

**Discerning a train coming down the track:
Three rural weekly newspapers and the Internet**

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The explosion of the Internet has affected community newspapers less than their metropolitan counterparts. In 2009, revenue at metropolitan newspapers decreased more than twice as much as it did at community papers, and not just because of the effect of Craigslist and other free, online advertising services on metro classified pages. A typical community newspaper has the strongest local-news franchise in its market, and is often the only broad, reliable source of information about the community. Also, many community papers are located in rural areas, where a smaller share of people use the Internet and access to high-speed Internet service, or broadband, is not available.

But change is coming. Local online news sources are becoming more common in smaller communities, and the expansion of broadband is increasing the number of people who use the Internet and the amount of time they spend with it. These trends, which are likely to continue with the \$7.2 billion investment in broadband from the 2009 economic stimulus (the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act), will create even more competition for newspaper readers' time. For example, the fastest-growing form of media is online video. An Arbitron survey in 2003, the last year that fewer people had broadband than dialup Internet service, found that newspaper readers with dialup spent an average of 24 minutes per day with the hard-copy newspaper, while those with broadband averaged only 6.6 minutes per day with the printed paper.

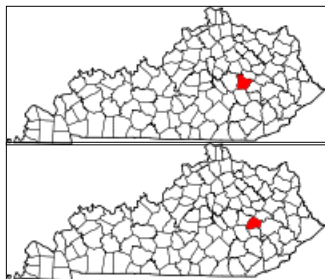
For weekly newspapers, the prospect of adapting to a digital, 24/7 world is like looking down a railroad track at a train gaining momentum. Many do not even have websites, either for lack of resources, or the fear that posting editorial material online will cannibalize their print circulation. That fear also makes them severely limit the postings on their sites, or put them

behind pay walls. Meanwhile, more and more of the readers of newspapers without websites are downloading videos and probably spending less time with the paper, which could make them less likely to purchase it on a regular basis.

There is a growing consensus among advisers to weekly newspapers, such as the Internet vendor TownNews.com and the Institute for Rural Journalism and Community Issues (RuralJournalism.org), that weekly newspapers need to put some of their editorial material online, reserving much of it to preserve print circulation, while at the same time putting online material that cannot be published in the newspaper, such as databases, files of public documents, photo galleries, slide shows and videos.

In response to research by the Institute for Rural Journalism and a grant application from West Virginia University, the McCormick Foundation provided money to WVU and the Institute for a project to encourage rural weekly newspapers in Appalachia (West Virginia and Kentucky, respectively) to create websites and/or expand their online offerings.

The Institute added a research component to the project by partnering with the Department of Communication at Eastern Kentucky University, which for almost 20 years has conducted readership surveys for community newspapers as part of its Community Journalism course. This paper is a product of research by the spring 2010 Community Journalism class, and also of a separate training project for the staff of three newspapers in the counties where the research was conducted.



Most rural communities in the United States are served by only one local newspaper, but there are many exceptions, and even in some small, poor counties, there are competing weeklies with very limited resources that vie for readers and advertisers. That is the case

in two adjoining counties in the Appalachian foothills of east-central Kentucky, Estill and Lee.
(Top and bottom, respectively, on Wikipedia locator maps)

Only one of the four newspapers in the two counties, the Estill County Citizen Voice & Times, has a regularly functioning Web site. Its competitor, the smaller Estill County Tribune, has a web page that is updated on special occasions. Neither of the weeklies in adjoining Lee County, The Beattyville Enterprise and the market-leading Three Forks Tradition, have any real online presence. (The Tradition has a website that appears to have been last updated in the summer of 2007). The lack of websites stems in large measure from the lack of resources at the newspapers, whose circulations and staffs are small (only two each at the Tribune and the Enterprise); the depressed economic status of the counties, which have many people who say they can't afford Internet access; and the limited availability of high-speed Internet service, or broadband, in the area.

All four of the newspapers were invited to be part of the research and training project, which (1) examined how residents of the two counties view their local papers, where they get local news, their use of the Internet as a source of news and information; and many points of demographic information; and (2) offered staff members at the newspapers basic equipment and training for multimedia reporting, to encourage them to adopt the Web or make better use of it. The Citizen Voice & Times, the Tribune and the Enterprise agreed to participate in the project; the Three Forks Tradition did not.

Methodology

A questionnaire prepared by students in the Community Journalism class at Eastern Kentucky University with input from the newspapers' editors was distributed by mail to a

random sample of addresses in each county, with 1,200 mailed in Estill County and 1,000 mailed in Lee County. Two hundred of 1,134 surveys delivered in Estill County were completed and returned while in Lee County 188 of 895 questionnaires were completed. The margin of error for both surveys was about 7 percent. With the exception of questions that made reference to a particular feature of a newspaper or were county specific, the questionnaires used in the two counties were identical. Respondents were asked not only about readership of the local newspapers and use of the Internet, but also about community issues and the usual demographic questions.

Characteristics of the counties

The Appalachian Regional Commission, a federal economic-development agency, classifies both Estill and Lee counties as economically distressed. (Distressed counties are the most economically depressed counties. They rank in the worst 10 percent of the nation's counties based on a comparison of each county's averages for three economic indicators—three-year average unemployment rate, per capita market income, and poverty rate—with national averages.) In the 420-county ARC region, 78 counties have such a designation; 40 of them are in Kentucky.) In 2000, the last year for which census data are available, the figures starkly illustrated the level of economic distress. Combined, the median household income for the two counties was about half the figure for the whole country; median home values were less than half the national median; and the poverty rate was more than double the U.S. rate. The low education levels and lack of wealth are probably responsible for the lack of local jobs, which creates a longer-than-average commute – for those who work. Only 39 percent of Lee County adults were

in the labor force; in Estill County, the figure was 49 percent. Both counties have relatively high levels of residents on government assistance.

<i>2000 Census</i>	Estill County	Lee County	United States
Median household income	\$23,318	\$18,544	\$ 41,994
Median home value	\$50,200	\$52,300	\$119,600
Families below poverty level	22.5%	25.2%	9.2%
High-school graduate or more	58.5%	50.9%	80.4%
Bachelor's degree or more	6.9%	6.3%	24.4%
Mean travel time to work (age 16+)	34.9 minutes	35.4 minutes	25.5 minutes

Characteristics of the newspapers

Like many Appalachian weeklies, most of the circulation of the four newspapers is through single-copy sales, not mail subscriptions. This regional phenomenon may be attributable to the economic circumstances in Appalachia; rather than make a one-time payment of \$19 or more for an annual subscription, residents seem to prefer to pay 50 cents a week.

The four papers vary widely in household penetration, which can be roughly estimated by dividing the total in-county circulation by the number of occupied housing units in the 2000 census. (The counties' populations have grown little since then.) Based on those data, the Three Forks Tradition has the best penetration, 69.7 percent, and its competitor, The Beattyville Enterprise, has the worst, 29 percent. In Estill County, the Citizen Voice & Times reaches an estimated 60.6 percent of the households while the Tribune reaches an estimated 33.4 percent.

Newspaper	In-county circulation¹	Out-of-co.	Ownership	Web presence	Household penetration (est.)
Estill Co. Citizen Voice & Times	3700 (1060 mail)	568	Headquarters paper for company with two weeklies	Full stories on WordPress site	60.6%
Estill County Tribune	2039 (661 mail)	224	Independently owned	No website	33.4%
Beattyville Enterprise	868 (62 mail)	102	Group of nine weeklies based in Manchester, Ky.	No website	29%
Three Forks Tradition	2080 (282 mail)	945	Independently owned	No website	69.7%

(1) All circulation figures are taken from each newspaper's last annual Statement of Ownership, Management and Circulation, filed with the United States Postal Service between Sept. 28 and Oct. 1, 2009.

Access to technology

Both counties, especially Lee, lag behind the rest of the state in home computer ownership and the use of the Internet and broadband. A survey conducted in 2007 by ConnectKentucky, a nonprofit that facilitates the expansion of communications technology in the state, found that while 72 percent of Kentuckians said they had a home computer, only 57 percent in Estill and 52 percent in Lee did. Almost as many Kentuckians, 65 percent, had Internet service at home, but in Estill and Lee the figure was 47 and 50 percent, respectively. And while 37 percent of Kentuckians said they had broadband at home, only 31 percent in Estill did, and the figure in Lee was a miniscule 12 percent.

A ConnectKentucky survey in March and April 2010, taken primarily online and thus skewed to Internet users, found that 90 percent of the respondents in Estill and 93 percent in Lee owned a computer, but only 53 percent in Estill and 26 percent in Lee had home broadband.

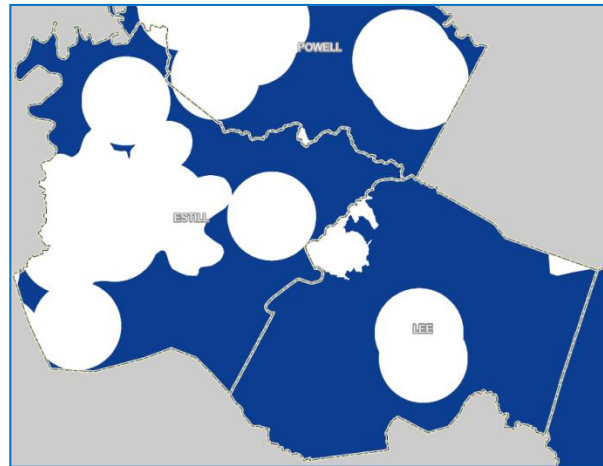
In both counties, the survey found that 19 percent of respondents said they did not have an Internet connection at home. Among these respondents, 46 percent in Estill and 56 percent in Lee said they did not have Internet because broadband was not available and they did not want dial-up. In Estill, 31 percent said they did not have Internet at home because it was too expensive; in Lee the figure was 28 percent.

The most recent survey was conducted in conjunction with a project designed to bring affordable broadband service to most of a four-county area that includes Estill and Lee. The project, funded with Appalachian Regional Commission funds and state coal-severance tax revenue, is called Coal to Broadband; three of the counties have coal mines and Estill once had a

major coal-processing facility. The project has issued a request for proposals from technology providers and hopes to start construction this year, probably using a wireless system.

The coming of broadband is likely to have the greatest impact in Lee County, where, as the data above show, broadband is in short supply. The project’s website says Lee County and an adjoining county in the project, Breathitt, “are

the two lowest served counties in the state, both with below 50 percent availability of broadband to the home.” This map, taken from the project’s site, illustrates how little broadband service is available in the area; *areas served by broadband are in white.*



The prospect of affordable, widely available broadband is likely to put pressure on the newspapers without a website to have one.

The long commuting times revealed by the census also indicate that all the newspapers need to consider mobile applications for the Web.

Survey findings

In both Estill and Lee counties, most people surveyed (about 85 percent) reported reading *both* of their community newspapers at least once a month. However, more residents of Estill reported reading both papers every week or two-three times a month than did residents of Lee.

READERSHIP	Estill County	Lee County
Read both always	91 45.5%	61 32.4%
Read both at least 2-3 times a month	131 65.5%	105 55.8%
Read both at least once a month	171 85.5%	159 84.6%

There was a statistically significant difference between the mean readership scores for the two papers in each county, which – not surprisingly -- mirrors circulation figures.

For only one newspaper, the Estill County Tribune, was age positively correlated with readership at a statistically significant level ($r = .162, p \leq .05$). How long residents had lived in Estill County was positively correlated to readership for both the Tribune and the Citizen Voice & Times. (Tribune: $r = .144, p \leq .05$; CV&T: $r = .165, p \leq .05$) In Lee County, there was a statistically significant positive correlation between reading the Three Forks Tradition and length of residency in the county ($r = .226, p \leq .01$).

The data for three of the four newspapers in the study also showed that residents who work outside their home county are less likely to read their local newspaper. For three of the four newspapers, a 2-tailed independent samples test found the difference in readership between those who worked inside and outside the county to be significant.

How often do you read the **Estill County Tribune**? Every week? Two or three times a month? Once a month? Never?

Workplace	Number	Mean
Inside Estill County	49	3.29
Some other county	34	2.79

$t = 2.251, df = 81, p \leq .05$

How often do you read the **Citizen Voice & Times**? Every week? Two or three times a month? Once a month? Never?

Workplace	Number	Mean
Inside Estill County	49	3.57
Some other county	34	2.97

$t = 3.393, df = 81, p \leq .001$

How often do you read the **Beattyville Enterprise**? Every week? Two or three times a month? Once a month? Never?

Workplace	Number	Mean
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Inside Lee County	54	2.85
Some other county	15	2.13

$t = 2.470, df = 67, p \leq .05$

How often do you read the **Three Forks Tradition**? Every week? Two or three times a month? Once a month? Never?

Workplace	Number	Mean
Inside Lee County	55	3.64
Some other county	15	3.33

$t = 1.391, df = 68$

Respondents were asked how often they use the Internet. Their responses also provide evidence of why weekly newspapers need to establish a Web presence if they wish to remain the primary source of news for their communities.

More than half of the 143 respondents from Estill County who use the Internet said they use it several times a day and 80 percent of users are on the Internet at least several times a week. The findings were similar in Lee County where half of the 127 Internet users log on several times a day and 87 percent are on the Internet at least several times a week. Those who are used to finding news and other information on the Internet may seek other sources of local news if they do not find their weekly newspaper there.

How often use the Internet	Estill County	Lee County
Several times a day	51.7%	49.6%
Once or twice a day	17.5%	18.9%
Several times a week	11.2%	18.9%
Once a week	7.7%	5.5%
Less often	9.1%	7.1%
Other	2.8%	0

The survey found considerable interest among respondents in using online features of a newspaper. Based on the mean scores for each item, both Estill and Lee county residents would

be most interested in additional photos, obituaries and breaking news. There was much less interest in interactive features, perhaps reflecting the lack of such features or Internet access, and in viewing ads online.

Estill County percentages and means	Very Impt.	Impt.	Unsure	Unimpt.	Very Unimp.	Mean
Read stories from the last issue of the printed newspaper	20.5	24.4	25.6	18.2	11.4	3.24
Get more information related to articles in the printed paper	22.2	31.3	22.2	14.8	9.7	3.40
Read updated news about articles printed in the last paper	24.3	28.2	23.2	14.7	9.6	3.42
Read news that's happened since the last paper was published	25.3	29.8	21.3	12.9	10.7	3.47
Read archived stories from older issues of the printed paper	21.6	27.8	23.9	15.3	11.4	3.32
See additional photos not published in the print version	23.0	33.9	22.4	12.1	8.6	3.52
Leave a comment on a story	13.2	21.8	31.6	20.1	13.2	3.01
Have access to chat rooms or community forums on the website	2.9	11.5	26.4	32.2	27	2.29
See advertisements for businesses	5.2	23.7	27.7	24.9	18.5	2.68
Submit information for news stories	8.7	25.4	30.6	19.7	15.6	2.87
Submit a letter to the editor	6.5	27.2	30.1	19.7	15.6	2.89
Contact the staff of the newspaper	7	28.1	28.7	19.3	17	2.85
Use links to find state, national and world news	17.3	32.4	24.9	11.6	13.9	3.23
Read obituaries for people who've died since last paper came out	28.6	28	21.1	10.9	11.4	3.49

Lee County percentages and means	Very Impt.	Impt.	Unsure	Unimpt.	Very Unimp.	Mean
Read stories from the last issue of the printed newspaper	24.8	24.2	23.6	17.6	9.7	3.37
Get more information related to articles in the printed paper	27	25.8	24.5	12.6	10.1	3.47
Read updated news about articles printed in the last paper	28.2	30.7	20.2	11	9.8	3.56
Read news that's happened since the last paper was published	33.7	31.9	15.3	10.4	8.6	3.72
Read archived stories from older issues of the printed paper	29.2	26.1	23	11.8	9.9	3.53
See additional photos not published in the print version	33.5	29.2	19.9	9.3	8.1	3.71
Leave a comment on a story	22.9	20.4	30.6	14.6	11.5	3.29
Have access to chat rooms or community forums on the website	13.9	12.7	32.9	15.8	24.7	2.75
See advertisements for businesses	17.2	24.8	29.9	14	14	3.17
Submit information for news stories	18.5	27.4	15.5	15.3	13.4	3.22
Submit a letter to the editor	17.3	21.2	29.5	16	16	3.08
Contact the staff of the newspaper	20.8	24	26.6	14.9	13.6	3.23
Use links to find state, national and world news	24	26.7	25.3	14	10	3.41
Read obituaries for people who've died since last paper came out	30.4	34.4	16.5	10.1	8.2	3.69

The editors of both newspapers without websites in this project recognize it is important for their papers to get online. "Everybody's on the Internet today," one said, exaggerating somewhat, but looking to the future: "That's where they're going to turn for their news, the younger generation particularly." The editor's comment was borne out by the survey, which

found a negative correlation between older ages and use of the Internet. In other words, the younger the age category of the respondent, the more likely he or she is to use the Internet.

Age and Internet Use

Estill County			Lee County		
Age	Use the Internet	Do not use the Internet	Age	Use the Internet	Do not use the Internet
18-24	5 (100%)	0 (0%)	18-24	5 (83.3%)	1 (16.7%)
25-34	22 (95.7%)	1 (4.3%)	25-34	18 (100%)	0 (0%)
35-49	46 (88.5%)	6 (11.5%)	35-49	48 (92.3%)	4 (7.7%)
50-64	48 (76.2%)	15 (23.8%)	50-64	44 (63.8%)	25 (36.2%)
65 or older	22 (41.5%)	31 (58.5%)	65 or older	28 (71.8%)	11 (28.2%)

$p \leq .01$ (2-tailed) $r = -.478, p \leq .01$ (2-tailed) $r = -.420,$

Other than their disparities in circulation and penetration, perhaps the greatest difference in the Estill County papers is that one has a regularly functioning website and the other does not. The Citizen Voice & Times places most of its editorial content online. Readers were asked how they would read the newspaper if all its content were placed online. A clear plurality, 39.5 percent, said they would still read only the print version; 7.5 percent said they would read only the online version, and 18 percent said they would read both versions. Another 22.5 percent said they were not sure, and 4.5 percent said they would read neither version. The results were similar for the Tribune, which has no regularly functioning website.

When responses for only loyal readers -- those who read the Citizen Voice & Times two or more times a month—were examined, 47.2 percent said they would still read only the print version, 4.2 percent said they would read only the online version and 22.5 percent said they would read both. Almost 22 percent were not sure and 4.2 percent said they would read neither. Again, the results were similar for the Tribune, with 44.8 percent of loyal readers saying they would read only the print version, 5.8 percent only the online version and 20.1 percent both.

These findings may either assuage or exacerbate the fears of one editor in the study who asked, “If I put all my stories on there, why would they want to buy my paper?”

The training project

The genesis of this study was a training project designed to help Appalachian weekly newspapers to adopt the Web and multimedia. The project, funded by the McCormick Foundation, is based at West Virginia University, but as a condition of the grant to WVU, the Institute for Rural Journalism and Community Issues received \$25,000 for the purchase of computers, cameras, audio recorders, other equipment and software, as well as fees for instructors in multimedia technology and techniques.

Because the project involved students at the University of Kentucky, who were assigned to work with individual newspapers, the Institute targeted papers in a very limited geographic area: Appalachian counties no more than an hour or so from the Lexington campus, out of respect for students’ time. In addition to the three participating papers mentioned above, The



Interior Journal in Lincoln County, a Schurz Communications weekly with a website, also took part in the training but was not part of the research project. Like the other two counties, Lincoln County (*Wikipedia map*) is in the area served by the Appalachian Regional Commission, but lies beyond the East Kentucky Coal Field. However, hills are major landscape features in all four counties, and all can be considered Appalachian foothill counties, so the project was named Foothills in Focus after consultation with students.

The training sessions began with instruction in audio, since good audio is essential for good video. Each newspaper was given an Olympus LS-10 digital recorder.

The second training session was in Soundslides, a program for creating slide shows of still photographs with or without audio. Each newspaper received the Soundslides software.

The first two sessions were taught by David Stephenson, photography adviser to The Kentucky Kernel student newspaper and formerly of the Lexington Herald-Leader.

The third and fourth sessions dealt, respectively, with shooting and editing video. Each newspaper was given a Flip video camera and Final Cut Pro video editing software. They were taught by Nathan Stevens, the information-technology coordinator for the university's School of Journalism and Telecommunications.

The training sessions for the newspapers were held on the Lexington campus on Friday afternoons. Training sessions for the students were incorporated into a pre-existing class, Advanced Writing for Mass Media: Online Community News Site, which began in 2008 with coverage of Midway, Ky., a small town halfway between Lexington and the state capital of Frankfort. (See www.MidwayMessenger.org and <http://irjci.midwayky.blogspot.com>.) The scope of the class was expanded to include the Appalachian foothills and students were assigned a newspaper with which to work.

The students were escorted to meetings with each of the editors in their offices to begin the working relationships and familiarize each student with the county he or she would be covering. Each student was required to produce four stories during the semester, with at least two using audio, Soundslides or video. Some did not meet these quotas and were downgraded accordingly. One encountered logistical difficulties in Appalachia and was allowed to do a story in Midway instead. That student produced the only truly complete Soundslides story, which can be watched at <http://www.uky.edu/CommInfoStudies/JAT/ss/stanford/index.html>.

The main expenditure of project funds was for three Canon HF-100 cameras, which shoot both video and stills, wireless microphone kits for each, and three MacBook Pro computers with Final Cut Pro, for students to use in the field.

At this writing (July 2010), the training has not produced the desired results at the newspapers. Those with websites have not used the training to produce multimedia, and the others still have not truly launched websites. The Estill County Tribune, which had to go to press before the May primary election results were compiled, put the results on its under-construction website, www.EstillTribune.com.

The Citizen Voice & Times, the Estill County paper with a website, sent an advertising employee to the training sessions, not a news employee, and the Soundslides story she worked on during the sessions was never posted online. (It may have never been completed; she did not respond to our requests for a follow-up interview.) In an e-mail, Citizen Voice & Times editor Rhonda Smyth reported that only once has the paper posted something online before it appeared in the paper and never post breaking news online. "It is something I would like to do, but (the publisher) is afraid it will hurt our paper sales." After the print edition is published, most of the content is posted on the paper's website.

Interior Journal Editor Michael Brohier, who had posted some simple, unedited videos on his site before the project began, has been stretched thin because he is also a farmer and his wife is deployed to Afghanistan. He told the Institute in an e-mail, "I do plan to use the equipment, software and training in the future with plans to extensively use them during the upcoming general election."

The editors of both papers without websites, The Beattyville Enterprise and the Estill County Tribune, attended all the training sessions, but the Enterprise has not established any sort

of Internet presence and the Tribune has created only one Web page, telling readers about it only when election results were added.

“We’ve been so busy on the paper, just the two of us, it’s just been a time issue,” Tribune Editor Delores Rowland said in an interview. Her niece is building the site for her. Rowland said she considers having a site “very important” because Internet use is becoming almost universal, and she wants to apply the multimedia training. “It was a very valuable learning experience for me,” she said.

Enterprise Editor Edmund Shelby said he wanted to have a local person create a site for him because he thought it would be more comfortable for him as he jumped into a new venture. He also has only one other person on his staff, and said “the lack of resources” is also a factor, “but I’m going to do it on my own.” The small, family chain that owns the newspaper places little emphasis on the Web; most of its papers have very limited sites, or no site at all.

Shelby, who was president of the Kentucky Press Association in 2009, said having a website is “exceedingly important. I see what is happening throughout the industry, and while I see a lot of mistakes being made ... I think there is a model. You’ve got to offer a little bit to the reader but you’re going to have to pay for it to get the full product.” He said he also wants to have multimedia features on his site.

While the project so far has not been as successful as the Institute had hoped, it plans to continue it as part of its broader effort to get weeklies to adopt and effectively use the Internet. Recent changes in the craft pose existential, long-term challenges to newspapers, which are likely to continue to be the primary source of substantive journalism about issues. The cameras and computers will be used in future courses by students who work with Appalachian weekly papers as part of their course work. The Institute is in the process of moving its website and The

Rural Blog to WordPress, which the Citizen Voice & Times uses for its Web presence, and may use that platform to help the other papers create Web pages. The Institute hopes to continue working with the four papers already involved, and will try to involve papers in other Appalachian foothill counties.

Summary

This research and training project illustrates the challenges many small weekly newspapers face in adapting to the Internet, but also show the facts and trends that make it essential for them to do so. While the project may have helped the editors discern the necessity of adapting to the Internet, it did not resolve the challenges they face in actually doing so, including small staffs and limited time. The research showed the editors how their audience is changing, what readers want from the Web and how readers use the Web. It also illustrated that even in counties with limited broadband and Internet access, the papers are lagging behind their audiences. The project also showed how philanthropies and institutions of higher education can try to help rural weekly newspapers meet these challenges. Despite the best efforts of higher education, including entities such as the Institute, until small weekly newspapers commit to going online, hire sufficient staff and provide them with the resources they need, the train coming down the track may run them over rather than carry them to a new platform.