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**THE METRO WIDE WEB:  
Changes in Newspapers' Gate-keeping Role Online**

Jane B. Singer

***Abstract***

Newspapers traditionally have brought selected information about the world to local readers' doorsteps. But as papers go online, their editors face new decisions relating to that gate-keeping role. This study examines the print and online versions of six Colorado newspapers, comparing the amount of local and non-local news, sports and business content in each. The findings indicate the online products have a much stronger local orientation than the print ones, suggesting that online papers may be moving toward a reinterpretation of their role in connecting readers to the world beyond their horizons.

## **THE METRO WIDE WEB:**

### **Changes in Newspapers' Gate-keeping Role Online**

It is hardly news that the World Wide Web presents newspapers with innumerable challenges to their traditional roles. Publishers and editors wrestle with issues of content, staffing, revenue generation and a host of related concerns. One persistently perplexing issue has been how to balance two of the Web's more striking attributes, which happen to present diametrically opposite alternatives for a news organization. On the one hand, the Web is the first truly global medium; content can be disseminated to millions of people in all corners of the globe instantly and without any incremental increase over the cost of sending it electronically around a more literal corner. Yet the Web also is the ultimate niche medium. Because it has no physical limits, it can serve the narrowest of interests, the tiniest of territories.

A print newspaper is somewhere between a universal medium and a personal one. Just where it lies on that continuum depends on its mission, market and resources; *The New York Times* serves an international community well beyond New York City, while a rural daily may reach only a few thousand people. But regardless of their size or scope, U.S. newspapers share the role of gate-keeper to the world for their readers. All newspapers present a selection of the day's events, along with other items deemed of interest. That compilation consists of a mix of information from both inside and outside the paper's local circulation area. Each day's newspaper provides a concrete and finite world view that takes in both the proximate and the distant. It is a package that inherently recognizes that the place one lives -- the place inhabited by local readers -- is part of a set of larger places that includes the state, the region, the nation and, ultimately, the entire planet. Though it serves a community primarily defined by geography, one of the print newspaper's key roles is to connect that geographic community to the rest of the world.

This study examines how that role is changing as newspapers move online. It suggests that although physical distribution of the paper's content has been freed from all geographic constraints, the online paper's world view is far more narrowly focused than that of its print counterpart. The findings

indicate that the online paper, at least in its early incarnation, is an overwhelmingly local medium serving a specific community of place. As such, it is giving up a major portion of its traditional gate-keeping function. Providing a link to "wire.ap.org," the online version of the Associated Press, is quite a different thing from selecting which wire stories are of such significance or interest that they merit inclusion in the day's paper. This study suggests that as papers move online, Mr. Gates may find himself out of a job.

### ***Gate-keeper to a Post-modern World?***

Mr. Gates, of course, is the eponymous 1940s wire editor whose job was to choose which wire stories were to be published and which got the spike. While his decisions were subjective, they were based on a set of criteria that, when pressed, he was able at least nebulously to define. Some stories were simply "not interesting," others were "too vague" or perhaps they were just plain "slop." Building on sociologist Kurt Lewin's proposal that a person or group with some power decides what passes through the "gate" and thus is able to become a part of general knowledge, White suggested that Mr. Gates relied heavily on his own value judgments for making those decisions. Still, make them he did, choosing about 10 percent of the thousands of state, national and international wire stories that crossed his desk each week as worthy to be passed along to readers of his 30,000-circulation Midwestern newspaper.<sup>1</sup>

Subsequent studies have confirmed both the subjectivity of the gate keeper's decisions and the readily observable fact that such decisions are made daily by professionals working in a medium of finite space. During the Vietnam War, an older Mr. Gates, still highlighting national and international stories through his subjective daily decisions, defined news as a day-by-day report that "should be presented as much as possible in variety for a balanced diet."<sup>2</sup> Other studies have sought to probe the criteria for news selection in a variety of ways. For instance, Chang and Lee suggested that perceived impact on American security and national interest was a major factor in the selection of international news for inclusion in U.S. dailies.<sup>3</sup> In a different sort of study, Wanta and Roark verified that gate-keeping decisions are reflected in wire photos as well as text; which photos make it into the paper is based on a mix of market size and

perceived audience needs, newspaper tradition and national trends, as well as news events.<sup>4</sup> Donohue, Olien and Tichenor looked at the organizational context within which editors operate and found that while the basic value of information dissemination seems to transcend structural differences, commercial constraints may be more strongly felt at smaller, more locally oriented publications.<sup>5</sup>

In print newspapers, the use of wire and other non-local items seems to be thriving. Although some recent journalistic trends, notably the emphasis on civic journalism, have stressed the primacy of the local community, studies indicate the print paper is not becoming significantly more "local" in its orientation. Bridges and Bridges suggest a rather mechanistic approach to selecting news could help explain the fact that front pages, "the reader's window to the tone and the 'spirit' of a newspaper...are not demonstrating an interest in the local environment" to the degree the researchers expected. They found that timeliness of news seemed more important than proximity,<sup>6</sup> an interesting approach for newspapers to take at a time when they have become among the slowest of delivery mechanisms for breaking news. Nor are small newspapers, which serve a geographically concentrated audience, more likely than large ones to focus exclusively on news of those communities. Voakes et al. found that medium and small news organizations have a much larger percentage of wire copy on issues of statewide interest than larger ones.<sup>7</sup> And although people may turn to newspapers for local news first, national, international and state news are also in the top six among content category preferences for readers of all ages.<sup>8</sup>

Although the Web in general can be a dubious source for trustworthy information, users do seem willing to turn to online newspapers for non-local stories of importance to them. A survey of politically interested Web users during the 1996 presidential campaign indicates that they see online newspapers as significantly more credible sources of this information than their print counterparts.<sup>9</sup> In an earlier study of college students' use of the Mercury Center, an America Online version of the *San Jose Mercury News*, Mueller and Kamerer found that a majority of respondents actually preferred the "electronic" newspaper to a traditional one as a source of world, national, sports and business news.<sup>10</sup>

Although online newspapers are beginning to provide increasing amounts of original content,<sup>11</sup> the bulk of the news online is still "shovelware" -- content that was created for the print product and has simply been shoveled on the Web or, to use the more polite term, "repurposed" for online distribution. For example, at two newspapers observed by Martin, stories were typically moved from the newspaper production computers to the online staff for the markup needed for Web delivery. Other content changes were rare and relatively minor, such as changing headlines to fit the different space requirements, although the online staffs did occasionally develop special content sections not available in print.<sup>12</sup> The majority of an online newspaper's content, then, might be expected to simply replicate the print product.

This study seeks to explore whether online papers reflect the content mix selected by gate keepers at their print counterparts to provide readers with information from around the globe, or whether they are giving their online readers a different view of the world than they are giving their print ones. Because online newspapers are still in their infancy and are only now beginning to emerge as a focus of scholarly research, hypothesis formation was judged to be premature. Instead, this study posed a research question: Is the online newspaper's overall news, sports and business content more or less "local" in its emphasis, defined as involving the paper's immediate circulation area, than that of its print counterpart?

### ***Methodology***

The study involved a content analysis of six newspapers located along Colorado's "Front Range." This region east of the Rocky Mountains is experiencing phenomenally fast population growth, as is the state as a whole. Through much of the 1990s, for example, the county just south of Denver was the fastest-growing in the nation; with some relief, local media recently reported it had lost that distinction and become only the **second**-fastest-growing, shooting up 11.2 percent from 1997 to 1998 alone.<sup>13</sup> U.S. Census figures indicate Front Range counties all have grown significantly in the past decade, contributing the major impetus to a statewide population growth of 20.5 percent in the 1990s. And the trend is

expected to continue. Colorado had about 3.3 million residents in 1990, was estimated to hit 4 million midway through 1999 and is projected to be home to an estimated 5.2 million people by 2025.<sup>14</sup>

Clearly, it is a part of the country whose communities are undergoing rapid change. Area newspapers thus face the challenge of serving a readership comprised of relatively large numbers of newcomers, whose local attachments may not run deep. (And not only because they have not lived there long. Research indicates that in areas of high population density, people are less likely to stay caught up with local news and more likely to be somewhat estranged from their community.<sup>15</sup>)

The newspapers used in this study were the print and online versions of the *Boulder Daily Camera*, the *Colorado Springs Gazette*, the *Denver Post*, the *Denver Rocky Mountain News*, the *Loveland Reporter-Herald* and the *Pueblo Chieftain*. These papers were selected for a variety of reasons in addition to their location in this Front Range area of rapid growth:

- \* They have an online product that includes news updated daily.
- \* They represent each of the Newspaper Association of America's four circulation categories; the *Reporter-Herald* and *Camera* have a circulation below 50,000; the *Chieftain* is between 50,000 and 100,000; the *Gazette* is between 100,000 and 250,000; and the *Post* and *News* are over 250,000.<sup>16</sup>
- \* Several of the papers have overlapping circulation areas and are, to varying degrees, in competition with one another, raising interesting issues of what constitutes local news. The most direct competition is between the *Post* and the *News*. Although the two papers since have agreed to enter a joint operating agreement, at the time of this study, Denver was one of the few U.S. cities with two unaffiliated competing papers, and the circulation war was red hot throughout the decade<sup>17</sup> and indeed the century. However, both papers also circulate all up and down the Front Range and are readily and cheaply available in each of the four other cities whose primary newspaper is included here. In addition, the Boulder and Loveland papers' circulation areas overlap, as do those of the Colorado Springs and Pueblo papers. So several papers serve common areas and must seek to differentiate themselves from competitors in their markets.

A composite week in June 1998 was used to conduct the content analysis, with specific days randomly selected to construct the composite. Use of such a "constructed week" in content analysis is

preferable to both simple random sampling of stories (because of the likelihood of oversampling from larger editions, such as the Sunday paper) and use of consecutive days in a single week (because those results are harder to generalize over time).<sup>18</sup>

Both the print and online versions of each of the six newspapers were coded on each of the seven days of this composite week. The analysis included all current-day stories in the news, sports and business sections, both print and online; it omitted lifestyles, other feature sections (such as travel or entertainment) and weather (although weather-related stories that ran in the news sections were counted), as well as all advertising content. Material that ran solely as agate (for instance, stock tables or Major League Baseball standings) was not counted; standalone artwork, however, was counted. Even with the limitations, the story count quickly added up. In all, 3,403 print stories and 1,383 online items were included in the study.

The author coded each story according to a variety of criteria, including its length in paragraphs; its placement on a page or site; and its inclusion of elements ranging from infoboxes to e-mail addresses.

Of primary importance here are the following criteria:

- \* Which newspaper and which version of that newspaper (print or online) it appeared in (for example, "online *Post*" or "print *Camera*"). Each paper had its own code in the data collection and preliminary analysis stage; for some of the subsequent data analysis, an aggregation of the six online papers and the six print papers was helpful.
- \* Whether it was a news, sports or business story. In rare cases, a story that appeared in one section of the print product appeared in a different section online; if so, it was coded according to where it ran in each product. For example, a story about Broncos quarterback John Elway's car dealership providing college scholarship funds for local teens was a news item in the print *News* but a sports story online.
- \* Whether it was a metro story (about something in the paper's core circulation area); a state story (in Colorado but outside the core circulation area); a regional story (in any of the seven states bordering Colorado); a national story (in a non-bordering state or a nationwide story, such as announcement of a new medical breakthrough); or a world story (in any country other than the United States). Some stories had dual natures; for instance, stories about the Denver trial of Oklahoma City bombing suspect Terry Nichols were simultaneously metro and regional stories for the two Denver papers, and both state and regional stories for the

others. These were coded in a way that acknowledged both "locations." In particular, collections of briefs, coded as a single story, often reflected multiple locations. For subsequent data analysis, an aggregate variable was created to allow examination of "metro" and "all non-metro" stories.

- \* Whether it was written or photographed by a staff member, a non-staff member (for instance, a local businessman's financial column or a story by a stringer), an Associated Press staffer, or a staffer at a syndicated service other than the AP, such as *The New York Times*. Codes also were assigned for multiple bylines (for instance, "staff and wire reports").
- \* Whether the story appeared in the print product only, in the online product only, or in both the print and online products. In some cases, parts of a story (for instance, one brief among many) might appear in both products while other parts did not; in other cases, a different version of a print story might appear online. Both cases were accommodated in the coding.
- \* Whether it had artwork. If so, the type of artwork (photo, infographic, cartoon and so on) was coded, as was the source (staff, non-staff, AP or syndicate), whether it was color or black and white, and how it was used (with a story, standalone or as a refer). If multiple pieces of art were used, that was also noted.

As McMillan has pointed out,<sup>19</sup> the challenges posed by online content analysis are numerous.

They include the transience of the medium and the resulting problems in testing the reliability of coded materials; the wide variation in the way stories are presented and accessed online, making consistency of coding hard to obtain; and the fact that because the medium is rooted in neither time nor space, there may be no clear indication where one "edition" ends and another begins. For example, the extensive use of archives, with or without dates on the stories, makes it tough to ascertain which items belong with which day's paper. In short, for a method whose reliability and thus credibility rest primarily on the fact that the content itself is stable and the classification of it is reproducible,<sup>20</sup> the Web can be a bear.

In this study, a single researcher did all of the initial coding, both print and online. Tests of both intercoder and intracoder reliability subsequently were performed on the print newspapers. Data related to the online versions could not be recoded; as entities that change daily if not hourly, the online products could not be reproduced. The intracoder reliability test was conducted by recoding a news section, a

sports section and a business section from three different days in three different print papers. A total of 66 stories were recoded. All stories recorded the first time also were recorded the second time. The coding for all categories relevant to this study was the same both times.

Two additional coders performed intercoder reliability tests on the print newspapers. Each coder examined a news section, a business section and a sports section from one of the papers in the study. Using Holsti's formula for determining the reliability of nominal data,<sup>21</sup> the percentages of intercoder agreement on data relevant to this report were:

- \* On inclusion of an item in the overall count: 99.3 (coder one) and 95.3 (coder two).
- \* On classification as metro or non-metro: 97.3 (coder one) and 90.2 (coder two)
- \* On story staffing: 98.6 (coder one) and 88.2 (coder two).
- \* On identification of artwork: 100 (coder one) and 90.2 (coder two)

A total of 20 variables (not all of which are relevant here) were identified and numeric values assigned; the data related to all 4,786 coded print and online stories were entered into SPSS and analyzed. Because the variables of greatest interest here consisted of nominal data, their analysis was conducted primarily through frequency calculation and selected cross-tabulations.

## ***Findings***

This section looks at the content analysis findings related to the raw numbers of stories in each of the two media; the location and content of those stories; the staffing of the stories; and the use of artwork.

### ***Story totals, print and online***

The print products of the six newspapers combined ran well over twice as many news, sports and business items as the online versions. Overall, 1,383 such items appeared online during this composite week, compared with 3,403 in the print products for the same days. Figure 1 shows a newspaper-by-newspaper comparison of total story counts for the print and online products.

**(FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE)**

So despite the unlimited news hole available online, editors of Web products were whittling down the print package for online distribution. Just how much whittling took place varied with the newspaper. The Boulder paper, which ran house ads urging readers to check its Web site for "the full content of today's *Camera*," did provide the greatest number of online stories relative to its print counterpart, with 279 online stories during the composite week and 509 print ones. At the other extreme, the smallest paper of the group, the *Loveland Reporter-Herald*, ran just 82 stories online during the week and 382 in print.

Of the 1,383 news, sports and business stories that ran online, just 158, or 11.4 percent, appeared **only** on the Web and not in print. Some local items had a longer life online (either deliberately or because of a failure to keep the site updated), and thus were coded as appearing only online because of the use of a composite rather than a consecutive week. Other items that ran online but not in print were stories from "wire.ap.org," the online Associated Press service; for example, the *Denver Post*, which included links to AP stories on its home page, had 69 of the online-only stories, of which 67 were wire.ap.org items.<sup>22</sup>

There was no evidence that any of these papers created daily news content specifically for the Web. True, some papers did have archives of ongoing stories. Some also offered special content packages online that were not available in print; an example was the *Gazette's* "Colorado Online" sister site, primarily a travel and recreation guide. And some provided discussion boards on various topics; an example was the *Post's* "Voice of the Fan" option from its sports menu. But while these are interesting and potentially useful applications of the Web's capabilities, they are standing features, not special content created to tell a particular news, sports or business story online.

The same version of 1,149 stories ran in **both** the print and online products of the papers in this study. They typically ran with no changes or with only minor alterations, such as a different headline to fit the available space or the inclusion of a paragraph or two online that may have been cut from the print version. Another 62 stories appeared both in print and online, but in different versions; for example, an AP story online might correspond to the *Washington Post* syndicate's coverage of the same event in print. A handful of stories, notably collections of briefs, overlapped only partially.

On the other hand, 2,173 stories -- 45.4 percent of all the news, sports and business stories coded -- appeared **only** in print. Looking at these stories in more detail helps address the research question concerning the "localness" of the two products.

### ***Story location and content***

Of the 1,383 total stories that ran online, 617 (44.6 percent) overall were metro items. Among the 3,403 total print stories, 1,051 (30.9 percent) were metro, a significant difference ( $X^2(1)=81.628$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Figure 2 shows a newspaper-by-newspaper comparison of metro and non-metro items. Although there was considerable variation among the papers in the amount of space each devoted to metro news, in all cases the proportion of the total daily package devoted to metro news was greater online than in print. No print newspaper devoted more than 40 percent of its news hole to local news, sports or business stories. Online, however, metro items accounted for as many as two-thirds of all stories, in the case of the Pueblo newspaper (and almost all its non-metro total involved a major crime story in southwestern Colorado, which the *Chieftain* sent its own staff members to cover). The two smallest papers in this study, those in Boulder and Loveland, actually had the weakest local orientation online, though they did both offer a greater percentage of metro stories online than in print.

### **(FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE)**

An even more dramatic statement can be made by looking at the stories that ran **only** in the print products and did not appear online at all. Of these, 78.5 percent were from outside the paper's primary circulation area. Of the stories with a version that ran in whole or in part in **both** the print and online products, 582 (47.4 percent) were metro items. These figures indicate that although the online products do contain a mix of local and non-local stories, they are not reflecting the full range of news, sports and business content available in print -- and where they are diverging is primarily over the provision of non-local stories. While the majority of metro news, sports and business stories appearing in print were picked up for the online version, a majority of the non-metro ones in each category were not. (Again, many non-metro online-only news and sports stories were "wire.ap.org" items.)

The data for all 4,786 stories can be broken down further by content category as shown in Figure 3. (Odd numbers appear in the "both" column because of the collections of briefs; for example, one set of briefs in print might have included two separate online stories.) This view offers more detail about patterns of differences among news, sports and business categories. In all three categories, the amount of non-metro content appearing in print exceeds that appearing online.

**(FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE)**

Looking at the news, sports and business items individually also offers insight into the relative importance given to each category in the print and online products. Overall, considering both products together, roughly twice as many news stories ran in this composite week as sports stories, and roughly twice as many sports as business stories ran. The totals were 2,660 (55.6 percent of all stories) for news, 1,407 (29.4 percent) for sports and 709 (14.8 percent) for business. The percentages are comparable when the online and print products are considered separately.

However, the weight given to these topics online varied among the six newspapers. The two Denver papers placed considerably more weight on sports in their online products. Sports consistently has been a high usage category for both Denver online newspapers since their launch within months of each other in 1995. They clearly are attentive to those figures. The *Post* ran 144 sports stories online and 149 news stories, compared with 273 sports and 416 news stories in print. The *News* actually ran more sports stories (107) than news stories (100) online; in print, it ran 211 sports stories and 388 news ones.

Both papers gave relatively short shrift to business stories online, with 37 appearing in the online *News* and 64 in the online *Post* (compared with 150 and 125, respectively, in print). In contrast, several online papers gave business items more play online. The *Pueblo Chieftain* ran 99 sports stories and 45 business stories in print; online, it ran almost as many business items (15) as sports ones (17). Similarly, the *Boulder Camera* ran 34 business and 51 sports stories online, compared with 77 business and 173 sports items in print. With the exception of the online *News*, all the papers in this study ran more news stories than items in either of the other two categories.

### *Story staffing*

Given that Mr. Gates was a wire and not a city editor, perhaps an even better way to look at the gate-keeping issues relevant to this study is to look beyond the location of the story to the staffing of that story. Some stories that took place outside the paper's primary circulation area were still covered by staffers. Examples included staff coverage by both the *News* and the *Post* of the NBA and NHL finals, neither of which involved a Denver team, as well as staff coverage by the larger papers of a cop-killing and subsequent manhunt in the Four Corners area, at the other end of the state and across two mountain ranges from their primary circulation area.

Overall, 2,037 (42.6 percent) of the total 4,786 print and online stories were covered by staffers either alone or in combination with a non-staff source, typically a wire service. Another 453 stories had no byline of any sort, and on seven, the author neglected to record a byline. Of the remaining 2,289 stories, 1,623 (70.9 percent) were provided by the Associated Press, either alone or in combination with another wire service, or simply had a generic "wire services" byline. Another 496 were from a non-AP wire or syndicate, such as the New York Times syndicate or Scripps-Howard News Services (Scripps owned both the *News* and the *Camera* at the time of this study), and 170 were from "non-staff" sources such as area business or sports personalities.

However, when online and print stories are considered separately, the relationships look quite different. The online content was predominantly staff-generated. Among the online stories, 818 (59.1 percent) were by staffers, either alone or in combination with a wire service report; among the print stories, 1,219 (35.8 percent) were by staffers. This difference between staffing of print and online stories also is highly significant ( $X^2(1)=222.722$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

Part of the reason for this, of course, is economic; copy from the print staffers is essentially free to the online product while everything else carries a fee. The Associated Press is not cheap in print, and it is not cheap online, either; for example, the *Colorado Springs Gazette*, with a circulation slightly over 100,000, paid roughly \$900 a month for the right to use AP stories in its online service at the time of this

study.<sup>23</sup> One of these six papers, the *Chieftain*, appeared not to have paid to use any wire copy; it simply never did. However, the other five did not take extensive advantage of that right, either.

### *Artwork*

Although the use of artwork -- photographs, infographics, sigs or logos, and so on -- is not the primary focus of this report, it is worth noting some visual differences between the print and online products. Not only does artwork serve to grab attention and draw a reader into a story, it also is material that must be selected for inclusion just as a text story is, as Wanta and Roark pointed out.<sup>24</sup> More important, a photograph or infographic tells a story in its own right and is worth inclusion in any discussion of the relative emphasis given to particular types of newspaper content.

Despite the Web's multimedia capabilities, many online papers are less visually enticing than their print counterparts, at least in terms of information-conveying graphics. Technological limitations are a partial excuse; pictures take longer to display online and the resolution is worse than in print. Whatever the reasons, the relative absence of substantive artwork among the online papers studied here is striking.

Altogether, 1,886, or just under 40 percent, of all the stories included in this study had one or more pieces of art associated with them. In fact, 206 of those stories were told solely by a photograph or infographic; these "standalone" graphics were included in the story count. Staff artists or photographers provided the artwork for 666 stories, and a wire or syndicate provided 518. The rest came either from non-staffers (for instance, family photos provided by a source) or multiple sources (for instance, a staff photo accompanying a story that included an AP infographic) or had no credit line (for instance, mug shots). Artwork accompanied both local and non-local stories, of course. Among all the "illustrated" stories in this study, 658 had a local flavor; that figure includes 88 standalone pieces of local art.

However, when online and print products are considered separately, the differences are again dramatic. Of the 3,403 print items, 1,634 (48 percent) had some accompanying art, ranging from a single sig or mug shot to a multi-photo package. Of the nearly 1,400 online stories, only 252 (just over 18 percent) had any art at all, either on the menu, accompanying the story or as standalone art, another highly

significant difference ( $X^2(1)=362.375$ ,  $p < .001$ ). And even that relatively low figure is inflated by the "wire.ap.org" items used online, many of which contained one or more color AP photographs. As described above, there were 158 online-only stories -- and 43 of those (27.2 percent) had artwork.

Given the findings related to stories in general, it is no surprise that a greater proportion of the art online was likely to be local in nature than the print art. Of those 252 online stories with art, 100 (39.7 percent) had local art. Of the 1,634 print stories with art, 558 (34.1 percent) had local art. Although this difference is not so significant ( $X^2(1)=2.943$ ,  $P < .1$ ) as some of the other findings, it should be emphasized again that the use of art online is skewed by the links to "wire.ap.org" stories, none of which were local and many of which had accompanying photos.

A final reminder before drawing some conclusions: These data were collected in June 1998. The newspapers discussed here have continued to improve, expand and revamp their online products since then.<sup>25</sup> Like their colleagues across the nation, they are in the middle of a learning process about what works and what doesn't. However, their local online emphasis remains strong today.

## ***Conclusion***

Despite the fact that these newspapers serve rapidly growing communities of people whose interests are likely to range farther afield than the immediate metropolitan area, and despite the global nature of the medium itself as a "diaspora... wherein new social groupings are formed and organized,"<sup>26</sup> the papers studied here are primarily local products. The findings indicate that although the online versions draw most of their material from the print products, they do not take everything. The content they include is likely to be local, and the content they leave behind is likely to be non-local. The research question, asking whether the online paper's content is more or less "local" than that of its print counterpart can be answered in two words: much more. Although there were variations among the dailies studied, that result held for all six of these newspapers. And reports from the trade press, professional conferences and

newsrooms around the country indicate that although the audience in Colorado may have unusually shallow community roots, the local emphasis of these six papers is very much the norm nationwide.

Certainly, that makes a great deal of sense in many ways. The Web gives readers access to literally millions of sources of information both broad and narrow; the one thing a local newspaper knows, arguably better than anyone else among those millions, is its own market. Particularly for newspapers whose circulation areas overlap, as those along the Front Range do, stressing expertise in the immediate community is one of the best ways to differentiate one's own product from those of competitors. In general, for publishers scratching their heads over what they can offer that will be unique enough to attract both reader and commercial interest, local content is an obvious choice.

By providing it, they have an excellent opportunity not only to serve their existing audience but also to appeal to former residents and to attract new users from outside their circulation area. When British nanny Louise Woodward was on trial for murder in Massachusetts, the tiny Newton paper's Web site seized its opportunity to be a key source of updates for people around the world. The Laramie, Wyoming, paper missed a chance to build its brand name and image (and to boost the number of hits it might have then pitched to local advertisers) by offering only scant coverage of the murder of a local gay student, a story that attracted global interest and media attention.<sup>27</sup> Local content remains the core franchise of a local newspaper. Failing to provide it online, even enhance it with supplemental local content, would be not just silly but irresponsible.

It is also true that online newspapers have limited staffs and, until profits become more widespread and secure, limited resources both human and monetary. Content from the paper's staff is essentially free to the online product; wire copy costs money. And as of early 1998, just a few months before the present study was conducted, the average staff size at papers with circulations under 50,000, such as those in Boulder and Loveland, was a grand total of one; even much larger papers typically were struggling to maintain a "24/7" product with fewer than half a dozen very overworked people.<sup>28</sup>

Obviously, some priorities must be chosen, and local content may well be the one thing the online newspaper cannot fail to include if it is going to include any news at all.

Journalists' seeming willingness to abandon their traditional gate-keeping responsibilities may stem not only from economic and staffing constraints, and not only from a reconsideration of their fundamental franchise. It may also be evolving out of the recognition that the Web offers the ultimate, so far, post-modern medium; each user can, and does, create in essence a "Daily Me"<sup>29</sup> consisting of items important to him or her. And that personalized world view is right at the user's fingertips, in the same medium in which the online newspaper also exists. Unlike the print newspaper, the Web is not a finite, concrete media form; instead, its form is simultaneously fluid and global and supremely individualistic.

Further exploration of the "why" behind the "what" that journalists are choosing to include online is an obvious follow-up to this study, but the decisions do seem defensible and even logical. However, those choices also pose a danger. As they wrestle with how to define and address their role in the online world, journalists may be giving up one of their most important jobs. In a world as tightly interconnected and interdependent as ours has become, we are poorly served by a myopic view of the place we live. It may be true, as former House Speaker Tip O'Neill is reputed to have said, that all politics is local. But we will not understand how we are affected locally if we do not understand how we are affected regionally, nationally and, in the truly international society that is rapidly constructing itself, globally. For a newspaper to assume that we will take it upon ourselves to seek and find that information elsewhere is, to some extent, an abrogation of its own responsibility to bring the world to our doorstep, virtual or physical.

We do not exist in isolation, and we do not exist only through our personal interests. We exist as members of a real community that extends well beyond our newspaper's primary circulation area. We always have relied on our paper to remind us of that. If the newspaper no longer does so, it will have relinquished one of its most vital roles: connecting its readers to the broader world.

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22. The *Post*, which had an online editorial staff of only two full-time people at the time of this study, occasionally got into trouble with these links when editors failed to update the menu text to reflect the latest AP story. An example was in sports coverage of both World Cup soccer and Wimbledon tennis matches; the *Post*'s menu text was apt to refer to results from games earlier than those the AP was moving copy on.

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25. In addition, as previously mentioned, the *Post* and the *News* entered into a Joint Operating Agreement subsequent to this study. The JOA's effect on their respective print and online content remains to be seen.

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**Figure 1**

Story counts, print and online newspapers

	<b>Print version</b>	<b>Online version</b>
<i>Boulder Daily Camera</i>	509	279
<i>Colorado Springs Gazette</i>	544	275
<i>Denver Post</i>	820	358
<i>Loveland Reporter-Herald</i>	382	82
<i>Pueblo Chieftain</i>	399	145
<i>Rocky Mountain News</i>	749	244
<b>TOTALS</b>	3403	1383

**Figure 2**

Metro and non-metro stories, print and online newspapers

	<b>Print</b>	<b>Online</b>
<i>Boulder Daily Camera</i>		
<b>Metro</b>	111	67
<b>Non-Metro</b>	398	212
<b>Metro items as percent of total:</b>	21.8 percent	24 percent
<i>Colorado Springs Gazette</i>		
<b>Metro</b>	186	150
<b>Non-Metro</b>	358	125
<b>Metro items as percent of total:</b>	34.2 percent	54.5 percent
<i>Denver Post</i>		
<b>Metro</b>	273	157
<b>Non-Metro</b>	547	201
<b>Metro items as percent of total:</b>	33.3 percent	43.9 percent
<i>Loveland Reporter-Herald</i>		
<b>Metro</b>	86	28
<b>Non-Metro</b>	296	54
<b>Metro items as percent of total:</b>	22.5 percent	34.1 percent
<i>Pueblo Chieftain</i>		
<b>Metro</b>	111	98
<b>Non-Metro</b>	288	47
<b>Metro items as percent of total:</b>	27.8 percent	67.6 percent
<i>Rocky Mountain News</i>		
<b>Metro</b>	284	117
<b>Non-Metro</b>	465	127
<b>Metro items as percent of total:</b>	37.9 percent	48 percent

**Figure 3**

Metro and non-metro stories by content category

	<b>Print only</b>	<b>Online only</b>	<b>Both (all or partial)</b>	<b>TOTALS</b>
<b>Metro News</b>	267	17	653	937
<b>Metro Sports</b>	110	16	321	447
<b>Metro Business</b>	89	4	187	280
<b>Non-Metro News</b>	922	65	736	1,723
<b>Non-Metro Sports</b>	559	42	359	960
<b>Non-Metro Business</b>	224	14	191	429
<b>Metro Other *</b>	1	0	3	4
<b>Non-Metro Other *</b>	1	0	5	6
<b>TOTALS</b>	2,173	158	2,455 **	4,786

\* These are stories incorporated in a news, sports or business section in one medium but in a feature section in the other.

\*\* Both the print and online version of each story is included in this total.