listings, and he turns to Facebook when he needs to read up on potential clients or check out news and information about his industry. The former has become his go-to tool to advertise the rentals, and the latter helps him find specialized real estate and banking news, while connecting him with professional contacts. Plus, Reichborn-Kjennerud still believes some of the city’s old media is useful – be it NBC’s Channel 9 news affiliate, the Denver Business Journal’s email roundups, the occasional Westword story, or his subscription to the slender Post. “All of these sources are nice, that’s why it’s hard to miss something like the Rocky Mountain News because it’s value was more on the entertainment side,” he said. “It was a sensationalist paper. I’m not saying that’s bad, but that’s what it was.”

Reichborn-Kjennerud was among the interviewees, who said it’s hard to miss newspapers when other news outlets do such a good job fulfilling so many of the print media’s traditional
roles. Lately, he’s been thinking of canceling his Denver Post subscription because he doesn’t feel like he gets much value out of it. “It’s not because of money, though they did just raise their subscription price by 50%,” said Reichborn-Kjennerud. “It’s that the Denver Post has less and less of a reason to be around.” Even when Denver’s dailies thrived, the Reverend Larry Grimm wondered whether both really needed to be around. “We had quite a bit of redundancy with the papers,” said the retired Presbyterian minister, who led a flock in Denver. “I suspect the Rocky is not missed as much because of that redundancy.” Like Pollak, Grimm is more interested in national news sources anyway, and he doesn’t feel like he needs the Post online, or in print, for that matter. “Personally, I gave up newspapers because I didn’t want to use up the trees,” Grimm added. Former Denver Mayor Wellington Webb only misses the Rocky’s prep sports coverage and a handy tabloid format that let him flip quickly between the political and the sports pages.

If the Post closed, he’d most miss its high school sports news and its movie reviews. But he’d adapt fast by spending more time reading national and international news elsewhere. Webb pointed out that newspapers have even lost many of their obituaries – one of their biggest, most reliable draws, especially for those over the age of 50 – because of the pricey rates papers charge for them. As papers print fewer obituaries, “Now, older folks don’t even have to look at or read the newspaper,” Webb said. Funeral homes haven’t helped matters. They tout how cheaply and easily they can publish obituaries on their websites and on Facebook, while friends and relatives of the deceased often create their own online memorials. Rob Klugman is among the innumerable Coloradans, who don’t miss the Rocky for a whole other reason. Some simply prefer the Post and its broadsheet format. Indeed, the retired Coors beer executive, who’s been a community leader by serving on numerous local nonprofits’ boards, grew up in a broadsheet-
reading family. And he’s read the Post since moving to Denver in 1979. If it disappeared, he
doesn’t know where he’d find the same granular level of local news.

Yet, he’s not so sure the closure of Denver’s last daily would matter to most of the city’s
residents. “People like me would miss it,” the 68-year-old said of his senior status. “But
demographically you’ve got an awful lot of young people, who do not read any sort of
newspaper, and they rely a lot on the Web, and I don’t think they would (miss the Post). Twenty
years from now, I very much doubt there will be a daily paper here of any sort of magnitude.”
For years, Klugman’s opposite was Jay McCormick. Not only did the Cranmer Park-Hilltop
Civic Association president prefer the Rocky, he grew attached to it, and he missed it after its
demise. He looked forward to hunting down the paper, every morning, no matter where it had
been tossed. He thought of the Rocky as a respectable tabloid, “spunkier, and somewhat more
irreverent, but not in a trashy way,” like the Sun Times in Chicago. Denver’s tabloid was “edgy
like the Detroit Free Press,” while the Post seemed “a little more country club like the Detroit
News.” Now, however, McCormick is over it. Like Klugman, he doesn’t miss the Rocky. “When
it closed, I was like, ‘Crap!’ I didn’t hate the Post, but I liked the Rocky and it was just gone,”
said McCormick. “Now, it’s been a long time,” and the feeling has waned.

**RQ8a: Uses and Gratifications**

What, if any, uses do community leaders think the Rocky served in their lives, and how, if
at all, did they derive gratification from reading the paper? Rare is the journalism research from
the 1940s that’s still accurate and appropriate to understand newspapers, nowadays, but that’s
Bernard Berelson’s study, “What ‘Missing the Newspaper’ Means.” But more than 70 years
later, this study joined the many that have since mirrored his findings. As discussed, Berelson
used a June/July 1945 newspaper delivery workers’ strike to learn whether New Yorkers felt like
they were personally affected by the disappearance of their dailies. And they were. His
interviewees said newspapers fulfilled five main uses and gratifications, and Berelson himself came up with sixth supplementary reason that people use newspapers. He concluded that newspapers:

- supplied “information about and interpretation of public affairs” in that they were serious sources of news, analysis, and opinions about matters of importance to the state and their communities.
- served as a “a tool for daily living” in that they supplied information to help them make all sorts of everyday decisions.
- provided “a respite” (i.e. a breather or an escape) by distracting readers from thinking about their immediate worlds
- enhanced their “social prestige” because the papers offered information and educated opinions about matters of the day that could be brought up in conversations with others.
- facilitated “social contact” in that readers felt more connected to their community and its members by reading what columnists and reporters had to say about the area.
- satisfied their “ritualistic” (i.e. habitual) daily news consumption needs, while comforting them by creating an orderly, unified summary of a chaotic, confusing world

Twenty-five years after the 1948 publication of Berelson’s study, three media researchers used those reasons for why people said they needed newspapers to create a general theory for how and why people consume all news media. Introduced by Elihu Katz, Jay Blumler and Michael Gurevitch in 1973, the theory of “uses and gratifications” is based on the idea that people use the media to fulfill four needs. Although those needs – diversion, personal relationships, personal identity, and surveillance – are very similar to ones in Berelson’s study, their new application to all media would have a significant effect on the field of mass communications.

The theory of media uses and gratifications shifted communications scholars toward studying “what people do with media” rather than “what the media does to people.” In other words, until the early ’70s, many mass communications researchers had viewed audiences as passive recipients of media messages, and a number of studies had focused on how the media
influence people. But the uses and gratifications theory asserts that people are individuals, who fulfill their personal media consumption needs by actively choosing among competing news outlets, not just members of a massive, passive public that’s persuaded to do whatever powerful media companies tell them. Today, Colorado’s community leaders are, indeed, active media consumers. And to a remarkable degree, reading the Rocky met the same uses and gratifications for them as for those New Yorkers listed in Berelson’s classic study.

**Information About, and Interpretation of, Public Affairs**

In all, 14 interviewees said the Rocky was a source of information about, and interpretation of, hyperlocal public affairs that they just couldn’t easily find elsewhere. Thus, a core of interviewees said the loss of their local newspaper means that Denver is without a distinct source of local facts, figures, updates, and analysis about both the major issues and the minutiae of their city. That information and interpretation came in the form of straight news from reporters and opinions and analysis from columnists and editorial writers. And it’s been greatly reduced in all beats – from politics to sports. For Debbie Harrington, who’s vice president of the University Park Community Council, the Rocky was a source of neighborhood information that she just couldn’t get anywhere. What five-story building was being erected behind her home? What letters to the editor had neighbors written about all the growth in the community? How did the Rocky’s reporters and columnists, who had intently chronicled the Broncos’ decisions for decades, feel about their latest roster move? All that hyperlocal information was right there for the taking when the Rocky was around.

As Robin Wise, president of Junior Achievement-Rocky Mountain, put it, “I want to know something beyond just what I already know. Whether it’s business news or the sports section, the paper was a source of (very local) information that you just wouldn’t have a good way curate (and find) by yourself.” For coverage of the biggest stories that are permeating
society, like the protests over the “Black Lives Matter” movement, the Rocky’s disappearance hasn’t caused an “appreciable loss,” said former governor Dick Lamm. “But in a number of other areas that we really counted on the media to be a watchdog on the subtle stories – (like) … when the state was wasting money on the Medicaid program – they just don’t have the resources to cover them.” Local masonic leader Claude Dutro’s “main focus for reading the Rocky was to see if there were any local events that he hadn’t heard about because I could count on that (paper) for being a more complete source than 30 seconds of TV or radio coverage.” With the Rocky gone, the local media still do an adequate job of handling the biggest and “most immediate notifications, which are their main function,” he added. “But at the same time we’ve lost a lot of the in-depth local reporting because they just can’t do both.”

**A Tool for Daily Living**

Which water bottle prevents plastic from leaking into a drink? What station wagon performed the best in crash test ratings? How many campaign promises has the mayor kept since being elected? What’s the top-rated high school in the region? Those are the types of questions newspapers are supposed to answer to help people live better lives – whether they’re voting, making purchasing decisions, or choosing a school for their children. Roughly a third of this study’s interviewees said that the Rocky’s loss has deprived them of a tool to help them live their lives. Most local leaders said that the main way they used the Rocky was as a tool to help them govern. “When you’re in political office there are constituents you have to take care of, and … the press is just crucial in terms of telling you how the community views your institution and what you’re doing,” said former Governor Roy Romer. Throughout Rosemary Rodriguez’s long public service career, including stints as Denver’s clerk and recorder, a city council member, and now as a school board member, the Rocky was essential. “Working in city government you lived and died on it,” she said. “You needed it to know what was going on because everyone was
talking about it.” Rodriguez recalled running into former Denver mayor Federico Peña during his
stint, from 1993 to 1997, as President Bill Clinton’s Secretary of Transportation. “And I said,
‘What do you miss about Denver?’ And he said ‘I don’t miss opening the paper and seeing
myself in it every day,’” she said. “That was their shtick. They covered the city every day” in
ways that made community leaders pay attention.

Every day, Colorado Supreme Court Justice Monica Marquez still wakes up at 5 a.m. to
read the Denver Post, though her Rocky reading session is no longer part of the agenda. Reading
Denver’s dailies has always been one of the easiest ways for her to anticipate whatever’s coming
down the pike. It’s a habit she began years ago as a deputy attorney general for a state division
that represents the legal interests of sixteen executive branch state agencies and five statewide
elected public officials. Nearly everything she needed to know about what was happening in
local legal circles could be conveniently found between the covers of the Rocky and the Post –
the lawsuits filed against state departments, the new bills that changed trial court practices, the
amended statutes related to pending cases, the controversies over voting matters, and the
emergency appeals from defendants and prosecutors (just to name a few). Denver Metro
Chamber of Commerce president Kelly Brough can relate. Before heading up the chamber, she
served as then-Denver Mayor John Hickenlooper’s chief of staff. “As chief of staff, it was
imperative that I knew what the news was that day because everything I was going to do
stemmed from what everyone had just read about,” said Brough. The Rocky and the Post helped
“in almost every aspect of understanding what was going on, even if it was just something like
knowing what conventions were in town.”

A Respite

For David Griggs, it was the Rocky’s columnists that made his day. They were “friendly,
engaging, opinionated, colorful, accessible, down-to-earth, easy to read, and perfect for the
format,” said the La Alma/Lincoln Park Neighborhood Association. For other community leaders, it was Rocky’s sports pages, its photos, and its comics. For so many Rocky readers, the paper was a form of relaxation, a momentary escape from the mundane moments of an ordinary day, and a means of transit to parts unknown. An adventure into the marvelous minds of Rocky columnists like Mike Littwin and Gene Amole was no more than a page-turn away. “It was so easy to read,” said Griggs. “I could flip right over to a certain column I was interested in, and I could go right to the sports page or a comic. There was no searching.” The Rocky’s human interest pieces were their own “satisfying” sort of therapy, said Justice Marquez, but less local newspaper coverage has meant fewer feel-good stories. “I spend my day hearing about all the horrible things humans are doing to each other, and it was nice to come home and read some things that were uplifting.”

Not knowing what you were going to learn when you cracked open the Rocky’s weekend edition was half the fun, said Metro State’s Stephen Jordan. Often, he’d discover topics he didn’t even know he cared about or unexpected stories that pertained to the field of education. “I loved to sit down with it, and all the additional inserts, and I’d find a lot to stories that may not have been about my university, but they had some important implications for it.” Sunday, he added, was his time to slow down and savor his discoveries. Governor Hickenlooper was equally immersed in the Rocky’s weekend edition, which was simultaneously stimulating and calming. “Obviously, a lot of young kids have never grown up turning newspaper pages, but I find it so relaxing,” said Hickenlooper. To hear him recall the variety of sections he read in the paper, and how he turned between them, is to be reminded of a restaurant patron wistfully recounting each of the dumpling dishes he was served at a dim sum restaurant. Though he grew up in a
broadsheet-reading family that subscribed to the Philadelphia Inquirer, and he still prefers the format, the Rocky captured his heart:

The Rocky “just had such great local reporting, and I’d always go to local stuff first or sometimes go I’d straight to the columnists, and they always had a killer sports section. I’d read the front few pages, and then go right to the sports pages, then I’d read all of their great columnists. Sometimes, they went over the top, but they were not a newspaper staff to shy away from offering their own explanations.

Denver’s tabloid didn’t just preserve memories, its memorable enjoyable experiences, too. “I loved when they put just one picture on the whole front page – when the Rockies went to the World Series or when the Broncos won the Super Bowl,” Hickenlooper added.

**Increasing Social Prestige and Fostering Social Contact**

Community leaders touched on two more ways that reading the Rocky was useful and satisfying. First, the paper had great conversational value in that it allowed its readers to look good in front of each other because they could offer educated comments on, and interpretations of, the news of the day. When the city had two papers, reading Denver’s dailies was a way to say something worth saying beyond just having something to say. “I just wanted to know what was going on around town,” said Cranmer Park- Hilltop Civic Association president Jay McCormick. “I talk to people a lot, and I don’t want to come off like a village idiot not knowing about important things.” Plus, keeping up with news of local affairs fostered engagement among community members – be they friends, family, neighbors, colleagues, or constituents – because they could draw on a network of shared information. McCormick himself fondly recalled bonding with his son over the Denver Post. The pair love to talk about what they read the paper, especially the police blotter, which they scan so that they can give their own “Darwin Awards” for the most astounding misapplications of judgment. Ledy Garcia-Eckstein, a senior policy analyst in Denver’s Office of Economic Development, “loved just touching the paper” because,
within a few page turns and coffee swigs, she had a good sense of what was happening in the community.

As she put it, “I loved knowing what’s going on, and it was funny because a lot of the time people would think that I’m smart, but I’d joke that ‘I’m not smart. I just read the Rocky every day, so I know what’s in it.’” Interviewees like Garcia-Eckstein also talked about how the paper’s local content fostered what Berelson called “social contact” or “a basis of common experience” that made everyone feel like they were part of the same community. What Berelson called “social contact” the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation dubbed “public engagement.” Just as the Rocky was closing in 2009, the foundation’s blue ribbon panel of journalism experts was recommending that newspapers get better at promoting public engagement as a way to help remain successful and relevant. As the Knight Commission on the Information Needs of Communities in a Democracy concluded:

No one is expert in everything, but everyone is informed about some things, including their own experience. The public’s diversity of information and perspective can contribute mightily to a community’s sense of shared identity and collective knowledge. When people engage across group lines, they share the diverse levels of information that all citizens possess. They inevitably strengthen a community’s capacity for problem solving.6

As the Reverend Larry Grimm, a retired Presbyterian clergyman, said, “People who were in power positions felt like they were part of the community when they read the Rocky Mountain News.” Indeed, several community leaders gave examples of how the paper made them feel more connected to their community and those in it. At age 75 and nearly 15 years removed from the Denver mayor’s office, it would be easy for Wellington Webb to pay less attention to the community. But, as was the case when the Rocky was around, unique local coverage like prep sports – be it of volleyball, basketball, or hockey – has helped keep him engaged.
For the school board’s Rosemary Rodriguez, the Rocky’s columnists did the trick – Greg Lopez, Page Six, and Gene Amole, though he was always grumpy, and whatever dirt reporter Charlie Brennan had tracked into the paper. For Claude Dutro, over at the masonic temple, it was the “much more local” style of the Rocky that made him want to read it and talk about with his friends and neighbors. Dutro described the Post as more like a voice from on high, while the Rocky was more like a trustworthy neighbor poking a head over the fence to pass along news. “The Post had more of a ‘big town’ writing style, while the Rocky was just more neighborly or friendly.” Denver’s Contemporary Art Museum director, Adam Lerner, said he pays more attention to the Post’s reporting partly because of the personal relationships he’s forged with the paper’s staff members. He wants to know what his friends down at the Post are writing about. Similarly, East High School principal Andy Mendelsberg feels the most connected to the community when he uses the Post rather than other local news outlets. “We’re still connected to the world through the newspaper in ways that we’re not through other media, which connect us to Denver news but not each other,” said East High School principal Andy Mendelsberg.

Former Governor Roy Romer offered a reason why local leaders felt more connected to the local community when they read the Rocky’s distinct local content – from its human interest stories, to its columnists, and business news. They’re not calling sources to swoop in and out for what’ll become a 30-second stand-up interview in front of a store. Day after day, newspaper reporters are out in the streets, pounding their shoe leather, making phone calls, and regularly covering the unglamorous stuff like school board meetings and high school baseball games. “The other media have a good work ethic and history, but they didn’t live and die on (local content) like the print press did,” Romer said. “I miss the institution of good newspapers and good writers. Journalism is just a very critical ingredient of a good community.” To the read the Rocky
each day, to know what was going on so well that you could talk about it, was to feel personally connected to community. All the daily beat coverage, the human interest stories, the columns, and the sports pieces created a basis of common experience, said La Alma Neighborhood Association Helen Giron-Mushfiq. The *Rocky* “gave me a sense of belonging – a sense of community because the newspaper was there every morning,” she added. “So, I could just go out the door and pick it up and see what was going on in the community, who was selling what, and what others were saying.”

**Habits and Rituals**

Rob Klugman has been reading the *Post* for so long he doesn’t even remember quite why he still reads it. “I assume I read it because there’s stuff in there that I guess I feel I want to know about,” said the retired Coors beer executive, who’s serves on a number of local nonprofit organizations’ boards. At this point, “I’m just used to doing it. It’s a habit. I always have.” Talk to Colorado’s community leaders about why they read Denver’s dailies and there’s one final reason that will pop up again and again. It was their custom and, at a certain point, a compulsion, and they needed to read one or both of the papers as a sort of ritual comfort. Several said that it’s bad enough that the *Rocky* is gone, but they’d be adrift if they didn’t at least have the *Post*. If the *Post* disappeared, “It would impact me tremendously because when the paper is not there when we get up in the morning we literally almost go into tremors,” said Debbie Harrington, who dispatches her husband to a nearby 7-11 convenience store if the paper doesn’t come first thing in the morning. “It’s such a part of our daily routine and we’ve been there so long.”

In the *Rocky*’s absence, Harrington, who helps run her local neighborhood association, the University Park Community Council, is hardly the only one who’d have that reaction if she didn’t at least receive the *Post*. If Denver’s last daily disappeared, “I would miss it so,” said school board member Rosemary Rodriguez. “It’s one of the first things I do every day, even
though there’s not a lot of news in it. It’s a source of local information, and I just don’t know where I’d find it if I didn’t have access to the paper.”

Capitol Hill United Neighborhoods Director Roger Armstrong called the newspaper an “addiction,” and Metro State’s president, Stephen Jordan, said simply holding the Rocky’s was a comfort. “I still miss it,” he added. “I liked the Rocky’s format, and how it opened. I enjoyed sitting there and reading the Rocky. I actually liked just having the paper in my hand and turning the pages.” Giron-Mushfiq still smiles and feels soothed just “remembering getting the Rocky, sitting in my chair and reading it with a cup coffee.” Yet, reading the Rocky wasn’t simply about scratching a solitary itch for information, said Josh Hanfling, a Denver Health board member, who runs a local lobbying firm. Sure, newspaper reading was “a routine” and a time filler, he said. And when he splayed it out on his breakfast table, it helped him find things to do and informed his work in Colorado’s capitol. But he also craved the social contact that was discussed earlier, and the Rocky made him feel connected to the community. “Even if you’re not going to do something, it’s important just to know what’s going on in the community,” he added. “So, many people are stuck in their own worlds and they don’t pay any attention to their surroundings and a community and it drives me nuts.”

Notes


Besides interviews with community leaders, 223 ordinary Coloradans also took online surveys, March and April of 2016, regarding whether they miss the Rocky Mountain News and if they think its closure has affected the community. More specifically, as with the interviewees, the survey’s goal was to get the respondents’ feedback regarding the purposes and social mission of the Rocky; whether it gave them the information they needed to participate in the community; how, if at all, its closure affected the community; the degree to which they thought the paper was replaceable, if they felt emotionally connected to the Rocky; and the roles they thought the paper played in their lives. Under the supervision of Qualtrics, which acted as a panel aggregator, three market research firms (Tap Research, SSI, and Clear Voice Research) assembled the sample of survey participants. Those three market research firms sent a whopping 13,295 survey invitations to adults, who were thought to live in Colorado based on the past information they’d provided to the companies (i.e. 641 survey invitations by Tap Research, 7,640 by SSI, and 5,014 by Clear Voice Research). In all, 1,601 of the 13,295 people who received surveys actually attempted to answer the questionnaire (i.e. a 12% response rate), and two completion rates are worth noting. Overall, 305 of those 1,601 survey recipients actually finished it (19%), but the real number of valid, finished surveys totaled 223 (i.e. for a true completion rate of 14%).

**RQ1b: Purposes and Social Mission**

How, if at all, do local residents think the Rocky was carrying on a public service mission? The process of answering that question began with a total of hose total 1,601 people, who attempted to take this study’s online survey. Out of that total, 305 surveys were completed, which means there were 1,296 terminates (i.e. those who started the survey but didn’t finish or were knocked out by the survey’s screening questions). In a moment, an explanation will be
provided regarding how those 305 surveys were narrowed down to 223. But, for now, it’s worth
noting why 1,296 survey takers were disqualified. Out of that total, 305 didn’t have a computer
IP address that could be traced to a Colorado location and 47 refused to agree to the survey’s
consent agreement. Additionally, research participants had to meet the following minimum
criteria within the survey’s screening questions to avoid being disqualified. They had to
continuously live in Colorado for at least six months before and after the Rocky closed on
February 27, 2009, and they had to still be Colorado residents (214 disqualified). They had to
follow local news at least a little (28 disqualified). They had to have read at least one Rocky
issue, and they had to have at least rarely read the paper—even if they only looked at it once a
month (188 disqualified). Further, the survey sought to poll people who were adults before and
after the paper closed. So, valid survey takers had to be at least 18 years old as of August 27,
2008, which was six months before the Rocky’s demise (100 disqualified). Survey completion
times were also used as a quality control measure. The average research participant needed
between 20 and 30 minutes to finish the survey, though some took longer or shorter amounts of
time depending, mainly, on how long respondents spent on the survey’s open-ended essay
questions.

Plus, the minimum completion time was 15 minutes. So, those who took radically less
time finishing the survey than the minimum completion time that was established by a group of
pilot testers during a three-week soft launch phase also were booted from the survey (5
disqualified). Finally, 130 among the 1,296 terminates simply abandoned the survey—more than
likely because it couldn’t be taken in a rush, and it required a significant time commitment of at
least 15 to 20 minutes. Among the 305 people who made it through all the screening criteria and
finished the survey, 82 completed surveys were removed. These surveys were excluded by the
researcher for various quality control reasons such as straight-lining (e.g. when respondents rushed through a survey by clicking the same response every time). Those disqualified surveys were the product of a lengthy, careful quality control review, and a few key criteria were used to disqualify them. One was the responses to open-ended questions, which played a big role in the process of screening out fake surveys. Overall, the survey contained 72 questions, though not all of those were thought-provoking. Many were quickly and easily completed demographic inquiries about things like the survey takers’ age and income. The researcher didn’t disqualify survey takers if they merely provided succinct answers to open-ended questions. Some were simply men and women of few words.

Yet, there were a few ways to readily knock surveys out based on certain types of research participants. Disqualified survey takers included those who met three categories. One group typed gibberish or nonsense answers (e.g. “shut up and give me money,” and “poop”). Another set of survey takers answered in a semi-clever way, wherein they wrote responses that almost made sense. But, upon closer inspection, their answers either didn’t quite fit the questions or they were overly vague or broad. For example, to the question “In what ways did the Rocky Mountain News seek to serve the public beyond maximizing profits?” one disqualified research participant wrote “Put papers in more locations,” while another answered “all the news.” The third group of disqualified respondents’ complete surveys contained far too many blank essays. It’s likely that some deduced they could dodge many of the open-ended essay questions by stating that they had no opinion in the questions that preceded them. Once again, the aforementioned quality control criteria led to a final total of 223 valid, completed, authentic surveys by Coloradans. That total included 93 from Tap Research plus 49 exclusions; 100 from SSI plus 27 exclusions; and 30 from Clear Voice Research along with 6 exclusions. And the
monetary payouts that survey takers received to complete the questionnaire ranged from 50 cents to a $1 (i.e. 50 cents from Tap Research, 75 cents from SSI, and $1 from Clear Voice Research).

**Demographics and Media Usage**

A total of 11 demographical and media usage questions were asked. The questions covered the number of years that survey takers had lived in Colorado, along with their counties of residence, news consumption habits, genders, races, education levels, ages, incomes, frequency of reading the *Rocky*, and whether, and how long, they had been subscribers. The average survey taker had lived in Colorado for 32 years, while the median total was 30 years, and the range was between 5 and 70 years. Fortuitously, the counties where the most research participants lived matched where the *Rocky* drew most of its readers. In the late ’90s, 90% of the paper’s readers came from six counties in the Denver Metro Area (Adams, Arapahoe, Boulder, Denver, Douglas, and Jefferson) plus the area that’s now Broomfield County, which became a county in 2001. In all, 91% (203) of this study’s survey takers came from the seven counties in the *Rocky’s* primary circulation area. And 9% (20) lived in Colorado’s other 57 counties. In terms of gender, 65% (145) were female and 35% (78) were male (See Table 12-1). The average survey taker was age 47, the median age was 46. Additionally, the survey participants’ ages ranged between 25- and 85-years-old, including 10% (22) from ages 25 to 39, 36% (80) between 30 and 44, 29% (65) from 45 to 59, 23% (51) from 60 to 74, plus 1% (2) who were older than 74. The U.S. Census Bureau’s race questions were used to record the racial composition of the sample. So, race questions were asked in two ways. The first question asked simply whether individuals were “at least partially Hispanic” to which 88% (196) said “No” and 12% (27) said “Yes.” Overall, 86% (191) were white, 4% identified as black (9), another 4% were American Indian and/or Alaska Natives (8), 3% (7) were Asian, and 10% (23) were Hispanic or Latino.
As per how the Census handles race, the second question gave survey participants the option to choose more than one race. Due to that fact, the number of people who identified as at least partially a particular race totaled 238, which exceeds the sample size of 223. The sample turned out to be well educated. In all, 67% (149) had a bachelor’s degree or higher. That includes the 25% (56), who had some form of graduate or professional degree, including master’s degrees, law degrees, medical degrees, and doctorates. Another 10% (22) had an associate degree, plus 15% (34) attended at least some college, while 8% (17) held no higher than a high school degree, and fewer than 1% (1) attended high school without finishing (See Table 12-2).

Income wise, the sample was also relatively well off. Most of the survey participants, or about 68% (151), met or exceeded Colorado’s median income of $51,000. The greatest percentage, or about 38% (84), earned between $50,000 and $99,999 per year, while 19% (42) earned between $100,000 and $149,999, 9% (20) brought home between $150,000 and $199,999, and 2% (5) earned $200,000 or more. A total of 32% (72) earned less than $50,000, among whom 10% (23) earned between $35,000 and $49,999, and another 10% (22) earned from $25,000 to $34,999. And, in all, 12% (27) earned less than $25,000 (See Table 12-3).

The final set of demographical and informational questions pertained to media usage. Those who self identified as “light” news consumers made up 3.5% (8) of the sample, “moderate” news consumers totaled 31% (69), and heavy news consumers constituted 65.5% (146). Only about 47% (105) of the sample were either regular or heavy readers of the Rocky Mountain News – meaning they read the paper at least three or more days per week. A higher percentage 53% (118) were light or rare readers of the paper, who picked it up once or twice a week or even less often. More specifically, 29% (64) were heavy readers, who read the paper five or more days per week. A total of 18% (41) were moderate readers, who read the Rocky
three or four days each week, while 31% (69) lightly read the paper. And 22% (49) rarely read the paper, which is to say they read it less than once per week (See Tables 12-4 and 12-5). A total of 60% (134) were former Rocky subscribers compared with the 40% (89), who didn’t subscribe to the paper. And, among those 134, most were long-term subscribers, including 69% (92), who subscribed for five or more years. Another 13% (18) received the paper for three or four years, while 15% (20) got the paper for one or two years, and 3% (4) subscribed for less than one year.

Most survey participants, or 73% (163), believed that the Rocky carried on a public service mission – beyond just maximizing profits – that bettered the community. Another 23% (51) were neutral or had no opinion, and 4% (9) thought it was unlikely the Rocky affected positive changes in the community. Ordinary Coloradans also thought that the paper served the public in the same three ways that community leaders mentioned. First, it “amplified and advocated” for a diversity of views and it gave voice to segments of the community that might not otherwise get a chance to speak. Second, the Rocky was a “philanthropist and a civic evangelist.” In other words, it was a civic booster and a promoter – both in a literal way by charitably giving and in a figurative sense by talking up the region to boost unity and community spirit. Third, the paper was the “community’s historian and its biographer” in that it was an indispensable source of local news and daily happenings and a repository of the region’s history. The paper “served as the longest published paper in this region, and had a great sense of Colorado history,” wrote a community member, who hit on multiple themes. Or as another survey taker put it, “The Rocky provided a more conservative voice than the competition, and was a major player in the communications arena. They also sponsored and supported many events in the region, and were very active in community affairs.”
Amplify and Advocate for Different Views and Voices

More than a dozen community members believed the Rocky served the community by representing a diversity of views and by standing up for the little guy (and gal), so that everyone in society was heard from. Several used the term “alternative” or “alternate,” meaning that they believed the Rocky’s views counterbalanced those of the Post. Typical responses included, “It provided an alternative slant on Colorado news and views versus the Denver Post.” The Rocky was all about “giving an alternative point of view to the more liberal Denver Post.” It was “a good source of local news, a great alternative, and a different voice than the Denver Post.” To another community member, who still has the paper’s last printed edition, “The Rocky was known to be the more conservative of the two and the competition was intense and, in my opinion, it was good for Colorado.”

Other survey takers focused on how the paper served people of all colors, creeds, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Without it, they said, a voice for the common man is gone because it was a paper for every Coloradan. As one survey taker put it, “They were an institution in the state that gave a balanced opinion on the issues that affected all Colorado residents.” Another pointed out that, “The paper had a long tradition in Colorado, and it offered additional viewpoints on local and national news stories” that represented all sorts of people. It was “honest news” for everyone, wrote one survey respondent. To another, the Rocky was “open to assisting all the people of Colorado with issues that affected (both) small numbers and us as a whole. They seemed willing to stand behind the common man and to research his or her issue.” Thinking of the paper as representing everyone, regardless of their views, is the “best way to explain the relationship between the Rocky Mountain News and the people.” And by reporting of all sorts of news and opinions that made people care about each other, the paper “helped the public get involved.”
Philanthropist and Civic Evangelist

Seventeen different respondents mentioned how the Rocky was a booster and a promoter of the community. As one reader put it, “It felt like a local paper (that was) invested in the community.” Another thought that paper instilled pride, “in particular, when they would do a highlight piece on high school scholar athletes to invoke a sense of community.” Readers could count on the Rocky to both “report the local and national news (and to) sponsor the state spelling bee.” Indeed, several recalled how the paper “sponsored benefits held in Denver,” “provided public services to charities and got involved in community activities,” and “supported local arts and fundraisers.” The Rocky didn’t just cover community institutions. It was one. And it stood out “by giving back to the community,” “providing a lot of financial sponsorships in the community as well as free or discounted publicity for nonprofits,” and by “often (being) involved with helping promote local events.” The paper “gave the community help at Christmas time” and “did many public service projects.” It didn’t just cover charitable activities. It “participated in and promoted them.” It was a “service provider to the homeless” and an “educational booster for the young that provided tickets to kids for sports games.” And the Rocky’s extra effort, its belief that its mission wasn’t just to cover the region and its schools, but also to enhance them, made it “a good supporter for the community and for education.”

Historian and Community Biographer

Coloradans recognized that the Rocky had some serious seniority, and now that it’s gone, the state has lost a historian, and the community no longer has one of the chroniclers of its daily events. As one reader put it, “It was the oldest newspaper and always thought of itself as a genuine Denver pioneer that served the public interest.” Another reader noted how, “The editorials and articles were very much locally directed, although the paper worked hard to keep their readers up to date on the national and world news also. Every page from the headlines to
the comics was geared to their local readers’ interest.” Humility was a recurring theme, too, as was the idea that it was a paper for everyone, or as one survey taker wrote, “They covered education and local news in a humble way, while speaking specifically to the Colorado community.” Readers turned to the Rocky when they wanted something that “covered a large spectrum of local and regional news (and) did major in-depth investigative pieces.” Often, the quality of the writers – who were singled out for their institutional knowledge of Denver’s history and the expertise on their beats – was mentioned. For example, one reader wrote, “The columnists were well read and diverse, and they did many in-depth reports. They were reliable. They had great writers. I miss them terribly.” As with any good historian, the Rocky’s reports were “non-biased (and) complete.” They “focused on personal stories from local people and events,” and they provided both “good information about what was going on locally as well as ways we could help out locally.” Another reader thought, “All the Denver news was provided,” by the paper, while others called that news “attentive,” “extensive,” and “unbiased.” And when the paper was chronicling the community’s happenings and acting as the keeper of its history, “It was all about the news, more about that than ever about selling.” As another concluded, “they did provide local stories, even ones that would not benefit them in any way.”

**RQ2b: Informing to Promote Civic Engagement**

How, if at all, has the Rocky’s closure affected how local residents learn about and spread the news and information necessary to participate in the community? Before asking ordinary Coloradans whether, and how, the Rocky’s closure had affected their ability to be civically and politically engaged, it was necessary to ask them if they have been involved in the community. And if this survey sample’s self-reporting is to be trusted, it happens to be a very civically and politically engaged group of people.

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How Civically Engaged Was The Survey Sample?

Not one of the 223 respondents said that, since moving to Colorado, they had not done at least one among eight categories of activities regarding public service and political involvement. Though social desirability bias can quite commonly lead research participants to overestimate how much they’ve voted or volunteered, most of these survey respondents probably weren’t exaggerating for two reasons. First, as will be shown in a moment, the choice categories were written in a very broad and inclusive way so as to capture all the main ways that people can be civically and politically engaged. Second, as was just stated, the question asked whether they’d done any among a wide range of public service and politically related activities “since moving to Colorado.” And all of this survey’s respondents had lived in Colorado between 5 and 70 years, while the average survey taker had lived in the state for 32 years. Note that, in the following results, the number of people who said they were civically or politically engaged exceeded 223 because the survey takers were permitted to say they’d been involved in more than one category of activities.

Overall, the most commonly selected category was voting – 93% (208) of the research participants said they’d voted in at least two of the last four elections. In second place, another 43% of the survey sample had attended a public meeting, a protest, or a political rally, or contacted a public official. At 43% (96), church volunteering took third, followed by volunteering to help local children learn (e.g. via the Girl Scouts, youth athletics coaching, and Parent Teacher Associations) at 42% (93). The fifth most common form of civic engagement was “working with fellow citizens to solve a problem in the community (e.g. Habitat for Humanity, litter pickup campaigns, soup kitchen volunteering, animal rescue initiatives)” at 40% (89). Two categories rounded out the pack with the smallest number of participants. At second to last was participating in political activities like “running for office, donating, volunteering, or
fundraising for a political candidate” (16%, 35 survey takers). Plus, a handful said they belong to a fraternal organization like the Freemasons, the Eagles, or the Rotary Club (7%, 16 respondents).

Civically Engaged Without Newspapers

The next research step involved finding out the extent to which the survey sample relied on the Rocky to learn about public service-related activities and community groups. And it turns out that community members were doing just fine in the Rocky’s final years, and they continue to have plenty of sources to be civically engaged without the help of newspapers. Just one in four, 26% (58) respondents said they used the Rocky as a “primary news to source to learn that sort of information,” while another 26% (58) used it as a secondary source for those purposes. For 30% (68), it was only an occasional news source to learn how to get involved in the community, 12% (26) didn’t use it at all for that reason, while 6% (13) didn’t know or remember. In summary, for about half the sample (52%) the Rocky was either a primary or a secondary source for information about how to be civically and politically engaged. For the other half of the sample (48%), they either barely, if ever, used the Rocky for information about public service and voting or they simply couldn’t remember how they found out such information. After establishing that the survey takers participate in public service-related activities and determining how much they used the Rocky to learn about them, the Coloradans were asked how they learn such information in the Rocky’s absence. That same question asked them to pick and rank which among eight potential methods they used to learn about public service-related activities. Plus, they could type a text answer for an “other” category. The most-often selected methods of notification were as follows. (Again, note that the totals for all the choices exceed 223 because survey participants were allowed to select more than one):
• Word of mouth from friends, acquaintances, family, co-workers, and neighbors (in person, online, or via mobile devices and cell phones): 163
• Local TV news (online, on a mobile device, or on a TV set): 152
• Information directly from the community organizations or public figures (e.g. in-person, on social media, from organizational websites, newsletters, emails and listservs): 137
• Local newspaper news (online, on a mobile device, or in print): 125
• Local websites that are not run by traditional news media like TV channels, radio stations, and newspapers (e.g. bloggers, citizen journalists): 104
• Local radio news (online, on a mobile device, or on a radio): 99
• Ads from non-news sources (e.g. ads that are on TV shows, non-news websites, billboards, buses, or fliers hanging in public): 86
• Other (i.e. the most common choices listed included social media such as Facebook, computer searches on subjects, and news from employers or health care providers): 10

As mentioned, the survey participants were also asked to rank the methods they prefer to use to find out about political and public-service-related activities and organizations. The overall number of people who selected each choice is noted in the second column (See Table 12-6).

Next, survey participants rated their satisfaction levels regarding how well they think the aforementioned news and information sources have been informing people about public service-related activities and community groups. In all, 32% (73) said they were satisfied, including 6% (14), who were “very satisfied,” and 26% (59), who were “somewhat satisfied.” Another 31% (70) were neutral or they had no opinion. And 35% were unsatisfied, including 26% (59), who were “somewhat unsatisfied” and 9% (21), who were “very unsatisfied.” (see Table 12-7).

What are the lessons here? In summary, a little more than one-third of the survey participants were some level of satisfied with how well today’s local news and information sources are informing them about how to be civically engaged. A little less than one-third were neutral. And another roughly one-third of the survey takers were unsatisfied. Now recall that the survey
takers’ four most-used/preferred sources of information about civic and political engagement were community organizations and public figures, TV, the *Denver Post* and weekly newspapers, and word of mouth from friends and family.

The satisfied survey takers feel like they’re doing just fine with those sources. That there are an equal number of unsatisfied individuals also makes sense when one considers two things. First, the sample was heavily reliant on local TV newscasts, which barely contains information about how to be civically and politically engaged. (It’s mostly car accidents, crime reports, sports, weather, and soft features). Second, about half the sample spent years relying on the *Rocky* as a key source for information about how to be civically and politically engaged. Given that high number, it’s no wonder that 35% would miss how the ways in which their dead daily paper helped them feel like citizens. Finally, the 31% who are indifferent also are easily explained considering that 28 percent of Americans aren’t civically or politically engaged anyway.¹ There’s one more point worth noting here. Whereas the regular citizens, who were polled, were about evenly split between satisfied, indifferent, and unsatisfied, the community leaders, who were interviewed, were nearly universally negative. In all likelihood, the local leaders were so unhappy because they’re already civically and politically engaged. They’re the ones trying to get regular people (e.g. constituents) to understand, care about, and even take part in serving the public and participating in the democratic process. Aside from this survey sample, they’ve had a rough go of it.

As has been discussed at length, the sociologist Robert Putnam has documented a cross-generational decades-long decline across all sorts of political participation and public service, from voting to volunteering, and joining fraternal organizations. Nowadays, just 48% of American adults directly take part in a civic group or activity.² Take voting. Just 33 percent of
Denver’s 400,000 registered voters reelected Denver Mayor Michael Hancock in 2015. Other recent mayoral elections, like Hickenlooper’s successful 2003 and 2007 campaigns, only respectively attracted 46 and 42 percent of the vote. Beyond even participating in elections and serving the community, dropping the bar to its lowest level, many ordinary Americans don’t even the know names of local leaders like state representatives, city councilors, and neighborhood association presidents. To be reminded of that, one need only watch one of Jay Leno’s many “Jaywalking” segments. For more than 17 years, the former Tonight Show host periodically conducted impromptu man- and woman-on-the-street interviews in which most people couldn’t answer even the most basic civics questions – many of which he plucked from the U.S. citizenship test. In one “Best of Jaywalking segment” from Leno’s final show on May 29, 2009, those interviewed failed to answer questions like: “How many stars are on the U.S. flag?”; “Who was the first president of the United States?”; “What was the Gettysburg Address?”; “What countries border the United States?”; and “What does the D.C. in Washington D.C. stand for?”

**RQ3b: Closure Affecting Community**

In what, if any, ways do local residents think the Rocky’s closure has affected the community? Put another way, do local residents think that their social institutions are any different because the Rocky closed? Such organizations make up the underlying structures of a local community, and a small sample of their ranks includes police departments and courts, schools, city councils, government agencies, chambers of commerce, neighborhood associations, churches, and fraternal organizations. This survey’s participants were asked the question thusly:

Think about your community and its social institutions. A community is a particular area or a place and its inhabitants. A few examples of social institutions include those that are political (a city council), economic (a chamber of commerce), legal (police and courts), and educational (schools). Do you think the Denver
community and its social institutions are different in any way as a result of the Rocky Mountain News closing?

In all, 7% (15) thought it was “very likely” that the Rocky’s closure had somehow changed the community’s institutions, 26% (58) thought it was “somewhat likely,” and 39% (87) were “neutral” or they had “no opinion.” Another 16% (35) believed it was “somewhat unlikely,” while 13% (28) thought it was “very unlikely.”

More simply put, 33% thought the Rocky’s demise changed something about the underlying structures of their community, 39% didn’t know or care, and 29% doubted that the paper’s closure had fundamentally changed the Denver area (See Table 12-8). Translation, one in three of those surveyed thought that society might have changed in some significant way as a result of the Rocky’s closure. Roughly speaking, a bit more than another third had no opinion, and a little less than that thought it was unlikely that the newspaper’s disappearance had actually altered the fabric of their community. Three themes emerged among the answers given by the ordinary Coloradans. One of those themes was unique, and two had already been brought up by the community leaders, who were interviewed. Like their local leaders, ordinary Coloradans thought that their society may very well have changed, but they had no way of knowing. Those surveyed suspect there may be more corruption and inefficiencies, but they can’t tell because, with the Rocky’s loss, there are 228 fewer journalists watching the streets. They believe that the risk of wrongdoing and ineffectual leadership have moved from a state of “known unknowns to unknowable.” As discussed, “known unknowns” are risks that can be foreseen. But without an extra Denver newspaper, locals said that their society may well be a little more crooked and a bit less well run, but they just can’t tell. And they think their community leaders lack transparency and accountability. The second theme that emerged was dubbed “community disunity,” which is to say that both local leaders and community members think the Rocky’s loss has caused more
divisions in region. The newspaper had the affect of making people in disparate local
communities feel like they were part of one big metro area.

Yet, with the *Rocky* gone, ordinary Coloradans said the community lacks cohesion, and
they think that locals are more apathetic about the idea that they live with others in one big
community. The third and final theme, which the ordinary people surveyed shared with their
community leaders, is the idea that the *Rocky* checked and balanced the *Post* and advocated for
change. When the *Rocky* was around, both the community leaders interviewed and those
surveyed really trusted the paper on two levels. They believed it safeguarded them against
corruption and wrongdoing by finding out what was really going on, and they thought the *Rocky*
protected and represented a variety of viewpoints. In other words, it was a check on the power
and the viewpoints spread by those in power and those working at the *Denver Post*. Now, several
of the survey takers said they don’t trust the region’s remaining media to represent and guard
everyone’s view and to provide all the news that’s worth knowing in the community. They
worried that the Denver Metro Area lacks a diversity of opinions. And they complained that the
*Rocky* and the *Post* are no longer around to counterbalance each other, so the *Post*’s skewed
views are predominant, though some are at odds over whether the paper’s bias is too liberal or
conservative.

**From Known Unknowns to Unknowable**

The survey taker who best summarized this theme wasn’t sure how the *Rocky*’s closure
has changed society, but he believes its disappearance robbed the community of another valuable
viewpoint and caused a “butterfly effect.” Considered by others but coined by the late
mathematician and meteorologist Edward Norton Lorenz, the butterfly effect is the central
metaphor behind chaos theory. That’s the idea that certain complex, chaotic systems, like the
weather, are highly sensitive to even the slightest changes in conditions, and even the tiniest
alteration to the present can have huge ramifications down the line (i.e. “a butterfly flapping its wings in South America can affect the weather in Central Park” weeks later). For example, for a short while, the weather can be predicted to a certain extent. But it can’t be forecast with any great accuracy in the long-term because even the smallest deviation of something like an air current can lead to cascade of unforeseen effects. Thus, survey takers said, the immediate consequences of the Rocky’s closure were known – fewer opinions and less local news. But they wonder about all the ways Denver is undoubtedly is different because of the paper’s demise.

As one survey taker put it, “people just are not as aware of what is going on,” and what might be happening. “The news,” another said, “should educate and inform. The Rocky Mountain News did that well and it has not been replaced.” A different survey taker wondered how the community is supposed to know what’s happening when:

There are no articles that give the pro and con perspectives about the communities or social institutions. There is no paper in the Denver Metro Area that reports about the community and social institutions on a regular basis that is not “condensed” into one small insert. Once a week, maybe a page or two (is published) about my town, Arvada. But nothing is consistently reported that I can rely on week after week now that the Rocky Mountain News closed.

There’s “no openness” lamented a different survey taker, and others complained that there’s “less coverage of local affairs,” and what remains is “not as in-depth and thorough.” Those seeking the news are forced to “manage communications more online, like through Facebook.” Websites and “community blogs exist, but they don’t cover the (the area with the) breadth (of the) Rocky Mountain News.” Those sources are “unable to give out the necessary information” about what’s really happening the halls of power.

As a result, “Citizens are not as well informed about local news because it simply isn’t available to them, so they’re not aware of nor able to react to issues that might concern them directly.” That’s because the news sources that remain are “not as active,” which means there are
“less informed people running around.” As yet another research participant said, when it comes to local leaders, “I don’t think they are held as accountable anymore. Having more reporters scrutinizing them made them work harder.” Another agreed that the “Rocky Mountain News held people accountable.” Coloradans came to count on the Rocky to monitor the community’s social institutions and as a trustworthy source of news and opinions. But nowadays:

All the (TV) stations seem to agree on what they can fit in 15 minutes of news each night in the same order. The rest of the time is spent on sports. I am sorry to say it, but sports are not community (news). It is a way of spending money and it has nothing to do with news. When there was a paper to read there where more topics.

Some think there’s a lack of specialized reporting, including the type of stories that could mobilize people. “I think there is less focus on the environment and (less) community involvement” as a result. In the Rocky’s absence, other local news outlets “have had to shoulder the responsibility of disseminating local news stories, (and) local TV stations have increased their local programming to a considerable degree.” But, “there is still a lack of coverage and pertinent content shortage.” And “without two newspapers things get overlooked or just not reported.” Ultimately, the community is still suffering because the Rocky “isn’t there to report it and to keep everyone honest.”

**Community Disunity**

As recently as 2009, when nearly a half million daily newspapers were being sold in the Denver area on a typical week day, many local citizens were literally and figuratively on the same page. In other words, they were reading the same papers and following and discussing the same stories. They perceive the Rocky’s death to have led to a lack of community cohesion and they think local citizens are more apathetic to each other and their towns. For example, one respondent fears that the death and diminishment of newspapers has led to less literate individuals, who don’t know how to be citizens. Now that there’s “one less option to read and
learn from, (it) seems the Internet is the future, but I just hope our children still know how to hang up a landline phone and they know how to do 2+2 and read and write like we all learned before (the Internet). So far, it seems (it’s) not promising.” Other survey takers rue that there’s just “not a unified source of news” now that the Rocky is gone, and people are “not as engaged in the community” as a result. As another research participant wrote, “The Rocky Mountain News was a Denver institution (that) kept us all aware of community happenings and real news, and (it) kept us connected as one big community in the metro area.” A different survey taker agreed that, with the Rocky’s loss, “a part of our history” is gone.

Common was the belief that, “There isn’t the connection between communities as there once was. The Rocky was convenient to read (because of its size, shape, as well as (its) content. We lost the connective thread and a piece of our culture when it closed.” That idea was reinforced by the person, who wrote that, “It feels like the community has become more segregated into smaller factions of local social institutions.” Another survey participant believes that there’s “less information to learn from/make opinions about, less authoritative opinions to think about, (and) the community has become more thoughtless all around.” A few of the survey takers think the Denver Post is part of the problem. They said that the Rocky was the paper of the people, and that the Post reports the news from on high atop its lofty perch. Those views were evident in responses like: “The Denver Post doesn’t interact with communities like the Rocky Mountain News did. It does some but not as much as the Rocky Mountain News”; “The Rocky Mountain News was very involved with supporting the community, and providing information to people who would like to do the same”; and “The loss of real local news from (the Rocky) harms the community, and (now) the impersonal feel of the news does not lend (itself) to a sense of community.”
With the Rocky gone and the Post depleted, some believe there’s no unified, well-aggregated source of local news and opinions. “There are several neighborhoods based publications but not one that complies all community information.” There are “new news (sources that) are being developed along with personal blogs written by people,” but they’re just not the same. The remaining news choices don’t have the “tabloid features or the columnists” of the Rocky, said another survey taker, who complains that “the Denver Post charges much too much” for its thin news content. Countless Coloradans were united just by being Rocky readers, but now, as one respondent said, the state’s residents are “unhappy to have to change to unfavorable sources” of news. Perhaps, the darkest view came from a Denver area resident, who thinks the rise of opinion journalism and a dearth of fact-based reportage has polarized people and made them less willing to believe news that doesn’t match their worldviews. People are “less informed, but as all news is now (full of) more propaganda. I am not sure it would be better with the Rocky Mountain News still open as most people only want their beliefs parroted back to them most of the time.”

Unchecked and Imbalanced

More than two-dozen survey takers miss the array of opinions that both the Rocky and the Post provided. And several don’t trust the remaining media to provide a fair, honest, unbiased, and full account of the news. They saw the Rocky as a checking and balancing the views and power of both community leaders and, in particular, the Denver Post. Simply put, said a Denver area resident, “Without competing newspapers, people are missing a diversity of voices.” A number of other research participants miss how the Rocky was a conservative counterbalance to the more liberal Post. Indeed, the Rocky was right of center, while the Post was left of center, though some Denver area residents think the Post has drifted to the right since hiring the Rocky’s former opinion page editor, Vincent Carroll, after the paper closed in 2009. Regardless, the
distrust of the *Post*, and the belief that it’s biased, was evident among the four survey takers, who respectively said:

The *Rocky Mountain News* kept the local goings on in front of the readers. TV news has no time for that, and it isn’t sensational enough for TV news. The *Denver Post* is busy trying to please its owners, which is probably why they chose to close the *Rocky*, and (remove its) points of view. (The *Post*) honestly doesn’t reflect the city, let alone the surrounding areas. School issues are not of interest to the local media now, unless there is some sensational issue going on, nor are neighborhood or local issues.

With only one major newspaper in the Denver Metro Area, newspaper readers only have one option for local news. The *Denver Post* has been growing increasingly conservative politically, and many people miss having a second newspaper to balance out the *Post*’s views.

You could trust the *Rocky* because it allowed you to make your own decisions on the stories, instead of the political slant that the “Denver Pest” does. There are more divisions within the community also because of the poor coverage of the “Pest.”

To get local news you have to rely on the *Post* and the TV news, and it means that the *Post* can skew news to its own point of view.

Despite Carroll’s move to the *Post*, other research participants fear a liberal bias has crept into the paper. As one put it, “The *Rocky* cast a critical eye when reporting local news, but the liberal media is now an advocate of liberal politicians.”

Another thinks, “We get a very ‘left leaning’ philosophy than when we had the *Rocky*,” while a third complained that “We lost our non-partisan (news page) and (the) more conservative voice (on the opinion page).” Others said that one paper now has too much power, and it’s not to be believed. The *Rocky’s* closure meant the “loss of a trusted news source,” which is made all the worse because “one paper now controls the information the community received.” Some think that Denver’s remaining paper cares more about making enough money to survive than carrying on a public service mission, or as one research participant wrote, “The *Denver Post* will not cover local news unless you pay for an ad.” Or as another survey taker put it, “I felt like the *Post* became a monopoly and changed to more ads, (and) less information. I watch the news or get it
online now.” A third thought the Rocky pushed the Post to broaden its news and opinions. in a positive way. “The Post has no competition and can rest on its laurels. There is no reliable way of getting opposing political views in my opinion.” Then, there’s the research participant who worries that certain people can get more favorable coverage because “the community only has to ‘please’ one newspaper now instead of two, so they can cater their message specifically to what they know the Denver Post likes.” As one of the most succinct survey takers said, “We suffer from a lack of opinions.”

**RQ4b: Rocky’s Replaceability**

How well, if at all, do local residents think other media outlets are replacing the Rocky as a news source? Part of figuring out whether the Rocky’s closure continues to matter ordinary Coloradans involved finding out whether they think other local news outlets have replaced it. A total of 29 survey questions were asked of each survey respondent to get at that answer. Those questions revolved around learning exactly what news outlets Coloradans are using today, whether they’re using them as a substitute for the Rocky, how much they use them, and the degree to which people are satisfied with them. This section deals with that last point of whether the survey takers are satisfied with the job other local media are doing in trying to replace the Rocky. The next two sections will explore whether ordinary Coloradans think a daily newspaper is even necessary, today, and precisely what local news sources they regularly use. Overall, a slightly higher percentage of the survey’s 223 respondents were some level of satisfied (45%) with how well other media are replacing the Rocky compared with those who were some degree of unsatisfied (39%). More specifically, 8% (17) were “very satisfied,” 37% were “somewhat satisfied” (83), 30% (68) were “somewhat unsatisfied,” and 9% (21) were “very unsatisfied.” Plus, 15% were neutral or they had no opinion. On a four-point scale, in which “1” represented “very satisfied” and “4” denoted “very unsatisfied” (while “neutral/no opinion” respondents
received scores of “0”) the survey sample’s mean satisfaction score was 2.13 (with a standard deviation of 1.171).

More simply put, overall, the sample has lukewarm feelings toward how well other media are replacing the Rocky because there’s roughly an even split between those who do and don’t think they’re doing a decent job. That makes sense given that 100 respondents expressed some level of satisfaction, while 89 were unsatisfied. Most among those 100 fell into two main categories. The first group primarily used some combination of local TV news, especially the area’s NBC affiliate, the Denver Post, and a smattering of other local news outlets (e.g. other local newspapers like weeklies). That’s no surprise given that, in a separate survey question, 44% (98) of the survey’s 223 respondents said they now “read the Denver Post because the Rocky Mountain News closed.” Among the first group of survey takers, the overall opinion was that local media outlets do somewhere between a serviceable and a mediocre job providing the news. For some among this first group of satisfied local news consumers, the Rocky’s closure was a moot point because they were always Post readers to begin with. Others aren’t exactly smitten with the Post. But, they said, it still exists (even if it’s in an attenuated form) so they read it. Regardless, a large share of this first group of local news consumers simply survives with what’s out there. So, these survey respondents are best characterized as “surviving with local news.”

The second group of satisfied local news consumers was more likely to say they’re thriving. As often, they believe the Web is a news wonderland, and many among them think the news nowadays is better than when the Rocky was still open in 2009. These survey respondents were also more likely to say that the remaining local news outlets have stepped up their game to replace the Rocky. And a small, but still significant, share of them expressed a greater interest in
national and international news, which is logical given that the Internet is rich with such content. This group of survey takers might be thought of as “thriving with digital news.” As one of these respondents put it, “There are more local TV news networks and programs than ever, and I have more access to national news online.” Another was quite content to use “more places to find local news and resources than I did before (the Rocky) closed.

As mentioned, 89 survey takers were unsatisfied with the job that other local news outlets are doing in replacing the Rocky, and three themes popped up among there answers. Like the community leaders, who were interviewed, the survey takers that the local media gone from shining a spotlight on the community’s social institutions to providing spotty light. In other words, they said that other local news outlets have been inconsistent in covering all the news that deserves attention, and they’re not holding local leaders accountable. Second, the survey takers voiced mistrust toward the local news outlets that have survived the Rocky’s closure. They believe the Post and other Denver news outlets have low credibility, mainly, because they think they’re politically biased but also because they think they’re more interested in financial survival and profits than the public interest. Third, the unsatisfied survey takers think much of the news that’s reported in the Rocky’s absence is impersonal and uninspiring. Whereas they found the Rocky’s format to be convenient, compact, and comprehensive, and they saw the paper’s personality as colorful and representative of ordinary people, the area’s remaining news outlets have failed to light their fire.

Satisfied: Surviving With Local News

For one local news consumer, “It’s been business as usual since the Rocky closed. I was always a Post person because that was the paper my dad preferred.” Similarly, another survey respondent said, “I very, very rarely read the Rocky. I didn’t like the format of the paper and felt that the reporting was seldom as on point as the Denver Post. Nothing has replaced the Rocky
because it was not the news source I turned to for information.” Others said the Rocky’s closure doesn’t matter because they just “read the Denver Post instead” or they “watch more local TV news,” and some do both. Another few respondents said they’re happy just to “use apps for the Denver Post and 9 News.” Several of those Post readers think the paper is a shell of itself, though they do think it’s better than nothing. “Unfortunately, the Denver Post, as in all daily papers today, is only a few pages, (but) I do not like online papers and do not use them.” There’s just not much left of the Denver Post, and it doesn’t give readers a whole lot of reasons to get the paper “other than delivering the Sunday ads, when and IF the paper shows up,” said another survey respondent. One survey taker said that she didn’t own a home or have a family when the Rocky was around, so its closure didn’t matter to her as much because she didn’t have as big of a stake in the community. But now she has both and she cares about local news.

These days, she “watches local news on television more frequently, and seeks out news websites occasionally to stay informed.” She thinks most local news reporting is superficial, and the only thing she misses about the Rocky is its funny pages. She was echoed by the survey respondent who said:

I still subscribe to the Denver Post, which I did prior to the Rocky closing. I read the newspaper daily and also (watch) local TV news on NBC or ABC. I will also get news online, especially when I am traveling out of state. I don’t really miss the Rocky itself, but I do miss the tabloid format because it was much easier to read while I ate breakfast.

Others were more positive about the TV news, especially the local NBC affiliate, channel 9, including survey takers who said things like: “9 News keeps me updated all day.” One more local news consumer is more satisfied these days than when the Rocky was around, but he admits to having a less comprehensive knowledge of local news because he can narrowly tailor digital news to his interests. “I primarily watch TV now and read news on the Internet,” he said, and “I
just search for what I am interested in so my knowledge is more focused and less informed overall.”

**Satisfied: Thriving With Digital News**

Approximately 14 percent (32) of the survey takers couldn’t be happier with the digital news from which they currently choose. Some of them were simply satisfied with the news they get from computers and mobile devices, but several raved. This group was also more likely to think that other local news outlets had improved their content enough to make up for the Rocky’s loss. As one digital enthusiast put it, “The Post has done a good job of getting the news out, but as the Internet has taken over they have so much more competition. I rely on the Internet for most of my print news. It’s instant access, anywhere, its free, and you get so many more points of view.” Another wrote, “It’s a whole new world since the Rocky Mountain News closed. I have all kinds of apps, that send me ‘push notifications’ on breaking news, (including) everything (that’s) local news, health news, New York news, (and) community news.” That same news consumer “also receives several free monthly newspapers (full) of everything that going on in my community, as well as near by communities.” A third online news lover believes, “The boon of the Internet has filled many of the prior functions of both (Denver’s daily) newspapers as have other (local) newspapers such as Westword, (and the) Aurora Sentinel.”

Other survey respondents said the Internet has advantages over traditional media, including the one who thinks that local news outlets are working harder to “cover a wider range of topics, (so) I feel comfortable that all the information I may need locally is out there.” For these survey takers, the regional media are a great source of “on-demand news” that’s “easier to access” especially “by virtue of social media, which provide up-to-the-minute news 24 hours a day,” and “7 days a week,” while “quickly updating school/workplace closings during adverse weather and providing interactive traffic reports that are just minutes old in lag time.” What’s the
big deal about the *Rocky* closing asked another respondent? The Internet is “just a new place to get news.”

**Unsatisfied: From Spotlight to Spotty**

Deficient – that’s how one in five survey takers described the local news coverage that remains in the *Rocky’s* absence. When it comes to the area’s new and old media, “They’re not doing enough” stories. “They don’t do enough explanation.” They’re “not as thorough.” They’re “not providing ‘real news.’” “They leave out many stories, and skimp on features.” There’s “incomplete coverage of various events.” There’s just “less local coverage,” and what does get covered “does not have the same depth of coverage (regarding) the issues of importance to me.”

A number of research participants waxed nostalgic, including a reader who longs for all the *Rocky’s* “special items, like coupons, book reviews, travel section reports, comics, and recipes” and more big feature stories about issues that affect all Coloradans. Similarly, a 71-year-old woman said the *Rocky* was so intimately intertwined with the community and published local news that just hasn’t been replaced:

There was a local information section letting you know about square dancing, local events, scouting events, school events (not just sports), etc. My name and my kids’ names were in the *Rocky* several times from the ’50s through the late ’70s. If someone in the neighborhood, or in my home town of Arvada did something “good” or “special” it made news in the *Rocky*. Not just all the “bad” or “negative” things that went on (went in the paper). I cut out lots of recipes for high altitude baking, funny sayings, (and) good advice, and (I) kept those all in a scrap book. I could always check the movie listings. It also listed radio stations and what programming was on the local radio stations. Sometimes it listed the top ten songs that were on the radio. There were lots of articles about the Junior League or society pages. You just don’t have that information anymore. I just don’t really know what is going on in this city.

It’s not just that there’s less news, said other former *Rocky* readers, it’s that the content that remains is often dictated by the media’s imperatives to survive and profit rather than the public interest. As one of survey taker put it, “Most other news sources seem to be so afraid of going
under themselves, so they focus less on the actually important news and more on scare/fluff pieces that generate more revenue.” Another added, “Unfortunately with the consolidation of all news into only a few companies, everything is starting to read like USA Today, (which is) not good. There is really no good source for local news any more, even with the Daily Camera or Denver Post.”

Separately, five survey takers longed to have both the Rocky and the Post because they believe they made each other better and their narratives balanced each other out.

Having more than one newspaper made me feel like I could always get the whole story. If one didn’t cover something the other would. I can’t quantify the difference without the Rocky Mountain News, but I certainly feel less informed than I did before it closed.

The Post has been scaled back and lacks depth of coverage. Sports reporting and dining critiques were a bit stronger when the Rocky Mountain News was still operating.

The coverage of all areas of the news has declined since the Rocky Mountain News closed. I still subscribe to the Denver Post, but every year the coverage decreases in all areas. Local TV news has not really changed.

Without the competition of the Rocky Mountain News, I feel like the Denver Post’s quality of journalism has decreased.

Once the competition was gone, the Denver Post floundered. We have since cancelled our subscription of decades.

Several folks said that what remains in the Post is “way over-priced, and it has too much national news,” too few regional reports and “interesting feature articles,” and a disproportionate amount of “sports and ads.” Another research participant described feeling like she was betwixt and between her local paper and the TV news because neither quite met her needs. She “stopped getting the newspaper,” and “tried to catch more news on TV,” but she found “it’s all the same regardless of channel,” and it lacked the depth and breadth of the paper’s shallow local coverage.

Perhaps, the shortest, gloomiest assessment of the state of the local media since the Rocky’s
closure came from the survey taker, who said simply, now, “We are missing a vital piece of our Fourth Estate.”

**Unsatisfied: Media Mistrust**

A strong undercurrent of media mistrust also ran through the sample. When it comes to replacing the *Rocky*, some said the *Post* was too liberal. Others said the paper is too conservative. Here a little context is in order. As mentioned, before the *Rocky* closed in 2009, the *Post* generally leaned to the left, while the *Rocky* was right of center, though neither publication stood fervently on either side of the aisle. (For example, both the *Rocky* and the *Post* endorsed Republican George W. Bush’s 2004 presidential run). As mentioned, the *Post* hired Vincent Carroll, the *Rocky*’s conservative opinion page editor, as a deputy opinion page editor after the *Rocky* closed in 2009. Four years later, in 2013, Carroll replaced liberal opinion page editor Craig Hubbard after he took a public relations job. The point here is that it makes sense that this survey’s participants would be split between saying that the *Post* is too liberal or too conservative because the paper has taken both sides. Regardless, it’s noteworthy that one of the other effects of the *Rocky*’s closure has been greater mistrust of the local media’s ability to be impartial.

When the *Rocky* was around, the liberal and conservative sides were respectively represented, and several community members felt like the region was in a kind of rhetorical equilibrium. Now, this survey’s respondents said things like:

I’m reading too many right-wing based articles without much substance in the *Denver Post* and TV doesn’t cover the local news issues like they should. I would prefer the *Rocky Mountain News* to come back, so I can subscribe to it again. I only get the *Denver Post* delivered on Sundays. If the *Rocky Mountain News* was available, I would subscribe to it every day.

I read the *Post* for a while, but it has become a shadow of its former self, and leans to the right politically, which is ironic since it’s based in Denver. I find it difficult to get local news. Our neighborhood monthly, *Front Porch Stapleton*, has stepped
in to provide very good local news, but it is only published once a month. They do, however, publish articles during the month on their website. Local TV news, as well as network news, is mostly fluff, so I don’t watch it much. I get a lot of news from the *New York Times*, which is one of the few truly good papers left. And, of course, the Internet is a good source.

(There’s) too much of a pro-Obama viewpoint (in the media). (The media is) too negative towards Republicans. I happen to actually be a Democrat, but I miss hearing the opposing views like I used to.

The ‘Denver Pest’ is a very biased news source. I seldom read articles because they don’t report the news. They report their desired slant of the news. The sports and sales pages are good, but the rest is only good for wrapping fish.

Others simply miss having two viewpoints, and they believed that the competition between the two papers brought out their rhetorically strong and honest. As one Denver area resident put it, without the *Rocky* around, “the *Denver Post* can be biased (and full of) media spin.” Another reader “liked that *Rocky Mountain News* provided competition and different viewpoints and angles than the *Denver Post*, and I liked being able to have a choice on which media source I wanted to read.”

For the news consumer who “believes major cities need at least two newspapers – preferably one that’s Republican and one that’s Democrat – the competition keeps them on their toes and stops them from being complacent.” One reader gave the *Denver Post* credit for hiring nearly a dozen former *Rocky* staff members in 2009, while pointing out that nearly none – with Carroll being a notable exception – are left nowadays. As that survey participant said, “The *Denver Post* tried at first to incorporate some of the *Rocky’s* personnel and content, but gradually that has fallen away. The *Post* has become quite partisan, and if I didn’t want to read local news and sports as I do, I would likely unsubscribe.” Yet another believes that without the *Rocky* around, “90% of the news is biased.” That same local resident “canceled my daily subscription (to the *Post*) three weeks ago.”
Unsatisfied: Impersonal and Uninspiring Media

Just 10% of the survey takers are dissatisfied with the Denver area’s news media because the survey takers think they’re too biased, another 10% are unhappy because they think local news outlets are impersonal and uninspiring. These two groups of survey respondents loved the Rocky’s brand, its diversity of news and opinions, its colorful/compact tabloid format, and the quality of its staff’s writing, and they said things like:

I have never liked anything about the Denver Post. I did try them for a short period of 30 days, but I was always upset that it’s such a one-sided, boring publication and I cancelled the subscription. This was several years after the Rocky was taken away. I rarely watch television and listen to the radio mostly for music and road conditions. The personal touch that the Rocky Mountain News offered is not available in any of the other media in the metro area. We were truly devastated when the Rocky was closed and felt that we had lost a trusted friend.

(I read the Rocky for) local information with a personal flair. (It) seemed to be (the) least biased, and (the) most in tune to the local vibe and needs. (I) felt the concern for the metro area and the state with the Rocky like no other paper has (had since).

I really loved the layout of the paper … (The tabloid format) really made it easy to read and hold. I really just miss my Rocky Mountain News all together. I do read the Denver Post, but I find it more difficult to be guided through and to hold and read.

The Rocky Mountain News had its own personality, and it just happened to fit well with the way I like things, such as the layout, while … the information (in) it was a lot more simplistic and easier for me to follow.

I liked the layout of the Rocky Mountain News. It was easier to read and there was more news and information in it than there is in the Denver Post.

For these Denver area residents, the Rocky transcended being a news outlet. They talk about the paper like it was a person. To them, the “Rocky Mountain News was very personal and down to earth,” and it just had more of a “community focus.”

The Rocky, they said, was easier and more fun to read, and it was better at reporting the news. The “Rocky Mountain News made it easy (to read because it was) just the right size,” it was well-categorized, and it had great “comics.” To these Coloradans, “the
Post’s reporters were not nearly as good at gathering and disseminating information as the Rocky’s reporters,” and it’s “not as visually appealing,” and its “format is harder to read” and not as fun. Others commented that “the Post is a formatting issue more than anything else,” and “the Denver Post is just not a newspaper that I enjoy reading as much as I did the Rocky Mountain News.” The Rocky’s absence “has restricted” their ability to “view the bigger picture” of the news and its context in the region.

**RQ5b: Necessity and Relevance**

To what extent, if at all, do local residents think a daily local newspaper is still necessary and relevant, today? To answer that question, those surveyed were asked: “If the Denver area’s local daily newspaper no longer existed in any form, would that have a major effect, a minor effect, or no effect on your ability to keep up with information and news about your community?” In all, 40% of the sample (90) thought the disappearance of the community’s daily paper would majorly affect their ability to keep up with local news and information and 43% (95) thought there would be a minor effect. Another 15% (34) thought there would no effect, while 2% (4) were neutral or they had no opinion. By comparison, when the Pew Research Center asked a similarly worded question of a national sample of 2,251 adults in 2012 survey, a far larger proportion – 39% – envisioned there would be no effect. Just 28% thought there would be a major effect, 30% anticipated a minor effect, and 3% either didn’t know or offer an opinion (See Table 12-9). Each survey respondent was subsequently asked an open-ended question to explain why he or she thought the disappearance of Denver area’s last remaining daily paper would have a major effect, a minor effect, or no effect.
No Newspaper Means a Major Effect

As mentioned, a total of 40% of the sample (90) said the Denver Post’s closure would majorly affect their ability to keep up with local news and information. Several of the survey takers offered four main reasons why they’d be majorly affected by not having any sort of daily local paper. The first theme is best characterized as “community disunity.” Like their local leaders, a number of ordinary Coloradans couldn’t imagine losing the Denver Post. They think a daily newspaper makes a community a community by defining it, building its community spirit, and fostering a sense of shared identity among residents. The paper creates newspaper-reading traditions within families, while chronicling the cultural traditions of those throughout its coverage area. The second theme the survey takers discussed is best characterized as a desire a fear of “losing irreplaceable local content.” Having at least one daily local newspaper is essential as a go-to source for hyperlocal news that they just can’t find anywhere else. With rare exceptions, TV reporters aren’t willing or able to sit in broken plastic chairs for hours to sift through the minutiae of a seemingly mundane school board.

Additionally, newspapers conveniently aggregate a lot of local news in each day’s publication. (And even if all of a newspaper’s stories aren’t in-depth, a typical newspaper story is a heck of a lot more detailed than a 30- to 120-second TV news story). Separately, the third theme that arose – and this too was a concern that survey takers shared with local leaders – was the idea that not having at least one daily local newspaper would lead to a “credibility gap.” Newspapers, they said, vet, verify, evaluate, and investigate information in ways that other news sources just don’t approximate. So, survey takers said, at least one daily local newspaper is necessary to provide credible news. Fourth and finally, they talked about the “digital divide” and their “print preference.” Not everyone has or wants TV service. Some can’t afford high-speed Internet access or they don’t own a smart phone. And there’s a digital divide between them and
the millions of Americans, who are more wired and plugged in. As often, it’s the older and/or lower income Americans, who either can’t afford or choose not to consume media via all the latest technologies. But survey takers didn’t have to be low-come or elderly to simply prefer a newspaper in some form or fashion, especially when it’s published on newsprint.

**Community disunity**

Several survey takers fear disunity would arise among the Denver Metro Area’s communities if they didn’t at least have the *Post*. Consider, for a moment, just how big that area is. It’s a three-hour ride between the scenic, itty bitty pit stop of Deckers, an unincorporated community along the South Platte River in Douglas County, and Fort Morgan, the seat of power in the northeast corner of Adams County. And yet, technically, though they couldn’t be farther afield, they’re both part of a Denver Metro Area that includes Adams, Arapahoe, Broomfield, Denver, Douglas and Jefferson counties (i.e. the Front Range Urban Corridor). By repeatedly telling people that they’re all part of the same territory, the somewhat arbitrary boundaries of a metro area become the popular will. And the region comes to have a shared history that’s documented by a particular paper. Indeed, in her 1995 book, *The Media and the Mayor’s Race*, that was one of the ways that the late communications scholar Phyllis Kaniss found that newspapers affect communities. Among other things, Kaniss documented how Philly’s newspapers helped create a cohesive regional identity by documenting the happenings and defining the problems and opportunities of the metropole and its surrounding areas. As one of this survey’s participants commented (in one wonderful 70-word stream of consciousness):

> If no local daily newspaper existed in our Denver (area), and the Denver metro communities, it would make me very sad and empty because we would have no community newspaper to connect us all to the local news and events happening in Denver and the metro area, where we could all gather and be useful to our city and enjoy events without them passing us by, and learning how they happened.

Other research participants were just as passionate, as reflected in quotes like:
Unless they continued to provide a website with this (hyperlocal) information available, the impact (of losing the Post) would be incredible. Even though communities are not what they once were, there are still masses of people that would prefer to support small businesses verses larger box stores. And without local presses, new residents may not know these businesses exist. Or what about local church events – ones that need donations, even from non-members, for activities they are putting on for the residents? There are so many more reasons, but the moral of the story is, without (a local daily newspaper) these communities would begin to further disconnect and unravel.

The Internet is so big. You have to search for the information. That means you have to know what to search for. When the news is reported on a daily basis you don’t have to search for it. It’s already there. Some folks say, “Why read the paper? The news is a day old by the time you get it.” But I say put the information in the paper with pictures about our people, our beautiful state, our good side and bad, but put it down, so we can have the information now and about whatever is going on in the future. Give us an opportunity to show off our good side and let people express their opinions. Show the art, the beautiful gardens, the lights that are on the homes at Christmas time. Show the long lines for stores, or voting, or events. Pictures say so much. Opinions are so important to hear.

Most of the rest of the research participants were more succinct, but they were no less fervent, as in the survey taker who said: “People barely know their neighbors. Without some local source (like a newspaper) a large part of Denver would have no connection to the town.”

Variously, Denver area residents worried that the Denver Post’s closure would mean a “sense of tradition would be gone”; the whole “community would be less informed”; and there would be “no weekly summary of upcoming events” for people to take part in. Another survey taker said that daily local papers cover such an eclectic mix of stuff that “it would be extremely detrimental to the community and to my ability to keep up with information and news” if there wasn’t at least an online publication. A different research participant pointed out that newspapers do more than just report the news. They also promote and donate to local nonprofits:

I would need to watch TV or get the news online if there were no local paper. The Post also has their Season to Share campaign that highlights the work of area nonprofits. I am not sure I could get that information from any other source as easily as I can currently with the Post. Since I’ve worked in the non-profit field for many years, that information is important to me.
Plus, if they had to scour all kinds of sources to find the news, a few of the folks said they’d be less informed, less involved, and less interested in the community. As one of three survey takers observed:

I will not be able to be involved in the cities’ decisions when (their) votes come around. I will not be able to know when taxes are going to increase in the city. I will not be able to know who the next mayor is going to be or when the city council meetings are. I will not be able to participate in city events to be part of the community.

I count on the Denver Post for this information (to be involved in the community), particularly since I read through it multiple times a week. If they didn’t provide this information I’m not sure I’d be motivated to dig it up on my own.

**Losing irreplaceable local news and opinions**

A daily local newspaper is a source of neighborhood news, community information, and area viewpoints that can’t easily be found anywhere else. Those were the sentiments of the survey participants, who said things like: “You need to have local news and an outlet for local opinions, AND I think it would be embarrassing to be a major city without a newspaper”; “Without local news companies at all, we would be informed only by global conglomerates seeking (to advance) a non-local agenda”; and “I use the paper Denver Post to get most of my news and information about the community, and without it I would feel very ill informed of what was going on.” Without the Post, two different Denver area residents similarly said, “I would not be able to keep up with local events, and I would not be able to comment on local activities or events”; and “I would be at a loss of what was happening in the community, and things I can do for my kids, and what I could do for volunteering.” And then there was the person who worried that the Post’s closure would lead to “no local reporting, no local editorials, and Denver would be dependent on national media that may or may not understand local issues.”

Never mind the Post, without just having any sort of daily local paper, others wondered where they’d find information about various local topics (e.g. issues with “Colorado’s
infrastructure,” the effects of “the weather,” “things to do,” “the government’s priorities,” the “openings (and) closings” of local businesses, and “special events”). Part of the problem with losing a newspaper is that not all the news is well aggregated or housed under one roof. If the Post wasn’t around, various survey takers said they “wouldn’t know how to get that (local) information,” and they “would have to waste time on the Web” searching for it.

They worried that no daily paper in the area would mean a lack of “local news that gives a different perspective,” “we would lose our diversity” of opinions, and there “would be no acceptance (of alternate views) or diverse channels” because people could just go to the news outlet that matches their views. As one research participant said, “You don’t want a news monopoly. A local paper adds its own opinion to the mix and promotes a diversity of opinions, and you need a diversity of information channels.” Ideally, said another, “News should be distributed through as many channels as possible to reach as many people as possible.” Others said that the trouble with replacing the Post is that TV news is full of short stories from around the region, so “television may not cover all the newsworthy (local) stories,” and it won’t always provide “news directly related to where we live.” In the worst case scenario, if no daily paper replaced the Post, one of more pessimistic survey takers said the region would lose the “fourth estate. And I doubt we’d be well enough informed of the everyday ramifications of our government’s local actions because organizations would be less transparent!”

Credibility gap

With the Rocky gone, and the Post greatly weakened since then, several community leaders and ordinary Coloradans are already worried about the credibility and the quality of Denver’s remaining local news sources. The survey takers said the newspaper is their go-to source for credible local news and information, and that other news outlets aren’t as thorough or as good at reporting on vetting local news. Without the Post, the survey takers said “it would be
harder to validate actual activities that are going on in the community,” “there are no viable alternatives for the type of news covered,” and “I would have to find other sources, and (I) can’t know what the quality would be” to replace the Post. Many added that television news wouldn’t fill the void because such reports are far shorter and TV news channels broadly cover whole regions as opposed to specifically and consistently focusing on individual communities and neighborhoods. Or as the research participants put it, “(without the Denver Post) I would have to find new places to get reliable news from because the … TV doesn’t give very much local news, (and there are) just a few main stories”; “My paper informs me of things that a news broadcast cannot. In both scope and detail, a paper is much more informative to me”; “I watch the local news on TV every night, but that is often sound bites, and it doesn’t provide op-ed pieces. I can zone out during TV news, but I have to put thought into reading a news piece in a paper, which I like.” TV, several of the interviewees fear, is not a “reliable trustworthy place to get news.” And another admitted that, without a daily newspaper in Denver, her “other means (of news are) gossip,” she thinks that she “would get my news from unreliable and biased sources, like blogs or social media.”

Digital divide and print preference

The premise of the final theme is simple. Many people still want a newspaper around – particularly in printed form – because they can neither afford to use all the latest technologies to access the news nor do they want to do so. As mentioned, Denver has one of the country’s narrower “digital divides” (i.e. the gaps between those with and without high-speed Internet, personal computers, and mobile devices). But 30% of Denver residents still don’t have access to high speed Internet, 15% don’t own a laptop or a desktop computer, nearly 25% don’t have a smartphone, and almost 50% don’t use tablets, all of which are common ways to acquire news and information. As the survey takers said, “some people don’t have access to online
information – specifically the poor and elderly”; “not everyone has access to a TV … (and not having a daily local newspaper) furthers the dumbing down of American society”; and:

Not all people have access to other news sources and some prefer the paper rather than online sources. Some people are intimidated with finding what they need to know online and the paper has the categories and sections ready for people to read what they are interested in and may not otherwise be exposed to.

Some people simply prefer to get the news via newspaper, particularly if it’s in printed form, or as one survey participant put it, “Many still like actually holding the paper. It’s more tactile.” Among other similar statements, four survey participants, said:

I do not live in Denver but close enough to want to know what is going on and (without the paper) they would have to look up online to get information which I do not like doing. I prefer to read news in paper format or watch news programs on TV.

I feel the need to have a physical connection when learning the news – both local and national.

I learn a great deal about the metro area through the physical newspaper, and it would be incredibly sad if that was no longer an option. I read news online as well, but there is something about having a local newspaper that online news will never replace.

Most people get their news on TV, but a fair number still get information from papers. It’s easier to remember when you can cut out an article or ad and save it.

The bottom line here is, as Columbia Journalism Review’s Dean Starkman wrote, there’s a chunk of mass communications scholars who arrogantly, and wrongheadedly, try to articulate the sort of journalism that everyone in the public wants. Such scholars prognosticate and pontificate about a whiz-bang future that’s full of digital doodads and new news delivery whatsits. News futurists like City University of New York’s Jeff Jarvis speak of a monolithic audience that craves the power to pick precisely the sort of news it wants at any moment. And, as often, he thinks they want a faster, shorter, more iterative news stream. Except, as this survey reveals, not everyone does.7 Or, at very least, it may take another 50 years (i.e. the time by which most of
this survey’s older participants die off) for most, if not all, Americans to want the sort of journalism that Jarvis and other news futurists envision. And even if everyone did want that sort of news, nowadays (and not just two or three generations hence), there’s a certain Ivory tower-imbued conceit in folks like Jarvis assuming that everyone can afford it. Yet, Jarvis and other news futurists aren’t all wrong. There are people who want news delivered exactly the way he’s described – customized, individualized, via all manner of digital devices, and without regard for whether newspapers exist in any form. And those people were among the survey respondents in the next section.

No Newspaper Means Little or No Effect

In all, 58% of this survey’s respondents, who think the Post’s closure would have little or no effect on them. Three themes emerged among those survey takers. The first might be best dubbed “the readers are alright.” This group of survey takers was slightly bothered about the idea of losing the Denver Post. They said that they’d be a bit inconvenienced, but they wouldn’t be affected if there were no local daily newspaper. The second theme reflects the idea that the survey takers are “media Macgyvers” in that they can easily come up with a number of clever ways to consume news across platforms, so they wouldn’t be terribly concerned if the Post disappeared. The third theme covers those survey respondents, who “don’t care a whit or a bit” about replacing the news if the Post closes because they either don’t read the paper or they’re more interested in national news. If the Post closed, they don’t think that they or the community would be affected. And they’re determined to get all the local news and information that matter to them, and they don’t think they’d have any trouble finding it.

Some people would be alright without a paper

Like the first group of survey takers, the second set of respondents cares deeply about local news and information. They too vary in the degree to which they miss the Rocky, but, regardless,
its closure isn’t on their minds much nowadays. Regardless, they don’t think the Post’s closure would matter, nowadays, and they share a resolve to find local news and information no matter what they have to do to find it. The Who sang that “the kids are alright” – as in they’d been through a lot, but somehow everything had turned out OK. These survey takers said things like “it would be slightly less convenient if the (Denver Post) were gone” because local news and information would be a bit tougher to find. To them, newspapers are only somewhat necessary and relevant. In short, they’re doing alright, and if the Post closed:

I would have to search harder for (real local news), but I know I could still find it.

There would be a minor effect on my ability if (the closure) included the online (and the paper versions of the Denver Post). I would not be able to keep updated on certain issues that have been important to friends and family, lately, such as the Swedish hospital tech, who may have placed contaminated needles back in circulation. However, if this question refers to physical copies of newspapers only, then there would be no effect.

It would make it more difficult to keep up with current events, but there are other sources available.

I like to know (local news from newspapers), but I would find a way to get information – probably online or from talking with people.

Media Macgyvers

From 1985 to 1992, Richard Dean Anderson played MacGyver, a savvy, resourceful, and perseverant secret agent on an action-adventure TV series of the same name. And when it comes to finding local news, this survey’s respondents seem to be “Media Macgyvers” in that they always seem to find just want they need at exactly the right moment. Indeed, these survey takers said that, at any given moment, there are loads of places for them to turn for news and information. They often rely on newsmakers and local organizations to directly spread messages, and on word of mouth, Web searches, news aggregation sites, mobile apps, tiny weekly
community papers, television, and the radio. To them, the Post’s closure would have little or no effect because:

I like to get my news in as many different ways as possible, so I can try to decide what is true and what is false.

There would likely be availability through Denver (TV) news channel apps or the Internet to find this information. You can always Google for answers.

I would continue to gather local news and information about events and other things that interest me from the Internet, the local library and friends and people I work with.

I would get information from other local sources including blogs, radio, community newsletters and community organizations like the YMCA and the Boulder Senior Center.

I rely on my local community paper to keep up on things that are happening or impacting my very immediate local community.

Then, there are those, who could not care less about the loss of daily local newspapers and they make up the final subset of those who said there’d be little to no effect if the Denver Post closed.

Don’t care a whit or a bit

The third group think newspapers are irrelevant and unnecessary for a few reasons.

Mostly, they think newspapers are archaic and useless. Typical responses included:

Print is dead. Newspapers are obsolete.

I do not subscribe to a daily newspaper. I depend on the Internet for keeping abreast of what I need to know.

Sorry, but print papers are dead. (I have) word of mouth and online sources.

With the ever increasing news outlets online or on TV the need for newspapers continues to diminish The way we receive our news and information is completely different now.

The ease of having the latest news in the palm of your hand unfortunately trumps reading a paper with yesterday’s news.

News on the Internet and social media has taken over and made daily newspapers obsolete. I could still turn to other sources for news: radio stations, television stations, websites, etc.
Others don’t particularly like the Post because they believe it’s worsened over the years due to its content cuts or they think it’s biased. And a few just don’t especially care about local news, either due to indifference or a preference for national news. People in this third group weren’t just sanguine and accepting of the death of newspapers. They sometimes exhibited a touch of malicious glee. These were the type of survey takers who might joke that newspapers are best for kindling, puppy training, fly squishing, lining bird cages and shelves, filling litter boxes, wrapping fish, and gift wrapping. And they think that papers have given them fewer and fewer reasons to read them over the years, and some simply don’t like the paper, even if they use it occasionally:

We cancelled our newspaper subscription years ago and haven’t missed it. We found it was full of news we’d already seen online or on TV by the time it arrived.

It seems like less and less is covered in these newspapers. I do not think they’re widely read. I feel like a few people would miss them (if they disappeared), but not many.

I seldom read the Post. I find their coverage biased and their opinions worse. I do occasionally check their website because it is one of the few sources for local news.

I never read the Denver Post. I consider it a rag full of ads and political opinions (that are) not my own. If it were to disappear it would have no affect on my keeping up with information or news in my community at all. None what-so-ever. Lakewood puts out a little weekly that suffices for Lakewood data, and my church puts out the Register, and that keeps me informed on the rest.

I no longer subscribe to a local paper. The Denver Post is more of a partisan liberal media voice. I look to community organizations, TV news, and the Internet for my information.

Finally, a couple of respondents pointed out that not everyone cares about the local news. They said that assuming the community would be affected by the Post’s closure equates to erroneously believing that everyone follows what’s happening locally. As one of them put it, the Denver area “would be unaffected (by not having a daily local paper) because of all the people that already don’t care about what community events go on.”
RQ6b: News Consumption Habits

How, if at all, have local residents changed their news consumption habits since the Rocky’s closure? Research questions 6, 7, and 8 focus on whether ordinary Coloradans and their community leaders think that they, personally, have been affected by the Rocky’s closure. RQ6b revolves media usage habits of the survey takers. It gauges how much news they’re consuming today versus in the past, which news outlets they’re using, and whether they’re using them to replace the Rocky. The idea is to get a sense of sense of how well they’re finding local news and information since the Rocky’s closure. Most of the survey takers reported using about the same or slightly less local news as when the Rocky was open, but any decrease can’t be definitively linked to the Rocky’s closures. And research participants most often replace the Rocky with TV news stations, especially the local NBC affiliate, the Denver Post, and community newspapers (i.e. weeklies). Additionally, the alternative weekly Westword and the Denver Business Journal play supplementary roles in replacing the Rocky. Generally speaking, the survey takers had a lukewarm satisfaction level regarding how well other news outlets are doing in replacing the Rocky. Indeed, they were close to evenly split three ways between those who are satisfied, those who aren’t, and those who are indifferent.

Media Usage

When it comes to survey takers’ media usage, today, 14% (31) consume more news than when the Rocky was open, 41% (92) use “less local news,” another 41% (91) use “about the same amount.” And 4% (9) “do not know or remember” how much local news they used before and after the paper closed (See Table 12-10). Before the Rocky went under in February of 2009, the survey sample reported consuming an average of 75.42 minutes of local news per day, while the median local news consumer used 62 minutes. And the survey respondents consumed a range of between 1 and 245 minutes of local news per day (with a standard deviation of 47.63 minutes).
After the *Rocky* closed, the survey sample consumed an average of 65.84 minutes of local news per day, while the median news consumer used 55 minutes. And the survey takers reported using as little as no local news and as much as 283 minutes per day (with a standard deviation of 50.73 minutes). In all, 214 of the 223 survey takers (95%) chose to answer the media usage questions. Since 2009, those survey respondents reported consuming an average of 9% fewer minutes of local news coverage per day (i.e. a drop to 65 minutes from 75), while the median self-reported total also fell 9% (to 55 from 62 minutes). These media usage answers dovetail neatly with the non-numerical self-estimates, which were reported a moment ago, that 41% of survey takers consume more news and 41% use slightly less since the *Rocky* shuttured.

When it comes to survey takers’ media usage, today, 14% (31) consume more news than when the *Rocky* was open, 41% (92) use less local news, another 41% (91) use about the same amount of local news. And 4% (9) don’t know or remember how much local news they used before and after the paper closed. Thus, a confident conclusion was drawn from the totality of the survey takers’ written answers for various open-ended questions and their answers to the aforementioned media usage questions. It’s unlikely that the *Rocky’s* closure is still affecting the amount of local news that the research participants consume nowadays. Few if any former readers have thrown their hands up in the air and said, “My favorite local newspaper is gone, so I’m going to consume less local news.” Those surveyed still care, in large measure, about what’s happening in the community. In other words, this study could not link the *Rocky’s* closure to the survey takers’ self-estimates that they consume 8-9% less local news (or between 7 and 10 fewer minutes) on a typical day. Even assuming the survey takers accurately recalled their media usage – a tough task to do for seven days ago, without a media diary, let alone for seven years ago – they could be using slightly less local news for reasons besides the *Rocky’s* closure.
Local TV News and Weekly Papers Replace Rocky

The survey questions that followed shifted toward identifying what news outlets Denver area residents are using to replace the Rocky. Respondents were asked if, at least in part, they use certain local news outlets to replace the paper on a typical day. Those local news organizations were broken into a few key categories, which had been identified and assembled by the Pew Research Center in its 2015 media usage study of Denver. Their ranks included “ethnic media” or news organizations that were generally related to race in some way (e.g. the African American Voice and the Chinese American Post); specialty media or niche publications that focus on a particular type of reporting like features, business reporting, neighborhood news, or the legal field (e.g. ColoradoBiz magazine, Law Week Colorado, and the alternative weekly Westword); community newspapers (i.e. small, hyperlocal papers that are generally weeklies or monthlies); radio news stations; the major broadcast TV news stations, and the area’s PBS affiliate; and digital-only news outlets (a.k.a. digital native news sites), nearly all of which are independent, nontraditional, online-only news media (except for Denver Post’s arts blog the Reverb and its pot news website, the Cannabist). Survey takers were separately asked whether they use each news outlet in a typical day and whether that use is to replace the Rocky. Because survey takers were permitted to select more than one of each type of news outlet little explanation is required for the numbers that follow. First, all 223 survey takers were asked a question like:

Typically, what Denver Metro Area community newspapers do you regularly use for local news? Choose all that apply. If you do not regularly use any Denver Metro Area newspapers, select “none.” If your newspaper is not listed, choose “other.”

For that category, as will be discussed, all 223 survey respondents said they regularly used at least one community newspaper among 30 different newspaper choices. Again, survey takers were allowed to select all the news outlets they used (or none). So, as with other questions, the total number of community news outlets (313) exceeded the sample size. Next, the news outlets
that each research respondent chose appeared underneath a follow-up question: “At least in part, do you use this news outlet to replace the Rocky Mountain News?” In the case of community newspapers, 159 answered “Yes,” while 154 replied “No.” Simply put, that “Yes” total (159) represented the number times that survey takers said they used some combination of community newspapers that included at least one paper for the purpose of replacing the Rocky Mountain News. On the backend, 159 (the total times people said they used one or more community papers to replace the Rocky) was divided by 313 (the total times people used one or more community newspapers for any reason).

By that math, 51% of the times that the survey takers use a community newspaper, they’re doing so to replace the Rocky. Finally, a similar process was followed to figure out which specific news outlets were most commonly among the community newspapers that ordinary Coloradans used to replace the Rocky. For the Aurora Sentinel, for example, 18 people said that, in a typical day, they at least partly use the paper to replace the Rocky. That 18 figure was then divided by 159 (the total number of people who use at least one community newspaper to replace the Rocky). Thus, 11% of the times that people use some combination of community newspapers to replace the Rocky, the Aurora paper was among them. With that explanation out of the way, it’s time to discuss the ways in which, and how well, ordinary Coloradans have been using other local news outlets to replace the Rocky.

“Ethnic media” was the first category about which the respondents were asked, and they were not a popular way to replace the Rocky. In all, 16% of them (36) reported that they replaced the Rocky by using 24 different combinations of 7 different ethnic news outlets. Among the ethnic news outlets, two newspapers, the Denver Weekly News and the Denver Black Pages, were the most common media used to replace the Rocky (See Table 12-11). Yet, this survey’s
respondents hardly ever used ethnic news media or included it among the mix of local news outlets they used to make up for the *Rocky*’s loss. A mere 24 of 52 (44%) combinations of ethnic media that the survey takers reported using included a news outlet that was being used to replace the *Rocky*. The *Denver Weekly News* was the most common substitute for the *Rocky*, but it was still barely used for that purpose. It was among 14 of the 24 (58%) combinations of ethnic media that were utilized to replace the *Rocky*. The *Denver Black Pages* was in second place, but it was among just 3 different combinations of the media outlets that the survey takers used to replace the *Rocky*. (12.5%). Compared to ethnic media, specialty news outlets (i.e. niche media focused on topics like the Catholic church, local businesses, and the arts and culture), were nearly seven times more often used to replace the *Rocky*. In all, 72% of the survey sample (160 of 223) reported using 16 different specialty news outlets as a substitute for the *Rocky*. And they tried to replace the *Rocky* 44% (152) of the times that they used one or more specialty news outlets. The three most popular media in that category were the alternative weekly paper *Westword*, *5280* magazine, a features-oriented magazine about arts, culture, and life in the Denver area, and the *Denver Business Journal*. They were respectively named among 35% (54), 24% (36) and 10% (22) of the specialty media combinations people used to replace the *Rocky* (See Table 12-12).

As for the Mile High City’s last remaining daily, a little more than half the survey sample (118 people, 53%) regularly read the *Denver Post* for local news. As mentioned, 44% of the respondents (98) read or subscribe to *Post* to replace the *Rocky*, while 25% (55) would currently read or get the paper regardless of its rival’s closure. And the remaining 31% (70) neither read nor receive the *Post* (See Table 12-13). Besides the *Denver Post*, the survey recipients were asked about community newspapers, which are generally small weekly papers that are narrowly focused on an outlying Denver town or a specific city neighborhood. Somewhat surprisingly,
100% of the research participants (223) said they use at least one among 26 different community newspapers, in addition to the newspaper names they typed for an “other category” text choice. And more than half the times when people were reading some combination of community newspapers (159, 53%), they were using at least one of those papers to replace the Rocky.

The community newspapers that were most often mentioned as part of people’s media mixes to replace the Rocky were in the “Other Colorado Newspaper” grouping (21%, 34%). That catchall category included 33 publications that community members mentioned once, plus four papers that they referenced repeatedly, including the Longmont Times-Call (mentioned by 7 people), the Colorado Springs Gazette (3), the Fort Collins Coloradan (2), and Westword (2) (which isn’t a community paper but some survey takers are using it as a source of hyperlocal news). Boulder’s Daily Camera, a small daily paper that’s 30 miles outside of Denver, had the second-highest rate of usage among those replacing the Rocky (13%, 21), followed by the aforementioned Aurora Sentinel (11%, 18), and the Arvada Press (7.5%, 12). And there was a fifth-place tie between the Lakewood Sentinel and the Littleton Independent (5%, 8). (See Table 12-14).

As for radio, 56.5% of the sample (126 of 223) reported using at least one of four Denver news radio stations. And just under half the times that the survey takers were listening to news radio stations, or 73 of 160 (46%), they were doing so, at least partly, to replace the Rocky. Two stations were, by far, the most popular substitutes for the Rocky. Half (50.6%) the times that the survey takers listened to some form of news radio to make up for the Rocky’s loss, they chose Colorado Public Radio. KOA AM 850 came in second, as 33% of the times that the survey takers used it they did so to replace the Rocky (See Table 12-14). When it came to TV usage, nearly 85% (202) of the survey takers said they use at least one among the six main local TV
news stations, including the big four local broadcast news affiliates (KDVR Fox Ch. 31, KMGH ABC Ch. 7, KUSA NBC Ch. 9, KCNC CBS Ch. 4), Aurora Channel 8 and Rocky Mountain PBS. Nearly two out of three times (65%, 250) that they watched at least one TV news stations, they were trying to make up for the Rocky’s loss. By far, the most popular TV station was KUSA NBC Ch. 9, both in terms of general usage (54% of the sample or 120), and specifically to replace the Rocky. (See Table 12-15). Those looking for a TV substitute for the Rocky turned to the Gannett-owned NBC 9News 33% (82) of the time, compared with 22% (55) for ABC KMGH Ch. 7, which is owned by the Rocky’s former parent company, Scripps. In third place, 47% (19) used CBS KCNC Ch. 4, followed by Rocky Mountain PBS, which has built a robust journalistic operation under the leadership of former Rocky investigative reporter Laura Frank. The same first through third order held for the general ranking of the most-used local TV news stations in the Denver area. Here, however, it’s necessary to add an important disclaimer. Due to a typo in the survey (in which CBS was mislabeled as NBC in one prominent place), it’s possible that the user figures for CBS are unreliable. In fact, the error was caught based on this sample’s preference for ABC as the second-most popular news outlet (both in general and for replacing the Rocky). Yet, a 2015 Pew Research Center study about Denver’s news ecosystem, and this study’s interviews with local leaders, indicated that the survey sample was likely to rate ABC third behind NBC and CBS\(^9\) (See Table 12-16). The final media usage category to be discussed includes digital-only news outlets (a.k.a. digital native news sites), which, as the survey takers were informed, can only be accessed online or via mobile devices such as cell phones and tablets. Plus, generally speaking, most are local, independently owned and operated news and information sources (i.e. legacy media don’t own them, staff them, or cross publish their content via traditional platforms). There were, however, a few exceptions in this survey’s list of
Denver’s digital-native news sites. Among them were Reverb (an arts and entertainment blog) and the Cannabist (a marijuana news website). Both are owned and staffed by the Denver Post, which sometimes cross-publishes their content in the paper’s Web and print editions.

The local investigative website iNews was another digital-native news site that was linked to a legacy media outlet (i.e. the Rocky Mountain PBS affiliate). Plus, the Huffington Post-Denver website is owned by AOL (which in turn is owned by Verizon). That makes it a corporate media source, not a local, independently owned and operated news blog/website. Additionally, much of the content on the Huffington Post websites is user-generated analysis and commentary, not original local news stories, though the company does create journalism, and it did have a 575-employee editorial staff (as of 2014). Drawing these distinctions matters, in part, because this section’s purpose is to see whether Coloradans are using independent, digital-native news outlets to replace the loss of local newspaper journalism. So, when locals use news sites that are owned and staffed by newspapers, such uses can’t be really counted as replacing the loss of local newspaper coverage (even if those sites carry their own name brands). When it came to using digital-only news outlets, just 37% (83) of this survey’s 223 respondents said they regularly used such media. In all, 83 respondents used 21 different websites, but the survey takers barely used them. And when they used them, it was nearly never to replace the Rocky. Roughly, 35% of the times that they used one or more digital only news outlets (50 of 145), they did so to replace the Rocky.

The survey takers most-often used five digital news outlets to replace the Rocky. But just 8% of the occasions (4 of 50) were for substitution purposes. Again, it bears repeating that those numbers are miniscule. The five most-often used websites included Colorado Peak Politics, DenverArts.org, Huffington Post-Denver, Rocky Mountain PBS iNews, followed by the catchall
text entry category “other digital-only news outlet” (See Table 12-17). That’s not to say that independent, digital-only news sites don’t make rich contributions every day. They do. Just look at the list of Denver’s news sites. Just to name two, Chalkbeat Colorado is an independent nonprofit, donation-based news outlet that does a bang-up job covering education news in Colorado, Indiana, New York, and Tennessee. And the Colorado Independent, which also operates on a nonprofit donation-based model, is a progressive news site that provides meaty local political news and analysis, while employing one of the Rocky’s former star columnists, Mike Littwin. But local, independent, digital-only news outlets have niche audiences, and what they provide is a supplementary stream of specialized news (though they certainly provide public interest journalism, including investigations).

Overall, 37% of the survey takers (83) used 24 different websites in 145 different combinations. Among the most-often used outlets were Huffington Post-Denver (34 uses); Rocky Mountain PBS iNews (11); DenverArts.org (10); The Cannabist (the Denver Post-run website), and Eater Denver (6). Nonetheless, 10 years ago, the combined efforts of the Rocky and the Post could be equated to their newsrooms figuratively serving the public three hearty meals full of news per day. Today, with the Rocky gone and the Post greatly depleted, the latter probably provides the public with one meal per day worth of news. The Denver area’s digital news outlets give the public something akin to a dinner side, a dessert, or a snack. In other words, the Denver news ecosystem and media usage patterns documented in this study underscore the idea that digital-native news outlets have generally supplemented rather than replacing newspapers. That conclusion bears attention given the recent history of scholars predicting that newspapers would become unnecessary and irrelevant for news delivery. Talk of the newspaper industry’s obsolesce first gained steam at the dawn of digital age in the ’70s. And
the popular, coincident belief – that new news creatures, like various versions of digital-native websites, would emerge and evolve to replace newspapers – has spread far and wide since then.

**RQ7b: Missing the Rocky**

Do local residents miss the Rocky, and, if so, what do they miss? In all, at least 54 people recalled at least one facet of the *Rocky* that they really missed. And most of those reasons – with the exception of the great many survey takers who loved its easy-to-read tabloid format and its colorful design – fell under two main thematic categories. For the first theme, “a community connector,” several research participants said that the Denver Metro Area is a little less unified because the *Rocky* made those living there feel like they were all members of one big region. These research participants also thought the *Rocky* and the *Post* connected and unified the community with all its hyperlocal news about the Denver metro region, including its events, local government actions, and the views surrounding them. And the *Rocky* made them feel close to the community because it taught them all about its history and culture. For the second theme, “like a trusted neighbor and a champion of the people,” the research participants described the *Rocky* like a trustworthy next-door source from which they could get reliable bits of hyperlocal news and information. Plus, they counted on the *Rocky* to be a humble champion of the common citizen because the paper reported about, editorialized on, and advocated for causes that would benefit Coloradans of all stripes. As for the *Denver Post*, a strong majority (68%) of the respondents also would miss it if it closed.

**Daily Papers Connect People to the Community**

Several survey takers described the *Rocky* and the *Denver Post* as community connectors. In other words, reading Denver’s daily papers unified those living in and around Denver because the papers gave them the news and opinions they needed to feel like members of one big metro area. Those respondents said things like, reading a daily local paper “makes me feel better
connected to Denver”; “more attached” to their neighbors and “more in touch and involved in local events and activities.” They said both of Denver’s daily papers helped unify the region by giving its residents the tough-to-find hyperlocal news (e.g. sports, opinions, investigations and political news) that they need to be citizens. And the paper taught them about the area’s history and culture:

There was a historical appreciation of Colorado and its residents, and the local coverage of events was excellent.

It kept us informed of our local news, interesting world wide events, social activities, sports, human interest (stories), and everyday life.

I remember it as being proud of Denver and a very strong voice with a lot of history behind it.

I still have copies of the Rocky Mountain News from when the space shuttle Challenger blew up. As we had a CU grad on that mission named Ellison Onizuka, I felt they covered that story from a very personal and local angle.

Another reader noticed that, during the week, the Rocky was all about quick hits – compact, colorful, conveniently packaged coverage – including stories that were contained on a single page and news briefs. But, she added, the paper also published plenty of long-form journalism, especially on the weekends when “the Rocky would cover news stories with more extensive reporting than there currently is, and (there would be) a series on specific topic that would last for an entire week.” As a different former reader put it, the Rocky “had investigative journalism at its best, and the tabloid style of the paper made it more convenient to read.” The Rocky’s coverage was “entertaining and enticing, and it had a calendar that helped me look forward to things to do.” And in the paper’s absence, several survey takers said they couldn’t easily get certain news, like the paper’s “great sports section and good real estate sections,” from other sources.
Like a Trusted Neighbor and a Champion of the People

A number of research participants said they missed the *Rocky* because they’d lost a trustworthy news source and an advocate for all sorts of causes that benefited ordinary Coloradans. Several survey takers anthropomorphized the paper by using human traits to describe it. They referred to it as a “trusted neighbor” that offered news and educated opinions about the community, and they thought of it as an unpretentious champion of ordinary people, that worked to better and unify the Denver area. As two former readers respectively said, “It was like a neighbor in the community talking to you”; and “It had a local feel, (and it was) in tune with the interests and needs of Colorado specifically.” Another two former readers similarly described the *Rocky* as “being more of a small-town-type of newspaper,” and “being more of a ‘down-home’” publication. It was, added the survey respondent, “more informal, but it gave you what you wanted.” *Rocky* readers could relate to each other and the paper “because it was written in down to earth language and it focused on community.” In perhaps the most vivid description, another respondent thought:

The personality of the *Rocky Mountain News* was that of an extremely knowledgeable, trusted, and well loved family friend. He knew his way around the political field and was able to explain both sides of an issue without bias and then give his opinion and why he chose (a position) the way he did. I didn’t always agree with him, but there was never any doubt about where he stood. He wasn’t sneaky about how he presented his opinions. … The characteristic that stood out the most in the *Rocky* was its integrity – something that appears to be intolerable in today’s news. The *Rocky* was willing to publish the unpopular right along with the popular view. That integrity is no more.

Other readers thought the paper was a “people’s champion” in that it conducted investigations, wrote opinions, and provided daily beat coverage that looked out for the best interests of blue collar and middle class Coloradans.

As one survey taker put it, “The *Rocky* did stories that appealed to the common man, not the rich, undeserving 1%. The *Denver Post* is in bed with the 1% and its stories make that fact
very clear.” Similarly, two different survey takers said things like, the Rocky “cared about the consumer and the community,” and it “always seemed to be less corporate than the Post. (The Rocky) covered a lot of local events and people in addition to hard news. I liked that aspect of their reporting.” It’s no wonder that so many readers felt an emotional connection to the paper such that they miss it nearly a decade after its departure. All these years later, many still use human terms to describe the Rocky, like: “independent and spirited”; “quirky”; “friendly and familiar,” “warm, opinionated yet open-minded, and friendly,” and “down to earth and approachable.” Five survey takers separately described the paper as “more personal,” while a sixth chose “more personable” than the Post and other news outlets. For example, several former readers believed strongly in the paper’s ability to give unvarnished opinions without fear or favor. “The reporters seemed to enjoy their jobs, and you could trust in them that there was not an ulterior motive in their reporting.” And, “They didn’t report like homers kissing the Broncos’ butts.”

Those same survey takers were just as likely to reminisce about “all different types of popular local (Rocky) columnists, whose opinions you could find both inside and outside the editorial section. I still think of the likes of Gene Amole and others.” The long-time loyalty evident among a healthy chunk of the study’s participants also came from their ardent belief in the paper’s credibility. Some of the respondents, who gave answers along those lines, described the Rocky as “more balanced politically”; “more informative and unbiased”; more likely to provide “honest coverage of education and religion”; and adept at balancing being both “independent and conservative.”

Most Would Miss the Post If It Closed

It’s already been established that the survey respondents miss the Rocky. But would it matter to community members if the Denver Post closed and they had no local daily newspaper
in print or digital form? That very question was among the last in the survey. More specifically, they were asked, “If the local daily newspaper no longer existed in any form, how would you feel?” In all, nearly seven in ten (68%) said they would long for the paper. The biggest group, 40% (89) said they would “strongly long for a local daily paper.” The second largest group, 28% (63) would “somewhat long” for it, while 14% (32) would “barely long for” it, and 14% (31) “would not” miss a daily local paper. Just 4% (8) didn’t know or had no opinion. The survey respondents’ answers also were rated on a 4-point scale, with “4” representing strongly missing a daily local paper if Denver didn’t have at least one, “1” signifying not missing the paper, and “0” meaning “no opinion.” (See Table 12-18) Overall, the survey participants (N = 223) tallied a mean score of nearly “3” (2.87, SD = 1.18) – meaning the average respondent would miss not having a local daily paper. All 184 respondents, who said they’d “strongly,” “somewhat,” or “barely” miss the disappearance of the area’s last local daily paper were asked an open-ended follow-up question. That question was: “What about the local daily newspaper would make you long for it if it no longer existed?” And it produced some interesting results.

When it comes to community unity, a number of survey takers think that it’s bad enough that the Rocky is gone, but the Post’s closure would make matters worse. As one survey taker put it, the Post’s disappearance would mean “the loss of a forum that focuses on events, people, and education in our community and it provides accountability for local government.” Without at least having the Post, others thought that:

I would be disappointed that local events, crime, protests, and politics are no longer reported on. I would like to continue to have those updates available, at least online. The news has also been important in emergency situations that may or may not affect family and friends.

Honestly, with the advent of news on the Internet, any national news I read in the paper is stale. It is the local news that I turn to a local paper for.
If there wasn’t at least one local daily paper, others wondered, how they would “find information about the community quickly,” “know what’s happening in my community,” and get “different perspectives of the news and opinions”? With other news outlets, nowadays, it’s hard to “check what’s happening with my neighborhood” because metro dailies are among the few providers of hyperlocal news. As one typical survey respondent lamented, with no Post, “I’d need to find another source or sources for the variety of opinions I’d miss.” Between the previous survey questions and this one, it’s clear that a number of community members are disappointed with the Post following years of staff and page cuts since the Rocky’s closure. But as with the Rocky, they think the Post makes them feel more connected to the community because of its hard-to-find hyperlocal news and opinions. Aside from any personal feelings about the Post, the fact that so many would miss it also is a reflection of their community pride (i.e. a feeling that having a daily paper makes a community a community). As mentioned, when both community members and local leaders were asked if newspapers were necessary and relevant, nowadays, a number thought that having a big daily paper conferred status on the community. So, they’d be embarrassed if a city the size of Denver didn’t have at least one big daily paper.

**RQ8b: Uses and Gratifications**

What, if any, uses do local residents think the Rocky served in their lives, and how, if at all, did they derive gratification from reading the paper? Nearly eight in ten of the survey takers said that reading the Rocky was at least a somewhat useful (79%, 175), and slightly more more (82%, 184) thought it was at least somewhat satisfying. Both local leaders and ordinary Coloradans listed the same five uses and gratifications for using the Rocky. The survey takers most commonly used the Rocky for “information about and interpretation of public affairs,” for a “respite,” as a “tool for daily living,” for “fostering social contact,” and to satisfy their “habits and rituals.” When the paper was still around, its five most frequently read parts included
community/neighborhood news, advertisements, business news, comics, and features and lifestyle stories. And the parts of the paper that had the highest raw number of users, regardless of how often each of those users read them, were the Rocky’s community/neighborhood news, features and lifestyle stories, investigations, national and international news, and sports.

The Rocky’s Uses

As with local leaders, the final part of determining whether the Rocky’s closure personally affected the region’s residents entailed asking them how, if at all, they used the paper and what, if anything, made it satisfying. In all, 79% of the survey takers (175) found it to be useful, compared with 10% (17), who thought it was useless, while the rest had no opinion. More specifically, 22% (49) found the Rocky to be “very useful,” and 57% (126) thought it was “somewhat useful,” 4% (10), said it was “somewhat useless,” 3% (7) declared it to be “very useless,” and 14% (31) were neutral or they had no opinion (See Table 12-19). In total, 83% (184) thought reading the paper was satisfying, including 31% (69), who thought it was “very satisfying,” and 52% (115), who said it was “somewhat satisfying.” A total of just 6% thought reading the Rocky was unsatisfying, including 3% (6) who said it was “somewhat unsatisfying,” and another 3% (7), who thought it was very unsatisfying, while 12% (26) were neutral or had no opinion (See Table 21-20). So, what made the Rocky satisfying and useful to read? Survey takers listed the same five uses and gratifications that the mass communications scholar, Bernard Berelson, identified as far back as the late ’40s. To begin with, the paper was a source of “information about and interpretation of public affairs.”

Information About, and Interpretation of, Public affairs

At least 40 survey takers said the Rocky helped them learn about, care about, and understand local and regional news on a deeper level, and many felt personally connected to the paper’s reporters and columnists. The survey respondents often referred to the Rocky’s reporters
and columnists as strong, honest, unbiased, and caring. Many of the paper’s readers felt empowered that they could choose from an assortment of news just by flipping a newspaper page or clicking on a different section of the paper’s website. In contrast, some survey takers felt like watching TV news programs wasn’t comparable to reading the Rocky because TV stations present the news in a linear fashion (i.e. people can flip a newspaper’s pages, but a TV news program presents the news in one block). Typical answers included:

The Rocky Mountain News had incredible journalists. (They were) real writers who investigated stories with as much enthusiasm as a college journalism student – read, a lot of enthusiasm! The RMN also had editors who appreciated letters from readers, and who didn’t respond with hatred and vitriol like the editors of the Denver Post do!

I felt that the writers of the Rocky Mountain News really cared about the city, the suburbs, and the people who were living here. Their editorials were written by “friends,” who really cared about us and what was going on in our communities. The Rocky was able to present both sides of issues in a truly unbiased manner in their articles, though some of the editorials were quite biased and made no bones about it. There was nothing sneaky or underhanded about the paper. I felt it was an honest and forthright publication that I trusted.

(The Rocky) kept me updated on local and national news without sitting in front of a screen. I could choose what interested me that warranted the time investment of reading about it. It was more of an active endeavor, instead of passively watching a screen. It also exposed me to other points of view through the letters to the editor and editorial sections. TV doesn’t have as much of the public opinion pieces.

(The Rocky) kept me up on local goings on in neighborhoods that I rarely if ever got to. It published human interest articles that were interesting and helpful about local businesses and people. It made sure that if there were fun, artistic, or ethnic functions happening, their readers knew about them. Even if they didn’t serve the “right” political party or economic group, the poor were served as well as the rich, and it didn’t have to be sensational to make it into their pages.

I felt informed and well-educated by the Rocky Mountain News. They had honest journalists full of integrity. They also had very few typos and spelling and grammatical errors, unlike the Post.
Several survey takers also said that the *Rocky* motivated them to follow local news that they wouldn’t have otherwise seen or cared about, and the paper was a source of educated, credible viewpoints on local issues. As one former *Rocky* reader put it:

(The *Rocky*) offered additional information and viewpoints. Having two local newspapers in a city of Denver’s size makes sense. There are people of all races, ethnicities, and opinions in our area; having two newspapers meant that more people could see themselves and their opinions represented in print.

Others said things like: “It was rewarding getting the information I needed from a reliable source, (and) knowing it was a trusted news source made it satisfying”; “I miss the in-depth coverage of local elections, particularly the synopsis of ballot issues and analysis of candidate platforms”; “it was a forum (of opinions and) reporting that I trusted”; “I felt very close to some of the reporters and editors” and trusted them. In the same vein, others believed the *Rocky* was useful and satisfying because it “educated me and made me interested in what was going on in the world and local community”; it was a source of “local and national issues that we may not (have been) exposed to if the paper didn’t arrive each day”; it “was my main source for learning about what was going on around me”; and the paper “filled the gaps that other sources had skimmed over, while offering alternative editorial positions.”

**A Tool For Daily Living**

One of the less common themes that surfaced was the idea that the *Rocky* was a tool to help people live their lives every day. Among the dozen or so survey takers, who expressed that sentiment, were those who recalled how the paper was useful because “it provided coupons and I could teach my kids to read and be interested in local events”; it “gave me the information and news I needed to make decisions on what I was doing”; it provided “local events to do with the family”; it allowed readers to “check for and plan things to do for the weekend”; and it served as a source of “inspiration, puzzles, and a way of knowing what was going on in my city and the
world.” Others recalled how, “when I was unemployed, the Rocky had a very large want ad section”; the paper was great for “finding ways to help in my community.” It was useful for “shopping coupons … and classified ads,” and it could be used to “keep up on all local news, to follow local sports teams, and to get weather forecasts, and help wanted ads for the local area.”

A Respite

Twice as many survey takers, or roughly two dozen, focused on how reading the Rocky was a relaxing, leisurely activity. They said things like: “It was a way of spending my mornings reading the Rocky Mountain News while enjoying breakfast and my morning coffee”; “I felt I had a better grip on my day with my daily habit of reading over my coffee and also updating the life of my favorite columnists”; “I enjoyed the entertainment sections as well as the variety of comics and self-help columns”; and “it was a source of enjoyment first and knowledge second.” Why did they think reading the Rocky was such an enjoyable experience? Nearly 20 respondents felt a big part of the answer was the paper’s design. As they put it, “The format of the Rocky Mountain News was easier to read and navigate than the Denver Post is”; “to be honest, it was the tabloid format (that I loved)! I hate big papers as you can’t walk and read them or you can’t read (them) as easily at a coffee shop”; the Rocky “was readily available, the format was easy to follow, there were numerous sections, and I could access the help wanted sections easily”; “the format of the paper was superior to the competition, the articles were well laid out and very readable”; and “the articles were short and a quick read, and the paper was sectioned off to easily find local news fast.”

Fostering Social Contact

Bernard Berelson merged two themes into one in his landmark 1948 study about why people read newspapers. He reported that his survey takers read New York City’s newspapers as a way of “increasing social prestige” (i.e. to sound smart and up-to-date about current events
around friends and family) and for “fostering social contact.” Unlike Berelson’s research participants, this survey’s respondents did not say that they read the Rocky to to be knowledgeable and to make a good impression around their peers. Instead, the ordinary Coloradans in this study gave answers that matched Berelson’s “social contact” theme in that reading the Rocky made them feel closer to the rest of the region and its inhabitants. As two survey takers said, the Rocky was “a lifeline to the world,” and “it helped me feel a bit more connected to my family and city. The Internet is not a good way of really doing that.” Along the same lines, others said the paper “was well written and relevant to my life because I had recently moved to Colorado and I needed to learn about the area”; it “let me know about what else was happening in other communities”; and it provided “information about the world around us that we may not seek out or know to seek out.” To read the Rocky, they added, was to be “community-oriented” and to be “up-to-date on events in throughout the area.”

**Habits and Rituals**

Finally, as with the interviews conducted with community leaders, the ordinary Coloradans, who were surveyed, said they loved incorporating the Rocky into their daily routines. For many, every day, it was a source of relaxation and information, including those who said things like:

(The Rocky) was a way to start the day, a daily ritual that put my mind in gear and on track for the day.

(The Rocky) was part of my morning routine and it helped me start my day.

My son and I would read the paper. He was going into preschool in 2008. This helped us start our mornings.

It was not only the information … but the feel, smell and even the sounds of sitting down and unfolding and reading the pages in your particular order (that I loved).

The ritual itself of reading a newspaper every morning was satisfying.
(The Rocky) was a positive way to spend time while I was eating breakfast, I could go to work with a knowledge of what was going on in the world that day.

(The Rocky) was just a fantastic way to start my day, to keep informed of what was going on in the world, and to learn things.

Besides broadly asking Coloradans about how they used and enjoyed the Rocky, the survey takers also were asked to name and rank the parts of the paper that they most most often read.

**Most Popular and Most Used Parts of the Rocky**

The final newspaper uses and gratifications-related survey question listed 18 different parts of the Rocky. The research participants were asked to rank (from first to fifth) the parts of the paper that they most often read. Only those who said that the Rocky was either useful (n = 175) or satisfying (n = 184) were eligible to answer the question. Two different lists of answers were produced as a result. The first list included popularity rankings, from “1” to “5,” in which the highest score that a section of the paper could get was “1” (See Table 12-21). The second list of results includes the raw number of survey takers, who used to check out different sections of the paper, regardless of how often they actually read them. (See Table 12-22). That list is best understood as containing the most used sections of the Rocky. The five most frequently read (i.e. most popular) parts the Rocky were community or neighborhood news (e.g. a parade story, a calendar of local activities); advertisements (e.g. coupons, classifieds, display ads); business news (e.g. local coverage of the economy, real estate, housing, transportation, and health care); comics; and features and lifestyle stories (e.g. homes, gardens, food, restaurants, bars, fashion, arts and entertainment). The sections of the paper with the largest raw numbers of users, regardless of how often each of those users read them, were for community or neighborhood news, features and lifestyle stories, investigations, national and international news, and sports.
Table 12-1. Home county, gender

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<th>Demographics</th>
<th>%</th>
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<td>From Other Colorado counties</td>
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<td>78</td>
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<tr>
<td>Female</td>
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Table 12-2. Education

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Table 12-3. Income

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<th>%</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>Less than $10,000</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$10,000 to $14,999</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$15,000 to $24,999</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$25,000 to $34,999</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$35,000 to $49,999</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$50,000 to $99,999</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$100,000 to $149,999</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$150,000 to $199,999</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$200,000 or more</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>223</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 12-4. General news consumption

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Media usage</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Light news consumer</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderate news consumer</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heavy news consumer</td>
<td>65.5</td>
<td>146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than once per week</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-2 days per week</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-4 days per week</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 or more days per week</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>223</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 12-5. Frequency of reading paper

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographics</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less than once per week</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-2 days per week</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-4 days per week</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 or more days per week</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>223</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 12-6. Preferred method of learning information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Methods of learning information</th>
<th>Preference rank</th>
<th>People using it</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Info directly from the community organizations or public figures</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local TV news (online, on a mobile device, or on a TV set)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local newspaper news (online, on a mobile device, or in print)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Word of mouth from friends, family, and co-workers</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>163</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local radio news (online, on a mobile device, or on a radio)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local websites not run by traditional news media (e.g. bloggers)</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ads from non-news sources (e.g. on TV shows, billboards)</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 12-7. Satisfaction levels

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Satisfaction level</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very satisfied</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat satisfied</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral or no opinion</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat unsatisfied</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very unsatisfied</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>223</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 12-8. Whether the Rocky’s closure changed society

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Likelihood the paper’s demise made a difference</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very likely</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat likely</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral or no opinion</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat unlikely</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very unlikely</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>223</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 12-9. Impact of newspaper closure on ability to follow local news

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Would local newspaper closure matter?</th>
<th>% of Coloradans</th>
<th>% of U.S. residents*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Would have a major effect</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Would have a minor effect</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Would have no effect</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know or no opinion</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Based on 2012 study by the Pew Research Center’s Internet & American Life Project.11

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Table 12-10. Local news consumption

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Media usage since <em>Rocky</em> closed</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Uses more news since it closed</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uses less news since closed</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uses same amount as before it closed</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know or remember</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>223</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 12-11. Use of ethnic news outlets to replace RMN

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnic news Outlets</th>
<th>Uses to replace RMN (out of 24)</th>
<th>% of times it’s used to replace RMN</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Denver Weekly News</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>58.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denver Black Pages</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>El Hispano</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colorado Chinese News</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>La Voz</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American Voice</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Viva Colorado</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

32 of 223 (16%) reported using one or more of 7 ethnic news outlets in a typical day, and 44% of the times they used them (24 of 52), they did so to replace the *Rocky*.

Table 12-12. Use of specialty media to replace RMN

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Specialty news outlets</th>
<th>Uses to replace RMN (out of 152)</th>
<th>% of times it’s used to replace RMN</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Westword</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>35.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5280 Magazine</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>23.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denver Business Journal</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denver Voice</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>303 Magazine</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denver Catholic Register</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ColoradoBiz</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aurora Magazine</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life on Capitol Hill</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Front Porch Stapleton</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colorado Statesman</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Country News</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Out Front Colorado</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life at Ken-Caryl</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Law Week Colorado</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colorado Expression</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.65</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

160 of 223 (72%) used one or more of Denver’s 16 specialty news outlets in a typical day, and 44% of the times they used them (152 of 344), they did so to replace the *Rocky*.
Table 12-13. Denver Post readers replacing RMN

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Daily newspaper readership</th>
<th>Uses to replace RMN</th>
<th>% using DP to replace RMN</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Denver Post</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

118 of 223 (53%) regularly read the *Denver Post* in a typical day, and 44% of the overall survey sample reads the paper at least partly to replace the *Rocky*.

Table 12-14. Use of community newspapers to replace RMN

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Community Metro Area</th>
<th>Uses to replace RMN (out of 159)</th>
<th>% of times it’s used to replace RMN</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Other Colorado Newspaper</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boulder Daily Camera</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aurora Sentinel</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arvada Press</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>7.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lakewood Sentinel</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Littleton Independent</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Broomfield Enterprise</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highlands Ranch Herald</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Columbine Courier</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centennial Citizen</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Douglas County News-Press</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glendale Cherry Creek Chronicle</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northglenn-Thornton Sentinel</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Westminster Window</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Castle Rock News-Press</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brighton Banner</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Golden Transcript</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parker Chronicle</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canyon Courier</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Castle Pines News-Press</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Englewood Herald</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lone Tree Voice</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adams County Sentinel</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foothills Transcript</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Villager Newspaper</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wheat Ridge Transcript</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.63</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

223 of 223 (100%) used one or more of 25 different Denver area community newspapers, plus those in an “other” category, and 72% of the times they read them (160 of 223), they did so to replace the *Rocky*. 
Table 12-15. Use of radio stations to replace RMN

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Radio news stations</th>
<th>Uses to replace (out of 73)</th>
<th>% of times it’s used to replace RMN</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Colorado Public Radio</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>50.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KOA AM 850</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>31.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KHOW AM 630</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KGNU FM 88.5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

126 of 223 (56.5%) listened to one or more of four Denver area news radio stations in a typical day, and 46% of the times they listened (73 of 160), they did so to replace the Rocky.

Table 12-16. Use of TV news stations to replace RMN

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TV news stations</th>
<th>Uses to replace (out of 250)</th>
<th>% of time it’s used to replace RMN</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>KUSA NBC Ch. 9</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KMGH ABC Ch. 7</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KCNC CBS Ch. 4*</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KDVR Fox Ch. 31</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rocky Mountain PBS</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>9.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aurora Channel 8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

203 of 223 (90.5%) watched one or more of Denver’s six TV news stations in a typical day, and 65% of the times they watched (250 of 385), they did so to replace the Rocky. *CBS total may be skewed due to typo in survey.
Table 12-17. Use of digital-only media to replace RMN

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TV news stations</th>
<th>Uses to replace (out of 50)</th>
<th>% of time it’s used to replace RMN</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Colorado Peak</td>
<td>4 8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Politics</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. DenverArts.org</td>
<td>4 8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Huffington Post-</td>
<td>4 8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denver</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Rocky Mountain</td>
<td>4 8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PBS iNews</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Other Digital-Only News Outlet</td>
<td>4 8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Colorado Independent</td>
<td>3 6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Denver Cityscape</td>
<td>3 6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Eater Denver</td>
<td>3 6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. ColfaxAvenue.com</td>
<td>2 4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. The Cannabist (Denver Post publication)</td>
<td>2 4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. ColoradoPols.com</td>
<td>2 4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Go Denver – Employ and Assist</td>
<td>2 4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Health News Colorado</td>
<td>2 4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Mile High Gay Guy</td>
<td>2 4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Weather5280</td>
<td>2 4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. 5280Fire</td>
<td>2 4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. BigMedia.org</td>
<td>1 2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. Built In Colorado</td>
<td>1 2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. Chalkbeat Colorado</td>
<td>1 2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. Denver iJournal</td>
<td>1 2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21. Reverb (Denver Post publication)</td>
<td>1 2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

83 of 223 (37%) used one or more of Denver’s 21 digital-only news outlets in a typical day, and 34.5% of the times used them (50 of 145), they did so to replace the Rocky.

Table 12-18. Missing the newspaper

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>If a daily local paper no longer existed in any form …</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Would strongly long for a local daily paper</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Would somewhat long for a local daily paper</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Would barely long for a local daily paper</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Would not long for a local daily paper</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do not know or have no opinion</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>100</td>
<td>223</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 12-19. How useful was reading the RMN?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Utility of the Rocky</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very useful</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat useful</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat useless</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very useless</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral or no opinion</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>223</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 12-20. How satisfying was reading the RMN?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gratification from reading the Rocky</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very satisfying</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat satisfying</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat unsatisfying</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very unsatisfying</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral or no opinion</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>223</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 12-21. Most popular Rocky sections

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Overall section rank</th>
<th>Different parts of the newspaper</th>
<th>Mean score on 1 to 5 scale of most popular sections</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Community or neighborhood events</td>
<td>2.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Advertisements</td>
<td>2.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Business news</td>
<td>2.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Comics</td>
<td>2.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Features and lifestyle stories</td>
<td>2.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Investigations</td>
<td>2.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Cops and courts coverage</td>
<td>2.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>National and international news</td>
<td>2.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Sports</td>
<td>2.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Local photographs</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Politics and government reporting on local and state governments</td>
<td>2.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>3.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Regional news</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Website/online-only attractions</td>
<td>3.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Opinion pages</td>
<td>3.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Traffic and weather</td>
<td>3.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Miscellaneous/additional local beats</td>
<td>3.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Obituaries</td>
<td>3.95</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This question could only be answered by those who said the Rocky was useful (n = 175) or satisfying (n= 184).
Table 12-22. Most used Rocky sections

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Overall section rank</th>
<th>Different parts of the newspaper</th>
<th>Raw number of users who read newspaper sections</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Community or neighborhood events</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Features and lifestyle stories</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Investigations</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>National and international news</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Sports</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Advertisements</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Comics</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Business news</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Politics and government reporting on local and state governments</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Regional news</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Opinion pages</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Local photographs</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Cops and courts coverage</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Miscellaneous/additional local beats</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Traffic and weather</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Obituaries</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Website/online-only attractions</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Out of all the survey takers who said reading the Rocky was either useful (n = 175) or satisfying (n= 184)

Notes


2. Ibid.

3. For the statistics regarding the Hickenlooper’s election, see: Denver Post Staff, “Voter turnout appears low in Denver’s all-mail election,” Denver Post, May 3, 2011, http://tinyurl.com/hlqdyar; For the statistics regarding the more recent election of Denver Mayor Michael Hancock, see: CPR News Staff and the Associated Press, “Hancock cruises to re-election in Denver mayoral race, Colorado Public Radio,” May 6, 2015,

4. The world has David Erickson, a veteran marketing, communications, and public relations professional from the Minneapolis-St. Paul Area, to thank for helping to preserve the “Best of Jaywalking” segment from Jay Leno’s final Tonight Show episode on May 29, 2009. Over the course of 17 years, Leno aired “Jaywalking” segments in which he visited public places and quizzed the people he encountered with basic questions regarding civics, U.S. history, and current and historical events. Such questions appear on the U.S. citizenship test. See: David Erickson, “The Best Of Jaywalking – Final Jay Leno Tonight Show,” Videolicious.tv, June 2, 2009, http://tinyurl.com/kvxthy.


9 Ibid.


By one account, Marcel Ravidat and his friends were just looking for his dog, Robot, after the pooch fell into a hole chasing a rabbit one warm September 1940 afternoon in the woods of southwestern France. In another version of the story, Ravidat and the boys were strolling along a ridge in the forest when Robot found a hole that had been punched in the ground by a downed oak tree. And when the dog began digging around it, the four teenagers lent a hand. Yet another telling placed Ravidat alone amid all the pines, oaks, and blackberry brambles. There, he found the hole, grew curious, and returned to the forest a few days later with his friends and his dog as a makeshift excavation crew. However it happened, however that 18-year-old French apprentice mechanic came upon and pried open that crack in the ground, however he shimmied into the cool, dark, primordial chamber below, he made one of the most important discoveries in human history. When Ravidat lit a grease gun from a local garage, he exposed the secret, vivid, 17,000-year-old menagerie of ancient animals now known as the Lascaux cave paintings. It was a veritable “Versailles of prehistory.” The 2,100 intricate paintings and engravings of “charging bulls, leaping stags and galloping horses” weren’t the first prehistoric cave art found in the region. But they were priceless – the most colorful and best-preserved works ever discovered.¹

Today, it may seem a bit hyperbolic to think that a newspaper like the Rocky Mountain News might be comparable to the triumph of early human achievement that is Lascaux. But, as is evident in this chapter’s results summary, it’s not such an airy-fairy comparison. Both those invaluable paintings and the Rocky are examples of what the legal scholar Margaret Jane Radin would call “contested commodities,” which can include the tangible (e.g. art or organs) and the abstract (e.g. human labor and sexuality). Twenty years ago, in her book Contested...
Commodities: The Trouble with Trade in Sex, Children, Body Parts, and Other Things, Radin argued that some goods and services occupy a special category. Although values can be assigned to these “contested commodities,” and they can be bought and sold, they also carry an additional, unquantifiable value because they’re quintessentially human. Without them, people would be deprived, to differing degrees, of the physical, mental or social sustenance necessary to flourish in a civil society. Radin’s definition of human flourishing is rooted in the philosopher John Dewey’s theories about democracy and human nature. Dewey believed that “a particular kind of education is a primary requirement if the polity is to support human flourishing.” Simply put, he thought that individuals can only fulfill their true potential if they work cooperatively in groups. And he believed that living in groups helps turn humans into thinking, communicating beings, who share and save knowledge, and create societal institutions to look out for each other.

Dewey held what amounted to a “broadly republican conception of politics” and free expression in that he maintained that “the purpose of free speech is to foster self-government.” And he thought the newspaper reading was among the vital “range of activities that also foster the appropriate self-constitution of persons as well-developed citizens.” Only journalism, Dewey said, “can furnish knowledge as a precondition of public judgments” through its “daily and unremitting assembly and interpretation of ‘news,’” and its subsequent presentation in a widely accessible format with mass appeal. Most of this study’s participants thought of the Rocky as more than just another product like a bottle of cologne or a tennis racket. They too viewed the paper as making special, irreplaceable contributions to their lives and to the community. Like works of art, the Rocky was a uniquely human form of expression that helped define the community and its inhabitants while connecting its members. This study’s participants talked about how the paper helped them adjust to, join, and feel like members of the Denver
Metro Area, and they thought the *Rocky* created a collective body of knowledge and a community spirit. The paper also helped them feel like better citizens just for reading it, and they said paper served as the community’s historian and its biographer in addition to being a major civic booster for the region.

Meanwhile, there’s no doubt that the *Rocky* occupied the “double bind” that Radin explained is at the heart of the contestation over contested commodities. On the one hand, contested commodities often must be sold to generate the revenue necessary for human subsistence. On the other hand, given their commodities’ extra-market worth, society is often divided about selling and pricing contested commodities because doing so can cause troublesome, negative consequences. The contest over the *Rocky* lay in its dueling goals of earning profits and serving the public. The *Rocky*’s social mission included monitoring those in power, promoting a diversity of viewpoints, and giving Coloradans the information they needed to make decisions to better their lives, whether they were picking a car or electing a local leader. But, ultimately, the paper’s market imperatives to earn profits won out over that mission. The following results summary reiterates that most of the nearly 264 research participants perceived the *Rocky* as something more than a product, and they think its closure affected the community in several ways. Both the Denver area’s local leaders and its residents said the paper played a number of invaluable roles in their lives and in the community.

**RQ1: Purposes and Social Mission**

Community leaders and ordinary Coloradans did, indeed, think that the *Rocky* carried on a public service mission, and both named the same three ways in which they thought the paper did so. The first way was by “amplifying and advocating” the viewpoints and interests of a broad swath of society. The paper also balanced out the *Post*’s liberal leanings and its positions on various local issues. As mentioned, the second way that survey takers and community leaders
said the *Rocky* performed a public service was by being a “philanthropist and a civic evangelist.” It didn’t just raise millions of dollars for various local organizations. It also rooted for and spreading the word about the region’s successes and strengths. Third, once again, local leaders and community members wish the *Rocky* was still around to serve as a “historian and a community biographer.” In those capacities, it recorded the region’s most significant happenings, served as a repository of institutional knowledge, created one big historical narrative, and promoted a discourse about how the community should be changed for the better.

**RQ2: Informing to Promote Civic Engagement**

The Denver area’s local leaders identified three ways in which the *Rocky*’s closure affected how local residents learn about and spread the news and information necessary to participate in the community. First, they mourn the loss of the paper as “democratic decoder” that helped educate them and explain what was happening politically and in their communities. Second, more than ever with the *Rocky* gone, the Denver area’s community leaders said that local reporters simply convey messages like stenographers or dumb pipes, instead of actively pursuing, verifying, interpreting and synthesizing information to create original journalistic accounts. Third, in the paper’s absence, the community leaders think there are “narrower channels” for their messages – meaning they think its tougher to get the local media to cover stories and that the resultant coverage is less accurate and thorough. The survey takers, however, disagreed with their community leaders in one regard. Those surveyed said they don’t need the *Rocky* to be civically and politically engaged. They think that they’re doing just fine learning about public service-related activities and community groups because they have plenty of sources to tell them how to vote and be active in the community.
RQ3: Closure Affecting Community

Three main themes emerged between the survey takers and the interviewees regarding how they think the Rocky’s closure has affected the community. First, a number of the interviewees and survey takers said the paper’s coverage used to help them anticipate what might be going on in the local area (e.g. if a city department was inefficient or corrupt). But now they have no way of knowing what they don’t know. Thus, many of this study’s participants believe their knowledge of what’s going on behind the scenes of society (e.g. in the back halls of mayor’s office) has moved from a state of “known unknowns” (i.e. uncertainties that they could foresee) “to unknowable.” Second, quite a few local leaders and ordinary Coloradans thought that the Rocky played a critical role in checking and balancing the positions and viewpoints of both local leaders and other news outlets like the Denver Post. In the paper’s absence, they think the local government and other area news outlets are “unchecked and imbalanced.” In other words, the Rocky’s closure means there’s one less powerful news outlet creating a diversity of viewpoints and spurring the public to press community leaders for changes. Third, and separately from the interviewees, a healthy portion of the survey takers think that the Rocky’s death has led to “community disunity.” With the Rocky gone, they believe there’s less community cohesion, and they think local citizens are somewhat more apathetic to each other and their towns.

RQ4: Rocky’s Replaceability

When it comes to whether the Rocky is replaceable, two main themes emerged among this study’s interviewees. First, the area’s local leaders said that the paper has not been replaced because most believe that the local media used to shine a “spotlight” on them, but now local news outlets only provide “spotty light.” In other words, the local leaders said that the media often miss the minutiae of government, and other important daily happenings, while gravitating toward covering only the most obvious or controversial stories. Ironically, several interviewees
went so far as sentimentally long for the days when the press policed and pestered them. Second, like the survey takers’ answers to the last research question regarding whether the Rocky’s closure had changed the community, the local leaders said there’s “community disunity” because the paper is gone. A number of the interviewees think that other local news outlets haven’t replaced how well the Rocky integrated people into the region by teaching them about its character, its culture, and its history. As for the survey takers, they were about evenly split into three groups regarding whether the Rocky has been replaceable. The first group of survey takers was satisfied but hardly ecstatic with the local news, so they’re best characterized as “surviving with local news.” The general consensus among them was that the area’s news outlets do somewhere between a serviceable and a mediocre job providing the news. Some in this group were already Denver Post readers, while others started using the Post and other news outlets to replace the paper after it closed.

The second category of satisfied local news consumers said they’re “thriving with digital news” in the Rocky’s absence. They think the Web is rich in sources of news and information, particularly national and international news, which several of these survey takers prefer. The third group of survey takers was unsatisfied with how well other local news outlets have replaced the Rocky. Like the community leaders, these survey takers thought that the local media have gone from shining a spotlight on the community’s social institutions to providing spotty light. More simply put, they don’t think the press is holding their local leaders accountable or covering all the local news that merits attention. This group of survey takers also voiced a certain amount of “media mistrust.” Many among them believe that the Post and other Denver news outlets aren’t credible, primarily because they think they’re politically biased and motivated by making profits. Plus, a fair of number of the unsatisfied survey said that, in the Rocky’s absence, the
region’s remaining local news media are “impersonal and uninspiring.” These study participants said that the Rocky, by comparison, had a lovable colorful, compact tabloid format, skilled writers, and moving columnists that just haven’t been replaced.

**RQ5: Necessity and Relevance**

Four main themes were evident among the local leaders after they were asked questions about whether local newspapers are still necessary and relevant. First, they said that Rocky and the Post made each other necessary and relevant. In other words, they think the two papers were “better off together” because they drove each other to produce higher quality journalism. And the presence of two papers expanded the opportunities for new coverage for deserving stories. They still think the Post is necessary and relevant today, but it’s not nearly as much of both as when the Rocky was around. Second, the local leaders said that, when they’re trying to disseminate their messages, there’s a “credibility gap” between them and the public. Although the newsmakers believe they have plenty of tools to share news and information with the public, the interviewees said that the public trusts messages more when they come from a newspaper. Thus, in that way, the Post also still necessary and relevant. Thus, the Post is still necessary and relevant in that it’s a third party that vets, verifies, evaluates, and investigates information in ways that make the news more credible than if the newsmakers themselves share it. Third, many of Denver’s community leaders think “the juice isn’t worth the squeeze” when it comes to the effort and money required to read Denver’s remaining daily paper. Several of the interviewees said that, since the Rocky closed, the Post is radically smaller, so its far less necessary and relevant compared to when its competitor was around. Fourth, a healthy portion of the community leaders also said they now rely less on the traditional media and more on technology, like social media, and former newspaper
reporters, who they’ve hired as communications specialists, to tell their organizations’ stories.

The survey takers were split fairly evenly into two groups, including those who that a daily local newspaper is irreplaceable and those who believe there would no effect from the region not having one. Three themes emerged among those who thought there would be an effect if the Denver Post closed. First, a number of the research participants pointed out that there’s still a “digital divide” in this world, which is to say that the Rocky isn’t so easily replaced because not everyone has high-speed Internet and a smartphone to get digital news. These same survey takers also often expressed a “print preference” for the old-fashioned version of the newspaper because they love the feel of a newspaper in their hands and reading the paper has long been a ritual for them. Second, like their local leaders, a number of survey takers were concerned that the loss of Denver’s last daily paper would lead to “community disunity.” The Denver Metro Area is large, and they believe that the Post makes them care more about the people and the news throughout the area, while helping to create a common identity for the region’s residents. Third, these survey takers worry about “losing irreplaceable local news and opinions” because they think a daily local newspaper is an unmatched source of hyperlocal news and opinions. Some added that a daily local paper is a vital part of what makes a community a community (i.e. they’d be embarrassed if a city as big Denver didn’t have one).

Three different themes were present among the survey takers who thought that newspaper closures have no effect on a community. The first might be best dubbed “the readers are alright” because these survey takers were slightly bothered about the idea of losing the Denver Post. But they thought the loss of a local newspaper was an
inconvenience that they could easily overcome. Second, several of these survey takers could be described as “media Macgyvers” because, like the former action TV star of the same name, they’re savvy, clever, and enterprising at finding exactly the information they want to know. Third, there were plenty of respondents who simply “don’t care a whit or a bit” about replacing the local news if the Post disappears. These survey takers either didn’t read the Rocky or the Post or they’re simply more interested in national and international news.

Ultimately, the survey takers’ responses reinforced the idea that the Rocky’s closure was done for business reasons. A great many people liked the Rocky much more than the Post. It didn’t close because the community liked the Post more. The Rocky shuttered, in large part, because the Post’s owner, Dean Singleton, and his private company, MediaNews, were willing to lose more money than the Rocky’s publicly traded owner, Scripps. As Singleton himself said in an interview for this study, internal marketing research “told us that their readers were more loyal to them than ours.” That’s because Rocky, he added, attracted a great many “old-time” Colorado readers, who’d been in the state the longest. And those were exactly the sort of people who were most likely to appreciate it – not just for its merits, were plentiful, but because of its history and the mark they made on an entire region.

**RQ6: News Consumption Habits**

Two themes emerged among the community leaders questioned about their news consumption habits since the Rocky’s closure. First, several think the community is suffering from a “wounded body of knowledge.” Without the Rocky, they believe the region’s remaining news outlets are producing fewer water cooler stories (i.e. those that everyone thinks and talks about in public places). Whereas local newspaper stories used to inspire people to convene and
converse, the Rocky’s loss means there’s less incidental learning, nowadays, according to community leaders. Second, the interviewees said that, in the paper’s absence, more Coloradans have been “entering echo chambers.” In other words, many of the region’s leaders think that the region is growing more polarized because they believe that locals are more likely to only seek out the opinions that match their own. Additionally, the 41 community leaders interviewed primarily use a few different local news outlets to replace the Rocky. The three most popular were the Denver Post (48%, 20), the Denver Business Journal (22%, 9), and the alternative weekly Westword (19%, 8). As for the survey takers, those polled generally consume slightly less or about the same amount of local news as when the Rocky was open. But this study could not directly link any drop off in their local news consumption to the paper’s closure.

By far, their most popular substitute for the Rocky was TV news stations (particularly the local NBC affiliate). Most of the survey takers have replaced the Rocky by using some combination of NBC, the Denver Post, and community newspapers (i.e. weeklies). Plus, Westword and the Denver Business Journal also play supplementary roles in replacing the Rocky. And the use of community newspapers was especially common. All 223 of the survey takers reported at least occasionally reading one or more of 25 different community newspapers in the Denver area. And 72% of the time that they read one of those weekly papers, they did so to replace the Rocky. It’s also worth noting that nearly two out of three times (65%) that the survey takers watched one of the Denver area’s TV news stations they were doing so to replace the Rocky. Finally, the sample had expressed a lukewarm level of satisfaction regarding the job that the Denver area’s local news outlets are doing in replacing the Rocky. Roughly equal amounts are respectively satisfied and unsatisfied, while a healthy percentage who are neutral or they have no opinion.
RQ7: Missing the Rocky

Three out of four (31 of 41) of the local leaders, and a majority of the survey’s 223 respondents, miss the Rocky. Among the community leaders, three themes popped up. First, several of the interviewees said that the Rocky’s “journalists felt like friends,” even when the local leaders didn’t actually know them. That’s because many of the interviewees genuinely believed that the paper’s reporters and columnists cared about bettering the community, and they got to know them through their writing and their coverage. Second, a number of the interviewees missed the Rocky because they thought of it as a “treasure trove of influential local opinions and information.” Third, roughly one in four of those interviewed (10) didn’t miss the paper either because they’re doing just fine finding local news and information from other sources or because they’re more interested in national news. For them, it “ain’t no thang that the paper closed.”

As for the survey takers, two themes were obvious. First, a great many of ordinary Coloradans polled said they viewed the Rocky as a “community connector” in that it unified the metro area in two main ways. Like the interviewees, the survey respondents said that the Rocky made them care about the Denver Metro Area by providing tough-to-find hyperlocal news (e.g. prep sports) and by teaching them about the region’s history and the culture. Second, several survey takers saw the Rocky as “a trusted neighbor and a champion of the people” that shared reliable local news in a humble way in addition to championing causes that benefited ordinary Coloradans. Additionally, nearly seven in ten (68%) of the survey respondents said they would miss the Denver Post if it closed. Although many think the Post is a shell of itself, following years of staff and news cuts, they reiterated that the Post, like the Rocky, is an indispensable source of hard-to-find hyperlocal news and opinions. Those surveyed also said that, like the Rocky, the Post’s news makes them feel more connected to the Denver Metro Area. Indeed,
several of the respondents, not to mention the region’s community leaders, would be embarrassed if a city the size of Denver didn’t have at least one big daily local paper.

**RQ8: Uses and Gratifications**

This study’s interviewees and survey takers listed the same five main uses and gratifications for reading the the *Rocky*. First, the paper was a source of “information about and interpretation of public affairs.” It provided local facts, figures, updates, analysis, and opinions about both the big problems and the little things going on in the city. Second, a number of the research participants characterized the *Rocky* as a “tool for daily living” that them the information they felt they needed to improve their lives. As often, such stories might cover information on voting or making purchasing decisions or by informing them about the latest happenings at local schools. Third, the *Rocky* helped provide a “respite” or a leisurely escape. Reading the paper was a relaxing, entertaining activity for many of this study’s participants. Fourth, the interviewees and survey takers also thought the *Rocky* helped “foster social contact” in that it connected them to the wider community. Fifth and finally, the paper comforted them because it fulfilled their daily news consumption “rituals and habits.” Three out of four (or about 75%) of the interviewees listed at least one of those five uses and gratifications for the *Rocky*. And, among survey takers, roughly eight in ten (or nearly 80%) thought that the paper was a useful and satisfying part of their lives. When the paper was still around, the survey takers said that they most frequently used the *Rocky’s* community/neighborhood news, advertisements, business news, comics, and features/lifestyle stories. Other especially popular sections included its sports section and its investigations.

**Discussion**

A strong majority of this study’s participants think that the *Rocky* was more than just a product. To them, the paper performed a number of public services, including spreading a
diversity of viewpoints, unifying the Denver area’s residents, and monitoring those in power. Although the Rocky fits the definition of a contested commodity because most of study’s participants thought it was much more than just a newspaper, the question remains as to what it’s best compared to. This study focused, in part, on whether Coloradans thought the Rocky’s closure had affected them and their community’s social institutions. Yet, maybe newspapers themselves are their own type of social institution. Before making that argument, some explanation is required as to what makes something a social institution. As mentioned, typically, today’s sociologists use the term “social institution” to refer to “complex social forms that reproduce themselves such as governments, the family, human languages, universities, hospitals, business corporations, and legal systems.” But that’s just a list of examples. It doesn’t include very many of the characteristics of a social institution. As sociology scholar Patricia Yancey Martin has pointed out, part of the trouble in defining social institutions that is there’s no agreed upon definition. According to Martin, there’s been a “failure of sociologists, psychologists, economists, and so on, to specify the meaning(s) of the social institution concept.” Martin added that, despite “rarely giving reasons for doing so,” social scientists “have applied the term social institution to an amazing array of phenomena, including, for example, taxation and handshakes, schools, mental hospitals, courtship, community and property, healing, sports, appellate courts, religion and marriage (and) universities” among other things.

Many definitions of social institutions do, however, share a number of key attributes. First, is the idea that social institutions exist to meet certain needs or goals of a society (e.g. family-related, governmental, spiritual, economic). The Rocky met the needs and goals of society by monitoring other social institutions, so as to keep society running efficiently and honestly. It also educated and entertained people in order to help create an informed citizenry that was better
able to be civically and politically engaged. Second, social “institutions control human conduct by setting up predefined patterns of conduct” (i.e. social norms or accepted behaviors). And social institutions “inform and enable members about how to get things done.” Similarly, the Rocky’s coverage encouraged people to feel like they were all members of one big community. It taught new arrivals the history of Colorado and Denver, and the paper educated them on the things they needed to know to help them adjust to the community’s culture. Third, social institutions have a long history over which their behavioral norms are created and people have been habituated to follow them. Put another way, a social institution “signifies custom, routine, and repetition” (i.e. practices and processes). For a large number of this study’s participants, reading the Rocky was most definitely a habit to which they grew well accustomed.

Fourth, social institutions have staying power (i.e. they’re well-established structures that endure for a long time). The Rocky certainly had history and staying power. It was around for 150 years. It predated both Denver and Colorado, and it played a critical role in the inception of both. Fifth, social institutions are guided by common ideas, norms, and values. For example, the Encyclopedia of Sociology defines a societal institution as “a definite set of interrelated norms, beliefs, and values (that are) centered on recurrent social needs and activities.” That to was the case at the Rocky, where the staff members believed they were charged with giving Coloradans the information they needed to be free and self-governing. Indeed, the paper strove to do the same (i.e. to convince local citizens they should vote and give to local charities and care about the community and their neighbors). Sixth, and finally, as Martin argues, social institutions aren’t just organizations, they’re the people who constitute them – a collection of individuals, who’ve internalized the organization’s values and goals. That’s true in a general sense in that the Rocky’s staff was trained in the ways of professional journalism (i.e. to fairly gather and interpret
all the best available evidence). Plus, the paper’s staff had shared values and goals. For example, former *Rocky* editor John Temple handed out a “Rockyness” chart to indoctrinate every new staff member into the paper’s culture of presenting “in-your-face, pull no-punches” writing, a “consistently conservative western editorial point of view,” and “a lot of divergent options that opinions that reflect the spectrum.” The paper also strove to be “a tool for (local) lives.” It was committed to reporting the news with “humor and humanity,” and it strove to “reflect Colorado’s history and deep roots.”

The *Rocky* also tried to meet the needs and goals of society by monitoring other social institutions, so as to promote more efficient, transparent, and honest governance. And it gave local residents the information they needed to get things done – like voting or deciding whether to support initiatives like a new airport. The *Rocky* wasn’t just a commodity. The paper itself was a social institution. Reporters are taught to believe in the noble myth of objectivity – that they merely render what the news as they see it. But the *Rocky* and its journalists were inseparable from the community. They were just as much a part of the local landscape as any other social institution, including the police department and the city council they covered. Through its reporters and its columnists, the *Rocky* acted as a check and a counterweight to the opinions and the positions of both local leaders and the *Denver Post*. And the *Rocky’s* influential endorsements helped the launch the careers of governors, like Dick Lamm and John Hickenlooper, and mayors such as Wellington Webb and Federico Pena. Plus, the paper raised millions of dollars for its philanthropic contributions to various community organizations. It also tried to unify the community with hyperlocal coverage that couldn’t easily be found elsewhere. For nearly 150 years, the *Rocky* was also a community booster and a civic evangelist.
In the paper’s earliest years, that meant the *Rocky* darkly began as the first agent of
western imperialism. Back then, the paper pitched the area to miners and those who might create
a service industry around them, while advocating for death and displacement of indigenous
peoples away, and pushing for statehood, a railroad line, and economic prosperity for whites. In
its later decades, the *Rocky* never stopped selling new arrivals, tourists, and any other
organizations that might listen, on the area’s high quality of life and its economic opportunities.
The four-page paper in 1859, thanks to a humble handpress that had been hauled 500 miles west
by oxcart, became quite the commodity. For at least 50 of the 82 years that Scripps owned the
*Rocky*, from 1926 to 2009, it was the profitable crown jewel of the company’s newspaper
division. But the paper was also a contested commodity, and the market’s moneymaking
imperatives would ultimately win out over its public service mission. In his 1960 biography of
the *Rocky’s* first century, the paper’s historian, Robert Perkin, described the demise of the
dpaper’s principal founder and inaugural editor, William Newton Byers. But by replacing “his”
and “he,” Perkin’s words can just as easily be applied to the *Rocky’s* closure as to Byers’ death.
To paraphrase Perkin, the *Rocky’s* February 27, 2009 demise, marked “the end of a long, active,
and useful life. There was almost nothing in the affairs of (its) city which (the Rocky) had not
influenced in some way at some time.”

**Limitations and Areas of Future Study**

This is a qualitative study based on how ordinary Coloradans and their community
leaders perceive the Denver area to be different as a result of the *Rocky Mountain News* closing
in 2009. Perceptions amount to how individuals regard, understand, and interpret the world
around them. They’re subjective – they can’t be measured with clocks or thermometers. They’re
personal, emotional, and experiential. Additionally, as with any quantitative research, this
qualitative study’s design is subject to the personal biases of the researcher who designed it. As
discussed, regardless of whether researchers call their work “quantitative” or “qualitative,” all social and behavioral science-related research is qualitative at heart. Statistical models are the product of subjective human judgments regarding constructing scales, assembling samples, choosing formulas to run the results, and interpreting them. And qualitative interview and survey questions are similarly born of a researcher’s study design decisions. When it comes to research in the social and behavioral sciences, subjectivities should be viewed as a good thing. This study solicited 264 study participants’ perspectives on the Rocky’s closing. Those views are like pixels that can be combined to provide one a clear picture of how the research participants think the paper’s disappearance has affected them and their community. The researcher is like the digital camera that uses sensors and software to capture and assemble large amounts of data to make create one big panoramic view. Obviously, much more research would be needed to affirm whether this study’s participants’ perceptions actually are reality. But finding out how they think their community is different as a result of the newspaper’s closure is a critical step in investigating the potential effects of losing newspaper reportage, which is an all-too-common occurrence today. Critics of this study might claim that its results are false because other researchers have yet to find evidence that disapprove this study’s findings. But that sort of criticism creates a false dichotomy between truth and fiction when it might actually be impossible to find out precisely how, if at all, a newspaper’s a closure influences a community and its inhabitants.

Even if they’re executed well, studies like this one represent best guesses for two reasons. For one, their results can only be applied to the locations in which they’re set. (In this case, that means the Denver area). Second, the best sort of study design would incorporate a city where the closure of a daily local newspaper left no other paper behind. Unfortunately for research on the
effects of newspaper closings, but fortunately for democracy, no U.S. city of more than 100,000 has lost its only daily paper (though Ann Arbor, Michigan’s paper came close in 2009). A third limitation of this study lies in the fact that it was conducted long after the paper’s closure. Coloradans in 2016 were asked to share their impressions regarding the ramifications of an event that occurred in 2009, and memories can grow hazy about what happened after a week let alone about what occurred seven years ago. Though perhaps three or four survey respondents commented that the closure had been a while ago and they found it hard to remember certain things about the *Rocky*, the rest of the survey sample seemed to have no trouble discussing the paper. And none of the community leaders, who were interviewed, complained that the paper’s closure was so long ago that they couldn’t remember the *Rocky*. Additionally, there’s something to be said for opinions that have been allowed to crystallize since the *Rocky’s* closure. Conversely, if this study had been conducted within 12 months of the paper’s demise, the research participants’ answers might have been biased by the freshness of their emotions.

On the surface, another limitation of this study is that its sample isn’t statistically representative of those living in Colorado. But creating that sort of probability/random sample wasn’t the point because not all Coloradans were equipped to answer this survey’s questions. The whole idea of this study was to create a purposive sample. It intentionally pulled people, who were familiar with the *Rocky*, those who follow local news, and adults who were living in Colorado before and after the paper closed. Plus, this study was primarily interested in those who live in the former paper’s primary circulation area, the Denver Metro Area. One last study limitation that’s worthy of attention lies in the fact that this survey’s sample was skewed toward being older and better educated. A total of 67% (149) of this study’s survey sample had a bachelor’s degree or higher compared with the 42.5% of the Denver Metro Area, according to
2015 Census data. Whereas 37 is the median age in the Metro Denver Area, the median age of this survey’s respondents was 46. In the Denver area, 22.4% are between the ages of 30 and 44 compared with 36% (80) among those in this sample. Another 29% (65) of this survey’s respondents were between the ages of 45 and 59 versus the 20% who live in the Denver area. And 23% (51) of this study’s participants were between the ages of 60 and 74 versus 13% in and around Denver. All of those figures matter because older, better educated individuals are disproportionately likely to read and care about newspapers.

Regardless of this study’s limitations, other scholars would do well to build on it by analyzing the potential effects of losing newspaper journalists in places like statehouses. That’s an important story that needs to be told, considering that one in three full-time employees of American newspapers were laid off, bought out, fired, or lost through attrition between 2000 and 2010. In all, those losses represented $1.6 billion worth of editorial capacity as the newspaper industry’s overall employment total fell from its recent high of 56,200 in 2000 to 38,000 in 2012. The existing body of research also would benefit from more news ecosystem research such as content analyses about the extent to which other media have or haven’t replaced newspapers. It’s not enough, however, for such studies to rely on straight story counts – as they so often do. Measuring the amount of news in a given area by counting the stories produced by different news outlets provides a deceptive metric because 30 TV news stories aren’t even half as long as 30 newspaper stories. As mentioned, this study relied on self reports of media consumption. But another way to measure how well the public is doing in the absence of newspaper reportage would be to have study participants keep media diaries. In the end, this study attempted to measure whether the loss of the Rocky Mountain News really mattered to the
Denver area residents. But the general question remains as to whether newspaper journalism goes out with a bang or with a whimper.

Notes


4 Ibid. 169-170.


12 Martin, “Gender as social institution,” 1250.


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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

In August of 2011, Daniel Axelrod accepted an appointment to earn a mass communications Ph.D. as a University of Florida Graduate School Fellow, and he completed his doctorate August 2016. At UF, Dan taught journalism classes on ethics and feature writing, researched how newspaper closures and layoffs have affected communities, and served as a board member for the Independent Florida Alligator – the largest student-run paper in America. In all, Daniel has 10 years (1999-09) of experience writing professionally for newspapers, including five years as a full-time reporter, plus another two years as a PR specialist (2009-11), and more than five years as a college journalism instructor (2010-15).

As a full-time reporter (2004-09), most recently with the Times-Tribune in Scranton, Penn., Dan won 14 journalism awards from press associations in New York, New England and Pennsylvania. Some of his top stories investigated the rising number of opiate addicts in Penn., a Poconos building boom, and how chronic under-funding affected schools in Plymouth, Mass. From ’09-11, Dan served as a PR specialist for Blue Cross of Northeastern Pennsylvania (now part of Highmark Blue Cross Blue Shield), which had more than $1.5 billion in annual revenue and over 550,000 subscribers. At Blue Cross, he drafted press releases, wrote company-wide memos, operated the internal communications system, and acted as an in-house writer for senior leaders. In his spare time, Dan is president of Writers Unlimited Agency, Inc.

Founded in 1976 by his father, Dr. David Axelrod (a past poet laureate in New York and Florida), WU is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit that promotes the arts and creative writing by hosting educational seminars and literary events. Based in New York and Florida, WU also operates Writers Ink Press – an alternative publisher with more than 50 titles. Additionally, Dan offers freelance journalism and PR consulting services via WU’s for-profit affiliate, Unlimited News Service. Daniel also is a dedicated member of the Society of Professional Journalists. From ’09-
11, he was president of the Keystone (PA) Pro Chapter, which SPJ honored as one of three best small U.S. chapters in ’10. And, from ’09-10, Dan was vice chairman of SPJ’s Digital Media Committee, for which he wrote the report “Will SPJ Remain Relevant in the Digital Age?”