

The State of the Weekly Newspaper Industry

by

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The first decade of the 21st century was difficult for daily newspapers. The number fell from 1,480 in 2000 to 1,397 in 2009 and total average circulation for all dailies fell from 55,773,000 to 46,278,000.¹ Perhaps more importantly, daily newspapers' advertising revenue dropped from \$48,670,000 for print advertising in 2000 to \$25,838,000 for combined print and online in 2010.² In an effort to counter these losses, daily newspapers have created websites and have seen increases in online audiences.³ Many have offered participatory features (e.g., allowing visitors to upload content) to grow the online audience.⁴ However, any growth in online traffic has not compensated for loss of print circulation.

Despite the financial problems faced by daily newspapers during the past decade, some anecdotal evidence suggests that the recession may have had less impact on mainstream community weekly newspapers.⁵ However, unlike the daily newspaper industry, weekly newspaper industry trends are not regularly documented in scholarly publications. Indeed, the last scholarly examination of U.S. weekly newspapers (published in 2001) used 1997 data.⁶

The lack of large-sample studies raises questions about change in the weekly newspaper industry since the turn of the 21st century. Did the geographic distribution of weeklies change? Have circulation and ad rates increased or declined? Have weeklies adopted websites to distribute content and engage readers?

Answers to such questions are essential to understanding an important segment of the newspaper industry. The United States is currently home to more than 7,000 non-daily newspapers with more than 150 million readers.⁷ To examine the state of the community weekly newspaper industry and changes since 1997, this study uses existing

data comparable to those reported earlier.⁸ In addition, it explores the online presence of weeklies and whether they allow citizens to upload material directly to those websites.

Literature Review

Weekly newspapers have been a vital part of the newspaper industry and their communities throughout history. As the U.S. population doubled in the last three decades of the 19th century, for example, the number of U.S. weeklies “which served mainly the small towns and rural areas,” tripled, from 4,000 to 12,000.⁹ While early scholarship on weeklies focused affectionately on editors of the “country weekly,”¹⁰ scholars like Wilbur Schramm published early analyses of weeklies’ readership,¹¹ and other researchers brought a sociological perspective to weeklies and their role.¹² More recent research has shown how weeklies can influence local elections¹³ and that reading them is correlated with social cohesion.¹⁴ Indeed, after losing its weekly newspaper, a small Kansas community realized its importance, and it was restarted two years later.¹⁵

Perhaps it was this very centrality of weekly newspapers to communities that led to an industry change during the 1990s: weeklies became hot properties, with daily newspaper groups buying weekly groups and concentrating the industry.¹⁶ Observing this growing trend, Coulson, Lacy and Wilson conducted a baseline study of a stratified random sample of U.S. weeklies, including type of ownership, circulation type (paid or free), geographic area served, and ad rates.¹⁷ Of course, the acquisition of weeklies mirrored the buying of dailies by groups, which was fueled by increasing debt among large newspaper corporations.¹⁸ Underlying groups’ expansion was an assumption that revenues would remain high enough to pay for acquisitions, an assumption that proved

incorrect for two reasons: the deep recession that began in 2008 and the rapid transition of advertising away from print toward online media.¹⁹

As a result, the newspaper industry has begun to experiment with ways to regain lost revenue, including using the Internet and mobile delivery to increase their reach and make up lost advertising revenue.²⁰ However, a 2012 study of 38 daily newspapers indicated that the transition to digital is not proceeding quickly, nor is online revenue making up for lost print revenue.²¹ Indeed, the study suggested that many dailies would drop to three print editions per week but offer daily Internet editions. Such a strategy is far from new. Research on dailies that closed between 1987 and 2003 found that about a third became less-than-daily papers.²² The future may see even more newspapers publishing less frequently and depending on the web for breaking news.

Considering the impact of the recession, shifts in advertising demand, and evolving news consumer preferences for distribution systems, the changing nature of the newspaper industry is hardly surprising. However, most commentary and studies of this change have focused on dailies. The present research draws upon the 1997 baseline data for weeklies and examines changes since that study, while asking three questions about digital-era weeklies: Do they maintain a website? Can visitors upload content? Do the weeklies charge for accessing web content?

Weeklies and Digital Media

Although most research about use of online and mobile technologies by newspapers has been devoted to dailies,²³ weeklies' use of digital delivery has not been entirely ignored. Using three data points between May 2009 and February 2010, a 2010 study looked at 141 "community" newspapers (defined as weeklies and dailies with less

than 50,000 circulation),²⁴ concluding that adoption of alternative delivery tools was occurring fairly quickly. The most commonly used tool by February 2010 was RSS feeds (62.4% of newspapers), followed by Twitter (28.4%), email summaries (25.5%), mobile/text (24.89%), and Facebook (20.6%). That paper, however, did not explicitly compare its weeklies and dailies, which typically have larger average circulations and would be more likely to use these delivery methods.

A 2006 web-based survey found websites at 92.8% of the 111 responding weeklies.²⁵ Six of the eight without sites said they would have sites within two years. However, survey response rate was less than ideal, and results reflect views of managers already employing a web strategy. Of 500 weeklies identified for the sample, 124 were unreachable and only 111 of the remaining weeklies responded. The data suggested that the newsroom was responsible for maintaining the web site at about half the newspapers, and only 11.9% of the weeklies updated the sites daily. Group-owned weeklies were more likely to charge for web site content than non-group-owned weeklies.

A 2010 dissertation exploring Mississippi weeklies and groups of weeklies found intriguing results: a large weekly group reported no online presence, but a small group *had* explored the web to enhance revenue.²⁶ Another study²⁷ began with the population of 1,234 weeklies that were members of the Newspaper Association of America and, after eliminating those with broken links, found 785 remaining weeklies. Thus, about 64% of the weeklies had web sites, although broken links could reflect changes in URLs for the web sites. Clearly, having a web site is not universal among U.S. weeklies.

The same study examined interactivity on weeklies' web sites.²⁸ Of 343 weeklies, 1.75% had chat rooms, 58.6% had message boards and active forums, 34.1% had opinion

polls, and 79.9% solicited reader feedback. The study did not indicate whether readers could upload articles without going through the editor, a dimension of interactivity examined on citizen journalism sites. One study found that 22% of 64 citizen sites allowed visitors to upload articles directly,²⁹ in many ways a better measure of community access because it is less restricted than forums and chatrooms, which may be monitored by staff. Overall, the authors concluded that few weekly newspapers are utilizing their web sites as much as they should in terms of citizen engagement.

Research Questions

Given economic and technological changes that have affected the weekly newspaper industry since 1997, it is natural to ask how the industry has changed. This study will answer this question, building on baseline 1997 data.³⁰ It measures weeklies in terms of being either paid or free circulation, ownership, and geographic distribution (metropolitan, suburban and rural towns and cities), as well as advertising rates. Finally, it examines whether they have web sites and allow visitors to upload articles, and whether they charge for web access.

The first five research questions address the state of the weekly newspaper industry in 2009, the latest year complete data were available, and how 2009 data compare with data from 1997.

RQ1: *What percentage of weekly newspapers were group owned in 2009? How did this compare with 1997?*

RQ2: *What percentages of weekly newspapers were located in metropolitan central cities, suburban cities and rural towns? How did this compare with 1997?*

RQ3: *What was the average circulation of central city, suburban and rural weeklies? How did this compare with 1997?*

RQ4: *What was the average circulation of group-owned and independent weeklies? How did this compare with 1997?*

RQ5: *What was the average circulation of paid and free weeklies? How did this compare with 1997?*

RQ6 and **RQ7** address whether advertising and cost-per-thousand rates differed by ownership, geographic location and whether the paper was free or paid, and how the 2009 data compared with 1997.

RQ6: *What were the 2009 weekly newspaper advertising rates for type of ownership, geographic location and type of circulation? How did these compare with 1997?*

RQ7: *What were the 2009 weekly newspaper cost-per-thousand advertising rates for type of ownership, geographic location and type of circulation? How did these compare with 1997?*

RQ8, **RQ9** and **RQ10**, addressing weeklies' Internet use, were not asked in 1997 study.³¹

RQ8: *What percentage of weekly newspapers had websites in 2009? Did the percentage differ with type of ownership, type of circulation and geographic location?*

RQ9: *What percentage of weekly newspapers allowed readers to post articles on their websites in 2009? Did the percentage differ with type of ownership, type of circulation and geographic location?*

RQ10: *What percentage of weekly newspapers required payment to use their web sites in 2009? Did the percentage differ by type of ownership, type of circulation or geographic location?*

Method

Measures: Variables included the following: 1. *ownership* (group or independent); 2. average *circulation* (paid, free and total); 3. *open line advertising rate*; 4. *cost-per-thousand advertising rate*; 5. *type of circulation* (paid or free); 6. *geographic location* (metropolitan, suburban or rural city/town); 7. *presence of a newspaper web site*; and 8. the *ability of readers to upload* articles directly to the web site, and whether visitors had to *pay to access* web site content.

Data for variables 1 through 3 were found in the *Editor & Publisher International Yearbook, Part 2: Weeklies*.³² Variable 4 was calculated by dividing variable 3 by variable 2 and multiplying by 1,000. To keep the data comparable with data from the 1997 stratified random sample of weeklies, the same definition was used in determining circulation type (variable 5): any weekly with 5% or more of its circulation paid was classified as paid, and those with fewer than 5% paid were classified as free.³³ The paid percentage was used because it is common for paid weeklies to give some copies away and for some free newspapers to ask for donations.

Geographic location (variable 6) was determined by visiting the web site City-Data .Com,³⁴ with classified among three locations: a *central city* weekly was in a central city of a metropolitan statistical area (central city larger than 50,000) or a micropolitan statistical area (central city 10,000 to 49,999); a *suburban city* weekly was

found in a city within a Metropolitan Statistical Area but outside the central city; and a *rural* weekly was in a city/town smaller than 10,000.

Several steps were taken to evaluate a weekly's web presence. If a website was listed in *Editor & Publisher*, a researcher checked to see if it was active and its type (news or promotional). News sites were examined to see if visitors were allowed to upload articles and had to pay to access to content. If a web site was not listed in *Editor & Publisher*, the same process was followed with Mondotimes.com, a site listing news outlets and types of media.³⁵

The Sample: The study's weekly newspapers were selected from the *Editor & Publisher Yearbook* using stratified proportionate sampling, in order to identify 1,000 weeklies from the list of 6,548 community weeklies, defined as any newspaper publishing at least once a week but no more than three times a week. This excluded shoppers/TMC products not carrying news, and niche weeklies aimed at audiences based on ethnicity, nationality, language, etc. Weeklies are listed by state, and the sample was based on the proportion of weeklies in the state. That is, if 10% of weeklies were in a particular state, then 10% of the sample was taken from that state. After 1,000 weeklies were identified, data were collected for each, though six weeklies were non-existent or out of business. Thus, the final sample was 994 weeklies. Thus, the sampling procedure for the 2009 data parallels the stratified random sampling used to select the 1997 weeklies; the 1997 study's sample of 1,027 weekly newspapers represented nearly 13% of the 1997 population of approximately 8,200 weeklies.³⁶

However, the current study's sampling technique differs slightly from the original study by relying only on *Editor & Publisher*, while the 1997 data were gleaned from

Editor & Publisher, Bacon's Newspaper Directory and state press association directories. However, experience has shown that *Bacon's* adds little beyond *Editor & Publisher*, and that it is increasingly difficult to access press association directories because few now have printed directories and instead limit online access to members. Thus, the 2009 data may under-represent newer weeklies that have yet to establish themselves.

Difference of proportion tests (z-tests), chi-square tests and one-tailed t-tests were used to evaluate whether observed differences resulted from sampling error or were present in the population from which the sample was taken.

Results

RQ1 asks the percentage of weeklies that were group-owned in 2009, and how that compared with 1997. Of the 994 weeklies, 62.3% were part of a group (37.7% were independent), compared to 49.7% group-owned (and 50.3% independent) in 1997's sample of 1,027 weeklies. A difference of proportions test was statistically significant ($z=7.88$, $p < .001$).

RQ2 asks how weeklies were distributed among metropolitan central cities, suburban cities and rural towns in 2009 and how the distribution compared to 1997. Of the 994 weeklies in 2009, 12.4% were in metropolitan central cities, 20.6% were in suburban cities, and 67% were in rural cities and towns. Nine percent of the 1997 weeklies were in metropolitan cities, 46% were in suburban cities, and 45% were in rural cities or towns. The 1997-2009 difference in proportion of weeklies in metropolitan central cities was statistically significant ($z=2.13$, $p < .05$). The 1997-2009 differences in proportions test for suburban weeklies ($z=15.88$, $p < .001$) and for rural cities and towns ($z=13.75$, $p < .001$) were also both significant.

RQ3 asks about average circulation of central city, suburban and rural weeklies in 2009 and how the data compared with 1997. Table 1 shows average 2009 circulation of 17,294 for central city weeklies, 12,646 for suburban, and 4,696 for weeklies in rural cities and towns, with statistically significant differences among the three types. Comparisons with 1997 data for weeklies showed a significant decrease from the average of 27,161 for central city weeklies ($t=2.88$, $p < .01$), a significant increase from the 1997 average circulation of 9,892 for suburban weeklies ($t=1.65$, $p < .05$), and a significant increase from the 1997 average circulation of 3,779 for rural weeklies ($t=2.93$, $p < .01$).

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

RQ4 asks about the circulation of group-owned and independent weeklies in 2009 and how it compared with weeklies in 1997. Table 1 shows that group-owned weeklies averaged 9,126 circulation in 2009 while independents averaged 5,863. By comparison, 1997 group-owned weeklies had a higher average circulation (9,327), but the slight difference could have been due to sampling error ($t = .22$, n.s.). There was, however, a significant 1997-2009 difference ($t = 2.67$, $p < .01$) for independent weeklies, which averaged 7,869 circulation in 1997.

RQ5 asks about circulation of paid and free weeklies in 2009 and how the data compared with 1997 circulation. Average circulation for paid weeklies in 2009 was 5,009, significantly lower than for free weeklies (22,500). By comparison, in 1997 paid weekly circulation averaged 5,311 while it averaged 23,530 for free weeklies. However, the 1997 data did not include standard errors for free and paid weeklies, so a t-test could not be used to determine if the 1997-2009 difference was due to sampling error.

RQ6 asked about the 2009 weekly newspaper advertising rates for type of ownership, geographic location and type of circulation, and how these rates compare with 1997. Table 2 data show the 2009 average open line rate for independent weeklies was \$12.52 and \$10.85 for group weeklies, a statistically non-significant difference. The 1997 open line rate for independent weeklies averaged \$6.78, and the 1997-2009 difference was statistically significant ($t=1.66$, $p < .05$). The 1997 rate for group weeklies was \$9.90, and the 1997-2009 difference was statistically significant ($t=2.06$, $p < .025$).

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The average 2009 open line rate was \$7.39 for rural weeklies, \$16.58 for suburban weeklies, and \$25.14 for central city weeklies. The difference in average rates between central city and rural city weeklies was statistically significant at the $p < .001$ level, as was the difference between suburban and the rural weekly rates, but the difference between central city and suburban weekly average rates was not. The 1997 rates were \$4.85 for rural weeklies, \$10.27 for suburban weeklies, and \$16.22 for central city weeklies. The difference between 1997 metro and 2009 metro weeklies was not significant ($t=1.10$), but 1997-2009 differences for suburban weeklies was significant ($t=1.91$, $p < .05$), as was the 1997-2009 difference for rural weeklies ($t=12.45$, $p < .001$). The 2009 line rate was \$10.60 for paid weeklies and \$15.95 for free weeklies, a difference that was not statistically significant. The 1997 line rate for paid weeklies was \$7.04, and the 1997-2009 difference was statistically significant ($t=2.41$, $p < .01$); the 1997 line rate for free weeklies was \$14.19, and the 1997-2009 difference was not statistically significant ($t=1.56$).

RQ7 asks about cost-per-thousand advertising rate across ownership type, geographic location and type of circulation, and how these compared with 1997 weeklies. Table 3 shows the 2009 cost-per-thousand level for group-owned weeklies averaged \$2.79, while independent weeklies averaged \$3.77; the difference was not statistically significant. The 1997 rate for group-owned weeklies was \$2.68, while 1997 independent weeklies averaged \$1.86. The 1997-2009 difference for group weeklies was not significant ($t=.55$), but it was significant for independent weeklies ($t=2.12$, $p < .025$).

The 2009 cost per thousand rate for central city weeklies averaged \$4.52, \$3 for suburban city weeklies, and \$2.96 for rural weeklies. The central city rate was considerably higher than 1997's \$1.43 average, but the difference could have been a result of sampling error ($t=1.20$, n.s.). The 1997 suburban weekly rate (\$2.49) was less than for 2009 suburban weeklies, but the difference was also not statistically significant ($t=.80$). By contrast, the increase from 1997's rural weekly cost per thousand (\$2.20) and 2009's rate for rural weeklies was statistically significant ($t=5.06$, $p < .001$). The reason the seemingly large changes in rates for central and suburban cities were *not* significant (i.e., they could have been due to sampling error) was the greater variability and smaller sample sizes compared to rural weeklies.

The 2009 cost-per-thousand rate for free weeklies averaged \$1.14 and for paid weeklies it was significantly higher at \$3.55 ($p < .05$). The comparable rates for 1997 were \$1.17 for free weeklies and \$2.51 for paid, but 1997-2009 t-tests could not be calculated because 1997 standard errors were unavailable.

RQ8 asks what percentage of weekly newspapers had websites in 2009 and how the percentage differed by ownership, circulation type and geographic location. Of 994

weeklies examined in 2009, 63% had news websites, with free weeklies significantly more likely (71%) than paid weeklies (61%) to have web sites ($z=6.25$, $p < .001$).

Fifty-seven percent of rural weeklies had web sites, compared to 76% of suburban weeklies and 72% of metro central city weeklies. The metro-suburban difference was statistically significant ($z=2.5$, $p < .05$), as were the metro-rural difference ($z=9.38$, $p < .001$), and the suburban-rural difference ($z=11.88$, $p < .001$).

Proportionately more group-owned weeklies (68%) had websites than did independent weeklies (55%), a statistically significant difference ($z=8.13$, $p < .001$).

RQ9 asks what percentage of 2009 weeklies' websites allowed readers to post articles and if the percentage differed by ownership, circulation type or geographic location. Of 678 weeklies with sites, 45 (6.6%) allowed uploading, with group-owned weeklies (7.6%) slightly more likely to allow uploading than independents (4.8%), but the difference was not statistically significant ($X^2 = 1.93$). However, both geographic location and circulation-type were related to uploading practices. Free weeklies were more likely (11.6%) than paid weeklies (5.6%) to allow uploading ($X^2=4.46$, $p < .05$), and both suburban weeklies (11.3%) and central city weeklies (10.5%) were more likely to allow uploading than rural weeklies (4.0%) were ($X^2 = 12.67$, $p < .01$).

RQ10 asks what percentage of 2009 weekly newspapers required payment to use their web sites and how the percentage varied by ownership, circulation type or geographic location. Of 678 weeklies with web sites, only 40 (5.9%) required payment; not surprisingly, 39 (97.5%) of the paid sites were for weeklies that had paid print circulation. Of 230 independent weeklies, 21 (9.1%) had pay sites, compared to 19 (4.2%) of 428 group-owned weeklies, a significant association ($X^2 = 6.54$, $p < .01$).

The probability of a weekly having a pay site varied significantly by geographic location. Of 424 rural weeklies with websites, 7.5% were pay sites, while only 5.0% of 159 suburban weeklies with websites and none of the 95 central city weeklies with websites were pay sites ($X^2 = 8.24, p < .02$).

Discussion

This study posed research questions designed to address variations in the 2009 community weekly industry's ownership, circulation type, geographic location and ad rates; changes in the industry between 1997 and 2009; and the web site presence of community weeklies in 2009.

Nearly two-thirds (62.7%) of 2009 weeklies were owned by groups, and group-owned weeklies averaged higher circulation than did independent weeklies, though this reflected the higher proportion of group-owned weeklies that were also free (20.4%) compared to only 10.1% free among independent weeklies. Free weeklies had higher—nearly four times higher—circulations than paid weeklies, because free weeklies are usually delivered to all houses in a geographic area. Despite higher average circulation for group-owned weeklies, the slightly lower open line ad rate and cost-per-thousand ad rate for group-owned papers were not significantly different from independents.

The open line rate for free weeklies was higher than for paid weeklies, but the difference was not significant because of the high standard deviation in the rate for paid weeklies. The difference in cost-per-thousand was higher for paid than for free weeklies because of their large circulation. In other words, the rate was higher for free weeklies but their much wider distribution dropped the cost per thousand below the paid weeklies.

Of course, managers at paid weeklies would likely argue that people who pay for a newspaper are more likely to read it than if it is thrown in their driveway.

Variation was found among the central city, suburban and rural weeklies. As would be expected, the largest circulation weeklies were in central cities of metropolitan areas, followed by weeklies in suburbs and then weeklies in cities and towns outside metropolitan areas. Again, part of the circulation variation reflects the higher percentage of weeklies in central (45.5%) and suburban cities (30.7%) that were free; only 6.8% of rural weeklies were free. However, the three pair-wise differences among central city, suburban city and rural weeklies are all significant, even if only paid weeklies are considered. In other words, differences among circulation levels represent the variation in city size. The larger proportions of free weeklies probably indicate available advertising resources. Smaller cities have fewer advertisers compared to suburban and central cities, so rural weeklies increase revenue by charging for the newspaper.

A second group of research questions, addressing differences between 1997 and 2009, suggest that the industry has indeed changed significantly. The expansion of group ownership that started in the 1990s has continued a decade into the new century, from being about half group-owned in 1997 to almost two-thirds in 2009. Average circulation of group-owned weeklies remained about the same, but independent weekly circulation dropped significantly, increasing the circulation gap between group and independent weeklies. This change probably represents the decline of paid circulation among independent weeklies, which had a higher proportion of paid weeklies than did group-owned weeklies. This is consistent with the decline of daily newspaper circulation during the same period.

Although the circulation gap between independent and group weeklies grew between 1997 and 2009, the gap in ad rates declined. Groups had significantly higher open line rates in 1997, but by 2009, independent weeklies had basically the same average rate. Both increased since 1997, but the independent rates increased more than the group rates. The same trend was seen in the cost per thousand. The cost per thousand rate trend obviously reflected the decline in circulation. Even if the ad rate remains the same, cost per thousand will increase as circulation declines.

Another factor might be a need for additional revenue as amount of advertising declined. Advertising revenue is the number of column inches multiplied by the column inch rate. If the number of inches declined, reflecting increased ad competition from the Internet, newspapers would need to increase ad rates to keep revenue from falling. Indeed, the open line rate did increase significantly at paid weeklies during this period.

One of the most notable changes between 1997 and 2009 was in circulation averages for the three types of communities. Average circulation dropped for central city weeklies but grew for suburban and rural weeklies, trends consistent with population changes between 2000 and 2010 which saw suburbs grow faster than the metropolitan core.³⁷ Average circulation for suburban weeklies grew as the percentage of all weeklies that were suburban declined. This suggests two possibilities. First, surviving suburban weeklies expanded to make up for the disappearance of these weeklies. Second, the weeklies were consolidating to serve wider areas with fewer newspapers. These data can't reveal which of this was likely, but further research would be useful to determine how these two trends are related.

The average open line ad rates followed the same pattern as circulation. The rate increased in all three types of communities and kept the same order found with circulation. The 2009 order remained for the cost-per-thousand ad rate, but the differences between the three pairs of city types were not statistically significant. By contrast, the difference in 1997 between central city weeklies and rural and suburban weeklies *were* statistically significant. The change mostly likely resulted from the decline in circulation among central city weeklies.

The third set of questions addressed web use by weeklies. The results are consistent with findings of a 2012 survey that 64% of the weeklies had web sites,³⁸ though that study did not break the weeklies down by geographic focus. In fact, 2009 data indicate that suburban and central city weeklies were more likely to have websites than rural weeklies. This may reflect lower broadband penetration in rural areas, less advertising competition in rural areas, and lower total profits at rural weeklies. In 2009, rural areas had 75% broadband penetration, while micropolitan areas had 83%, and metropolitan areas (central city and suburbs) had 92% penetration.³⁹ In addition, rural areas have fewer news and media outlets competing for advertising dollars because these cities do not have television stations and the number of radio stations per market is small. Finally, rural weeklies generally have lower revenues and profits. As the groups expanded in the 1990s, they bought larger market weeklies with higher revenues and left smaller weeklies as independents.⁴⁰

Although the majority of weeklies had websites, few (6.6%) allowed individuals to upload articles. Earlier speculation about the web's potential suggested that sites might become venues free of the traditional "strong gatekeeping" and would allow people

to post what they wanted to post.⁴¹ This model was envisioned for citizen journalism sites, but one study found that such sites were strong gatekeepers and controlled the content posted.⁴² Another study found that local government coverage in weekly newspapers was more likely to feature citizen-written articles than were citizen journalism sites.⁴³ There is of course no reason weeklies could not allow more citizen input, but they were not doing it to any great degree in 2009.

A final question asked to what degree weekly web sites had become pay sites. These 2009 data reflect the industry just before the “take-off” of recent trends toward pay sites.⁴⁴ About 6% of the sites required payment. Interestingly, rural weeklies, though not as likely to have websites, were more likely to have paid web sites. The most logical interpretation is that rural weeklies are more likely to be the only source of news in their markets. This would give them enough market power to create pay walls and not have too much of a drop in circulation.

Conclusion

The underlying questions for this study are whether economic and industry trends have reshaped the community weekly newspaper industry and whether community weeklies have adopted digital, Internet-era tools. The answer to the first question is that the industry has changed since 1997, but more in some ways than in others. In addition, weeklies have not adapted the Internet to the degree that they could have. This second conclusion is consistent with a 2009 survey of weekly managers about web sites.⁴⁵

Between 1997 and 2009, the weekly industry became dramatically more rural and urban as well as more group-owned. The percentage of weeklies located in rural communities changed from 45% to 67%. The percentage of weeklies in central metro

cities increased by about a third, and the percentage in suburbs decreased by about half. Even though the percentage of weeklies in central cities grew, circulation declined.

The change in geographic distribution likely represented three possibilities. First, the proportion of weeklies that were group owned increased significantly, and groups usually concentrate on larger population areas because of their higher potential for revenue and profit. As groups bought more suburban weeklies, they may have consolidated some of the mastheads. A second possibility is that the 2009 percentages reflect the closing of suburban weeklies that existed in areas with higher levels of competition. Third, the increase in the proportion of weeklies that were rural may represent the importance of these weeklies to their communities and their resulting market strength. Weeklies with stronger market positions are more likely to withstand the impact of recessions, such as the one that began in 2008.

In all geographic locations, the percentage of weeklies with web sites lagged behind the percentage of households with broadband. Exactly why this is the case is not clear, but weeklies will need to attend to potential demand for online news content as more people move online. Once a weekly is online, it will need to examine what it does there. Just how much community participation and what form that participation takes will need to be determined.

Because these are secondary data, the causes behind the trends cannot be determined. In addition, the sampling frame used here, while extensive, is not the entire population of community weeklies. However, the consistent results from these data and the result of a survey conducted the same year⁴⁶ help validate the conclusions.

The clear trends raise some interesting questions for future research. Why has the number of weekly web sites lagged behind the growth of broadband? Will community weeklies allow more direct contribution of stories to their web sites? Why has percentage of weeklies located in rural areas declined? Is the decline in numbers of rural weeklies related to the increase in average circulation? Will the decline continue? Will the expansion of groups continue at the expense of independent weeklies? Will the differences in advertising rates among the three geographic locations continue to decline? Will more weeklies move to pay web sites?

Table 1

Average Circulation by Ownership and Location of Weekly, 2009 Weekly Newspapers

	<i>Type of Circulation</i>		<i>T-test of Total Circulation</i>		
	<i>Paid</i>	<i>Free</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>T-test</i>
Ownership					
Group	3,480 (181.7)	5,646 (657.4)	9,126 (646.9)	619	-3.620 ^a
Independent	3,295 (228.6)	2,569 (426.1)	5,863 (447.3)	375	
Geographic Area					
Metro	4,050 (720.2)	13,243 (1,812.2)	17,294 (1,749.6)	123	-1.93 ^b
Suburban	3,978 (348.6)	8,669 (1,587.9)	12,647 (1,540.9)	205	-8.39 ^c
Rural	3,117 (125.0)	1,580 (210.7)	4,697 (228.3)	666	-13.71 ^d

(Standard error appears in parentheses).

Significance:

^a $p < .001$.

^b Comparison of metro versus suburban mean for total circulation, $p = .05$.

^c Comparison of suburban versus rural mean for total circulation, $p < .001$.

^d Comparison of rural versus metro mean for total circulation, $p < .001$.

Table 2

Advertising Rate by Type of Weekly, 2009 Weekly Newspapers

Type	<i>Ad Rate Per Column Inch</i>			<i>T-test</i>
	<i>Total</i>	<i>N</i>		
Paid	10.60	830		1.518 ^a
	(1.56)			
Free	15.95	164		
	(.865)			
Ownership				
Group	10.85	619		.617 ^a
	(.301)			
Independent	12.52	375		
	(3.44)			
Geographic Area				
Metro	25.14	123		-1.06 ^b
	(8.90)			
Suburban	16.58	205		-4.98 ^c
	(3.29)			
Rural	7.39	666		-4.63 ^d
	(.167)			

(Standard error appears in parentheses).

Significance:

^a n.s.

^b Comparison of metro versus suburban mean for total circulation, n.s.

^c Comparison of suburban versus rural mean for total circulation, $p < .001$.

^d Comparison of rural versus metro mean for total circulation, $p < .001$.

Table 3
Advertising Rate Per Thousand by Ownership and Location of Weekly, 2009 Weekly Newspapers

	<i>Type of Circulation</i>		<i>T-test of Total Per Thousand Ad Rate</i>		
	<i>Paid</i>	<i>Free</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>T-test</i>
Ownership Group	1.16 (.096)	3.20 (.177)	2.79 (.146)	619	1.354 ^a
Independent	1.09 (.148)	4.07 (.999)	3.77 (.899)	375	
Geographic Area					
Metro	7.43 (4.682)	1.03 (.105)	4.52 (2.56)	123	-.711 ^b
Suburban	3.77 (.890)	1.24 (.159)	3.00 (.623)	205	-.097 ^c
Rural	3.09 (.132)	1.15 (.146)	2.96 (.125)	666	-1.371 ^d

(Standard error appears in parentheses).

Significance:

^a p = n.s.

^b Comparison of metro versus suburban mean for total circulation, p = n.s..

^c Comparison of suburban versus rural mean for total circulation, p = n.s.

^d Comparison of rural versus metro mean for total circulation, p = n.s.

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